

# **Notes Made While Falling**



# Notes Made While Falling

Jenn Ashworth

In Collaboration with the Goldsmiths Writers' Centre



Goldsmiths  
Press

© 2019 Goldsmiths Press  
Published in 2019 by Goldsmiths Press  
Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross  
London SE14 6NW

Printed and bound by TJ International, UK  
Distribution by the MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Copyright © 2019 Jenn Ashworth

The right of Jenn Ashworth to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 in the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles and reviews and certain non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-912685-19-6 (hbk)

ISBN 978-1-912685-20-2 (ebk)

[www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press](http://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press)

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

For E



# Contents

## *Within:*

<b>How to Begin: The Cut</b>	1
<b>Off Topic: On Derailment</b>	33
<b>A Lecture on Influence</b>	65
<b>Ground Zero</b>	94
<b>Attempts on the Life of King Lear</b>	136
<b>I Was Here: Suspicious, Pathological, Normal</b>	157
<b>How to Fall Without Landing: Celestial City</b>	177

## *And:*

Notes	195
Acknowledgements	200



## How to Begin: The Cut

A beginning is a cut in the onward flow of things. It is a lie too: we section out the story, slashing away what came before and after. A cut can form an opening: a hole or a door or a cave or a mine. But what kind of mine do we open? A landmine? Yes. A bomb.

Knowing already that this is the wrong place to start, we will begin with the operating table, and me upon it, abdomen gaping. The sound I hear is my blood hitting the floor.

I have been operated on once already today. In the recovery room, after the first incision was sutured closed, I started to haemorrhage. The epidural left me too numb to feel the wetness of the blood on my legs and I didn't notice it. The man who I live with tried to get the attention of the theatre nurses discreetly, because he didn't want to frighten me. Later, he will tell me that my blood was blooming through the sheets like poppies and before his mind could parse what he saw he thought someone had spilled a glass of Ribena.

But, befuddled and blurry as I was, I did already suspect that something was wrong. My heart was fluttering in my chest like a mad trapped bird against a window. I was hot and clammy and I couldn't see properly: the world started to tunnel in and fade away. It was letting go of me, I think. They wheeled me back into the operating theatre and erected a sheet between my head and the rest of my body. The surgeon re-opened the wound and it was during this second opening – a present tense moment that will expand into the years that haven't happened yet – that I heard my blood fall.

Then the epidural started to wear off. First came a great burning, then a disturbance I still don't have a word for. Pressure? My internal organs in a wind tunnel. I felt hands inside my body. Pulling and squeezing. Unimaginable pain – like bright lights – no,

like nothing else, coupled with the urge to sit up, to kick my legs, to move them away and to run – my heart thrumming with terror – but the paralysis that came with the spinal anaesthesia was still near enough complete, the drug-numbness lapsing just enough for the pain to break through, but not enough so that I could move. My legs were dream-legs: rubber, treacle. I knew the heat and pressure of the surgical stockings around my ankles but I could not move my feet. I think I spoke but my mouth was a dream-mouth. My skin turned into mist.

Panic is worse than pain. Worse still was the calm and single-pointed knowledge that if I didn't move or speak they were going to carry on cutting me up and I would be utterly unable to defend myself. Rage at my own helplessness built hot and strong in my hands, which I could move – I felt them bat uselessly against something soft – a sheet? The physical sensation of knowing where I ended and the rest of the world began faded, and with it, my rage ebbed away. I had been exploded and rubbed out. I was falling. / I still am. They had a suction machine and I heard my blood rattling away through it, as if down a drainpipe.

I'd been here before: not surgery, but this feeling of rage and helplessness. Childhood had served me a lot of that. But I'd grown up. I'd carefully built an entire adult life around a private and unarticulated vow that I would never feel it again. I was in pain and terror and fury, yes. I was panicking. But on top of all of that, I was incredulous. This was not me, gasping on the table. I'm the type of person who would sit up and grab the sheet and take the butcher's hook out of the hand of the Jack the Ripper who attacks me with it. I am the type of person who would threaten to lodge a complaint and who knows the words for everything they are doing to me. My rights. I'm the type of person who knows her rights. I'm not the type of person to be cowed by the fake authority of a white coat. The surgeon was in blue and I could see nothing of her face but her eyes above the mask – pale eyes – though she was looking at the mess she's making and not me. I was / am so very afraid.

I started to hyperventilate and someone injected something into the cannula on the back of my hand. I immediately became drowsy – but that didn't end the pain and the panic, it only made it more difficult to express.

'What did you give me?' I asked.

'Just a little something,' the man who did it – he sat behind me and I never saw him – replied.

Rage returned, and compared to the fear and the panic, anger was a comfort – so I held onto it as well as I could. How dare they put something into my body without asking me? Without even telling me what it is? How dare they? They were all so calm.

I told them I could still feel it. I did tell them. And I told them again. Then I – after some superhuman effort – managed to twitch a toe. They saw that: my heroic dream-legs saved me! A glance passed between surgeon and nurse and someone in royal blue brought me a little brown glass medicine bottle with a straw in it and told me to drink it and I did, then she put a mask over my face. There was no time to count. This wasn't sleep. No time passed, but I lost five hours before waking for the next round.

What else to say, as we begin? Well, the sensations I felt in those moments go entirely beyond my vocabulary but I'd take those moments again – a helping of them every day – *every hour* – for the rest of my life – rather than the fall into madness that followed.

I am sitting here typing / I am in the literature tent at a Christian music and arts festival. The organisers of the literature programme are particularly interested in *The Friday Gospels* and my impressions about religion and writing, growing up in a religious family and leaving my faith community. I've never imagined myself speaking at a Christian music festival, or a Christian anything, but all the same here I am wearing muddy boots and a cagoule / sitting in bed with my laptop on my knees. It's the August bank holiday weekend / last weekend in November, dark before the kids come

home from school so of course the small audience / I'm alone / is sitting on blankets on the grass listening to rain patter on the roof while I read to them. When I finish reading from my novel a woman in a blue coat puts her hand up to ask me a question.

'How did you get started with the writing?' she asks / I'm alone with you and you're not asking me for anything.

Her question is big enough for me to hide in. I could talk to her about my literary influences, or how I got an agent, or how I move from first draft to final draft, or what it was like to do a perennially controversial MA in Creative Writing. I could try to tell her something about my nasty habits: the journal keeping and the writing in library books, the stealing of other people's stories, conversations, retold dreams and childhood memories. I'm not a writer who shies away from waxing lyrical about where the ideas come from and I have a whole talk prepared to answer this question – *how it begins* – so there in the warm tent / here in my newly painted bedroom I give this woman, and everyone else, the spiel / I confess.

I start by telling her about reading – about how I learned to read quite early and never got over the magic trick of black marks on a piece of paper becoming a character, a story, another world entirely. About how it seemed like telepathy to me. The contents of one mind decanted into another. The man I live with told me that when he was little he used to open the Argos catalogue to the page where the toys were. Sometimes the pictures would show children playing in plush living rooms and manicured gardens and he would lay the catalogue on the floor and try to jump into it. Jumping in – or *through* – worked for Jane and Michael Banks in *Mary Poppins*, who were able to wound time and space merely by leaping through the pavement and into (not onto) a chalk picture. They were richly rewarded for this and got to spend a day at the fair messing about on horses and learning impossible words that promised to cure speechlessness. The trick with the Argos catalogue never worked for the man I live with (he doesn't much enjoy reading fiction, either) but it did work for me, if you think of reading

as another kind of jumping. By the time I was five years old I had mastered the trick of moving through the page and disappearing entirely, and for most of my childhood I spent more of my time in the cartoon bright world on the other side of the chalk picture than I did in this one. So I tell her about that.

Then I tell her about the way I got above myself. Because reading was just like jumping through the skin of the world and into somewhere else – somewhere better – and because this was so impressive and necessary to me (and to everyone else, I assumed) I had to try making some chalk pictures of my own. So I started to write stories about zombies clawing themselves out of their own graves and families of field mice being chopped into smithereens by a combine harvester and armies of old-age pensioners rising up and murdering the nursing home matron who would not allow them to keep their beloved pets. (I suppose one of the things I'm trying to tell you is that it didn't all come from that terrible operation – that I was like this *before*, interested in cutting, in blood, in people who won't stay dead. There was, perhaps, an earlier event that left its mark.) I wrote, and I showed the stories to my family, and I waited for them to jump.

To illustrate this arrogance further and the part it still plays in how my writing begins I go on to tell this woman (who is becoming sorrier and sorrier that she asked) the story of a girl who bullied me for a while at primary school. I make this experience into a funny story even though at the time my hair started falling out in chunks and I developed a bit of a twitch and a squint in one eye. This isn't entirely true (my hair did fall out, but my eyes were fine – though I have to put that detail in there for the punch line of this story to work) but bear with me.

I describe the way the factual alopecia and the fictional squint made me an even more appealing target for my bully – let's call her Debbie. I tell the woman in the blue coat about the times when I have imagined getting a prize for writing a novel – some kind of trophy – in my imagination, for the purposes of this story I am

telling, for the purposes of making the audience but mainly this woman in the blue coat sitting on the grass in front of me laugh and getting her on my side and making sure she knows I am, actually, human (though what else would I be, a ghost?), the trophy is giant and glittering. So giant I can't quite carry it. I have been known to mime collapsing under its weight as I take it down from its shelf in my crowded trophy cabinet and take it around to Debbie's house to show it to her and ask, 'well, what do you think of my wonky eye now?'

It isn't much of a punch line, but she does laugh, even though I am telling her this tale because I want to illustrate how petty and ugly a writer can be sometimes. If I am making a portrait of the artist, I don't say, then let me come clean and make it warts and all. Let me talk about the ordinary and pathetic human impulses that go into works of art. Let me tell this woman about Debbie, whose face I can hardly remember (who is easy to find on Facebook), not to make her laugh, although that's a cowardly part of it, but because I want to demonstrate to her something I still can't help but hope is true of art generally and might one day be true for me in particular: the things we sickly humans make can be more complex and intelligent, more humane and more precious, than the wounded people who make them. / Alone in my bed, I feel ashamed.

What I don't tell her is that I have lost my faith in fiction, which was supposed to be able to hold and transform everything. I am writing a novel, and working on several short story commissions, but I'm typing through a lump in my throat because I can't make a story about the most important thing I have to tell. What if the silence spreads and in the end I end up not being able to write fiction at all? When I try to write fiction that springs from the things that have happened to me – a story about a woman who has had a baby and goes mad – another about a woman wrestling with the effect her childhood has on her relationship to her own children – a third about a teacher who begins to use her lectures

to tell increasingly outlandish and self-serving lies about her life to her students – the stories fall apart and I am unable to find the necessary compassion for or even interest in my characters. Plot becomes a logic machine that creaks under the weight of the inexplicable thing that has happened and I cannot make it acknowledge the way I need to live my life now. It feels like this: the trick is gone, the pavement is a brick wall instead of an open window; throwing myself at it hurts. For a few months now, I haven't even been able to read much fiction. I've gone off it. This is far too shocking a thing to say at a literature festival. They're supposed to ask questions, not me.

Q: What's wrong with fiction, my best, most precious thing?

Q: What's wrong with me?

When I emerge into the light from the book-signing tent it is still raining. Of course it is: this is the bank holiday weekend / this is winter, there are advent calendars in the shops and I've moved to Lancaster now and the rain isn't going to stop – it hadn't all weekend and the jokes about floods and arks and rainstorms of biblical proportions flow thick and fast. As does the mud: great churning sinkholes of the stuff. The festival is held on a racecourse and lots of the venues are tents on the grassy track itself, while others are unexpectedly indoors, in the swish conferencing and socialising facilities built into the back of the open stands. There is a lot of traffic back and forth between people wanting to get out of the rain, and people wanting to get through it quickly and into a tent. The racetrack is churned up beyond recognition.

I learn this: when you walk through mud, you have to adjust your gait. If you walk as you usually do, you splash the stuff all over your trousers, your coat – it flicks up and covers your face and hair. There's no point worrying about your shoes – I am wearing hiking boots and not wellies, which is a mistake, given the circumstances – but if you want a fighting chance of keeping

the mud out of your hair you tiptoe slowly through it, and in the place where it is deepest and the grass has disappeared entirely, you slide along on the soles of your feet, hoping for the best. This afternoon I forget about the mud and I run, and when I find a toilet I lock myself into it and am efficiently, violently, sick.

When I come out there are two kind women waiting by the hand-dryers who ask me if I am all right. I nod and smile and wash my hands and they hover and offer to come with me to the first aid tent. All I do is skip the hand-dryer, wipe my hands on my jeans and get out of there, pretending not to know what they're talking about.

'I'm completely fine,' I say, and waft away into the crowds. But the truth of it is I have been unwell for quite a while now.

## i) Vomiting

Not every day, but often enough to be notable. I am never nauseous. It feels like my body has an ejector button. It is throwing something out of itself. It is a landlord doing some serious evicting. Think Regan MacNeil's best performance: eviction as a symptom of possession.

I know when it is going to happen (in my mind, I call it 'having one') and I can always get myself behind a closed door. The pre-'having one' feeling is not nausea; it is a heavy cold lump in the centre of my body, a blankness or an absence that needs to be got rid of. I have perfected the art of vomiting quietly and with exemplary aim. I almost always carry mints. I weigh less now than I used to. The skin around my nose and mouth is starting to crack.

One day one of my friends asks, delicately, 'do you think you might have an eating disorder?'

I laugh.

'I love eating,' I tell him. 'I just can't get it to stay in.'

## ii) Insomnia

Lying down brings on a cold, crushing sensation in my lungs, a kind of suffocating paralysis that terrifies me. Sometimes it feels like fingers in my throat, sometimes ice inside my chest. Sometimes concrete. My arms and legs shake. I sweat. I breathe too fast – so fast that sometimes I see spots or lights.

So I don't sleep. Lots of people say they don't sleep. But I really don't sleep. Sometimes in the late afternoon the walls start to curve and I'm not entirely sure if I'm thinking, or speaking out loud. It becomes hard to tell the difference between trees and their shadows on the afternoon drive home. Parking becomes impossible: I abandon the car in the middle of the street and demand the man I live with brings it to the kerb: I can't tell how far apart things are anymore. In the small hours, I chatter to myself, teeth clicking. Sometimes I walk up and down the stairs in the dark, counting, as if I am in labour.

I'm in good company with this. 'However much of a stir John Bunyan made as a preacher, he laboured as a wounded soldier,'<sup>1</sup> Kevin Belmonte writes, in a biography that suggests Bunyan was as traumatised and sickly as he was faith and fervour filled. Bunyan's turmoil, his insomnia, his bad dreams, paranoid delusions, epiphanies and nightmares became *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. / That's what I've got to do. Make a book out of it. Make a book out of it. Cut a hole in a life and through it, pull out the story. But I can't.

## iii) The Demon, Drink

You can't just lie there suffering. You've got to do something with the time, so most nights I sit up until four or five in the morning drinking wine at the rate of a bottle or two a night. More than

that, if I'm honest – and I'm not. Let's just say I used to be a red wine drinker but I found it necessary to switch to white because my teeth were turning blue. The recycling bins overflow. / I don't drink at all anymore.

Because of ii) and iii) my life has split in two and my waking hours have doubled. I already know how to live like this. I was a school refuser and truanting was always a way of doubling time. There was school, and whatever else I did instead of school, taking place at the same time as school went on inevitably and inescapably taking place elsewhere, the Education Welfare Officer diligently banging on the front door. The life I carved out while school existed elsewhere was always superimposed on top of the morning bell, the lessons, and the queue at the canteen and afternoon registration.

Adulthood doesn't cure this way of being in the world: Barthes calls the writer a 'false holidaymaker,' because she is always at work, and a false worker too, because even while working she's on holiday. I'm a truant, then I'm a writer, then I am sick/not sick and later a doctor will call my ability to work while sleepless, pissed, starving and delusional 'apparent competence,' which I will find hilarious.

Apparent competence looks like this: during the day I pretend to write and read and lead creative writing workshops and hold tutorials for MA students. I pick my children up from school and nursery. I quietly vomit and go to the supermarket and pay bills and wash dishes and fold laundry. And at night during my second life / my real life I spend seven hours getting drunk and watching serial killer programmes on my laptop. I should be reading, but like I said, I can't. I was drunk every night for three/four/five years.

#### iv) Ed Gein et al.

When the insomnia and the shaking begin, I pass the time by tip-sily watching detective dramas – *Morse* and *Wycliffe* and *Prime*

*Suspect* and *Cracker* and *Frost* and *Blue Murder* and *Silent Witness*, but they become too tame for me and the shape of the investigation too predictable. Then I start watching true crime documentaries about serial killers on YouTube, black-out drunk before the episodes finish, so never knowing the ending. The details of the raped and dismembered girls stuffed into suitcases, the voice-over descriptions of their bleeding body parts and the crime scene photographs of their maggoty shallow graves soothe me in ways I don't care to/prefer not to understand.

Susan Sontag reminds us that 'the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked,'<sup>2</sup> and certainly these documentaries – anything on the World Wide Serial Killer YouTube channel – are a kind of pornography (I watch them in bed, the wine bottle between my knees) of torture and nakedness, full of blood and blades and open wounds. In medieval times, the religious would regard – with great devotion – gruesomely detailed images of Christ's weeping wounds. They would contemplate – for many hours – the physical reality of his suffering. The term for this work is affective piety: putting yourself into the scene as a way of worshipping, and it occurs to me that one of the things I am doing here is an excommunicant's version of this type of labour: an apostate, impious version; but no less sincere for that.

I am not completely indiscriminate in my tastes. Ed Gein the grave robber, murderer and alleged cannibal is my favourite. His life has a kind of literary aftermath that interests me: Gein, whose little Wisconsin house was burned and bulldozed to the ground – erased in an attempt to deter souvenir hunters – became the model for Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel's Leatherface character in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Alfred Hitchcock's Norman Bates (*Psycho*) and Thomas Harris's Buffalo Bill – the serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*. There's something to do with the inevitable flow of horror towards fiction that feels nearly hopeful to me.

In milder moods, I watch autopsy programmes. There are plenty of medical and educational YouTube channels of real people really being cut up and disembowelled by doctors and medical students, and in my mildest mood of all, I watch the star of *Dr. G: Medical Examiner* chat happily away about her science while she ladles blood from the open abdominal cavity of a naked gunshot wound victim. At some point in most of these programmes – especially the post-mortem, docudrama types about the investigation of a crime – someone is bound to say, ‘the body will tell the story,’ or something like that. And every wound is a mouth. It’s tripe.

Leslie Jamison wrote an essay called ‘Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain.’ In it she describes the wound not as the start or end to the story, but the middle: ‘Wound implies *en media res*: The cause of injury is in the past but the healing isn’t done; we are seeing this situation in the present tense of its immediate aftermath.’<sup>3</sup> That phrase is perfect: the *present tense of aftermath*. (I don’t know where it began! I don’t know how to begin!) In these bad autopsy programmes the story the wounded body tells is almost always forensic: each wound is a clue to the cause of itself: whether the narrative destination is Ted Bundy or a heart attack or a mishap with an unregistered handgun, all of these wounds and cuts and gouges and holes point backwards, to the answer, and the answer is always there.

I find all this as comforting as a bedtime story – both knowing the answer, the origin, the wounds’ first cause, and wading through the gore knowing that I will hear it, hanging out for it in a prurient, booze-pacified anticipation – another kind of punch line. But it’s wrong. It’s wrong. That present tense thing is more like it. All suffering is now, and the thread that will lead me backwards to causes and forwards to cures is broken. I do know that. I know it, and I don’t want to know it, which is why I’ve picked these bloody and comforting bedtime stories for myself.

I experience something else while I watch too. Sontag says, 'it is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's,'<sup>4</sup> but during my drunken doubled nights Sontag is wrong: I watch these things and indulge in the terrible phantasy of kinship with these bodies and if not quite comforted, I am calmed. No. Not calmed. Made whole? There is a filling-in-the-blanks effect to it.

I was the only one in the room who didn't see my blood. I heard it running off the end of the operating table and splashing onto the floor. I smelled it. / I smell it all the time. But I didn't see it, and wasn't allowed to see the hole until it was stapled and sutured into modesty. Everyone else saw it except for me. But I wasn't there / I was there.

Alternatively: I stay up all night and I look at what Ed Gein and Dr G saw. Because I am always drunk, I don't really know why.

## v) Weak Skin

Some days I can't drive. Or at least, I can operate the car, but I absolutely cannot wear a seatbelt. I can't tolerate the sensation of something pressing against my abdomen and from time to time I become certain that if I hit the brake too sharply the belt will pass right through my body. My skin will breach like the parting of the Red Sea, eager to make way, and my internal organs - blue and purple and lilac and pink and red and violently throbbing and hot - hotter than you'd imagine - will drop out onto my lap. In 2011 - a year into madness - I am offered a job I really want and I nearly don't take it because I'd have to drive there and the seatbelt would damage me.

At other times, I am convinced this has already happened. That the two parts of me - the head end and the feet end - are disconnected. That there's only a gap where I used to be. I tell my friend this once, when we're in a pub.

'It's like I'm not there,' I say. I gesture with my hand towards myself: that blank danger zone between sternum and pubis. I can't bring myself to actually touch it. I'm only telling him now because I am disastrously drunk (in about three hours I will throw up on my kitchen floor).

'You're just tired,' my friend says. I don't blame him. He buys me more gin. I don't blame him.

Another time, I start to tell my doctor this - about my body going missing. There's a doubleness to this experience, in that I can look down at myself and see that I am there, but also close my eyes or look away and know that I am entirely gone, and that being gone is dangerous. It's unsayable. Both because it sounds ridiculous (I'm sick, not thick), and because a few days ago there was a woman in the news who had post-partum psychosis and they put her into a hospital with her baby and she escaped and killed herself and the baby, and I don't want them to think I'm pre-murder and send me to hospital, I want this weakness in my skin to be repaired. I believe - right now - in mind over matter.

Another symptom that belongs in this category of weak skin and strange thoughts (it is because my skin is weak that the strange thoughts are getting in: I've gone leaky, my border control policy needs tightening up): I have got to avoid knives and scissors and sharp things, which makes me useless in the kitchen. There is always the chance that I will fall and impale myself on a potato peeler or while cutting the fat away from a piece of bacon my hand will slip and the scissors will end up buried in my guts. Most days there is a possibility, not remote at all, that I will grow tired of waiting for the time when a disposable razor will drop out of a bathroom cabinet and hurt me. The anticipation of this is exhausting and sometimes I am within kissing distance of hastening the inevitable and dissecting myself. Reading becomes strange: the words *cut* and *slice* and *ice* make me wince, make me close my eyes and turn away.

## vi) Bad Dreams

When I do sleep, this is the kind of thing I dream about: an operating theatre, and my body doubled inside it, both patient and surgeon, receiving the knife and the disembowelling at the same time as I dispense it. Or I see myself in a bed, (I get the bird's-eye view) while legions of doctors hold my arms and legs and press their gloved hands over my nose and mouth and stab me until I die.

Once, spectacularly, I dream that there is a pupa lodged in my nostril. I want to get it out but I don't want to hurt it and I decide a sharp tug is best – like ripping off a plaster. So I grab it and pull, and the thing is attached to, or part of, the network of veins in my sinuses and face, and they all come out too, a red wet web, and the hot blood flows out from my nose and mouth and the only thing I can do about it is clamp a hand over both and wait to drown.

Or I dream of a coughing fit so severe my abdomen bursts – I'm always in public when this happens – and the heat of the blood on the tops of my bare feet is embarrassing, and I'm spooning my guts back into the gap with indecent haste, hoping that nobody will see.

I thought I was over this. I was plagued by nightmares as a child: of a baby that I had murdered. Prison. Death row. The lethal injection, or the chair. Sometimes the hood and the hanging. Worse: everyone else knowing I had done it, though I wasn't ever totally sure myself. These dreams, that happened when I was ten and eleven years old during the alopecia period, come back too.

The unsubtle nature of my unconscious is a little humiliating. They're jokes of dreams, I know. Bunyan comes to mind again, who as a child dreamed that demons and devils were lying in wait, surrounding him, wanting to make off with him. Who spent all of his time in prison thinking about blood and knives and being cut – the word of God, or reality itself, being so

sharp and unwelcome it divided him blood from marrow, spirit from flesh, cause from effect. And he made a living from this, in the end, writing about a dream that ended at the Celestial City. / I should write a novel about this – about what it is to go mad – but I can't.

## vii) Rage

A few days before the festival I found myself guarding my abdomen with my hands when walking through the playground to collect my older daughter from school. There were always kids running about – what if one of them bumped into me and my skin split like a ripe tomato and my entrails fell out around my feet? I have to watch out for things like that. And someone did bump into me, a woman stepping backwards to avoid someone else. She barely brushed me and was immediately apologetic.

I hissed with rage, not human anymore, but reptilian – a crocodile on the warpath. She apologised again, and stepped backwards. Something on her face, not quite fear, but something near it. She knew I wanted to kill her, and looking at her face let me know that too.

'Is everything all right?' she asked. And I jammed my hands in my pockets and bit my lips together because anything else would be too dangerous.

Safely back in the car I became aware that my hands hurt. I looked down to see what was happening because proprioception – the sixth or seventh sense most humans possess, the one that lets them know where their bodies are in space without necessarily having to see them – was temporarily suspended. My hands were where they should be, on my lap, but they had also disappeared. I could see them, but I could not feel them. They were clenched into fists, ready for the fight. I was sweating. The

dashboard clock had made a little leap: some minutes had gone astray. / This happens during the writing too, sometimes – this entire winter afternoon has gone and the kids are home from school already. I didn't kill her. I wanted to, but all I did was go home and do a google search for 'snuff films' because I'd run out of serial killer documentaries to watch.

It happens a lot, this rage. I can't see very well. This isn't part of my illness. I just need new glasses. But the last time I went to the optician she asked me to close my eyes while she gently pulled open the lids and shone a torch into them. I knew to expect it. But experiencing it tipped me into a rage so sudden and complete I had to leave the office, abandoning my favourite coat and any chance of getting my prescription updated. I hurried home weeping, my teeth bared and with nothing there to bite.

Alternatively: a list of all the things I broke. The time I first noticed the man who I live with was afraid of me: that my sickness was spreading towards him, like gangrene.

### viii) The 'Oh No He Didn'ts' or So Much for This and That

I resent having to write like this. It is embarrassing, not only because of the confessional nature of the material – though that's not so bad, not really – but because I am admitting that the novel, my best beloved one, cannot hold this. That fiction will not do. Q: Will not do what? Q: Will not hold what? These are my questions. Why can't I write fiction about this? Start with the feeling and work outwards, as I always do, decorating the truth? Why can't I? Why can't fiction? This is my newest symptom. I can't read. / The shame of it.

I still can perform the mechanics of reading – I can turn marks on a paper and screen into sounds, into meaning – that part of the

magic still happens between eye and mind. But for now, novels and short stories and films go like this: first *this* happens, then *this* happens. Because of *that* happening, *this* happens. Then because *that* has happened, *this* happens. And it ends like *this*. Or they go like this: because *this* happened, she thought about *this* particular thing in a slightly different way. Which made her say *this*. Which meant that such-a-body said *this*. And this made her look at *that* in a slightly different way again. And this new understanding made her do *this*. Which affected her life for the better in *these* significant ways.

And I don't buy it anymore.

And because reading is to writing what inhaling is to exhaling, and because I don't buy it, I can't make it either. I can write sentences. I can write paragraphs. I can write passable lines of dialogue. But I am cheating. Even when the raw materials are true, I am still making things up, and that slipperiness makes me weary.

I am sulky and weepy. I make a show of myself, sometimes in public, and have to be placed into taxis. It is a bit like grieving, this, because I have so very badly been let down.

## ix) The Secret

That child – the one who dreamed about a baby she had murdered? That everyone knew that she'd done it, while even she herself couldn't be sure? What if they weren't dreams? What if she wasn't mistaken then, or what if I am mistaken now? A dangerous question, because the only answer is months searching newspaper archives for evidence of a crime I might have committed, and a fall into a paranoia so intricate I am still not entirely out of it.

Let me take you back to the festival where, according to the novelist's logic of scene, flashback-as-thematically-relevant-digression, return to scene, I've been vomiting in the toilet this

entire time. I rinse my hands and flee from the concerned ladies in the bathroom, chew a couple of the always-handy Trebor Extra Strong, then pretend I've wandered into a charismatic Evensong service with healing entirely by mistake. It's just this kind of festival that makes such a mistake a possibility.

Nothing about this service is familiar to me - there are no pews and instead we sit on the carpet in the half light inside a huge, chairless auditorium, muddy and unravelled, while a polished and pitch perfect choir sings sets that are intensely familiar to everyone else in the room and are entirely foreign to me.

A PowerPoint presentation presents the words to the songs the choir and the precentors are singing - a kind of performed prayer, we're informed - against a backdrop of schmaltzy images of children at barbed wire, lipstick stigmata, tear-stained faces and rushing waterfalls. A legend on one of the slides reads: *practice some body prayer with us if you like, or just lie back and chill*. I sit cross-legged, not in the mood for chilling, and having no idea what body prayer is. You pray with your head and your mouth. The rest of you just sits there and waits. I sit there and wait. I watch the others. Some of the ragged congregation bow or cross themselves at certain points in the songs. They touch their lips or dip their heads. Sometimes they stand, hands upturned and open, as if waiting for a present. Most people just sit and listen, like me.

After the singing comes the healing. They'd prayed, with their music, and asked the spirit to come. Healing is one of the gifts of the spirit, they say. Another of these gifts is the ability to speak in tongues. Babel: the birth of language and lying. I glance around, fearful that the people around me are going to become infected by ghosts and start wailing in gibberish, but everyone sits peacefully except for one blonde four-year-old twirling and twirling in a fairy dress, as if the music is still playing. And then it does play, something lush and instrumental with strings, and the girl picks up the pace and spins and tumbles, giggling, onto the carpet, rolling and

cross-eyed and happy. / I am still in my bed and I should be with my children.

We wait. When the spirit arrives, the healing can begin. Healing is reconciliation, they explain, and involves the spirit bringing the body back into proper relationship with its purpose, the organs all in service to the soul. They use words like 'pour down' (I think of blood I always will) and invite us to get up and come forward, the workers doing the healing taking up their stations in the four corners of the room. People get up and queue for what they came for, and the queues for the healing stretch from the corners of the room to the centre, and I join one.

No one falls down, slain in the spirit. I don't see anyone cry or wail or thrash around. We're lining up as politely as the British at a cash point and when I get to the front there's a woman who is dark haired and smiley and looks quite like my mum and she shrugs, apologising for my wait. She asks me my name. I tell her, leaning in to whisper in her ear. She puts her finger in the oil and draws a lavender-scented cross on my head. I close my eyes and she tells me to open them and look at her. She starts praying, whispering, and I can't hear much of what she says over the swell and lilt of the music. She puts her hand on my forehead and I feel a tremble through my lungs - as if there are guitar strings in there and someone has run their fingers along them. A moment's difficulty with inhaling, but pleasurable, like the seconds of delightful, starry breathlessness you get before you tip over into an orgasm. I move away. They smile. The woman says 'every hair on your head has been counted' and those inner strings move again. Then they let me go.

All the books I've read have taught me that beginning often involves a flash of inspiration. A strike of genius. A hand or a light or a fork of lightning from the sky. A blow to the head. An angel whispering into the ear. Beginnings are sudden and contain the shock of the unexpected: the injury to the status quo that cutting in your first line involves. But epiphanies tend to come at the end

of short fictions. They are the moments where a sudden insight, perhaps prompted by a conveniently placed line of dialogue or change in the weather or even a domestic object, bubbles up through the consciousness of the focalising character.

Epiphanies observed by literary critics also, apparently, mark the beginning of short fiction's move from the outer world – the twist in the tale where the identity of the murder is revealed, or the boy gets (*obtains*, not *understands*) the girl, or the adventurer returns home: the stuff of epics – into the inner world, the world of lyric, where the mission achieved or tragedy suffered is traded in self-knowledge and awareness, or lack of it. The stakes are lower (perhaps) but more complex, and more akin to the non-adventuring reader's own experience. I've seen it work like this in stories too but the technique jettisons the load of the manifestation from the experiencing character onto the reader, because whatever else they are, epiphanies are also full stops. They are a practical way for a writer to gain control of a work. They usher in an ending and stem the flow of cause and effect, of associative linking, of hopping from one scene to the next to the next to the next.

Epiphanies work wonders for keeping a short story short: we don't need to know if Joyce's Eveline is going to do anything about her constrained, miserable, paralysed life (and she probably isn't), only that the sound of the horn on the ship she cannot bring herself to board has finally made her notice it. In 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' O'Connor allows the Misfit to suggest to us that the grandmother had a sudden apprehension of grace, but as she's dead now, we'll never know if her epiphany had any lasting effect on her behaviour, or not. The writer gifts us not only the work of imagining the rest but the weight of integrating the manifestation into lived life. *You're wiser now*, these epiphany stories seem to tell us. *Go forth and do differently.*

The word comes not from literature, but from religion. In Christianity, the epiphany is the moment where Christ is revealed as God-in-the-world. Spirit made flesh, and the recognition of

that revealed fact by humans. Birth as beginning, of course. The first movement of the Christ-child-to-be in Mary's womb wasn't enough to prove the embodied Messiah really had arrived, and I think that was because only she could feel it. The real epiphany was social and happened on the arrival of the Magi when his status was endorsed by educated, high-status men who were connected to the wider world and could act on that world in a way that a pregnant woman could not. But curled inside Mary's guts Christ moved – a heel jabbing the diaphragm, the sensation of a bowling bowl knocking against the pelvic floor – and she knew.

We writers truck in epiphanies all the time. They've become a cliché – a cheap flourish at the ending, promising a change that might happen post-story. We sometimes make them ironic and use external detail or overstatement to imply that the internal firework of self-knowledge itself is another layer of delusion, of misunderstanding – one more damp squib. We can grow weary of them altogether, as David Jauss is, when he reads in dread of them 'arriving right on schedule, like trains in a fascist state.' And we can question what real-life good they do us. David Jauss speaks for readers and creative writing teachers everywhere when he wonders if all the thousands and thousands of vicarious epiphanies he's witnessed have made him 'one whit wiser.'

In real life, epiphanies don't arrive on time, like a train. They're a shock. They're nasty sometimes. They fall out of the sky like an apple or a rock or a shell and they hit you on the head and break a life wide open: ask St Paul. Early models of shell shock were dominated by images of the shell itself – the bomb, the object, 'a violent, concussive *deus ex machina* which arrived from out of the heavens and left the solder a shattered, gibbering wreck, his nerves destroyed.'<sup>5</sup> (Some of them got poems out of this, of course – wonderful poems – but most of them didn't, and a poem does not excuse a bomb – does not make it all worth it, no matter how many legions of schoolchildren learn to recite *Dulce Et Decorum Est* in their assemblies). The Lisbon earthquake was shocking enough to

kill God, and if that isn't enough, think of Susan Sontag's experience the first time she saw the photographs taken at the liberation of the death camps. It was, she said 'a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany,' and this event injures her – she talks about being 'cut [...] sharply, deeply, instantaneously.'<sup>6</sup> Her aftermath constituted a kind of living death – a simultaneous murder and resurrection: 'some limit had been reached and not only that of horror, I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten, something went dead, something is still crying.'

This is the eternal present tense of the real-life aftermath. Something we writers leave alone. Something went dead. Something is still crying. Something went dead. Something is still crying. / I could type that out until the rest of the book is full. (Q: when do the dead cry? A: now and now and now.)

The idea of a living death, a zombie, a return, a corpse animated, is useful to the novelist Toby Litt. 'Epiphany stories are rubbish,' he says, and buries them. Yet. Yet. He either thinks better of his argument or is, characteristic of writers, able to hold two opposing ideas in his mind at once (it damages our heads, you know). Epiphanies, he allows, 'might be a semi-noble attempt at asking – in what particular ways does language deform non-verbal experience?' and he compares this last-minute rescue to an exhumation. Epiphanies 'weren't really dead and buried. They were already scratching their way back to the surface. They're like zombies. Everything is.'<sup>7</sup> This resurrection metaphor is more horror than halleluiah and the thing resurrected has no soul. It is a type of birth though. A type of beginning, although an unlovely one.

I am searching for a beginning – when I first became ill, or when I started to get better, or when I found the words to write about it, or something else. Perhaps the real beginning is the moment I learned that prayer and writing are and are not something you do with your body and church is not supposed to

happen in a conference centre on a racetrack. *God knows what sort of mammon worshipping has happened in that place.*

I've been brought up to be suspicious of gambling (I've never ever done it) and tentative about stepping into sacred places. We don't buy things on Sundays and we never ever purchase raffle tickets and we always, without exception wear dresses to church because *Heavenly Father likes boys to be boys and girls to be girls.* I once took a pair of kitchen scissors and screamed and screamed and cut my church dress to ribbons, thinking that without a dress I would not have to go, and instead I was made to attend in one of my sister's school skirts and a T-shirt with a yellow smiley face on it that said 'Glasgow Smiles.' We make sure our shoes are clean and don't make a noise when we go into the chapel. / I don't have to go anymore.

Now we're in a Sunday School lesson in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Preston Ward. / I'm still in bed and you're nowhere, or wherever you are. I am guessing it is sometime in the late 1980s. The building we meet in is made of red bricks turned outwards in a kind of squat ziggurat, making it very climbable, though because we're strictly not allowed to climb, not at all, but especially not on the Sabbath, we never do. Inside, there's wall-to-wall carpet in a dirty shade of lime-green, polished dark wood surfaces, Christmas tree green hymnbooks and more turned-out bricks. All this sickly green might be a subliminal reminder of the temple ordinances for the portion of the congregation who have taken them: in the temple, the men and women wear green aprons patterned with leaves, to remind them of the fall and of the covenants made with God when he clothed their naked bodies. We don't understand this now. It will be years before we do.

Behind the chapel - which is what we call the room in the meetinghouse where we worship - there's a 'cultural hall,' for dances and sports and socials. But the work is growing and since the meetinghouse was built the congregation has overflowed it. So the folding partition between the chapel and the cultural hall is

open and the hall itself is filled with metal folding chairs we bring out in stacks. In a few years' time we'll all be teenagers and we'll have our lessons in a row of sagging portacabins in the car park.

Our class is in a corner of the cultural hall, partitioned from the other classes going on by a few screens on wheels – faintly medical. We're about six or seven or eight or nine and we perch on our folding chairs, arranged in a half-circle and facing our teacher. We're learning about the Plan of Salvation – which is the reason, we're told, we're here. We existed before we were born and we lived in something called The Spirit World with our actual parents, Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. They had bodies of flesh and bone, and we didn't, and we wanted them – mainly so we could become parents like them, and make things. So the plan was hatched to make a world and send us down to it. And if we were successful we would evolve into gods and as gods we would make things. I would make things. (I didn't learn until much later that the making was for the boys: us girls, one goddess wife among many, would be eternally pregnant with spirit babies. I learned even later still that there was a difference between creation and mechanical reproduction, even if the machine is your own body.)

The Plan is hard to grasp. But our teacher is a good one and she has brought visual aids. A carrier bag full of gloves and mittens. She passes the bag around and we each take a glove. They belong to her children – pink ones and black ones and green ones, and padded waterproof mittens, and gardening gloves. In front of us she stands with a glove in one hand and the other flexed and still, like a spider.

'This is what Heavenly Father wants you to understand,' she says. She wiggles her fingers. 'This is the spirit. This is who you really are. It looks like you. It moves like you.' She flaps the glove. 'This is the body. It looks like the spirit.' She flaps it again. 'The body is the temple of the spirit.' She puts her hand inside the glove and flexes her fingers. 'The spirit is the master of the body.' She eases

her hand out of the glove and lets it fall to the floor. It lies there still. 'On death the spirit leaves the body until the resurrection.'

This is when we learned that the body was so desirable that it was something to leave the presence of God and Heaven for. There was no guarantee – no promise at all – that we'd all make it back. Many of us wouldn't. But we knew that, and we voted to come down to earth anyway because these temporal, easily damaged shells were worth the effort. We wanted to look like our parents.

This is when we learned that the body was disposable. It was a separate entity. It could get sick and die because it was matter, but our spirits would never get sick and die. Even bad people who had lived bad lives and didn't have a hope in hell of returning back to the presence of our Heavenly Parents, would still regain their bodies in the resurrection and these bodies would be perfect, all infirmity and disease corrected, and all signs of injury and age and congenital deformity wiped away. It was a bonus gift from our First Parents, a reward for being brave enough to make the jump from their world into this one.

This is when we learned about treating the body well. About avoiding smoking and drinking. The damage these habits would cause to our bodies would be wiped away in the resurrection, but the habits of mind they taught us would still be there. We were told about the spirit prison, a kind of Mormon purgatory where spirits would wait in the period between the death of their bodies and the start of the resurrection. They would be without their bodies, but their spirits would crave and rave and cry out for the substances they had become addicted to.

There's a rumour about the specialness of our ugly building. *Special*, in this case, meant *eye-soreish*, and *strange*. It had hardly any windows and no upstairs, just a ground floor and a basement. The heating and ventilation system was expensive and inefficient – there were vents in all the rooms, and we kids could shout into them in the cultural hall and our booming echoing voices be

heard by our more obedient friends in the basement classrooms. If someone played the piano downstairs, the kids in the little nursery room upstairs could hear it. You could sit on the toilet and hear the disembodied booming of the priesthood meeting going on four rooms away.

But apparently, all of that was in service to a higher purpose. All LDS church meeting houses and temples are designed and approved from the church headquarters in Salt Lake City. There's a catalogue of different building plans that a local Bishop and Stake President can choose from, and the range is wide enough to account for local variations in climate and congregation size and the requirements of a world of planning departments. The Stake President at the time, apparently, flicked through this catalogue and was prompted by the Holy Ghost to choose our squat, bricky meetinghouse.

'That's a special design, very expensive to build. The foundations are extra-deep. There are steel girders running up and down every wall.'

'I'm being prompted that is the one for this ward.'

'They're earthquake proof. They're used in towns and cities on fault lines. The last one of these we approved was in California.'

The Stake President, as the story goes, raised his eyebrows. 'We're in the latter days. Maybe Heavenly Father is telling us we'll need a building like that sometime soon.'

And who could argue with that? The expensive, quakeproof, bomb-resistant building was ours, and we met in it, and I lived my childhood against those unclimbed bricks, green carpets, and amid the voices echoing through the walls.

Years later, the building was sold, and the congregation moved to a new meeting house across the city built in the Salt Lake style, with a small white spire and neat, easily maintained gardens. They've done away with the green interiors and the new church is bigger and looks like a proper church and not an earthquake-proof bunker. The old building was sold and now it is a medical centre,

the turned-out bricks on the outside still very climbable, but the ones on the inside covered with shiny white plastic panelling.

Twenty years or so after my lesson about the glove, I sat again in the old cultural hall, transformed now into a waiting room. I saw the screens and bricks and stacked hymnbooks against or behind or between the posters about smoking cessation and breastfeeding support and *verbal abuse will not be tolerated* warnings and I waited without any sense of foreboding at all for my name to be announced so a midwife could come and weigh me, measure my belly, listen to my extra heartbeat and so she could take my blood. I'm five months and two weeks away from the operating table.

Epiphanies, whether you like them in your literature or you don't, whether they wound you or wisen you, are Janus-faced. They have their evil twins and their doppelgängers too. They cast shadows. In *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* David Morris describes the 'apophany' – the faulty sense of 'aha!' and the wrong-headed noticing of interconnectedness that is one of the symptoms of PTSD.

Morris is a former Marine infantry officer who worked as a reporter in Iraq from 2004 to 2007. While out there, he hallucinated a portent of doom in the form of his doppelgänger, a matching ghost – right down to an identical pair of desert boots and battered paperback. On his return home the omen came to pass and Morris became sick. Apophenia was one of his symptoms. Safe at home, he watched out for snipers and prepared himself for a bomb. He connected his conversation with a friend to that friend's later injury. Meaning was everywhere, and what his sickened apprehension of cause and effect – his pattern-recognition sense – was telling him, was that talking about your feelings was dangerous, that the world was full of bombs. 'In the wake of trauma, the mind seems to develop a ravishing hunger for meaningful facts, the raw material from which a story can be fashioned,' he writes. 'Sometimes, and particularly with respect to traumatic narratives,

these stories take the form of portents and premonitions, as if the trauma in its unalloyed power is able to reach forward through time, disrupting the present.<sup>8</sup>

The word 'apophenia' was coined by a German scientist named Klaus Conrad (it comes from the Greek *apo*, away, and *phaenein*, to show) in 1958. He was writing about some phases of schizophrenia, during which unrelated details seem saturated in connections and meaning. Later, the Swiss neurologist Peter Brugger brought the term into the English language when he wrote 'From Haunted Brain to Haunted Science,' an essay collected in a 2001 volume about ghosts and poltergeists and demonic possessions and haunted houses. Apophenia, he said, was a weakness of human cognition: the 'pervasive tendency [...] to see order in random configurations,' an 'unmotivated seeing of connections,' the experience of 'delusion as revelation.'<sup>9</sup> Brugger's interest in apophany is a way of explaining the 'functional neuroanatomy of psychotic and paranormal belief' – a belief against all evidence that as a child you committed a murder you have since forgotten falls into that category, I think – and the first example he gives of this kind of delusion-as-revelation in action is of a writer.

In his essay we meet a German professor of chemistry called Ludwig Staudenmaier who lost the ability to consciously control his writing hand and developed a belief he had contacted ghosts, who were writing through him in a sickened process of inspiration – their thoughts, their stories, his body, his writing hand, his pen and paper. Staudenmaier started his career in the seminary – he was a Catholic priest and when he became a chemist, he wore his religious vestments in the lab. When this scientist-priest also became a writer, as Brugger tells it, he went mad – experiencing the writing process as an intrusion from without, feeling something that was not him was in control of his writing instrument. He saw evil faces, smelled sulphur and heard a voice he named as the Devil's. In other words, religion + science + art had sent his pattern-finding (or story-making) facility into overdrive and 'he

had lost the sense for the borders between perception and imagination, between experience and belief, and between volition and automaticity.’

Later in Brugger’s essay, he makes a link between August Strindberg’s *Inferno* and *From an Occult Diary* and full-blown apophenia. Strindberg saw gothic gargoyles, dragons and the Devil himself in the crumpled fabric of his pillows. He opened the Bible at random to find significant verses leaping out at him. The placement of the furniture in every room he entered signified ‘the obvious intention of making me the victim of persecution mania.’ The link here between apophenia and creativity is obvious and has been described and speculated on elsewhere. Brugger uses cognitive neuroscience to explore from where in the brain this out-of-control pattern recognition comes from but my take-away from his essay is that while the spiritually inclined, the artistic and the sick may exhibit exaggerated versions of it, apophenia is normal: we all see angels and dinosaurs and cats in the clouds. William Gibson, author of *Pattern Recognition*, has said this skill is what makes us human – the jury is out on whether animals can do it too. We like it when it happens – there’s a whole sub-genre of visual art and photography (Georges Joniaux, Matthew Shlian) that makes use of this universal human tendency.

There are limits to the spectrum of human creative endeavour, though. As long as other people can see your cloud animals too, you’re not sick. (Can you see what it is yet?) In a nutshell (don’t knock them – Hamlet would have lived in one if he’d been able to shed his own ghosts and nightmares): if there’s a social element to the manifestation – if someone else thinks you’re right, or if your insight causes you to do or believe something useful, it’s an epiphany. If you’re wrong, it’s an apophany. It’s the difference between faith and fanaticism. Apophanists see Christ’s face on a burnt piece of toast. Epiphanists find him in the Turin shroud. Apophanists are the sick, the deluded, the paranoid. They are the returning soldiers who search for snipers on the

roofs of supermarkets and they are the lovesick stalkers reading reciprocity in the arrangement of the blinds in the object of obsession's bedroom window. Epiphanists explode with insight and self-knowledge, connecting themselves to the rest of the world in ways that are comprehensible to others. Apophanists are mired in sticky delusions, joining meaningless details together in a whirl of illness and misunderstanding that makes them see ghosts, develop phobias, become suspicious of or angry at inanimate objects, doubt the motives of loved ones, write fantastically complex conspiracy theories about con-trails and UFOs and Big Government and in doing so disconnect from the world, creative, lonely, mad. In Sontag's terms, these conjoined twins are the border guards between the Kingdom of the Sick and the Kingdom of the Well.

The neurologist Bessel van der Kolk describes the difference between 'ordinary' and 'traumatic' memory in similar terms. What makes the difference isn't the substance of what is remembered, it is the purpose the narration of the memory constitutes. 'Ordinary memory is adaptive,' he says. 'Our stories are flexible and can be modified to fit the circumstances. Ordinary memory is essentially social: it is a story we tell for a purpose.' In comparison, 'there is nothing social about traumatic memory. Re-enactments are frozen in time and they are always lonely, humiliating and alienating experiences.'<sup>10</sup> when you give a PTSD sufferer a Rorschach test – which involves presenting her (*him* – as most of the studies have been done on combat veterans from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan) with a blurry invitation to create an image out of chaos – she doesn't see more patterns than anyone else – but she only sees patterns related to her original traumatic event.<sup>11</sup> Traumatized pattern finders see blood and guns and bombs. They see broken bodies when the rest of us might see elephants and vases and butterflies. The PTSD sufferer's apophenia (or imagination) isn't out of control – it is limited to one track, unhelpfully focused and repetitive.

And when it comes to fiction, unlike epiphanies, literary apophanies never happen at the end. Instead they are a way of starting, a faulty mustard seed bound to bloom into something bigger. Anthony Minghella's film adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* uses one to trigger the action that gets Tom out to Naples. It belongs to Herbert Greenleaf. He sees Tom's borrowed Princeton jacket, believes Tom is a Princeton student, and assumes Tom must know his errant son, Dickie. Later, the characters who connect Tom's facial features with Dickie's – the two men share a resemblance to each other, not doubles or doppelgängers, not dead ringers (I keep thinking of Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* here, the evil twin gynaecologists. It might be relevant, but all I can remember from the film is blood, and instruments for looking and hurting, and I will not watch it again), but like each other enough for acquaintances to mistake one for the other, to believe Tom is Dickie – allow the machine of the plot and the narrative line of Tom's actions, to continue running. Epiphanies are the full stops. Apophany is the 'once upon a time...' One is a sign. The other is a symptom. And to find out which one it is, you have to tell other people and see what they say.

It takes hours to drive home from the strange festival and I smell of mud and my feet are still wet. When I get to my house I get out of the car and go into the house. Before I've taken my boots off I am talking, spilling out the story I have prepared on the long, silent drive north. The words speak me. They tell the man who I live with, who has also suffered, that I am all better now, that things are going to be all right, that it's all over.

I ask if there's anything in the house to drink. No, not water. / I am still in bed typing, once upon a time...

## Off Topic: On Derailment

*What could you do better for your children and your children's children than to record the story of your life, your triumphs over adversity, your recovery after a fall, your progress when all seemed black, your rejoicing when you had finally achieved?*

Spencer W. Kimball, 'Angels May Quote From it,' *The New Era*, 1975

### #0

I'm on a train, on the way to a different literature festival where I have been tasked to give a fifteen-minute talk about death, and how writing helps us to live with death. (This is something I would like to know.) / When I was growing up my father and my maternal grandfather both worked at a factory that made the kind of slightly waterproof waxed cardboard packaging that frozen foods such as beef burgers and fish fingers are sold in. / I have options for this talk and at this late stage I have still not yet determined if I will go for the angle that understands writing to be a means by which to produce a monument to yourself and preserve the workings of your mind for long after your brain has rotted into nothing, or if I will instead talk about writing as a process by which we learn to pay attention more fully and taste our brief lifespans to the full (what if you pay attention to the wrong thing? What if it - the book, and life itself - tastes bad?) / I know very little about my father's work during this time, other than the fact it often took place at night, which meant we had to be very quiet during the day, and that he had a small black holdall which he always took with him, and inside it was an array of Stanley knives, coloured and black marker pens, and crayons. / I've booked a seat at a table so I can

use the power socket to type this, but the socket doesn't work and I am going to have to hand-write my talk on the title pages torn from the front of the paperback I have with me, which is Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost*. I am enjoying this book very much. / One of the perks of my father's job was that he often brought spare offcuts of cardboard back home for my siblings and I to draw on. Pencil and felt-tipped pen would slide right off the waxed and shiny surfaces, which was good for temporary secret messages, but biro was what you needed for longevity. / The man sitting opposite me watches me tearing at *Giving Up the Ghost* curiously. I love what she says about childhood in it: something about every single event that happens to you being appropriated by others, adults, who think they know what is going on in your head better than you do. She advises utter silence. Give them *nothing* to use against you. I write down the word 'nothing.' / Sometimes the sheets came as enormous oblongs that were kept upright between the back of the settee and the living room wall, and sometimes as stacks of smaller cuts, about the size of a slice of bread. / I only have a fountain pen and when I try to make my death-notes it bleeds through the rough cheap paperback paper I love so much. I wonder how Mantel's advice to say nothing applies to me, who wants to write a book that includes scenes from a childhood I am certain made me into a writer. I wonder how it applies to her. Writing the death talk becomes impossible. / With the smallest cuts we made our own playing cards, then sets of Top Trump cards, and stapled the edges of them together to become cardboard boxes, or the covers of tiny books. / When I give up and look out of the window the man opposite raises his eyebrows at me and asks me if I need to borrow a pen. / When I am still quite young, my mother tells me about a time she was making my bed and found a carefully stacked collection of these oblong cards under my pillow. I had used them to make a kind of deconstructed comic book. / I find myself explaining the situation to this man, this fellow passenger - not the subject of the talk, my feelings on that are too indeterminate to

get into right now – but how important it is that I am able to make notes during this journey, and how frustrated I am that the power socket doesn't work. / The first card showed a man sitting on a fence. Big cowboy boots and hat. The second showed a woman walking past. Calamity Jane? / The man offers to swap seats with me, and we both gather up our luggage and I am grateful, but not so grateful I want to have a conversation with him, which would defeat the purpose of me getting the plug to charge my computer and write, but in the end, the other plug socket does not work either. / The third card showed the two of them holding hands, hearts floating in the air around them. More cards showed them in their wedding clothes; a suit and a dress with a veil then in a car with tin cans attached to the back (I remember drawing that one. Having to draw the car in profile to show the cans dangling behind was difficult and I also struggled to demonstrate that it was moving, that they were driving away, from left (home) to right (off the page and away) and how do to that using only my biro.) / My fellow passenger is on a mission to be of assistance to me now, and he speaks to the ticket collector about the matter of the powerless plug sockets. 'This lady here needs some power to do her work,' he says. / The last card showed the two of them together again, and the woman in her own cowboy boots and hat (she had become like him) holding a baby. / The man's persistence in helping me is sort of annoying. He wants to help me so much and I do want to be helped, but I do not want him to do it. / 'I was so surprised,' my mother had said, 'you'd done an entire story on your own. / The ticket collector advises us that the whole carriage has an electrical problem and we should decant ourselves into just these seats but one carriage along, they are free, he says, and the power there is working just fine. / I didn't know what to say. I just put them right back where I had found them.' I am curious about why my mother never said anything or why she was surprised or why she'd put them back. / After some shuffling and rearranging of luggage we are in our new seats (yes, the man comes too: I don't

know why either, and it is getting even more annoying now) and the plug does work and I am able to get started on notes for my talk about death. I have some quotations I have been collecting, about finality and immortality, and I pull up the document. One of the quotations is from Susan Sontag, who writes about the 'obscene mystery' of death and while the man opposite me eats his sandwich then wipes his hands on a patterned handkerchief I stare out of the window and consider this word, 'obscene.' / I remember being embarrassed that I had been caught, and embarrassed by my mother's surprise or her embarrassment about what I'd been doing. It was the reproductive aspect of it, perhaps. What happened in the gaps between the cards. / My granddad used to call me Calamity Jenn. Or perhaps he just called me it once, when I tripped over the pattern in the carpet and fell and knocked over his ashtray. I really was very clumsy - always falling over and hurting myself. I was often bruised. Calamity! / Or perhaps it was the fact that I had an inner life and she had not expected that to develop so quickly. / I have been paying attention to the wrong thing. / It comes to me that I learned to make stories like this, a run of discrete events, each caused directly by the one before it. / It is, frankly, no wonder at all that I am struggling now.

## #1

Having failed to find a beginning and failed to get better, I proceed. In the underwhelming aftermath of my healing I attempt to write an academic essay about the history of prayer and the physical. I begin the work quite interested in whether prayer is something you do with your body, or your tongue, or your hands, or your mind. In that sense, it seems very like writing to me - which is about silence as much as it is about 'voice' and has a peculiar relationship with the writer's body, and disembodiment. I decide there might be some mileage in characterising prayer as a type of

work, and comparing the products and processes of spiritual and creative labour. But the essay goes nowhere. I abandon it halfway through and drag and drop the file into the folder buried deep in my Dropbox I call 'the graveyard.'

The man who I live with tells me the reason I can't write the story I hope will become a novel about the woman who has a baby and then sets about the work of going mad, praying and writing is because I don't sleep and that one of the reasons I don't sleep is because I insist on watching serial killer shows on YouTube before bed. It's not just the subject matter, he says, it's the quality of the light on the screen hitting my retina that suppresses my melatonin, or something like that. He says I have no sleep hygiene. That I read and work in bed and my mind does not associate this place of ours – our white sheets and Ikea pillows – as a place for sleep. I need to compartmentalise more (*I can't stop connecting things, I want to say, it's part of the problem*). It's past midnight (I hadn't noticed) and he turns out the light and all night long my head spins like Shelob, weaving sticky threads.

I'm thinking about shapes, I think, or containers: the things we build to hold other things, and I am nearly there but there's something on the radio about fracking along the Lancashire coast; there's going to be a protest in front of the County Hall in Preston. I should go, but my mind slips and I can't hold it. Too late. And I can't hold it. Now I'm wondering again about dead babies: guilt washing over me like tar. The protest is planned for October but it won't help; Cuadrilla has already brought in the drills. There's something I had in my hand – I could feel the shape of it, I remember holding it, but not what it was.

There's a name for this: the flight of thought, the derailment of the way the brain interrupts itself; the leaps and breaches of association that used to be the prelude to a novel but is now a type of sickness. A doctor told me I have intrusive thoughts and because he said that, I now think of the threads my mind makes not as woven things I fashion while sitting staring out of windows,

but as foreign objects forcing themselves into my body from the outside, like knives, or bullets. R.D. Laing in his poetry collection *Knots* made an attempt to commit to writing these sort of sickened thinkings, claiming in his introduction to the pieces that they have a kind of 'formal elegance.' It does not feel elegant to have them: there is little of literary interest in my paranoid imaginings. I have to defend myself against them – the constant inward jump-cut. Is that why I am thinking about containers? I remember knowing but I do not know now.

Recently in *The Paris Review* the literary critic Jeff Dolven described the rail of the sentence as 'an image of sanity.' These sentences, and perhaps the novels made out of them, are 'capable of organising the parts of speech into a whole; a logical subject, capable of managing the rules of argument, premise and consequence; a rhetorical subject, aware of self and audience and the difference between them. Each sentence released into the world,' he says, 'is a little promise that the person it comes from has an analogous integrity.'<sup>1</sup> But my sentences will not do this. / I can't make a novel out of this. I must write about myself without the fig leaf of story or expertise or authority. So be it. I have been trained to do that: to write autobiographically. To keep a record.

Once upon a time, my mother, who once had a poem published in *Jackie*, but had chosen babies over books, had a daughter whose name was Jennifer. She wrote a poem for her daughter: the firstborn.

*A head so wise for such a size,  
A mother's pride and joy.  
Put down your books,  
Your knowing looks,  
And play with just one toy!*

The daughter was neither one thing nor the other. At sixteen, she'd wear cut-up clothes and black T-shirts held together by

safety pins and shiny plastic trousers then carry a Barbie backpack with a teddy she'd had when she was a baby sticking out of it. Or she'd spend a lot of time doing her makeup with lots of eyeliner and purple and green eye shadow, imagining that when she closed her eyes her lids looked like a peacock's tail. She'd spend hours over it, but she couldn't sustain things. She'd make all that effort, then go out in a jumper with holes in and her hair all sticking up at the back because she'd not washed or brushed it that day or for many days.

And the room where she shut herself away from her mother was like that too. No compartmentalisation. No follow through. She'd insisted on painting it herself when they moved in: a sickly shade of baby pink, with a bright pink feather boa draped around the lampshade so even the light was a sticky pink colour but there was no coherence to the theme because she also had a giant poster over her bed that was a blown up version of one of the police crime scene photographs taken at the suicide of Kurt Cobain in the garage of his Seattle home in 1994.

Cobain, miserable and heroin-addicted, had shot himself up and then shot himself in the head – a perforating gunshot wound, which *Dr. G: Medical Examiner* teaches me means in one side, and out the other. The hole out of the back is always bigger than the one in through the front because the bullet is deformed and its trajectory made uneven by its passage through the skull.

Regard it: they took the photograph from outside the garage door. The shot is enclosed by the outline of the wooden door frame, the eye led by the geometric patterns on the tiled floor along the line of his leg and outstretched arm, hand in a loose fist, towards a crouching figure. This is a shiny-shoed police officer, head out of shot, hands wrapped around a clipboard. He's writing: taking down the detail perspective hides from us voyeurs because as far as we're concerned, peeking through that garage door, there is no smashed-up head, no skull fragments and sprayed-around brain tissue, not even any blood. He's the *punctum* in the picture – this

writing man. Note taking at the scene of horror. The way even a bullet through the head won't stop the endless telling and being told about. Elsewhere in the picture you can just about see the cigar box Cobain kept his spoons and syringes in. But if you knew what had happened to him and when the photograph had been taken – and everyone did, they were selling T-shirts printed with his suicide note within a year of his death – the smashed-up head and blood were there anyway, in your mind, which was worse, and it was an awful poster to have stuck up like wallpaper over your bed where you could stare at it every time you lay down to sleep.

When the daughter was shut up in her room she was writing. She was far from being a good Mormon girl but even bad Mormon girls are encouraged to keep journals and she excelled in this area, hoarding every detail of every conversation, every trip to the shops, every interesting song lyric and funny thing her brother said and detailed outlines of Sunday school classes and Mormon Youth Conventions and Fast and Testimony Meetings and Firesides and Ward Socials and all manner of other activities. The journals were huge hard-backed notebooks that bulged open because she taped in receipts and bus tickets and all the ephemera that provided evidence that the events she had recorded were true: she really was there and this really did happen.

In the front of one of these volumes Jennifer has taped in a handout from a Sunday School lesson. The handout is festooned with 1990s clip-art: books, inkwells and old-fashioned quill pens. There's a filleted list of quotations from a talk about journal keeping given by President Spencer W. Kimball, the man who was prophet of the church when she was born. The talk is called 'The Angels May Quote From It' and if you think that sounds like a threat, well, you'd be right – it landed that way for Jennifer, who even in her private moments felt observed. Kimball reimagines Moses as a diarist, the first five books of the Old Testament his personal record. He quotes passages from the Book of Mormon, where Jesus tells the Nephites and Lamanites (in Mormon

mythology, the native inhabitants of America – Semitic peoples, chosen ones) to make careful records of their lives, their societies, their successes and failures. The church itself, Kimball claims, is based on the personal, detailed records that the first prophet, Joseph Smith, kept of his seeking after God, and which became another holy Mormon book: the Doctrine and Covenants.

‘Accordingly, we urge our young people to begin today to write and keep records of all the important things in their own lives,’ he says. Kimball is quick to define what is important and to list what belongs in a journal, which could be the private story of a life, a way of speaking and listening at the same time (that’s how Mina Harker puts it), and what does not. ‘Your own private journal should record the way you face up to challenges that beset you,’ Kimball says. But success stories only, please. ‘Personally I have little respect for anyone who delves into the ugly phases of the life he is portraying, whether it be his own or another’s. The truth should be told, but we should not emphasise the negative. Even a long life full of inspiring experiences can be brought to the dust by one ugly story. Why dwell on that one ugly truth about someone whose life has been largely circumspect?’ (What if ugly truth is all you have?).

Jennifer took Kimball’s advice seriously. She wrote daily. If she’d been out and about too much, she’d panic to get back to her journal, knowing that she couldn’t live too much, or there wouldn’t be the time to write it up. Experience had to be halved, then doled out in manageable portions because recording it in proper detail took much longer than living through it. And a detailed, complete record was important because the purpose of the journal was to record inspiring experiences for her posterity – it was assumed and expected that she would have children – and that this record would, if she wrote regularly and honestly – constitute a piece of living evidence of God’s hand in her life. Experience, translated into words, could corroborate theology.

While she knew the purpose of the journal was to be read by her children, she still worried about her day-to-day privacy. In

the late 1990s, Jennifer experimented with codes and alternative alphabets. The writing needed to be inaccessible to her mother, but easy enough for future generations to decode and access the theological confirmation they were entitled to inherit from her. She tried to learn Pitman's shorthand from a library book. She invented a numerical code that was too laborious to use. Eventually, she trained herself to write mirror style, producing a reflected replica of her own handwriting quickly enough to be able to knock out a few pages a day, and perfectly legible when viewed through a mirror.

The solution seemed perfect and her anxieties about longevity were quelled until the day she flicked back through an earlier volume and saw that the cheap paper in the notebook had caused the fountain pen ink to blur and fade and bleed between the pages. Months and months of work – tens of thousands of backwards words – were decaying before her eyes and though she could read them now, just about, if she didn't do something about it her as yet unborn children would be presented with nothing but a yellowed set of Rorschach tests.

The daughter did what she could, which meant buying an old manual typewriter from a charity shop and attempting to type up the pages. She'd sit on the floor, leaning against her bed, with her legs stretched right out like Kurt Cobain's and the typewriter on the floor between her knees. The noise of it clattering and banging was something incredible, and this apparent solution bred several more problems for her.

First, the time she had to actually do things had to be reduced. She couldn't live a day, write up that day, and type up a day or two from the spoiling pages. There just wasn't enough time. Something needed to give.

Second, even presuming she did have the time; there was the problem of recollection, completeness and accuracy. Very often, when copying up the events of a day, she'd remember things that she hadn't recorded at the time. Should she add them to the

record, for the sake of completeness? Or should she retain the record exactly as it was set down at the time?

Thirdly, if much of a day's activity involved typing up a previous day's record, and thinking about that, re-remembering it, for example, did that typing and thinking and worrying count also as something she'd done *today* and if so, did it need to be recorded again, and if so, how might she do that?

(She did not go out much, this Jennifer. She would not go to school. She refused Girl Guides, and most of the church camps. She declined regular music lessons and a book group. She preferred not to type indoors, but there was work to be done.)

The answer came. Some of the service work Jennifer did for her church involved typing up old census records from paper facsimile copies into a digital database the church was creating at their Family History Centre. Helping to digitise these records was another way of preserving the facts of the past for the children of the future and all the young people doing this work were told, very clearly, that if there were repetitions or spelling mistakes included in the census records, they needed to type them into the database exactly as they were and should not make any clarifications or additions. The handwriting was old-fashioned and cramped, and they must also be extremely diligent in not adding in any errors of their own caused by misreading.

Jennifer thought for a while and eventually came up with a solution to the fading journal problem by using the red typewriter ribbon. She typed up the journal exactly as she had first written it, and any amendments she wanted to make, she did in red, to indicate they were later additions. The work became a tangled and evil set mess of today's writing self talking back to yesterday's writing self, the most narcissistic (and lonely, as all self-centred people are) of sub-literary collaborations.

The American novelist and essayist Heidi Julavits started out as a diarist too. In her meandering, time-out-of-joint collection of daily meditations *The Folded Clock: A Diary* she wrote about

looking back over her teenage diaries and expecting to see an embryonic writer there. She fantasised, as I have, as every teenage diary writer has, of the posthumous time when her 'literary fame might bestow upon them an artistic and biographical value.' What she found was the mind, 'not of a future writer, but of a future paranoid tax auditor.'<sup>2</sup>

There are about three years of my journal entries that are basically unreadable, that look like a bad draft of *The House of Leaves*, that record, even though they desperately did not want to reveal it, the ugliness of a troubled mind. When I read the journals I find a girl who was writing, not for the posthumous literary biographers, but for the angels, who were always there with their calculators and weighing scales and ledgers. She does not narrate her misery, but it shows. I am astonished, now that I must write in bed, through the night, in order to have the time, at how many hours Jennifer spent on this work.

I stopped writing in my journal when I was twenty-seven and in the middle of writing *The Friday Gospels*. The work on that novel involved three years of examining a story – I think of it sometimes like the long white dress I was baptised in – I had inherited that would not, no matter what damage I did to my body, ever fit me. I cast the dress and my journal aside at the same time: the entries tailed away in the first few weeks after the birth of my son and I wrote to the church headquarters and resigned my membership when he was six months old, which is a kind of self-excommunication or act of spiritual suicide. I was entering another ugly phase of life: there was no good news fit for the angels to quote, and the angels weren't listening anyway. Sometimes I think about starting it up again, but the six/seven/eight-year breach in the line of my daily train of thought would bother me forever: it's too much to get over.

There are fifty-six notebooks stacked into towers – like Babel – and they gather dust, waiting like tubes of radium on the very top of my office bookshelves. Even now the old-fashioned sound

of a typewriter carriage returning makes me feel anxious and guilty: when I'm not typing, I'm playing truant. When I'm typing, I'm truanting too. A girl can't win.

## #2

Though this anxiety provoked by typewriters could indeed be an inherited traumatic memory. The machine is hardly a tool of my trade - not anymore - but I do own a typewriter made in the Olivetti factory in the Queenslie estate, Glasgow. It is pale blue - robin egg, some might call it - and the case is buff beige leather lined with red and white tartan. It is a relic; they don't even make ribbons for it anymore but I won't throw it away because even though I can't be sure, it is very likely the typewriter was made at the same time when my grandfather's brother, Eddie, worked there. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine or hope that he laid his own hands on it at some point?

Maybe not. He was a machinist in this factory, and at some point in the mid to late 1970s while working on a machine that cut and moulded sheets of metal to form the curved cases that enclose the keys, his hand was dragged into the machine. In an industrial accident that marked the end of his working life and the beginning of his slow death, he lost the index finger and thumb on his right hand. The compensation he was awarded as the result of this accident allowed him to step up his drinking to the point where only a few years later he was found in an alleyway, drunk and dead with his head smashed open.

A relative told me about this, on a long drive back from Glasgow after attending a funeral for another member of the Glaswegian family: a right pair of English family delegates, we were - except I was, English - that is - and she wasn't. She's kept her accent and I inherited one from my mother until school wore it off me and I can't even fake one anymore. She told me she'd

gone up with Granddad for the funeral, and afterwards helped clear out Eddie's flat. It was sad, she said. She told me about the unwashed frying pan and the broken clothes maiden she found in there. About how what was left of Eddie's compensation money had passed on to Granddad, who had used it for pretty much the same thing Eddie had.

Can you grieve people you don't know? Can you inherit a fear of typewriters and a taste for booze? At the funeral I sing a hymn I don't know and I selfishly marvel about how the writing has caught my head in its crosshairs: a great uncle who made typewriters, another relative in the library book supply business. One of the downstairs flats in the tenement block my Glasgow family lives in has a polished plate on the door like a turned up coffin lid with my initial and the surname I was born with – my English father's name – engraved onto it. Some coincidence. Is this predestination or paranoid apophenia? I have a grandfather and father who worked in a paper factory. All this, and me with the luck to be born glib and sceptical and with a knack for words, a talent, they said, but one that felt less like a coin than a slow trepanning. My God-hurt head has a hole in it or needs one; to let the world in, or out – I can't ever decide.

And anyway, I did know Eddie once. For an afternoon. Him on a rare holiday southwards to England, me two years old and wearing white tights and patent shoes. There was a bagpipe player on a council run green in Ingol, Preston, playing *Scotland the Brave*. While we listened to the throb and wail of the pipes Eddie picked me up and, complimenting me on my baby-fat thighs, told my mother I had 'braw wee legs for a kilt.' I don't remember him saying that: this is something my mother told me later, along with the plans the doctors proposed to fix his ruined hand by amputating a toe and grafting it into the gap. The operation never happened and I never met him again. But thirty-two/three/four years after his holiday I can still see my shoes and the whiteness of my tights. The grass is wet and cold. I am afraid of the bagpipe

players, of their giant black hats and the sad groaning of the music they make.

### #3

Here is something I did not write in my journal. In 1995 my mother left home and husband and emerged into the light after a decade and a half of a bad marriage. Amidst the wreckage of a family, she stopped sleeping at night and, during her dark-eyed days, began rollercoastering. She knew about the sadness of trains, about the way they run in circles, going nowhere, trapped on their tracks. About the oddness of being strapped in tight, still and in motion at the same time.

I don't mean 'rollercoastering' figuratively, and I do not deploy the story as a way of speaking about her emotions, to which I did not and do not have access. What I am saying is, she rode a rollercoaster: sometimes three or four times a day, several times in a week. At that time the Pepsi Max Big One was the fastest, longest, highest rollercoaster in the world. It had cost twelve million pounds to build and it was so big it had taken three months to construct. While it was being put together the pieces of the ride were stored in air hangars in Blackpool Airport. Everyone in the North was very proud of it because it not only beat the Alton Towers rollercoaster into a cocked hat but it also blew the crazy Japanese rollercoasters that went upside down and under the ground and gave you whiplash (and were probably only myths, but all the same) out of the water. When it opened it was on the news, and so we all, in our overlooked part of the world, felt a little bit famous.

(In the spirit of apophenia, the great disorganising principle of this book, I'm going to detour here and mention that the company who made the Pepsi Max Big One - Arrow Entertainments - was originally based in Salt Lake City, Utah. The state generally

and the city in particular is a kind of Mecca for British Mormons who equate Utah with Zion and would – as my mother did – make infrequent pilgrimages to visit it. We had a framed picture of the Salt Lake Temple in our living room: it was directly and indirectly communicated to me that a worthy life goal would be the ambition to be married there.)

The Pepsi Max Big One had a gift shop that sold mugs and mouse mats and key rings in leather and plastic. You could have any of these things printed with a photograph of yourself on the rollercoaster because there was a camera at the bottom of one of the steep drops which went off as each carriage rattled past it. If you didn't like the photograph – and the rollercoaster really was so fast that the pictures showed most people screaming, with their eyes closed or bulging out of their heads, and the skin on their faces stretched out in strange ways – then you could also buy any of these things printed with the famous silhouette of the rollercoaster itself in black, gold or red. The silhouette was actually very impressive and in real life it was visible all the way from Southport at least (when the weather was fine).

On one of her trips to the rollercoaster – perhaps her very first – my mother bought one of the little leather key rings printed with the outline of the ride and kept it not with her house keys but tucked into the inside pocket of her handbag where she also kept the card with a picture of Jesus coming out of the tomb on the front and the Mormon Articles of Faith printed out in full on the back. Every time she went on The Big One she'd make a snip or a notch in the leather of the key ring with a pair of scissors. Maybe there was a discount for a regular rider or a certificate on offer to celebrate the hundredth ride and the key ring was her way of proving what she'd done, *for reals*. When I was getting ready to leave home for good, just before my seventeenth birthday, I found bunches of the cut-up key rings in a drawer in the kitchen and realised if that was her goal, my mother must have met or exceeded it months before. There were about a dozen of them.

At the time I might have laughed, might have rolled my eyes, might have barely registered the significance of it. Everyone's parents are unutterably strange when you're seventeen: the fact of her eccentricity was one of the little things that made me feel ordinary. But now I wonder if she'd stopped riding the rollercoaster or if she'd just given up counting. And if she had, did that mean that meeting her goal wasn't the point of it any more for her - it was the journey? I think that it might have been, because that was something she was always telling me about my exams and life more generally - we weren't to think too much about the end results, but were just to enjoy the ride and learn as much as we could. If she'd stopped riding the rollercoaster did that mean that she had been sick, and now she was better? Or did stopping mean she'd given up entirely on recovering from the ailment that interrupted her sleep?

I never asked. I never wrote about this in my journal. But I found something else too. A photograph she must have bought from the gift shop after one of her rides. *Regard the pain of others*: this photograph is Polaroid sized and mounted in a shiny cardboard frame with the silhouette of the roller coaster embossed onto it in gold. The colours were bad, the white and grey sky in the background of the shot washed out and blurred. You can't see much, but you can see enough. In this photograph my mother is sitting at the front of her carriage with one person to her left and two behind her. Strangers, I think: she usually went alone. The other three are screaming, their mouths wide open, their faces bulging with fright. You can see the hands of the people sitting behind, right up in the air - that was the thing to do, get your picture taken with your hands waving about to show that you weren't scared and didn't need to hold on - and you can tell the carriage was moving fast because everyone's hair is flying around and sticking straight up from the top of their heads. But Mum is an old hand at this now and in the picture she is sitting there staring right at the camera. She doesn't have her hands in the air but she's

not holding on either. She's just sitting with her hands folded in her lap, her mouth closed, her expression and maybe her mind, entirely blank. Perhaps this is praying.

#### #4

The hours pass slowly in the dark. Even with sleep hygiene applied, I still can't sleep, so I quietly fire up my laptop and talk to my Australian friend over iMessage about the difficulty of it – of finding the words. We've decided to call this bit of the writing process – the nasty part – 'crawling through the shit-pipe' after Andy Dufresne's prison-breaking antics in Stephen King's novella 'Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption.' The moral of the dirty fairy story we tell each other has moving parts, depending on what the day requires:

- a) You've got to really want something if you're willing to dig yourself a hole through a solid wall and belly crawl through a pipe filled with sewage in order to get it.
- b) Shit is inevitable. Nobody forced you to do it.
- c) A boat and the blue sea are waiting.
- d) I'm Andy, waiting for her on the beach at Zihuatanejo while she finishes her first novel.
- e) I'm Red, locked up inside, penitent and too scared to be made hopeful by her courage.

It's a birth metaphor, of course, and Stephen King repeated it ten years later in *Desperation*. David Carver is a little boy who strips naked and soaps himself up so he can slide unscathed between the bars of his prison cell. David speaks to God – if *Desperation* was *Lord of the Flies*, David would be Simon – and like Andy, he has an affinity for holes. It's David's special knowledge that reveals

the Desperation Mining Corporation are to blame for releasing the monster. To fix this, David and his motley group need to go back to the China Pit (the exposed mine shaft, earth's wound – American kids don't dig down to Australia, they dig across, to China) and seal the evil back up. These sticky and painful births/prison breaks (painful for David and Andy, that is) are the start of things. Birth is how plot gets underway.

From this structural metaphor we learn that births aren't bombs or knives or the shattering end and that mother isn't even a secondary character, she's just a pipe full of shit or an unyielding pair of prison bars or a hole in the ground that, like Carrie White, needs plugging the fuck up.

I tell my friend, who is drinking her morning coffee and just about to start her sunny day, that when I was little and we went on days out to Blackpool I'd dig holes on the beach to bury my father, or to watch the frothy water rise up like magic from the bottom, or in productive moods, to shovel my way through to Australia. I had no concept of the country, other than everything was upside down there and, like Narnia, the Australian winter was uninterrupted by Christmas. She's there for the summer months and she promises to send me a picture of Santa on the beach in his board shorts.

There's a piece of biomythography<sup>3</sup> circulating in my family about both Australia and Blackpool. One of those near-miss, might-have-been, type of stories. If it weren't for the pull of the 1960s bingo halls and the Pleasure Beach my Glaswegian grandparents enjoyed during the annual Glasgow fair – the Scottish equivalent of the Wakes weeks, an annual synchronised holiday for industrial communities in the north (for a while, Morecambe was known as Bradford-on-Sea, because all the millworkers would decant there each August, whole streets of families reconstructing their neighbourly relations in rows of sea-front B+B's), they'd have gone 'Down Under' as some of the last Ten Pound Poms. Which means, in some world through the looking glass, I'd have been Australian

and not my father's daughter. But Granny loved Blackpool so much they moved to Preston, where Granddad started working in the paper factory and they lived their first English years in a little council house on a street named after Dunbar, the Scottish *makar*.

## #5

See how it circles? See how the apophenic mind digs and webs and threads its fate? Take a breath. We'll wait here a while – stick to the murky mud of the northwest coast, where my mother rides her rollercoaster, going round and round and getting nowhere.

In 1895 the central pleasure pier in Morecambe collapsed. It was a Monday morning – the second week in September, and the pier was crowded with children and families getting a healthy dose of the damp air. The sun looks low at that time of year: the mudflats shine and shimmer, the sky is the same colour as the sea, as the sand – the horizon could be a photograph turned upside down, and if you stare long enough, the earth spins and perspective buckles. On solid ground, you get seasick.

On this day, the iron gratings and piers, later judged to be too slender for the weight of the crowd, suddenly broke down. Everybody fell into the water. Those who died, died quickly, inhaling lungfuls of the freezing bay and drowning. Those who lived were treated by William Thorburn, a Manchester based spinal surgeon and neurologist, for 'railway spine.' Thorburn noticed that the individuals who'd been fished out of the water, as well as some of the lucky ones who'd watched the pier collapse from the safety of the beach, had started to suffer from some of the same symptoms reported by survivors of railway accidents – the shakes, phantom pains, changes in disposition, lethargy, disruptions to sleep.

This strange illness, a kind of concussion of the nerves, had always been called 'railway brain' or 'railway spine' but years later Thorburn gave a lecture to the society of medicine. He'd had time to connect the events on Morecambe beach with the railway disasters he already knew about and with the first reports of shell neuroses coming over from France. He'd read the work of Erichsen, who was the first to suggest that the problem wasn't with a jolt or concussion to spine or the brain affecting the nervous system, but with the uncharted territory of the head. The threads had started to stick, and 'traumatic neurosis' was born.

## #6

The two conceptual metaphors (by which I mean, the rails we use to thread our thoughts along when plain words fail us) of the bomb and the railway line come together in the letters of Wilfred Owen. Owen, who taught us that sometimes prayer and blasphemy are indistinguishable. Poor out-of-his-head Wilfred Owen, who named the inciting incident of his own aftermath the 'embankment shell shock'<sup>4</sup> and described for his friend the night and day he spent lying in a railway cutting, blown into the soil, buried alive and waiting, next to a body. He went into the ground well – well enough, anyway – and was dug out of his hole with a mind uncoupled from itself. The train – the line, the cutting, the embankment – seem as central to his conception of how it began, as the bomb itself. His account forms a junction between pre- and post-Freudian ways of thinking about trauma and it also hints at something I suspect: the 'impossible history'<sup>5</sup> or un-narratable aspect of trauma isn't the traumatising event – not always – but it's the 'now' of aftermath. 'Not then was their evil hour,' writes Siegfried Sassoon, 'but now.'<sup>6</sup>

## #7

A disrupted childhood should provide me with enough material for hundreds of novels. But there's so little there. For a while – I am not sure how long – I lived in a children's home. I remember precisely four things concerning it. One: I arrived, I think, unexpectedly, or perhaps in some kind of emergency and I didn't bring any clothes with me. I assume this because I remember being out somewhere with the other children, coming back to the home, and seeing all my clothes piled on my new bed. Every single item of clothing I owned. I think that was the first morning, and my parents must have brought them while I was out. On top of the pile was a giant bar of Galaxy chocolate – the size you only get at Christmas. There was a message here: this was not going to be a short stay. And something else, to be inferred from the chocolate, but I don't know what it was they were trying to communicate. I ate all of the chocolate while everyone else was in bed, and vomited it up again. Two: I cut my foot on a piece of glass in the garden. One of the keyworkers took me to casualty, and waited with me while the foot was x-rayed. The x-rays were given to her in one of the reusable type envelopes. Spleen. Ankle. Rib. (She assumed the envelope was my personal envelope, and that I'd been x-rayed many times before.) They keyworker had a dark purple birthmark on one of her cheeks: it spread across her eye and back over her temple towards her hairline. We all called her Sideburn because of it and she pretended she didn't mind but I knew she did. Three: it was my birthday while I was there. Another keyworker took me into the office and gave me the Argos catalogue. She consulted a grid in a ring binder and told me that twelve-year-olds (was I twelve? I have my files now and I could check that kind of thing, but I don't want to go near that stuff again) were entitled to choose any item up to the value of £10.95. She said it like this, 'ten pounds and ninety-five pence,' like she was telling me the price of something

particular I wanted to buy, and while I remember the number, I don't recall what I chose, nor if I got it. Four: when I went back to my mum and dad's house (it was never home again), I saw a letter from the council addressed to my parents, and about me. It was a bill for my keep while I had been 'accommodated.' That was how I learned that I'd been placed there, and not taken away. These four little things are all I have. I suppose I could use them for something at some point.

## #8

After shell shock and Freud, when trains steaming into tunnels started to mean something else, the railway persists. Eight years after Agatha Christie's own eleven-day breach in time - the time she went missing during the early part of December 1926 (volunteers looking for her dredged a lake - it turned out she'd checked herself into a health spa claiming to be the mother of a dead baby, and for the rest of her life she would neither explain nor remember this time), and only eighteen months after her own cross-European train journey home from an archaeological dig (there's someone making holes again - it won't go away) in Nineveh (you must be thinking now, as I am, of a God-hunted/haunted man called Jonah being eaten alive by a whale. That'll teach him to run) was interrupted by floods (yes - a world-covering tsunami) that washed parts of the track away, she publishes her most famous novel: the one where Poirot gets onto a train and loses his right mind entirely.

At the opening of *Murder on the Orient Express* Poirot is travelling home from Aleppo in the aftermath of the suicide of a French soldier. The details of this case and the suicide itself are mysteriously elided - mere prefatory material, to explain Poirot's presence in the east and get him onto that train. *Murder in Mesopotamia*,

published three years later, covers the period of time immediately before Poirot boards the express: he's in Syria, we learn, 'disentangling some army scandal' though the case itself – and the suicide referred to in *Orient Express* – isn't dramatised.

Between these two novels is a little gap – a breach. The 2010 television adaptation of the story fills it in: Suchet's Poirot's denouement of the Syrian military crime is so complete that the French soldier who perpetrated it fires a bullet through his own head during his speech. Poirot/Suchet is standing near enough for the blood to hit his face: he barely flinches. In Christie's own *Orient Express*, however, there are only the merest hints about what happened followed by a rapid and motivated forgetting. What starts as 'a very distinguished officer had committed suicide' becomes a 'delicate mission' and eventually merely 'a little affair in Syria' before the facts of the event, if not the impression they have made on their witness, drop out of the novel entirely.

There's plenty of reason to think that Poirot hasn't been able to shrug off the scene he has witnessed/caused quite so easily, though. During the first evening, as the train travels towards Calais and away from Istanbul, his guts are troubling him: 'the food in Syria was not, perhaps, suited to my stomach.' He goes to bed and inside his little compartment he has a restless night and is unable to sleep. Is he guilty? Is the crack of that gunshot and the smell of brains and blood on his mind? 'Decidedly I suffer from the nerves,' he says, and then he can't quite place the bumps in the night that follows: 'I must have had the *cauchemar*.' Is he anticipating or remembering? The apophenic mind is always busy sticking past to future. Poirot loses time: there's a little gap and an entire hour goes missing as the train passes through time zones, rupturing, temporarily, cause and effect and disrupting his reconstruction of the events around the murder. A touch of railway spine?

We all know that in Poirot's missing evil hour a man is stabbed and stabbed and stabbed in a controlled orgy of revenge. In Christie's novel he's drugged unconscious and insensible while

the stabbing takes place. It's a cowardly act: a craven kind of vengeance. In the 2010 television adaptation, which is bloodier, more brutal, Samuel Ratchett/Lanfranco Cassetti (child murderer/victim in transit) is drugged into paralysis but remains conscious, and, the implication is, able to understand and feel exactly what is happening. Can you imagine what that is like? To lie there, drugged into stillness, to be able to see and hear and feel, and to be stabbed? I know what that is like. The child murderer bleeds and the train stops, halted on its tracks by unexpected heavy weather.

*Orient Express* is great for double spotting: pretty much everybody in it is themselves, and somebody else: some other character shed at the site of a tragedy back in America. Poirot himself doubles and splits in this story too. Colonel Arbuthnot, searching for somebody to deal with the snow on the tracks and the inconveniently broken journey, mistakes Poirot for the director of the line. The suspect the passengers invent – a crowd-sourced fiction of their guilty imaginations – is ‘the mythical small dark man with a womanish voice’ who wears a moustache and looks like nobody on the train except Poirot himself, though he does not notice this.

Poirot's last-minute booking onto the train – ‘like destiny’ – is only accepted because the mysterious M. Harris doesn't turn up for the ride. “A name of good omen,” said Poirot. “I read my Dickens, M. Harris, he will not arrive.” And of course he doesn't arrive and Poirot becomes the stand-in for the mysteriously, conspicuously and conveniently absent Harris, because Mrs Harris is a ghost, she doesn't exist, other than in the pages of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in the mind of his character Mrs Gamp, where Mrs Harris, quoted often, is only ‘a phantom of Mrs Gamp's brain [...] created for the express purpose of holding visionary dialogues with her on all manner of subjects.’ We can go back to Dickens to learn that Gamp is no saint: she's a sloppy pisshead, a midwife and a postpartum nurse. When needed, she lays out the dead. Perhaps Mrs Gamp is a prayerful woman too, and the interlocutor for these

visionary conversations, Mrs Harris, is her God. As she stands by with her bottle at the beginning and end of things, no wonder Gamp needed her Mrs Harris.

At the end of *Orient Express*, Poirot is separated from his better self when he 'retires from the case' without calling in the authorities or making his usual conclusive denouement. The crime is, he says, 'a perfect mosaic' – his paranoid reading of the action – *everybody's in on it* – is surely correct – but still, he won't denounce. It's a breach in protocol; he provides two options and leaves the suspects themselves to decide. He's out of his mind, off his head: the good Catholic, letting a train full of murderers get away with it. What's wrong with him?

Maybe it's because he remembers the hole in the head, the blood on his face, in his mouth. His apophenia is kicking in. *That's* what you get when you tie up the ends in a neat little bow and get too sure of yourself – when you use 'the direct method.' He doesn't dare do his party trick again, not so soon. So he lurches off the rails, heading rapidly towards his own end, which arrives many years later in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*.

Now an old man, Poirot finally allows himself to take matters into his own hands and becomes a murderer. A proper murderer, this time, not just the one who stands by and hastens the death, the one who sees the blood fly but does not handle the weapon. This time, the gun is in Poirot's hands. The relief of surrendering to what he always knew was coming must have been immense. The hole in the skull has haunted him since that nasty little business in Syria – the one he can barely remember these days. Hercule rises from his wheelchair to shoot a hole clean through Norton's forehead. The hole gives itself away and is a kind of love letter to Hastings, who, on reading Poirot's posthumous confession, remembers the neatness of the wound, its bull's-eye location 'so symmetrically in the middle of the forehead' (people who kill themselves are never as neat as that: Cobain was *a mess*) and understands what it might mean: Poirot has gone mad – he's

playing God now. '[T]he mark on Norton's forehead - it was like the brand of Cain.'<sup>7</sup>

After he's dispatched his murderer, Hercule Poirot takes himself and his broken, ailing heart to bed, and waits for death. Death, which, according to Suchet, arrives for Poirot like the Orient Express itself: 'waiting for the next attack of his angina is like waiting for a train. It could arrive without notice, suddenly squeezing the breath out of a body, rendering it first speechless, then lifeless.'<sup>8</sup>

Yes, Christie knew about the uncanniness of trains: the unhappiness of them. At the start of *Curtain*, Hastings is travelling back towards Styles and he just knows something is going to happen. He's going backwards, back to the scene of their meeting. Alone on the train as it speeds towards Essex and death, he indulges his sadness, as I always do.

## #9

Charles Dickens has his own business with trains and with the havoc they cause. He knew. A wounded writer always knows. In 1865 he was nearly killed when his train - en route from Folkestone to London - derailed on a viaduct in Kent. There was a gap in the line; a breach in the track. Two of the carriages fell from the viaduct onto the riverbed below, and the carriage Dickens was riding in slipped from the track and hung over the edge. Dickens helped the other passengers disembark, then went back to rescue his manuscript; he records the event in the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*.

If only all of us could be so calm in the face of derailment. Dickens had a feeling it was going to happen though - in 1851 he'd published his essay. Q: 'Need Railway Travellers be Smashed?' - and he'd been waiting, ever since, for the answer. A: Yes. Yes. Yes. A: Here it is. Here it comes. And here it comes too, in 'The

Signal-Man,' whose eponymous character waits and waits for the rail disaster he knows is coming, though the warning does not help him to avoid the inevitable. Dickens was never the same again after his accident: he lost his voice, he shook, he panicked while travelling, trembling and clutching at his chair, or falling into a trance, seemingly unaware of the presence of others.<sup>9</sup> Dickens died five years after his smash, on the anniversary of it.

I first read 'The Signal-Man' in hospital, when I was ten years old. I was in a room of my own with chickenpox and complications, and too infectious to be allowed onto the children's ward. I'm not sure what the complications actually were: a severe case of the virus, yes, and a cream prescribed for the itching triggering an allergic reaction which came in the form of blisters that became quickly infected. I was swollen, raw, hot and weeping: sticking to the clothes and the sheets, leaving bloodspots on the pillowcases. Someone (not a doctor) said it looked like leprosy, which sounded suitably serious and biblical, though I am not sure I was ever in any danger.

I was delirious much of the time I was in hospital: day and night turned into each other and there weren't many visitors. I was horrified about not being allowed to leave my room to use the toilet in the ward and being required to use a bedpan, and refused until spoken to firmly by a doctor. My granny came and brought me a bag of sweets and *Mr. Bean's Diary* from the hospital gift shop. Once a day someone from the hospital – not a nurse, but a play-therapist or a volunteer, perhaps – would bring books and paper and felt-tip pens to keep me occupied – and one of the books was an anthology of Christmas ghost stories, and Dickens's tale was inside that. Reading it while feverish and too young to understand some of the words gifted me a clammy feeling of horror – a warning of an unnamed danger, impossible to either ignore or to act upon, the sense that time itself worked strangely – that has never left me. A few days later, temperature down and pox scabbed over, I was allowed onto the ward.

My first visitor was the headmaster of my primary school. He strode into the ward carrying a - *a thing* - that my classmates had made for me. It was big. A graveyard diorama: headstones and mausoleums made with matchboxes and plasticine. Ghosts and zombies and vampires in pipe cleaners and tissue paper: the whole thing crowded (the sheet of cardboard it was made on sagged in the middle when it was carried, like an overloaded bookshelf) with the unquiet dead.

My friends had made me a cemetery in miniature: a Blue Peter version of the miniature model town in *Beetlejuice*, the film I loved so much and watched three times a week that year. The year I got chicken pox was the year Anthea Turner made Tracy Island from papier-mâché and toilet rolls: perhaps Blue Peter was where my classmates had got the idea. I cannot imagine our teacher suggesting the project to them. The whole thing was too amazing for that: every single headstone bore my name and a reference to chicken pox, or *complications*. There was gore.

The headmaster might have been horrifically embarrassed, carrying that thing through the corridors and wards on his way to find me. Might have worried about how it would look to my parents or the doctors: whether they would consider this monstrous masterpiece a form of bullying or just a piece of artwork in very poor taste. But he carried it anyway, laying it softly on the edge of my bed with a flourish.

‘Well then, Jennifer,’ he said. ‘A little present for you.’

I remember sitting forward on my bed and examining it for half hours at a time. I had never felt so seen or so loved.

## #10

Tracks persist in David Lodge’s reading of Virginia Woolf’s delinquent narratives, in the way she breaks time and place to show us what it’s like to be Septimus, home from the front, his hurt

head miles behind: 'by breaking up the formal railway line of the sentence, by the use of ellipses and parentheses, by blurring the boundaries between what is thought and what is spoken, and by switching point of view and narrative voice with bewildering frequency – by these and similar devices she tried to imitate in her fiction the elusiveness of the phenomenon of consciousness.' But Lodge thinks she didn't quite get there. No derailment for her (in the river, she'd disagree, I think. I disagree) because the pull of the linear sentence, the linked carriages of cause and effect and plot, were too strong: 'She could never entirely escape the sequential linearity of her medium.' For Lodge, it was only Joyce who managed to get properly off the rails, but it cost him. 'the price of this was to sacrifice the narrative cohesion which makes stories intelligible to us, and therefore to take leave of the novel as a literary form.'<sup>10</sup>

## #11

Mary Cappello, in her essay about writing and massage, 'Contact,' reflects on texts containing plot lines that peter out to nothing, memories that turn out to be fiction, fiction that turns out to be stolen facts from someone else's life. Even the scholarly essay, when allowed to ruminate as well as argue, can become wild, can go out of its mind, can be a runaway train hurtling down the wrong tracks.

'If an essay digresses,' she says, 'we can be hopeful or fearful of missing its point of indexical charge.' The allusion here is to pointing, prodding, and (in the context of massage, her essay's subject) touch and tickling. According to Cappello, pointing is bodily and literary bad manners – something my uncle Eddie un/luckily became unable to do.<sup>11</sup> Poirot learned too, I think, the dangers inherent in coming to the point too quickly, in being too

direct. ‘The most I want to do is show you the end of my index finger. Its muteness,’<sup>12</sup> Maggie Nelson says, and we look at the nature of her showing as well as what she shows us because the fact of her pointing is at least as interesting as what she might point at. ‘I do not have the subject in my hand,’ Gabriel Josipovici tells us at the start of *Touch*, ‘I do not hold it.’<sup>13</sup> The subject is a handful. More than a handful. Too hot to hold. Keats knew this and while he was deep in the hole his terror of death approaching dug for him he wrote into being a resurrected hand to point at, to threaten, to throttle the reader who might dare to forget him.

I’m out of hand again too. Me. It. The writing. My dad used to say this about me (I was very bad: beyond the usual childhood naughtiness), that I was out of hand. That I needed taking in hand. I know I slipped through the fingers of both of my parents and since then have been falling, unable to catch myself. (They looked for causes for this unexpected plot – the bookish girl turned into a furious truant nearly overnight. Was it an aggressive kind of grief in the aftermath of that Nirvana singer, perhaps? Or maybe a post-viral malaise caused by chickenpox and complications? Who knows?)

These fingers and hands are a way of thinking about writing, or of a particular kind of writing, as, like prayer is, something you do with your body, not just with your head. It’s a feeling out, this kind of work, a tentative groping in the dark, the hands fluttering along the edges of unseen objects. Most of all it’s about fumbling the catch.

Cappello ruminates that everything this kind of writing does is beside the point: “Improvisatory” might be a better descriptor than “digressive”, whose assumption is an invisible line we’ve tacitly agreed to toe.<sup>14</sup> great-uncle Eddie kept his toes and Cappello has elevated this improvisatory form into a literary mode of its own – the ‘detour’<sup>15</sup> – an allusive, slippery style of writing that ‘make[s] possible a kind of truth telling otherwise barred by writing that

fails to allow for wandering, accident, estuarial swerve, or straying from a purported centre.'

## #12

It is on trains, sitting still and being moved between A and B, where A is home, and B is most often a literary festival, that I do most of my crying. Face turned towards the window, and nobody asks. Once I saw a young soldier in uniform get on the train at Bolton, wiping his eyes as the young woman left on the platform tapped on the window with her glittered fingernails and sobbed. The whole carriage sighed with delight: it was just like being in a film.

Some of my vomiting happens on trains too. I kneel before the flushed jumpers and goldfish notice Virgin Pendalinos on the Northern Line have affixed above their bowls. Sometimes it's the booze that makes me vomit; more often it's the thought of blood. I'm always aware of it, sloshing around inside of me like cups of tea on an empty stomach. I know they put it into my veins because I woke up to see the bruises, but it feels like I've drunk it.

Am I taking leave of fiction entirely or just deploying a strategic swerve? Time will tell. Some days I can't imagine ever being able to write a novel again. It's slipped, or been removed from me. My training has ill-equipped me for autobiography too. I won't commit to anything. For the time being, let's just say I am playing truant again, indulging in a kind of 'I-prefer-not-to' naughtiness behind the novel's back. I'm taking a sick-day. I'm on strike. I refuse. I decline. I am not figuring out a way to 'tell it slant' because the thing itself is slant and untellable and only my body knows my evil hour.

# A Lecture on Influence

## Writing with Heart I

Today I am lecturing. A thought for each slide, accompanied by titles and images that will illustrate, and perhaps assist the visual learners to commit the quotations to memory. Sometimes my students have difficulty writing and it is my job to help them get started. (I know, right?) I tell them to remember, even when they are stuck - especially when they are stuck - that writing is like breathing out. But to do it well, to do it fully, to do it at all, they have to breathe in, and this part of it, the inhalation, is called reading. You take in, then you give out. Your heart gives out.

## Finding a Model

For example, there's that part in *Misery* where Paul Sheldon remembers Annie breathing into him, her mouth against his, and the stench of her breath. He's dying and there is his reader, part muse, part murderer, huffing and puffing and blowing his house down. You're not supposed to remember the resuscitation - the part where they bring you back. You're supposed to be out for that. That's the part I like the best: the fact that he does remember it. That the memory itself is as much of a foreign body as her breath is, swirling around inside him. His reader's breath: an intrusive thought.

## Developing as an Independent Reader

When I was at university, now and again somebody would ask, 'and did you have many books, growing up, at home?'

In another lecture on dialogue, I tell my students that people never really say what they think they are saying. That there's the thing they say, the thing they meant to say, and then the thing they didn't mean to say. We talk about that a lot: the layering that happens in writing – where one line can unfold like an origami crane, and fold back up again, in the time it takes to run your eye along a line. Like this. A fluttering of compression and unfurling: the sentences pulsing as the eye brushes past them: anemones.

I didn't know what 'and did you have many books, growing up, at home?' meant – except I did. When I was little my mother sometimes told me if I lied there'd be a black mark on my tongue and only she and Jesus would be able to see it (I also tell my children this). I still have that mark on my tongue and people can hear it and it surprises them, perhaps, that a Preston accent does not prevent you from being a writer.

When I answered the question about books, growing up, at home, I sometimes talked about the Harris Library in Preston and about how even though I was a persistent and unrepentant and basically incurable school truant, I was also a rubbish and unskilled school truant because when I wasn't in lessons, I spent a lot of time in the Harris Library. About the books I gobbled there. *The Fabled Lands* game book series, on which I spent my birthday and Christmas book tokens sent down from Scotland. Losing an entire day throwing dice and exploring a world with a map, stopping only to draw my own maps, to sketch the houses and ships I bought, to add to that world.

Sometimes I spoke about my uncle, who worked at Askews, a library book supplier (I worked there during my A Levels for a couple of weeks too, until I was sacked for being unable to put books in alphabetical order and forgetting to go back after lunch)

and the times he would bring a bag or a box of books back from work for me that had been bound with the cover on upside down or the wrong way around, and were in the throwing-out-box. And one of these binned books – I don't remember the title – had a dark brown cover the exact colour of Bisto and perhaps a boy in jeans on the front too. I think he was there. I can just about see him.

The story inside was about two brothers, told by the younger one (I might be confusing this with Astrid Lindgren's *The Brothers Lionheart*, also narrated by the younger brother), who was watching his older brother go mad. I don't think it was described that way in the book – that's probably my adult's perspective on what I remember. These two were brought up by a single mother, who was at work most of the time, and the older brother refused to go to school, and refused to talk to the doctor, and refused to speak for a while, and stayed in his room and was this wound-up, silent, oppressive presence in the house. I don't think this was an image from the book – it might have been – but as the story progressed this boy stopped being a boy or a brother and just became a shadow or a kind of foggy darkness seeping out from under the crack in his bedroom door. It was frightening.

Then one day, in this lost, misbound book from the bin, something changes. It looks like the brother is better. He gets up and puts his clothes on, and he leaves the house, and the narrator follows him, and sees him walk away from the house, through the streets on the estate where they live, and down to the river – the Mersey, it was. He'd always been very interested in the way the Mersey connected to the sea. He was clever, and read a lot, and knew a little bit about everything, and one of the things he was particularly interested in was the way rivers all connected to each other, and to the sea, and how all the water in all the rivers fed into the sea but the rivers themselves never ran out of water. And the narrator thought about all these things that his brother knew as he watched him build a raft out of planks and rope – a temporary, rickety thing – and push it out onto the water and get onto

it, and as he's telling the story we know this is a bad idea – and yes, the narrator and his mother never see the older brother again, and it isn't the sort of story where it is possible this lost mad boy has found a treasure map, or developed a magical power, or vanishes through a portal and turns up in somewhere like Narnia. It isn't that kind of book.

It was very clearly the kind of book where a boy, a child, might build a raft and cast themselves onto the suck and pull of dirty, diesel smelling waters, and never be seen again – drown, and die – and that would be the end of the story. We stay with the little brother's point of view so we never see the older brother's mouth and nose filling with water, or his jeans washing up on a riverbank, or the skin on his hands turning white and falling apart. But I knew those things about the book and the ending of it all the same. And his little brother, the narrator, told the whole story in such a way that we knew he was sad that his brother never came back but also secretly relieved about it, because that dark foggy presence in the upstairs box room was gone now and his mother could stop worrying and start grieving.

I lost that book, and I don't know the title, and whenever I am in a second-hand book shop or a jumble sale or a charity shop or I meet a children's book author or illustrator or school librarian, I ask about it, and so far nobody has been able to find it for me. Not one person I have ever asked has heard of it. I see its brown cover and perhaps – maybe – a boy wearing jeans on the front of it – but nothing else. I've googled every possible combination of keywords you could think of.

When at university somebody asked me – as they often did – 'and did you have many books, growing up, at home?' – that book is the one I wanted to tell them about, despite what they were really asking me.

Have you seen it? Have you seen that book? I spent three years wafting around the finest and most famous libraries in the world and I did not come across it. And yet it influenced me, of course.

## Working with Personal Stories

The stories that influence me the most are the ones that were never written down. I know for example, or I think I know, the story of a girl, a little girl, being walked through the town centre by her father. I say being walked, like a dog and not a child, because this girl was so small that she was wearing reins. They were red, these reins, and when the father stopped at a kiosk in a shopping centre to buy cigarettes, she would amuse herself by leaning forward, feeling the reins tighten across her chest, over and between her shoulders. She enjoyed feeling the nylon webbing and plastic buckles hold the little weight of her small body, feeling her father hold her weight, the looped ends of the reins wrapped twice around his hand and tucked inside his fist. It felt a bit like flying: the way flying is in dreams, the way you can run fast, and lean forward, and lift your feet from the floor and be, suddenly, safely, unremarkably, treading through air. She felt it in her head most of all, her heels lifted, her toes touching the floor but only just, and her head and arms hanging forward, dangling. Like a puppet, perhaps, limbs and head dangling loosely while the cords hold the torso upright. Her head nodding. Her hair curling in front of her eyes, into her mouth, making a curtain between her face and the rest of the world: the people going to and fro in the shopping centre, the noise of talking and feet and piped music and whathaveyou, all receding, vanishing entirely in fact, in the face of this pleasurable pressure across the ribcage and the loose heaviness in the head.

And it must have been annoying for him: she can get that – can get why it was a pain in the arse to have to keep tugging the reins back, to keep telling her to stop messing around, that she's a frigging liability, when all he wanted was to get his wallet out of his pocket and take the box of cigarettes from the man who was handing them over the counter, over the raked display of chocolate bars and crisps and chewing gum, holding them out, and waiting for her father to take them, and he's got one hand in his pocket for

his wallet, and the other tugging on these fucking reins, pulling her back, even though she can walk perfectly well and understand perfectly well – better than most children her age (people are always telling him that she’s clever, that he should watch her, that it’s unusual for a child of that age to be able to read all the signs in the shops, and the newspaper headlines, and understand where he’s going when he spells out ‘off for a B.A.T.H.’ (she’d want to come, otherwise) and it does his head in sometimes, what she can see) and so he hits her – not hard – with the hand the wallet is in, and she topples right off her feet and lands on the floor, awkwardly, with her legs tucked beneath her. She’s only little: it’s hardly any distance to fall at all. He lets the end of the reins drop and takes his cigarettes and pays for them and accepts the change and when he turns back to her she’s breathing fast, as if she’s fallen off a cliff, but she isn’t crying. She’s staring at him, panting with her mouth open, and in that moment they both understand fully that they hate each other.

## Using Sound

The dear one that I want is still on the table hearing the sound of her bloodfall hitting the floor, unable to move and able to feel and hear everything. She’s still there / I wasn’t there, lungs slowly filling with fluid, heart fluttering into overdrive. She hears the blood falling every day inside the sound of the bath filling, the crumple of the shower curtain, water poured from the kettle into the mug. The wine bottles, emptied by the dozen. Every single time. Heavy rain, and the water butt behind the greenhouse overflowing and having to be tipped out into the drain on the patio. In the bath, and the tiny din of bubbles popping. The basket of cutlery from the dishwasher slipping from her hand and falling onto the kitchen tiles. A man on a train sitting opposite, crunching up his empty

crisp packet. Cymbals. Sometimes just hands, when they are clapping. Applause doesn't ripple for her: it splashes. Every sound is a bloodfall and a bout of nausea, and she lies still, panting, and they hook open her jaw for the pipe and pierce her veins, one on each arm, to prepare her to receive the blood. She takes it in. It's like breathing or drinking, the way it goes into her / I wasn't there. So much blood. (For a while it was quite important to me to find out how much and how many. Not one person's because I took so much it would have killed her, so a group of them. A chorus a gaggle a brood a clutch a nest a coven a legion.)

### Unreliable Narration: A Primer

I was talking to a friend of a friend, once, in a bar, about first-person narrators. About the impossibility of them. The necessary suspension of all kinds of disbelief, and what hard work it is to suspend: what a weight and complexity of ropes and pulleys the puppet show takes. What a relief it can be, when we read a book, just to say to ourselves, 'okay, I don't buy this. I don't buy it,' and to read on anyway. To hold the thing away from you a little. To see it resting in your hand, small and perfectly formed and dear and improbable. It's a myth, to say that the stories we don't believe, the ones that we only took inside for a while, don't continue to work their way through our systems long after we believe we have spat them out.

In the bar my friend of a friend told me about a woman - a distant acquaintance of hers - who was convinced, even as an adult, that after she was born her mother had had a second baby. I imagined the pair of them in their royal blue sweaters and blue-and-white gingham dresses. Matching white knee socks. But the other one never went to school because when it was still very small and she was only a child herself, my friend's friend had killed it.

She had suffocated or squeezed it to death or she had pierced its fontanelle with a little pair of nail scissors or she had thrown it out of a window or pushed the pram out onto the road on purpose.

She didn't know exactly how she had done it. It was a terrible thing to have done, a real tragedy, but because of her age just a senseless accident, and not really her fault, though of course there'd always be a question mark over her head within the family. She'd felt that question mark her entire life, she said. She told her friend that. It was like there was a mark on her face that everyone except for her could see. A scar that her parents and grandparents and siblings knew the origin of, but she could only sense, and not understand, because the incident had happened when she was too young to form a proper memory of it.

But children do things like this sometimes. We all remembered the Bulger trial. She'd googled and turned up Mary Bell, who had murdered babies when she was still a little girl herself and had been sent to Red Bank, the same prison for children that would later contain Thompson and Venables. 'Baby-killer' is novelistic shorthand for the worst thing a person can do: it's why the murderers in *Orient Express* get away with it: some sins are beyond reckoning. Knowing that such things were possible because they had happened, had happened more than once, had helped and not helped. All kinds of things were possible.

She'd admit, when pressed, that there were no clues there had ever been another baby – not a single photograph – but that in itself was a clue. Because she'd been so tiny when she killed her mother's other baby it couldn't possibly have been her fault so it had been decided just to pretend the dead baby – the younger twin – had never existed, and to never mention it at all. To save her feelings. To let her move on, and live her life as a relatively normal person. What else could the family be expected to do?

She had nightmares though. About going to prison. About being hanged. About being tried in a court and found guilty for a crime she didn't remember. She had nightmares about the last

judgement day. There was a Mormon folk-tale – a piece of mythology turned into unofficial doctrine – that on judgement day, everyone who had ever lived would be gathered together and would watch (she imagined huge television screens – outdoors, because the spirit world would be like an American drive-in) screenings of everyone’s lives. It would take an eternity, all that public judgement – the pleasure of watching others’ televised and private misdeeds tempered by the anticipatory shame of your own fifteen minutes of fame. But that’s when she’d find out, along with everyone else, how she’d done it. The scissoring or the drowning, the throttling or the poisoning.

There was a phrase she’d been taught to say off by heart – ‘all manner of things will be revealed’ – and she always took it to mean the bad stuff you’d done that you couldn’t remember. You’d get to know it. Everybody would get to know it. She’d very often lie awake at night imagining (she would call it ‘preparing for’) the gathered throng of spirits, the noise their collective intake of breath would make as her bloodied hands (the eternal camera – God’s-eye-view – would zoom in on her at the crucial moment) appeared a hundred times larger than life on the screens. It was about this time that her hair started to fall out.

‘Do you even remember having a baby brother or sister?’ her friend had asked her. I don’t know if she was doubtful or horrified, sympathetic, or just playing along to get to the punch line.

‘I don’t remember any of it,’ this woman replied. ‘There aren’t any photographs, no extra baby things. My mother didn’t keep the wrist bands or the scan picture. She couldn’t. It was too painful. And they couldn’t risk me finding it, in later life. Turning up a birth certificate in an envelope or a lock of hair or something. Imagine what it would have done to me.’

‘It’s more likely, isn’t it, that no evidence of a murdered baby means there isn’t a murdered baby at all?’ her friend says, probably thinking about Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, which they had also read together and discussed. ‘It’s more likely there’s

some other reason, some perfectly innocent reason, why you'd be a bit odd to your parents. Nobody asks for a novelist in the family, do they?'

'Yes,' she said, 'but that's what somebody who murdered a baby and couldn't remember it would say, wouldn't they? She would tell a story with what was left of the facts to make herself feel special. Given the choice, you'd rather be an artist, and a little eccentric, than someone who'd killed a baby, wouldn't you? It's human nature, isn't it?'

My friend told me this woman did not sound sad when she said this. She almost prided herself upon it. The fearless kind of truth telling. Her willingness to follow the evidence – the business with the reins, and many other things, too numerous and sad to mention here – all seemed to her to point in one direction only, and she was fearless enough to follow the signs. Because this woman was a reader and she knew before she knew anything else that a first-person narrator almost never intentionally tells a story which makes them look bad. Even when there is some kind of confession, it's in service of another kind of performance: one of fearless truthfulness.

'Look how brave and clear-sighted I am,' the first-person narrator always says, even when she's telling you about the forgotten baby that in her childhood madness she began to imagine she might have done away with. When she had her own baby, the madness came back and the madness felt like the strangest kind of clarity: a mess of a jigsaw puzzle suddenly solved.

## On Adaptation

The song that my great-uncle Eddie from Glasgow and I listened to the bagpipers play when he was down for his visit to England was *Scotland the Brave* and I heard that song so many times when

I was growing up without knowing what it was because when I heard and sang it I was in church and *Scotland the Brave* was called *Praise to the Man*. The version I knew was written in 1844 by William W. Phelps during the first week of the long, slow aftermath of the murder of the first Prophet of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith. His hymn is a rousing piece of hagiography. Joseph becomes a hero who died a martyr's death at the hands of a mob. His blood speaks. The song itself is a threat or a promise or the enactment of a vow of vengeance the Saints who sing it make: 'earth will atone for the blood of that man.'

William Phelps has an interesting, incidental history. Not one of the church's superstars, but a writer, and, now and again, a scribe for Joseph Smith. Some sources call him a ghostwriter and suggest that texts, doctrines and theological revelations attributed to Smith and endorsed by him may actually have been written by Phelps – including the speeches Smith made rallying support for his bid to become president of the United States. Phelps the speculative fiction writer, whose nearly forgotten short story 'Paracletes' first captured some of the minor eccentricities of Mormon theology. Phelps the actor, who, in the first versions of the ritualised initiation rite Mormons call the Endowment, played the serpent in a dramatised re-enactment of the fall and, in his suit and hat, crawled across the Nauvoo temple floor on his belly. Phelps, who on top of all this was a colourful character, getting in trouble more than once and getting kicked out of the church – excommunicated for apostasy, which is a kind of spiritual murder the church can commit on anyone it likes, unfastening the bonds of baptism and sealing and tearing the ties and tethers away. He was cut free. But despite his persistent and seemingly incurable apostasy (he was found guilty of it more than once), his church was also persistently hospitable towards him: they excommunicated him three times, but each time he was welcomed back, brought inside and baptised again.

And he borrowed *Scotland the Brave* and turned it into *Praise to the Man* and when I hear that famous patriotic tune at funerals and football matches and in the arms of the injured Glaswegian uncle I don't quite remember, the words *blood* and *atone* are the words that come.

## Write with Intention

I want to show you what my fiction cannot hold in its hands and this showing will either bring my fiction back to me or it will kill it. Next slide.

## Open to Influence

It is possible to be poisoned by blood, even when they match the types right. We must never forget Lucy Westenra, who wants every man who shows interest in her and is punished for it by Stoker, who gives her exactly what she asks for. She's unconscious or drugged when they transfuse her, pumped full of Seward's and Holmwood's and Morris's blood while she sleeps, unknowing, then unconscious or hypnotised or out of her mind, she's sucked dry, then, dead but not really, she's stabbed and stabbed and stabbed and then decapitated. Lucy is a cup, only there to carry the blood of the men to the lip of the monster. / Sometimes they have to give you so much blood, so fast, it puts your organs into shock. Even when the type is correct, occasionally there's something to do with the proteins on the outside of the cells not matching up, and when that happens, you get anaphylaxis. The thing they feed you with poisons you. Your breath stops. I wonder if that was what was happening to Lucy. Not the blood that was being taken away, but the blood they pumped into her. She

gasped and panted in her bed, then she died. Stoker keeps using the word 'stertorous' to describe the sound Lucy makes as her lungs struggle to take in air. This gasping labour can damage the heart too, as it pumps more and more blood into the bronchia, doing the only thing it can to get the oxygen exchange system working again. The lungs fill with fluid and they call this odema when they talk about it, over your head, as if they're spelling out a secret word they don't want you to know the meaning of. *B.A.T.H.* Other symptoms include discoloration of the skin, vomiting and an impending sense of doom. The system overreacts. Makes something out of nothing. / My breathlessness struck as they were wheeling me back to recovery from the operating theatre for the second time. The man who I live with says he knew something was wrong because I was coughing and my hands were covered in hives; as if I'd been stroking nettles. I started to swell up, he says. It happened fast; I felt the elastic holding the oxygen mask onto my face stretch, then grow tight. I don't remember them taking it off but they must have, because I am still gagging around the tube they put into my mouth.

## Using Images

Today is a crying day. It's the thought of the blood – the horror of it running along the trolley and the man who I live with trying to point it out to the nurses without alerting me. I have a photograph of that time, me holding the baby in the recovery room, and I am so white I am grey and my pupils are blown and in just a few moments they will wheel me back to theatre and dismember me from myself and the little mad one will come back. A borrowing from Artaud, here: 'The dead little girl says, I am the one who guffaws in horror inside the lungs of the live one.' The surgeon's cut let her out.

## Working with a Publisher

I grew up on the story of Joseph Smith the hero – the version of the myth tended to by William Phelps – who portrayed him as a religious martyr who had been murdered by a braying godless mob. I was an adult before I thought to ask what Smith was actually in prison for, and it was only later I discovered he'd been thrown in jail for authorising the destruction of the printing presses of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the newspaper that, in the hectic, violent times of early Mormonism, came into being solely to spread the word about his secret extra wives. About how young some of them were. About the other men they were married to. The church admits to it now: once Google came along, they had to.

When I think of those printing presses – dragged out into the street and smashed to pieces under Smith's direction – I think of great-uncle Eddie too, hurt even unto death by the typewriter that bit back. Smith learned this the hard way. Marry as many teenagers as you like. Run for president. Invent a cosmos stuffed with an infinitely regressing chain of anthropomorphic gods. Admit that God can be a woman too. Do anything you want, but don't kill the source.

## Scholarly Conventions

When I wipe my eyes and blow my nose I check the tissue for blood like I always do because this new body is not to be trusted. It should be in your medical notes: a list of who you took the blood from. Names, addresses, dates and places of birth. A census. It should be done the way we do it at the end of essays: I should come with a bibliography, trailing it behind me like a streamer of toilet paper stuck to the sole of my shoe. It is only polite. The tissue isn't bloody. I don't think it is even pink, but my judgement is shot.

## Structure

Now I wish I could paint or give you a book like a deck of cards. Better yet to cook for you: a mess of pottage, a stew, a pie made of offal like the one Titus serves up to Tamara Queen of the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*. She ate her children. Their offal. (To swallow something always carries its double meaning: to be nourished and to believe a lie – Kool-Aid and Eucharist in one). Off-fall – the crap that falls to the floor while the carcass is butchered. Falls. What befalls us. The unexpected strike. For apples, the word is windfall (who hit his head on an apple and came up with a better idea than the one he'd had before? Did Burroughs really shoot his wife in the head while drunkenly trying the William Tell trick? Did she die with a hole in her face and an apple on her writer-hurt head?), and windfalls are named for the instrument of their falling. You know, it isn't much of a leap from (of)fall to fail and an even littler leap from fall to jump. I used to look at the railway tracks every day. Nearly bought a house with a cutting at the bottom of the garden but thought better of it. The man who I live with thought better of it. He caught me and breaking my fall hurt him.

## Uses of Genre

Joseph Smith was either a prophet or a novelist. The Book of Mormon is a cheap paperback with a navy blue cover but when I saw pictures of it, it was a set of engraved gold plates held together by golden rings that had been stored under the American ground for centuries. Joseph either exhumed these plates – his golden Bible – from a hole in the ground (the book was delivered from the bowels of the earth both by his spade and the intervention of the angel who told him where to dig / I grew in that soil too) and translated it from the 'reformed Egyptian' it was written in, or he remixed it onto paper from the books he was reading at the

time. A rip off. Treasure hunter or magician. Dissolver or inventor of genres. Creative writer or the very first alternative-historian. A Chronicle of an Imagined Past. How It All Began. That's all he wanted to know, and if nobody was going to tell him, well then he'd write up his own findings. It was an enormous con-trick he'd end up dying in the service of. Pure light, restored. Or both, both of these things. That is what a real writer is. All of these things.

## The Writing Life

Mina, who always travels with a portable typewriter, is force-fed Count Dracula's blood in a ceremony that is part baptism, part rape. He leans above her, scores his own chest with a fingernail and forces her to drink. Stoker compares her to a cat with its face in a saucer of milk: the monster's blood becomes nourishment as well as poison. The transfusion-by-mouth turns her into a leaky sieve: Dracula can see what she sees, and she can see and feel his slow dark journey across the water, towards home. Lucy is a cup but Mina is a heart which pumps and circulates words, turning shorthand and stenography and audio-diaries into something resembling a novel. Mina the writer, whose head hurts when touched by the host, the body of Christ. Her God-hurt head has a hole in it for the rest of her life: a perfect circular bull's-eye, where the touch of the host burned instead of blessed. Her blood made her repugnant to God. Unclean. Stoker gets out of his novel early and leaves us to wonder just what she passed on to her little Quincey, the mongrel boy with too many names.

## Working with the Peripheral Narrator

Jonathan might wonder too, as he watches his wife sleep, the baby in the crib by the bed. He might close the curtains and turn down

the light and leave a glass of water and an Alka-Seltzer on her bedside table. He might fold himself between the sheets beside her, hardly daring to breathe, but wondering, after the tears and the shouting, if he should go to work in the morning, if she's just got the blues, if she's really quite all right to be left alone with the baby, if she should really be feeding the baby with that much booze inside her, if her bad blood will get the better of her, will get the better of him. She acts, he thinks, like she hates him. Like she wants to kill him. Maybe one day she will.

Their argument tonight was over the scar on her face. She checks herself in the mirror constantly. There's nothing there. He tells her every time she asks that there's nothing there. Stands behind her and looks over her shoulder at both their reflections in the mirror. He looks at her forehead and he can't see the hole that she swears is there. 'There's no scar,' he says, 'it's all over now. Forget about it. You're fine.' Even in her sleep, she bares her teeth at him. He doesn't sleep. She says she doesn't sleep - and she doesn't, she just passes out drunk - but he really doesn't sleep, and there's nobody around to see that. She's got this idea about going back there: catching a train and going overland to the source of it all.

Two weeks ago she ordered up all her medical records under the Freedom of Information Act. She wrote to the hospital trust, the county council, to social services. She got all the recent stuff: the records of the surgery, but also a lot of earlier documents from social workers and educational psychologists and education welfare officers. Minutes of meetings where she was discussed, placed on the At Risk Register and then removed from it. A note about a hairdryer she took with her to a Local Authority Children's Home, and which broke, and which the electrician tried to fix, but was unable to. A copy of a letter sent by children's mental health services to her parents, discharging her back to her GP because she refused to co-operate with the child psychologist. In all of these papers - some going back to the early 1990s - there are erasures.

Someone has been through them all with a black marker and crossed out parts of the text.

The letter that came with the CD they sent all the information on says that they've removed anything that doesn't directly concern her, that she's entitled to the information about herself, but they must balance that with the need to protect the confidentiality of others. He told her not to look at it but she did and then she raged and cried then got roaring drunk just like she knew she would.

What he did not expect was the strange peace that settled on her during the aftermath of her hangover: a grim, still happiness. It was as if the missing parts seemed to prove a theory she had about herself: there was something terrible there, behind those black marks. Something she did. To do with a baby? It all makes sense to her now, she says. She was right, she says. All those years ago – a foolish, childish idea, but she had it right the first time. Now she checks her head for marks and talks about the boys who killed the Bulger baby all the time.

But Jonathan tries not to worry. She does dote on their son. Dotes. No child was more wanted. But all the same, he can't sleep, lying next to her, and he doesn't like it.

## Working with History

For Mormons, the concept of Blood Atonement is both an obscure and dated piece of theology developed by Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor and the punk prophet of this most handmade of faiths, and a central but unspoken and nearly forgotten thread of their identity. Mormons don't really believe in hell – there are many planets in the cosmos, and lesser, but comfortable planets, for those who don't quite make the grade. But for the very worst – the sons of perdition – there is the 'outer darkness.'

I imagine this place as the blackness between galaxies: an airless lightless void where the very worst people would float, cut off from the chains formed by baptism and sealing that bound everyone else to their families across the light years between Preston and Kolob and the millennia between Eve and me. The missionaries used to have little diagrams of these places to show potential converts. The pictures would show a simplified alternative solar system containing the spirit world (where we were before, while we waited with our Heavenly Father and Mother to come to earth), and Earth (where we are now) and spirit prison (where the unbaptised dead would wait for their proxy baptisms) and the three separate planets of heaven (where we'd end up, after our final sorting). I asked in Sunday school once, thinking of this map, just where the outer darkness was in relation to Kolob (the planet where God and his harem of Goddess wives live) and the three kingdoms of heaven – Celestial, Telesstial and Terrestrial.

'I don't want to talk much about that,' my Sunday school teacher said, 'it isn't information that is essential to our salvation.'

But wherever this unspeakable darkness was, there was a list of sins, according to Brigham Young, that would get you there. Apostasy, theft, murder, fornication, and miscegenation – which I looked up once and only understood it as something to do with blood, and the mixing up of it. The 'mis' brought me to misplaced. Carelessness or loss of blood, perhaps. I was already a cutter – precocious like that – and I thought of the blood-spotted toilet paper hidden under my mattress and felt the downward swoop in the guts that meant guilt.

Apostasy was confusing too. When I asked about it, I was told it was something to do with saying or thinking the wrong thing. But that it was unlikely I'd have cause to trouble myself with it further if I concentrated on the basics of good behaviour and didn't try to dig too deeply with my questions into matters that were not essential to salvation.

Nevertheless, it was understood without understanding that Jesus could not atone for those particular sins: everyone had a limit. But you could effect your own atonement by voluntarily allowing your blood to be spilled on the ground. Apparently the church discontinued this idea before I was born, but I knew about it. Everybody did. We knew also about the ritual expressions of this dark theology that still occurred during a secret vow the adults made in the temple to slit their own throats and slice open their abdomens and spill their guts (symbolically enacted in a series of gruesome hand gestures that mimed the injury) rather than reveal the content of the temple's sacred ceremonies. Joseph Smith introduced these penalties in 1842 while the Saints still lived in Nauvoo, before their long trek west. He probably borrowed them from the Freemasons - they do something similar - though the church has said that the signs, tokens and penalties come directly from Solomon's Temple, and have made their way through time towards the Freemasons only in a corrupted form. Later, Brigham Young added the 'Blood Oath' part of the ritual, where participants vow to avenge the blood of the prophets, Joseph and his brother Hyrum.

Both of these rituals took place during a longer ceremony - a dramatic re-enactment of creation and the fall, along with a form of body prayer - learning of signs and symbolic gestures that act as passports into the presence of God - that Mormons call the endowment. It's been trimmed, over the years - the blood oaths removed and the enactment of penalties taken away in the 1990s. But because it is sacred nobody is allowed to speak about it. Nobody knows which version of the vow the other took. Nobody describes it.

But I knew about it. All of us kids did: what our parents wouldn't tell us we secretly looked up in lesson manuals and textbooks. We miniature apostates spied out the white veils and hats and sashes and green aprons - the garb worn for the ritual - hidden under towels in airing cupboards and locked into suitcases

right under the bed, tucked in, close to the wall. Little jugs have big ears. And then we became teenagers and our school libraries had the internet and the earth disappeared from beneath our feet. All of us Millennial-generation Mormons had our lives cut in half like that, the second we thought to tell Dr Google what was ailing us. So many of us are still falling through the newly exposed air.

## Uses and Abuses of Quotation

I can say that when I was a girl I was loved. We were all loved. We were loved as the gavage-fed geese are loved. The loving took the form of learning words by heart. As children we were taught the Thirteen Articles of Faith, learning them one by one, reciting them as a small gaggle in the basement room of the church built to withstand an earthquake. We also learned a book full of children's songs that taught us what to want and how to be (*I Want to Be a Missionary* and *I Love to See the Temple* and, most terrifyingly, *Families Are Forever*), then the grown-up hymns we sung that taught us what we thought (*I Know That My Redeemer Lives*, *I Believe in Christ*) before we were old enough to think it.

That's not all. In seminary, which is an early morning before-school scripture programme, we learned thirty scriptures off by heart every year for four years as preparation for either serving a mission or teaching children. We were tested on our knowledge by playing a game called a 'scripture chase,' which involved being given a fragment of a line – a mere thought – then scrambling through our Bibles, Books of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants to find it. I have happy memories of cheating at the scripture chase game, even though I was good at learning the words: all of us had our own techniques for smuggling in bookmarks, or crumpling the tissue-thin pages so the large book fell open on the relevant passage.

(A memory here that may or not be relevant: my Sunday school teacher – the same one who would not locate the outer darkness

for me – telling me that it was alright to abbreviate the Doctrine and Covenants to ‘D+C’ if I were writing it down: making a note during a lesson, for example, or copying out a passage I wanted to learn off by heart. But I should never say the abbreviation out loud, because as well as the name of a book it was also the name of an operation ladies sometimes had. Speaking and writing bifurcated. I knew I wasn’t supposed to ask what kind of operation, and it was years later that I found out about dilation and cuterage, going into the uterus via the cervix and scraping it out, removing foetal tissue or fibroids.)

There’s more. As a teenager working her way through the Young Women’s Programme (lessons for girls aged eleven to eighteen) I learned to recite *Stand for Truth and Righteousness*, which is a ‘motto’ the length of a few paragraphs, ending with a list of ideas that form ‘The Young Women’s Values.’ Faith, Divine Nature, Individual Worth, Knowledge, Choice and Accountability, Good Works and Integrity.’ (A few years after I left, the authorities in Salt Lake City saw fit to add a new value to the chant: Virtue. I delight in taking this personally.) Each of the values has a scripture passage to go with it, and its own mottos, and ‘value activities’ to complete (the boys work towards becoming Eagle Scouts instead) and if you get it all done before you turn eighteen – it’s pretty much a full-time job – then you get a medal.

I never got my medal but I still know the whole lot off by heart. All the mottos and scriptures and references. I was, if nothing else, a goose with a talent for the tube. The whole system was part of an epistemological method that is alarming in its simplicity and violence. If you want to know the truth of something, you should pray. If you are worthy then the words you have learned off by heart should come to you as an answer. Clear your mind and let them come. If they do not come, or alternative answers come, it is because you are unworthy and too unclean for God to speak. Satan speaks instead and you must ignore him, repent and try harder. This is what I was later to discover in my attempt at faith

healing, where those who don't get better have failed to believe well enough, sick in soul as well as in body and mind.

## Identifying Your Literary Context

The first time I was diagnosed with depression I was eleven years old and my hair was falling out in handfuls. One evening I had been crying for so long and so loudly (I suspect overreacting or making something out of nothing was a feature of my physiology long before they opened my veins for the blood) that a locum GP came to the house and prescribed me a single Valium tablet. He looked at the library books around my bed: the Stephen King and Agatha Christie and Point Horror novels – and decided my fanciful reading was the problem. The books were removed.

That weekend my mother took me to the Bishop and told him what had happened. He put his hands on my head and gave me a blessing. One of the things he wished for me was the strength to become worthy to resist Satan. Around this time, I became what they called a 'school refuser.' The term made me think, even at the time, of what it is like to try to spoon-feed a baby who'd rather have the breast: the way the child clamps its lips together tightly and turns its head. It's why we shake our heads when we say 'no.'

I have always tried to be careful about what I let inside, and I have always been wrong. You can be nourished by anything and if Kool-Aid is all there is on offer, you drink it. I can say that all these gobbled scriptures came in useful during a university entrance exam when I was unexpectedly presented with an extract from *Paradise Lost* and asked to comment on it. I'd never heard of Milton, but was able to cobble something together referring accurately, desperately (and perhaps impressively) to a range of references in the Old and New Testament. They let me in and proceeded to tell me how to read. I ate books like air.

## Order and Chaos

In her book, *When the Sick Rule the World* Dodie Bellamy says:

Confined children speak in shrieks grunts growls and snarls. If confined with other children, they may have developed sign language or other strange languages that sound like German but aren't. The confined child is brilliant at non-verbal communication. When frustrated at not being able to say what she wants, she will grab a pencil and paper and in a few strokes, illustrate fairly complex ideas and even feelings. The confined child achieves the highest score ever recorded on tests that measure a person's ability to make sense out of chaos and to see patterns.<sup>1</sup>

## Writing with Heart II

The phrase to know something 'off by heart' comes from the Greeks, apparently, who believed the heart was the thing that you thought with: not a pump to circulate the blood, but the vessel of all the words you'd ever learned. We don't say 'off by head' or 'off by brain' even though we think we know where memories live because we also know that the words we can recite in our sleep go deeper into our bodies than that. But we do say 'off her head' when we mean that someone is very drunk, or if they have gone mad. It isn't the heart that goes wrong in cases like this, but the mind.

## Intertextuality for Creative Writers

When the philosopher Gillian Rose was dying, she wrote a book called *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* which is, among other things, a meditation on its own epigraph, from Staretz

Silouan: 'Keep your mind in hell, and despair not.' There's a dangerous sanity to her work: a clear-eyed refusal to elide suffering, narcissism, poor behaviour, self-pity, hurt. The work she describes is partly her writing, but also her endeavour to 'woo' life. It's another kind of work, she says, this wooing.

When something untoward happens, some trauma or damage [...] one makes the initially unwelcome event one's own inner occupation. You work to adopt the most loveless, forlorn, aggressive child as your own, and do not leave her to develop into an even more vengeful monster, who constantly wishes you ill. In ill-health as in unhappy love this is the hardest work: it requires taking in before letting be.<sup>2</sup>

I love the dignity of describing personal disaster as 'something untoward' – it echoes, for me, with Herbert's 'something understood' – the vague decorum of the phrasing belying the total brutality of the experience. Rose's book makes me think about the way one text quotes another: each book taking bites out of the ones that come before it – mammocking them as baby Coriolanus mouthed his butterfly, sure (the politeness of a footnote doesn't excuse the theft, the gobbling) – but also about how us writers are barely able to do anything else. Barthes has told us that all writing is just 'a tissue of quotations' – that all writers are really mixers, samplers, and collagists. Earlier, T. S. Eliot distinguished the good and the bad poet by their ability to get their borrowed tissue to cohere with the whole: to become entirely new. Bad poets throw their borrowings into 'something which has no cohesion.'

We are supposed to make something better – more coherent – than the world that makes us? We are supposed to be something other than embodied and enworlded? No. But we are supposed to take the parts inside somehow, even if it is like eating broken glass.

## Character Development

Marie Curie died of blood cancer without ever allowing herself to understand how sick she was. Many years later Adrienne Rich wrote a poem about her. 'She died a famous woman denying / her wounds / denying / her wounds came from the same source as her power.'<sup>3</sup>

I know that 'source' is what they used to call radium - in particular the radium they put into little metal bullets and inserted into the vaginas of cervical cancer patients in the dark days before chemotherapy. I know this because I researched this for months when I was writing *Fell* - my novel about cancer and healing and dying and the curse and cure of hope. I even found an x-ray image taken of a woman's pelvis during the treatment, the five glowing white metal rods floating in the dark bowl of space between the cloudy bones of her pelvis. It hurt. It didn't always work. They called it brachytherapy: high doses across a short distance. Sometimes the metal bullets are tiny and injected into the tissue directly and in those cases they are called 'seeds' which is confusing if you are a patient, because tiny metastases (cancer out of place, on the move, setting out from its place of origin) are called tumour seedlings too. Source. And power. Wounds.

You'd never say that, would you, to a sick or hurting woman sitting in front of you? A real woman. Not an emblem or an idea. A woman is a woman and not a shelf for putting an idea about *pharmakon* onto. 'This thing that hurts you and is making you famous is also the source of your power. Your hurting makes you powerful.' You wouldn't actually say that, would you? Would you say, 'the crack is where the light gets in' to someone with a hole in their skull?

Rich wasn't quite saying that, perhaps. Was instead asking us to think about our own wounds and how we deny them. She wasn't attempting to turn her poem into radium - a source of help

and comfort. The poem instead is a telescope she hands to us and asks us to point at our power source until we see it is a wound. She would have preferred, I think, for Curie to acknowledge the pollution in her system: the way her work – which was her life – had radiated all the way into her and changed her blood.

## Writing as Research: Identifying Your Research Questions

In other words (and this is the apophanist's problem – the unsolved theorem I should have shared with my students instead of instructing them on the basics of breathing): how to write about everything? How to take in the things that don't belong to you without being poisoned by them? How to make use of the things that live inside, those seedlings you never asked for? How to breathe in? How to breathe out? How to keep on doing that?

## Approaching Your Reader: Pathways to Publication

The nearest I can get to what I want to say to you is to show you John Mirk's *Festial* – a collection of sermons probably composed in the 1380s. One of his sermons gives us a version of Christ who, when faced with an unrepentant man who refuses to confess (confessional writing is a way of spilling your blood on the ground and, like a public disembowelling, it certainly risks disgusting your reader) puts his hand into his own wound, retrieves a handful of his blood, throws it into the man's face and condemns him to hell.<sup>4</sup>

The work is a mood and a world away from the luminous delight and curiosity Caravaggio depicts in *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, which gives us the bloodless portrait of Thomas having

his finger guided by Jesus towards the wound in his side. That picture gives us something: it reminds us that witnessing alone is not enough – seeing is not believing – but touching – putting your finger into the gap – using your hands to read – is a kind of connection. But it doesn't hurt. Caravaggio lets us forget about that: that wounds hurt and they bleed.

Mirk had it though. I read this and feel the heat of the blood on my face, in my mouth. The ferrous smell of it as it flies through the air. The rage of it. He was writing in response to the Lollards, who rejected both the tradition of confession and the belief in the power of a priest to grant absolution. But the sermon gives us something more complex than a selling of the idea that to confess something is to be relieved of it. Something that was perhaps more complex and unsettling than he meant it to be. The process of telling, in Mirk's sermon, requires something more from the listener than mere witnessing: in Mirk's time, a priest who would sit silently behind the grille, only listening: the prototype, perhaps, of the blank faced psychoanalyst. The version of Christ given in Mirk's sermon is very much alive, despite his wounds, and his blood-slitting makes confession into a two-way experience: requiring a creative engagement that goes way beyond witness or empathy. Christ exposed his wound and expected the same from his audience. *I'll show you mine*, he seems to say, *and now you show me yours*. Confess. Contact.

Additionally, Mirk was demonstrating to us what kind of engagement this listening/reading/confessing requires because he was, from the pulpit, dramatising it by telling a story that was evidence of an intrusive, possessive reading of the New Testament. This pre-modern parable of the blood-hurling-Jesus is apocryphal, in the loosest sense. It is Mirk's remix, perhaps, of the resurrected, un-dead Christ showing his wound to Doubting Thomas and the angry, living Christ scourging the money-lenders away from the temple (to buy and to sell is not the kind of transaction this form of reading, of writing, of listening, of being in the world requires

of us – of you and me). It's very nearly blasphemous to add to the record in this way. It is dangerous and essential. To take up the baton and generate literature by repurposing and misusing it. This is the kind of reader I want to be: one who makes disorderly, messy contact. This type of contact: a risky mutual transfusion, is what literature is for.

# Ground Zero

*I am choosing, as you have already observed, the genre or rhetorical form of tiny atomic nuclei (in the process of fusion or division in an uninterrupted chain) which I shall arrange or rather I shall project towards you, like tiny inoffensive missiles, in a discontinuous, more or less haphazard fashion.*

Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now'

## #8

I'm still in bed. It's late at night on a different day. / I am resigned to this book becoming, in part, a diary of its own making.

The man I live with and I have our laptops open on our knees; he's revising pulmonary x-rays for an exam in the morning and I am knitting and browsing *The Guardian* website. Something distracts him and he turns away from the smoky greyscale images on his slides. I don't like those ghostly photographs, the ones which show chests unpeeled and expose the ominous privacy of flesh to reveal white clouds of intercostal muscle or bronchial mucus or pulmonary embolisms or matted webs of cancerous tissue. He closes his laptop and for a while he watches me watching a time-lapse video of the second shelter being erected over the old Chernobyl power station. Though the video is under one minute long, during it the sky changes colour from white to blue to grey to white again while the great curved steel shelter goes up in two halves then is slid together and made airtight.

While I knit, I ask Siri to collect some facts for us. According to her, the structure is a bit of a record breaker. The largest land-based movable structure ever constructed. The numbers are phenomenal: 20,000 tonnes of steel. The shell cost 1.27 billion pounds, took five years to build and was funded by donations from twenty-eight

countries, who, stirred into action by the Fukushima crisis, had a whip-round in 2011. St Paul's Cathedral and the Statue of Liberty could fit inside it (together, at the same time, I take this to mean – perhaps wrongly). I try asking Siri a few different ways (it keeps my hands free to work on my shawl) – rephrasing the question when she doesn't understand – but however I word my enquiry I can't find out how long a period of time has been collapsed into this video. I watch it again. It looks like an old-fashioned barn raising: the struts and beams flicker into being, then the great curved pieces of the outer walls appear and are lifted into place by juddering cranes and behind them, that pulsing, staccato sky.

The words of the article that swim around the embedded video provide an anchor and some context. I should have read them first. I'm seeing this video now because today a ceremony took place to mark the completion of the work. All the people who spoke at it emphasised that this steel structure was good and solid and would hold for at least a century. Hans Blix said that, 'moving together the two halves of the huge arch of this gigantic shelter is like closing a wound, a nuclear wound that belongs to all of us.'<sup>1</sup>

But covering isn't closing and closing is not closure. The work is not over. Literally, activity continues beneath the shelter of the sealed steel dome (it doesn't shine: you'd think it would shine, but it doesn't, it looks smooth, but dull – like a river stone). For the next year, under there in the dark and observed only by camera lenses (eyes on stalks, controlled remotely), the daddy-long-legs limbs of robot-controlled cranes slowly dismantle the original concrete tomb encasing Chernobyl's fourth reactor. Figuratively, our frenzied and impossible remembering can't stop either: the dangerous knowledge the disaster gifted to the world is a wound with no repair other than forgetfulness, which is a kind of derangement. Chernobyl was a near-miss – when the real disaster comes there will be no remembering of the 'absolute pharmakon,'<sup>2</sup> as Derrida puts it, because there will be no aftermath. In Svetlana Alexievich's collage of oral testimony, *Chernobyl Prayer*, she

refers to the incident as ‘a catastrophe of time’ and ‘a pathway to infinity,’<sup>3</sup> and this is only partially to do with the dreadful task of dealing with poisons which have a half-life of millennia. It is also because we don’t dare to forget what we cannot remember and because denying or imagining are as deranging as each other. We are all sick with impossibility now.

This interests me, this dome within a dome. The man who I live with returns to his lungs, and Siri and I set about an investigation. She reminds me of something I already knew: the first shelter was hastily built by the Ukrainian authorities after the 1986 disaster, and within ten years of its erection became cracked and badly damaged. I learn these crackings and crumbings are a common problem with some types of concrete. Water gets in and starts to rust the metal web of reinforcing struts within, and the rust spreads, the concrete turns brown and starts to crack. It’s called concrete cancer. In 1996, *Ogonyok* magazine referred to the reactor as the ‘Shelter Object’ and the damaged shell as a ‘sarcophagus’ and ‘a corpse which still has breath. It is breathing death.’<sup>4</sup> Hence the need for a second dome.

Maybe one day a third, a fourth, a fifth, until the domes are bigger than the entire world, still breathing death like glowing lungs, and all the work we have to do is to frantically build more of them: that’s all we live for now, to hammer curved pieces of commemorative metal into place, to make a wall or an egg, to press a cupped palm against an arterial wound as it spurts. Who can blame a person for becoming exhausted? For wanting to stop? For wanting to blow the whole thing wide open? There’s no exposing and abrading a wound like this. The entire thing has a kind of Russian-doll struc

## #7

I met some kids from Chernobyl once: children of the Belarussian evacuees, sent for recuperative holidays across Western Europe by

the patchwork of charitable organisations that sprung up in the years following the disaster. I have trouble pinning down exactly when, though I want to say it was around 1993 because at the time they came to stay the James Bulger trial was going on in Preston, in the law courts in town.

I have a vivid memory of this: the police had closed down the main roads past the court and one day, when my granny came to collect me from school, we had to walk home the long way round. There were barriers up near the Harris Library and around the flag market and it had been inconvenient to her, and I thought I was sensing her annoyance. There were lots of adults standing around, just huddled together or shouting into cameras and the feeling was one of furtive guilt and waiting, and it seemed, all of a sudden, like my fault my granny had been irritated.

She looked at the barriers and the people waiting by them (to throw things – I know that now – I know why the trial was moved from Sefton to Preston) and she tutted and said, ‘those boys are the same age as you are,’ which places it in 1993 when those two famous little boys and I were ten years old and I didn’t know if she meant, ‘and it’s a terrible thing that is happening to them’ or ‘and look what terrible things a ten-year-old like you can do.’

I think she meant the first but at the time I took it to be the second, perhaps because I’d been schooled that way. I knew the ‘age of accountability’ was eight because that was when I’d been baptised. I’d been taught and warned that everything after the stroke of midnight on your eighth birthday counts (‘counts’ means ‘has eternal consequences’). I knew about the stolen baby, left on the Walton railway line with his head bashed in, then broken into two by the train. For the rest of that year the newspapers were full of discussion about what a ten-year-old could really be responsible for but I already knew that free agency is a loaded gun and it is perfectly possible for a child to choose itself into hell.

Anyway. I've placed the year as well I am able to but it is possible I am wrong and the Bulger trial and the day the sick/not sick children arrived belong together for some other reason and not because they happened during the same month. So I will only tentatively say that during this time, some of the people in my church got together with a charity that organised 'recuperative holidays' for children living in the contaminated towns around Chernobyl and further afield, across Belarus and the Ukraine. The charity organised groups of children who would leave their parents and travel across Europe to stay for a little while in the houses of host families in towns across England and Wales. At the time it was believed these recuperative holidays would give the children's bodies a break from the substances - lead and Caesium 137 and Iodine 131 - that had contaminated the air and land and food, that gathered in the grass and the cows and so even the milk - and which accumulated too in their bodies.

On the evening they were due to arrive, us kids were gathered at the church and, as a way of priming us for the task of befriending the visitors, were given preparatory talks by our Sunday school teachers while other adults ran around with clipboards and sorted clothes and toys into piles. Our teachers told us about the length of the drive, and how tired the children would be when they arrived.

I remember this - sitting cross-legged on the shiny floor of the cultural hall trying to listen to the talk but thinking about them driving from France to England under the sea, seeing afresh the handshake through a hole broken into the dead end of a tunnel on the day the French and English burrowing teams had met in the middle. In my mind, this undersea handshake always took place in the presence of a huge oscillating drill. It was big news. I didn't know anybody who had been through the tunnel. Not one person. But at our school we spoke about it all the time: the jokes were constant, our way of picking up and holding the terror, of containing it. (Q: What's the last thing you

want to see when you drive through the Channel Tunnel? A: A drop of rain on your windscreen.)

We were reminded of the fact that these children would probably look healthy to us but it was very possible that they would all get sick eventually or that they had been sick, some other time in the past, and were currently in remission, which didn't mean sick, but which meant something else. Delicate, perhaps. I think that was the message. That they were delicate even if they didn't look it, and we should be gentle even if we didn't feel like it. We should, at all times, remember how lucky we were. We knew nothing about their evacuation: that their parents had left everything behind, only writing their names on their windows and front doors in the hope that their belongings would be sent on to them afterwards. When the clean-up workers went into the abandoned towns and villages to shoot the farm animals and pets, they'd loot what was left and turn the family photographs to the wall. We didn't know they'd been told not to walk on the grass, or swim in the rivers, or pick the flowers. We didn't know that their parents had been told it was all right to eat the apples, but they had to bury the cores afterwards. All we knew was what we were told, which was that we weren't to speak to them about getting sick – they wouldn't know English anyway – and we shouldn't worry about the disease that was waiting for them in their presents or pasts being catching. Our adults emphasised this, and the hope that if these children came to live in our spare rooms and come to church with us and sing with us and even just watch television with us for a couple of weeks – then there was a tiny chance that the magic trick of half-

## #6

This essay will argue that the linguistic and structural and ethical difficulties involved in writing about pain and trauma tell

us something about the nature of writing itself. (I'm going to be honest with you here: I am hoping this 'something' I haven't discovered yet turns out to be something I want to know. It may end up as 'something untoward' or even 'something understood.') If you are sitting comfortably, I will begin with Virginia Woolf, who in her essay 'On Being Ill' writes about being lost for words when it comes to writing about being unwell. She isn't saying that illness isn't a fit subject for literature – she insists throughout this essay that it is – only that there aren't good enough words to spend on describing it. 'English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way. [...] let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to the doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him.'<sup>5</sup>

Woolf diagnoses the problem in a way that utterly exculpates the writer. First the poor workwoman blames her tools, then she blames her reader – their impatience and their unwillingness to linger, 'the public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot,' she says. When attempting to write about illness the writer only slides through a crack between transmission and reception and gets off scot-free.

But her return to this work implies she herself didn't feel entirely let off the hook. She first published the essay in 1926 in T. S. Eliot's magazine *The Criterion*. Four years later she republished it, with revisions that in their totality – not least in her renaming the work *Illness: An Unexploited Mine* – suggest the essay should be read as more of a call to action than a helpless lament. There are diamonds in them there hills, so to speak. All written works, whatever else they are, are both love and poison pen letters to the ego, so perhaps Woolf was really addressing the essay selfwards and uncovering or constructing a sense of vocation rather than calling up others to the draft. Yet other writers have not always welcomed the call down the mine.

Hilary Mantel, writing about her own experience of major surgery and the recovery from it, energetically dismisses Woolf's essay as 'piffle.' She insists that 'nobody's pain is so special that the devil's dictionary of anguish has not anticipated it.' The work is vibrant, grumpy and colourful – part of the diary series she wrote for the *London Review of Books*. 'Hospital talk is short and exclamatory,' she tells us, and her delight in finding another kind of talk is palpable. She pastes metaphors onto her body and becomes her own book, describing the wound in her abdomen as having 'a spiral binding, like a manuscript.' She waxes lyrical on 'the iambic pentameter of the saline stand, the alexandrine of the blood drain, the epidural's sonnet form.' The register is high, florid, feverish. At one point she wonders if the content of her hallucinations – literary, liturgical, historical – featuring priests and princesses – might seem elitist to her nurses, who, she notes, don't speak English as their first language and may not even be Christian. But not for long. 'I am easily parted from the present day,' Mantel reminds us, before taking us off on her drugged head's flight of fancy, showing us what she, in her delirium, is able to achieve, as if to underline the heavy sadness of Woolf's 'creature within' who is unable to 'separate off' from the body. (I think of Peter Pan here, dislocated from his shadow, and wincing a little when Wendy takes a needle and thread and stitches it back on.) Mantel's diary entry, entitled 'Meeting the Devil' is very many things but it is most obviously a riposte to Woolf who Mantel decides is both a 'schoolgirl' and a 'wuss.'

This should feel like good news. Mantel, in insisting that nobody's pain is unique, provides an important antidote to the sorrow-addict's sickly insistence that they, among all others, are special and incurable. This is important and useful. But she is not only saying that she can write what Woolf felt unable to and that it is possible to get pain down on the page. She goes one better and implies quite strongly that unlike her, Woolf wasn't even

really *properly* ill. Mantel performs a kind of snobbery of suffering, where her own 'wound the size of Wales' beats the more 'seemly' and 'decorous' illnesses of Woolf - her fainting, her fever and her palpitations - hands down.

This is not surprising. We all play card games with our sufferings and Mantel, lying in her bed with a surgical incision big enough to fit a fist into, calls our bluff by displaying a wound which looks like a book and comes with its own mechanical black box which cleans it and sucks it closed and drains away the putrefying matter. Even the flies are interested in Mantel's rotting abdomen: why on earth wouldn't we be? It is visible and measurable and smelly - it exists and is provable in the way that other pains, the kind of pains that bother the soul behind the glass, are not.

If this is a game of poker, Mantel remains unimpressed with Woolf's hand. What we might call Woolf's head-hurts, the pains that led her to her river, are dismissed. Mantel is impatient with it all and only notes that part of Woolf's treatment (for what? Mantel won't name Woolf's decorous, posh-lady illness and she doesn't say *hysteria* but it's there, the rotten stink of it clinging to her insistence on giving Woolf a certain kind of wet, weeping, femininity: 'her secretions are ladylike, tears, not bile') involved her having her teeth taken out.

Mantel proves Woolf's point about the reader who won't - who simply can't - tolerate reading about somebody else's illness and in so doing aids Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* when she says that to be in pain (and head-hurt counts - it counts - it counts because I said so, I am saying so, I am saying it now, typing in my dressing gown on my little red sofa with a candle burning: look at my hands) is to have certainty, but to hear of another's pain (even while indisputably suffering your own, in your nice quiet private hospital near the M25) is to have doubt. And what is easier to doubt than

an interior wound, than an internal experience without an external referent?

This is a problem for a writer.

There's more. There is always more. The essayist and critic Tim Bascom, in an essay on the shape and form of the personal essay, diagnoses the issue of writing about pain as a technical one. It's not to do with the poverty of words (let's assume we've leapt over that hurdle and we can find them), but it is to do with the train-crash aspect, the tendency for derailment. He's one of the readers Woolf imagined, hanging out for the plot and not wanting to read about losing it. 'Trauma, which is a common source for personal essays, can easily cause an author to get stuck on [a] sort of plateau,' he says. Essays about trauma 'seem almost to jog in place emotionally, clutching at a kind of post-traumatic scar tissue.'<sup>6</sup>

For Bascom the difficulty is an architectural one – some insufficiency of form and shape caused by trauma's immobilising, anti-narrative properties. Bascom uses a metaphor to describe the faulty writing here, one that conjures a body – a jogging, clutching, body. He's not talking about the writing any more. He's talking about the writer/jogger herself who is at fault: it is not only the work, but the author of it herself who suffers from Failure-to-Progress (in the stalled process of childbirth sense, as well as the way Bunyan meant it). She jogs, like the arm of a record player scratching the needle across the surface of the record (when-ever I think of this, I think of ECG machines and their rows of inky needles (tattoos?) scratching out their spidery outputs and making another kind of writing that does not progress at all – the line of the heartbeat, the blood turned into ink, the pump and pull of a pulse, of the oldest and youngest utterance we make: *Here I Am*). Bascom's sickly writer is a ladylike runner with heart trouble – phantom palpitations – lingering at the starting line with a hand against her chest. She fails to get on with it. I can return to Woolf here again, who says in writing's great marathon

and in the face of this impatience from the reader, women writers 'dropped out of the race.' (I'm glad to have a sick-note that gets me out of this kind of P.E. I'm exempt for medical reasons and also a C.O. I want to stay in bed. My heart is broken.) Mantel gets her writing to progress by turning it into a competition – with Woolf – that she can win.

We haven't started on the ethical trouble yet. On the responsibility the writer has to the culture she writes into and away from. It is significant that Woolf foregrounds the difficulties experienced by the woman writer. The wounded woman writer, which of course she was. It is significant because wounded is a tricky thing for any woman to admit to being. Not least because any time a woman utters a sentence about her own experience, she becomes a kind of terrorist and there's an army out there waiting to strike her down. Some days it feels like writing truthfully about her own life is the most subversive thing a woman can do. But more specifically there is also the sense that in uttering the truth of painful experience she is letting the side down and embracing the straightjacket and the hysteric's sickbed a little too easily. That she is first with her very body then again with her writing (that is, with her hands) providing strong evidence that all ladies are poor poorly hysterical ladies (the story railroads us all towards its conclusion: all they need is a good fucking, even when they've already been fucked). More nicely: women writing about illness risk equating womanhood itself with illness.

In her essay 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain' Leslie Jamison articulates the risk we take in writing, the risk that our words can be taken to mean 'being a woman requires being in pain, that pain is the unending glue and prerequisite of female consciousness,' and 'the moment we start talking about wounded women, we risk transforming their suffering from an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution.' Jamison's essay goes on to ask the obvious question – just how is a writer supposed to represent female pain – her own pain (the

essay was later included in the collection *The Empathy Exams*, which explored, among other things, Jamison's own experiences with surgery, injury, heartbreak and self-harm) without contributing to or creating a culture where female wounding is 'fetishized to the point of fantasy or imperative.'

Her own answer is tentative and is partly about sincerity, about moving beyond the bored, ironic millennial tones of fake-toughness she calls 'post-wounded.' She wants us to mean it. Art, but not artifice. She also hints that some of this work of representation belongs to the reader and might be to do with a style of reading, of listening, of sitting curiously with the inevitable doubt that somebody else's experience provokes. Pain reaches beyond itself when it becomes public, she says. Collective is the word she uses. We must share the experience and the work that goes into recreating it. I think, as the title of her collection implies, she is asking for empathy. That she hopes that narrative repair comes not in the process of her construction, but in the completion of the act by a reparatively inclined reader.<sup>7</sup>

'A wound is where the interior becomes exterior,' Jamison says, earlier in the essay. So the hole lets the light in, lets the reader in. There is a crack in everything. The essay itself is a wound. An aperture through which you can peek at me and I can peek at you and we can get to know each other. / Say something, then. I suppose a writer *would* jettison the difficulty onto the reader. Woolf did it. Jamison does it. It's our way of both getting the last word in and leaving the problem on somebody else's doorstep. It's the literary equivalent of a game of ginger: we knock on doors and run away. We make doors and we knock on them and then we run, though only in place.

It may help us to progress from the start line if here we recall Ben Lerner's *10:04*. The book describes another problem inherent in the kind of writing I am trying to do, which is that some kinds of pain are both unavoidably present, and utterly unavailable for the telling. In the section titled 'The Golden Vanity' which is the

original container for the whole – the short story from which the book grew, and about which process – plucking a novel from a short story, like Mary Poppins pulling the standard lamp from out of the carpet bag – the rest of the book ruminates on – we begin with a character – ‘the author’ discussing his teeth (this matters, I think. Remember Woolf’s teeth?)

This man has recently been informed his wisdom teeth have holes in them and need to be removed and his dental surgeon has offered him a choice between forms of anaesthesia: one which will render him entirely unconscious, or one in which he will be lightly awake for the operation – in a ‘twilight’ state and not entirely pain free – but will leave the hospital with no memory of the experience. In order to make his decision he speaks to his friend Liz about the difference between abolishing pain and abolishing the memory of the pain and about which state might be preferable. ‘If I take the drugs, it’s like dividing myself into two people,’ he says. ‘It’s like leaving a version of myself alone with the pain, abandoning him,’ he goes on. ‘And then you meet him one day in a dark alley. And he wants to settle the score.’<sup>8</sup>

Freud’s theories about ‘working through’ when applied to the impossible problem of writing about trauma suggest that the integrating of wild-card and un-integrated experience into a life’s story is the very definition of ‘better.’ The traumatised don’t write and the sick don’t tell stories because when they do, they’re better. Hey Presto. ‘Working through’ suggests that the figure in the alley – this pre-literate howling violent monster that lurks in the shadows, hell-bent on revenge – is not only met face on, but welcomed into the house, sat at the dining table, and asked for his opinion on current affairs. As the one who took the rap is welcomed back into the city, he is re-civilised.

It might be, then, that the method by which this invitation from the dark alley to the dining table works is through containment, through a kind of cleaning that is part putting old wine into new bottles, and partly a setting apart – a setting up of a *cordon*

*sanitaire* of chapter or line or plot or some other unit of holding. The object relations theorists have taught us this: we speak to our therapists, who become a pair of cupped hands, the way mother should have been. They hold all our blood in their hands and we are able to step away from it and watch as it congeals into a jelly with a dark surface reflective enough to see ourselves in. Dr John Dee's obsidian mirror – the one he polished and peered at in order to see his ghosts (Joseph Smith had a couple of these too: he used his shining seer stones to translate the Book of Mormon). And if we do not have therapists or mothers, 'ready-made,' as Woolf put it, we bloodied artists have the opportunity to manufacture other kinds of frames and containers and, if we're any good, we'll make a pair of hands from words or paint or clay or sound that will succeed in holding our blood for us. As the critic Reina Van der Wiel says in *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma*, 'The more structured a work of art, the better able it is to function as a container for the artist by offering a means to control and gain distance from its emotionally overwhelming content and transforming it into thought.'<sup>9</sup>

But I am afraid this fantasy of symptom transmuted into symbol, the bloody sheets run through the washing machine of prose, the dark twin taken by the hand and taught to speak, is only wishful thinking. The container

## #5

But of course pain can be demonstrated, even if it can't always be adequately described and this is one of the things P. Selbit was doing when he gave the world the pinnacle of his life's work and very best magic trick for the first time at the Finsbury Park Empire, North London, on the 17th January 1921.<sup>10</sup>

Imagine it now: this man, in a dinner jacket and white bow tie. Photographs of the time show him as a pale, sleek, clean-shaven young man. There's something serious in his expression. Maybe he

just had to pull a straight face for the photograph. Maybe he had to hold still for a long time and the slightly mournful, thoughtful look he has on his face was easier to maintain than a smile. Perhaps he was thinking of the money. He'd auditioned the fourteen-minute-long trick in front of agents from a number of theatres in the nearby St George's Hall just a month before – in the dark days at the end of 1920. January must have felt like a good time to unveil it to the public.

The stage was gas-lit. In the breath-held silence as he set up the trick, he'd have heard the lamps hissing and moved slowly, with confidence, I think. He knew he was onto a good thing. Knew it was something special. Maybe he didn't know *why* it was special. But he might have smiled a little as the curtain went up. We can forgive him for being smug, if he was. I think he was. I would have been smug.

The lady with him (Betty Barker, she was called. Her name was Betty) is wearing a black lacy dress – she's quite plump and perhaps he wonders if she is going to fit and if she's going to be able to move in the way she needs to, to make the trick work. He holds her hand as he helps her into the box – there's a little set of wooden steps on the stage so she can do this elegantly, but if she slips and flashes a little leg, well, there's no harm in that. She lies down. His hands are clammy as he lowers the lid and she fits: she fits perfectly and of course she does, because the box has been made especially for her and it's the one they used at the auditions and there's really no need to be nervous because they've rehearsed themselves past boredom and out the other side, into that relaxed state of devoted fascination the experts that come later would call 'flow.' In other words, they know what to do. He flicks the hasps on the lid down.

He's caught himself, sometimes, repeating his patter in his sleep. The first part of the trick involves sliding panes of glass downwards through the lid and bottom of the box. It's a preparation for the main event. He talks about matter through matter.

Atoms shifting. The re-stitching of the universe by a temporary alteration in the laws of physics. Only three years ago, some boffin in Cambridge split the atom. He'd read about Rutherford's work and his confusing achievement in his morning newspaper, didn't understand, and felt nausea radiating upwards from his guts, even as he culled phrases from the article to weave into the patter.

He sleeps alone, this man. His wife is gone. Perhaps she didn't like the life, or didn't like him. Perhaps he did something to her or she did something to him, or it just went cold, or something else, but whatever the reason is, he's on his own now, and when he takes this lady's hand to help her into the box, and takes it again when it pokes out of the specially cut hole in the side, and when he touches her forehead and her hair and she smiles – just to show the audience she's still in there, and she's really real, this lady in the black dress, with her white skin and her shiny red lipstick and her black shoes and her calves – this is a little racy, but on the right side of tasteful, he thinks – her white calves wiggling at the bottom end of the box where they poke out of the specially cut holes in the bottom (they don't call it a coffin – she does, because he doesn't like it, it's a kind of joke they have between them and she finds it funnier than he does) – when he touches her, he always notices the softness of the skin under his hands a little more than he thinks he should, or than he means to. He notices himself noticing that. He wonders what it means. It disturbs his flow – this relaxed state of utter concentration he has, during which the audience, invisible in the wide bowl of darkness that is the theatre beyond the stage – may as well not exist. Where he himself may as well not exist. Where the box and her head and hands and calves disappear and there is only the darkness, and the heat of the stage lights, and his own pale and undamaged hands, moving in the air before him as he deploys his patter. The patter is everything. The trick itself is very simple really – some American magician will steal it and make it famous before he can patent it – but it's all in the patter. He coughs lightly, which is a signal to the lady to start, then clasps his

hands before him and turns to the audience. He begins. This man – Selbit – he sleeps alone these days but sometimes in the night he wakes up and knows he has been speaking aloud, rehearsing his patter, and talking to an imaginary audience about this most wonderful trick, the one where he will take this young lady and saw her clean in two – this man can talk for England, and he does.

Selbit doesn't do the actual sawing – there were two suited assistants for that – to handle the back and forth with the blade, making sure they made a mess with the sawdust, hesitated as the saw moved through the wooden box then bit into the abdomen of the woman inside. Sometimes she squeals a little and kicks her feet. Sometimes she just smiles, brilliantly, and there is lipstick on her teeth. Sometimes Selbit loops ropes around her wrists and ankles and has another four assistants – suited, as he is – hold them taut while the sawing takes place. He likes the effect of her being spread-eagled open while the saw bites and it's a nice touch to walk around the box while the vigorous sawing continues and pluck at the ropes to show the audience how tightly she is being held: how like a spider she is. Selbit never wonders what she is thinking about while the trick is happening: he's too far gone for that. The world has dissolved. Only his hands. His hands and his voice. His assistants let the two-handled blade clatter to the floor and they lean back, exhausted. At Selbit's signal, the two halves of the box are pushed apart and someone in the audience screams.

The secret wasn't in the business inside the box. The real trick was to make the audience feel it: make them smell it, if possible. Selbit sometimes arranged for an ambulance to park on the street outside the theatre so that the audience would pass it as they came in to take their seats. He has been careful to take precautions, he'd tell them as he wrapped the lady's ankle with rope, and gently introduced the possibility of catastrophic and violent failure in their minds. More often, he'd instruct his assistants to fill the gutters outside the theatre with a dark liquid – water stained with ink, cow's blood, red wine? – then he'd be able to hint without

saying a word that the worst had already happened, that something terrible had gone wrong during the dress rehearsal but because he was a professional, the show must go on.

He must have been so proud. Not knowing, then, what disappointment lay in store. Nobody remembers his name now. Later, as the word spread to Europe and America and his imitators started to claim the trick as their own, he planned his own Stateside tour. But his rival, the American illusionist Horace Goldin (who would later invent the trick with the circular buzz-saw that slices a woman in half lengthways, from the crotch upwards - he called it *The Living Miracle*), had registered the name of the trick in as many states as he could, so by the time Selbit arrived, in September of 1921, he was forced to rename his trick *The Divided*

#### #4

Things I want to tell the doctor:

My ~~tummy~~ abdomen hurts.

~~I feel a~~ Some days there is weakness in my bones.

~~They are rotting, honeycombing like Aero bars or tubes of pumice.~~

My ankles ~~feel wobbly~~. All my hinges ache.

When I move, ~~like this~~, there's a ~~stabbing~~ pain where ~~they stabbed me~~ between my belly button and my pubic bone.

~~I feel like I'm being sliced and scored and stabbed all the time.~~

My body hurts. My ~~tummy~~ hurts.

~~It hurts every day.~~

I can't sleep ~~and I dream about knives.~~

The doctor says I am fine. He says my blood is fine. I lie down and have a wand swept over my chest: ultrasounds on my lungs and my heart. It is possible that the anaphylaxis caused oedema that caused long-lasting damage to the systems of air and

blood. He tells me to breathe. In. Out. He says they are fine too, my systems. My lungs. My air is fine. He says my body is fine. He says everything is absolutely fine. Because everything is fine I am forced to find my own treatments. I wrap bandages around my wrists and ankles because the pressure is soothing: if my bones really do break or crumble or otherwise come apart, as it feels they might, the wrappings will hold me together. ~~Quite often~~ Once or twice I go to bed with a giant elasticated bandage around my waist and hips to keep my guts inside through the night. In the morning the skin under the bandage is white and clammy and ridged: a corpse pulled out of water.

One of these mornings, staring at the damp ruins of my belly, I decide I look just like Fredrica Bimmel. The woman was starved and unpeeled, murdered for her skin by Buffalo Bill in Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*. There's a scene in the film where Clarice Starling has to view the corpse, and we get a view too: its soaked and cheesy pallor, the dimpled thighs like feta and the moon-white padded flesh across its back and shoulders. It's not been sawn up, this corpse, but diamond-shaped pieces of its skin have been peeled away and sewn together elsewhere, the remains of her weighted and immersed. I'm doing better than she is, even if, in the moments after I take off my wrappings and see what the bandages have done to my skin, it doesn't look like it. And this binding helps. It does help.

It shows how far gone we are that the man I live with lets this – the wearing of bandages – and the outrageous comparison I make between my *medically diagnosed* perfectly fine body and a fictional murderess – pass without comment. I ask him to check the scar ten, twenty, thirty times a day. He might see something I don't see, but can certainly feel: an unravelling. First they stitched it closed, tiny invisible stitches, they said, so it would hardly leave a mark. Then they had to go in again in a hurry, and opened it up wide and made a mess they didn't bother with stitching, but stapled. They stapled me. (I wasn't awake, but subsequent research reveals

surgical staple guns look just like ordinary staple guns and they make a similar kind of noise, something between a click and a bang.) I was stapled and for the first few days the protruding metal teeth would catch on the sheets and I didn't dare move in case twitching my foot pulled my intestines out.

'I've checked,' he says gently. 'I've checked. It's fine.' But it is not fine and I will always ask him to check again.

~~It hurts. It really hurts and so for years~~ I gobble painkillers (paracetamol, aspirin, ibuprofen, co-codamol, paracetamol+caffeine, diclofenac) and they do work - the pain, if not the bone-weakness, goes away when I take them. I take this as proof that the pain I feel is a thorn in my side and not

### #3

Another thing we do when we turn our pain into a performance is to demonstrate what it is possible to live with. In 1970 Amanda Feilding filmed herself drilling a hole into her own forehead with a dentist's drill. Her film is nearly impossible to get hold of but I accidentally came across a clip from it - *Heartbeat in the Brain* - one night as I looked for a documentary about Jeffrey Dahmer, the 'Milwaukee cannibal' who, in an attempt to lobotomise them, drilled holes into the heads of Errol Lindsey, Konerak Sinthasomphone and Jeremiah Weinberger.

Feilding is a trepanning enthusiast, and twice stood as an MP on a platform of making the procedure available on the NHS. She lost her deposit both times, of course, but claims this was more of an art project designed to get trepanning researched properly, by scientists.

People have had holes drilled in their heads for centuries. A cure for headaches and migraines, brain cancer and epilepsy. A way of, in the Middle Ages, making a little doorway for the demons that caused insanity to get out (how they got in was

another matter). People survived it: there is evidence of this – skulls found with the trepanned hole worn smooth around the edges, starting to heal, delicate filaments of bone beginning to grow back.

Feilding's thesis is that since man learned to stand upright, the blood flow inside his skull became restricted and troubled by gravity and the effect of this is to rob him of his energy and his full capacity for thought. She believes that through some complex and not entirely coherent process of blood pressure, pulse and flow, the cure for this restriction lies in creating a new fontanelle in the skull through trepanning. Only then can the brain's pulse beat unhindered.

The clips I've seen of her film are graphic and stagey: too real and too fake, all at the same time. In the first she wears a spotless long white dress and we are shown her cutting off the hair on the front of her head and taping a shower-cap over the hair that remains at the back. When she's finished, the get-up looks like a plastic tonsure. She completes her preparations by putting on a pair of reflective sunglasses and so it is suggested that the blood from the wound she's about to inflict on herself will otherwise flow into her eyes and obscure her vision. Her donning of the sunglasses – so reflective we can glimpse the camera her boyfriend is holding – helps us anticipate and imagine the blood they are intended to shield her from. The preparations imply (or invite us to infer) that she's seen someone else do this, or done it to someone else. This isn't her first time: she's experienced, practiced, even, in setting up the trick.

These prefatory shots are alternated with motion studies of her pet pigeon, Prince Charming. He's just an ordinary pigeon: the kind you see pecking at chip papers in city centres. He sits on her shoulder. He walks, in that back-and-forth, nodding sort of way pigeons have, along a cluttered windowsill. When Feilding starts to drill (it's a slim sleek silver thing: it could be a discreet vibrator or a fancy pepper grinder), the blood flows freely behind and

around the sunglasses, down her face and breasts and into her lap. Prince Charming wheels and struts.

The next clip shows her standing, wearing a bandage like a turban, and cleaning the blood from her lips and teeth with a piece of tissue. The gesture is a practiced one: she looks like an actor removing grease paint after the show. The blood that pooled between her thighs as she sat and drilled has left a messy red triangular apron painted on the front of her dress and so we're asked to think about her genitals and consider this, perhaps, a kind of birth. Or perhaps a menstruation: she only sheds what she does not need. Her jettisoning is a renewal. While I ruminate, her pigeon hops along the windowsill, takes flight over green lawns and trees, swoops over terracotta tiled roofs. The sky is picture-perfect: the right kind of blue, with the right kind of white clouds scattered across it. Back to Amanda, who is talking about pressure, about heartbeats in the head, about this new fontanelle she has made for herself. The way she looks at it, it isn't an injury, it is a repair.

If trauma has an aesthetic, it would be an eternally occurring flicker, a modulation like this – back and forth, between the whirring of drills and the spatter of blood and the jerky movement of tamed pigeons on the wing. It would be a stammer; a staccato, pulsing struggle between speaking and not-speaking. If trauma has an aesthetic, it would be Charlotte Perkins Gilman's impossible wallpaper: a magic-eye pattern of distress and rage. It would be Poirot's 'perfect mosaic' – a whole made of brokenness, capturing total guilt and total innocence: hands soaked in blood, and lily white. Lodge is wrong when he says Woolf wasn't able to get off 'the railway line of the sentence' – that the linearity of her form confined her in a way that Joyce managed to escape. Woolf knew that trauma is a strobe, that it is always both repetition and variation, it is both track and breach and fake and real. And if trauma had a time and a place, then it would be the no-time, no-place utopia of the eternal present tense, the sheer icy surface of now, the cold obliteration of forever. / This page. This keyboard. This

bed. The nature, too, of the essay, a more indeterminate form than even the novel. The writer Lawrence Sutin turns to science to make sense of the structural flickering of this type of weird prose. 'As chaos theory teaches us, there is apparent chaos, then apparent pattern, then apparent chaos again, and the cycle continues infinitely

## #2

The horror felt in the face of infinity's pulsations is something Mormons try to tame with paperwork. They love their forms. They are a record-keeping people; a White American tribe of accountants and secretaries and administrators. They are the diary writers, keepers of lists, composers of family histories and pedigree charts and genealogies. They think about infinity constantly and they don't go mad because they think with their spreadsheets open.

When I typed up old census records in the Family History Centre as a teenager, I did it because I was part of a larger project that aimed to gather up the names of the unbaptised dead. I was taught that all those lost ones, doomed to spin through eternity, were relying on me. The facsimile copies, old-fashioned handwriting and spelling were difficult to read, it was hard to keep your place and I learned to touch type accurately, which, though I did not know it then, would become useful in later life. In that life though, I only typed up names and dates to take to the temple.

Visiting the temple is a slightly different prospect than going to church. Church is weekly. Church is friends and Sunday school and monthly socials and seminary and all that is ordinary about life. The temple is an overnight minibus to London, to do sacred and secret work in white clothing. I don't know if my friends found it as frightening as I did, because we never spoke about it.

It happened: two or three strange weekends in a year. And then it was over, and after it was over the flow of our daily lives continued unbroken. Sometimes it felt like a bird had flown through an open window and got into the house, then found its way back out again almost immediately. Perhaps the curtain was ruffled. Maybe the lampshade still swung slightly. I wanted to turn to somebody and say, 'did you just see that? That wasn't just me, was it?' but nobody would catch my eye. We did not even allude to it and when on Sundays we sang *I Love to See the Temple* we were careful to keep our minds blank.

The work we did went like this: inside a special room with white and gold walls and miles of beige carpet and a crystal chandelier, us teenagers would wear white jumpsuits with zips up the front and queue around the edges of an enormous stone basin balanced on the backs of twelve oxen. They were huge, these oxen; three times larger than life, horns and all, and they meant *family* because they were there to represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the ones we belonged to, the ones we were born into or adopted by when we were baptised ourselves, at eight years old. We waited by the oxen in silence, shuffling across the carpet in our bare feet. This particular time I'd not quite managed to scrape all the nail polish from my toes and kept one foot on top of the other to hide it. A few days previously I'd taken the blade out of a disposable shaving razor and dragged it in a criss-cross pattern across the inside of my left arm, up high, near my elbow. I hid this with Rimmel blemish concealer (porcelain) and kept my arms folded, which is how Mormons pray and so made me look very reverent. The line moved slowly.

When it's your turn you have to descend the steps one at a time into the warmish chlorinated water and be baptised on behalf of the dead people you have spent your Saturdays rooting out of history. But while you're in the queue there's nothing to do but listen to the low sound of male voices saying the baptismal prayer over and over and over again, and the comforting noise of water

slopping at the inside of the basin as the people in front of you get done. Ten or twenty or thirty on the trot. *I baptise you for and on behalf of Martha May Bootle, who is dead.* Whoosh. *I baptise you for and on behalf of Abigail Elizabeth Henry, who is dead.* Whoosh. I looked at the oxen. Some of them had their heads down, as if to graze. Others looked up or directly at you. *Who is dead?* Their stone sad eyes were the size of dinner plates.

We'd had to be interviewed and determined worthy to come and do this work; the Bishop took each of us alone into a room and briefly checked we paid our tithing, didn't drink coke or play with ourselves. He asked us if we understood what the Law of Chastity meant and how it applied. He asked us if we sustained the authority of the priesthood (that means all of the men) in the church. He told us that when we were inside the temple we should listen carefully to the men in white suits and ties who would be in the water with us to do the baptising. He said we shouldn't try to learn the words by heart, but consider them afresh each time and look for new meaning and nuance. He said these trapped and imprisoned spirits that had died too soon for proper baptism in life would be using our ears and eyes to experience their long-awaited saving ordinance. They'd only know what we knew. We were proxies – that was what it was called – baptism by proxy. I was the body double for a

## #1

Q: I want to know what happens when the delicate call and response mechanism between the reader and the writer stops working. When the questions you or I are supposed to ask fail to find the mark, and the answers to them are as disappointing as the joke on the slip of paper that falls into your lap from between the two halves of the Christmas cracker. And also: What is adulthood?

## #0

I closed my eyes to the sound of the blood falling.

Out.

Out.

Out.

It is like falling backwards and never landing.

Jenny Bouilly, in her collection of slashed-open lyric essays, *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, writes, 'I too have scissors aimed at the sky; I too will slice open the belly of a great heaving.'<sup>11</sup> / When I first read this, I copy it down into my notebook, but I make a mistake – I write 'slice open the belly of a great healing' and spend weeks wondering what she might have meant – what a cutting open and a healing might have in common, what a peeling back and a knitting together would look like. Was there hope in this sentence? I am so puzzled by it I put away my notebook and go back to the original volume of essays and I see that I have made an error – perhaps caused by wishful thinking – in the transcription.

## #1

A: It is a recuperative holiday from childhood. You should also know that the opposite of half-life is double-time. Both are measures of change through time. Remember: the first measures radioactive decay, the second the growth rate of malignant tumours.

## #2

ghost, that day. For a legion of ghosts.

Finally, it was my turn and I went down the steps. When it's your own baptism, you're eight years old and wear a long white dress and everybody makes a fuss of you. Sometimes when you're

laid back into the water the hem of the dress floats to the surface and the immersion needs to be done again – it has to be total – but when you’re doing the work for the dead, you’re issued with a nylon jumpsuit because it is more practical. The elastic around my ankles itched. I closed my eyes and held onto the wrist of the man who was saying the baptismal prayer *for and on behalf of* and somebody else’s name. It was so important not to mess this up. *Who is dead*. He held his hand above my head and I let myself fall backwards. *Who is dead*.

Under the water, the bubbles streaming from between my lips, I thought about blood. While we were changing into our white jumpsuits all us girls had been gathered and euphemistically reminded that if we’d had a ‘nose bleed’ recently we couldn’t go in the water because the blood would make it dirty. But we all knew that if you were having a ‘nose bleed’ and had to sit this one out, everyone else would see you waiting at the outside of the font, missing your turn, and wonder what unworthy thing you’d done to be banned from doing the work at the very last hurdle. Drinking coke? Not paying tithing? Playing with yourself? *Inside the temple?* The shame would have been unbearable so we crossed our fingers and smuggled in tampons tucked inside rolled up pairs of spare socks.

I kept my eyes closed and forced myself to think instead about the chains that bind the generations being locked into place because of the important work I was now doing, right now, underneath that chlorinated water. All those dead people: cholera, typhus, tetanus, influenza. Childbirth, of course. Girls are baptised for women and boys for men. I’m doing the baptisms (many, many of them) for (*and on behalf of, who is dead*) all these dead people but that’s only their very first step out of prison and back home to their families. In other rooms, adults are being married on behalf of them, sealing the generations together, claiming them out of the unnamed and unrecorded darkness. In the rooms where couples are sealed they have a mirror on each wall so you can

stand there with your man, or the man pretending to be the man of the woman you're pretending to be – and look at your reflection bouncing backwards and forwards to eternity. They let us look into the mirrors sometimes and as we did they stood behind us infinitely reminding us all to keep ourselves clean and tidy until our wedding days.

When I was a child, they showed me the infinity trick with two hand mirrors. I was sitting in one of the basement classrooms being taught about eternal consequences. The mirrors were taped together with red electrical insulating tape to make a kind of reflecting hinge which we adjusted and played with until we got the trick. *This is what eternity looks like.*

When I first saw it, the flickering of that infinite regress called up a fragment of a scene – just a millisecond – from *Return to Oz*. In the film, a 1985 sequel to the original, Dorothy is a malingering melancholic, and she won't stop lying, telling everyone who will listen tall tales about Sparkling Cities. Nobody likes a crying, lying girl, so her doctors strap her to her bed and attempt to shoot electric current through her brain until a power cut sends an angel to drag her back to her dreamland. That will teach her.

This second Dorothy (Judy Garland had been dead for years) returns to Oz and discovers what all children always know – are born knowing, know by virtue of being born: there's no such place as home. Oz is broken and ruined and dirty and dangerous and Dorothy finds herself running through a corridor of cabinets, inside which are rows of detached and screaming heads. The corridor – the longish room, rather, where the heads – sometimes sleeping, sometimes screaming – are kept, is decorated rather like the inside of a Mormon temple: all beige carpet and golden cabinetry. Mirrors, and plush chairs and rows of just-beyond-tasteful chandeliers.

The heads belong to Princess Mombi, a deranged and duplicitous sorcerer who has taken one look at Dorothy's pretty little head – so sad and sleepless, and so full of sparks – and has

decided she wants it for herself. And Dorothy, after trying to steal The Powder of Life from Cabinet 31, the resting place of Princess Mombi's chief head (bear with me) accidentally wakes her. Wakes all of them. She runs – runs as if in a dream, so slowly, with all the heads screaming at her, and Princess Mombi's headless body rises from its sickbed and stumbles, zombie-like, towards her (I cannot tell you how horrible this is) and the doors at the end of the corridor are covered in mirrors, which makes finding a way out difficult, and as Dorothy fumbles to open them, there's a split second where the reflective hinge is formed, and you get a terrifying glimpse of her reflection: the back of her coveted head, her plaits, her electrified skull, bouncing back and forth forever. (Every single time I was sick when I was a child – chicken pox, ear infections, flu – I'd have a delirium dream about those heads and mirrors.)

I am lifted up out of the water, the cool air hitting my face like a slap and before my ears are properly clear the man baptising me speaks my new and temporary name – I don't catch it – and I am lowered backwards again and the water covers my mouth and nose. *Who is dead.* I didn't hear the name. And it's gone now. At the time I either thought that the man baptising me had learned all the names off by heart in advance of us getting into the water, or that he was being constantly divinely inspired: that God was whispering the names into his ear as we worked.

Since then, I've been told that the man who sits up outside the font on a high chair at a desk overlooking the water (it is impossible, once you notice the height of his perch, not to think of him as a lifeguard, and if you think of lifeguards you're a leap away from *Baywatch* and then you're screwed) isn't only there to check you are fully immersed and the baptism is legit, but also pushes the cards with the names on under a camera built into the desk, and there's a television screen in the side of the font that shows the names in the eye line of the man doing the baptising. *For and on behalf of.*

I never knew that – never noticed the screen because I was and am horribly short-sighted and would have been without my glasses as I went into the water. I forgot the name. I forgot the name and was possibly thinking about *Baywatch* and probably leaking blood from the self-inflicted injuries on my arm into the pure water and on top of all this I was suddenly and additionally convinced I had made a mistake with the typing, that I'd transcribed someone's name or dates wrongly, and that the ordinance wouldn't count and someone would be missed. Left out there in the formless dark, unnamed and unclaimed forever. It's the nearest thing we Mormons have to hell. The eternal humiliation of not belonging to a family. *Who is dead.*

I went under again and vowed to try harder and to spend more Saturdays at the Family History Centre. To pay closer attention. *For and on behalf of.* Under again, water bubbles clicking in my ears and I promised someone – God? No, just those men around me who were watching and checking – that I'd fill out the boxes on that database as quickly as I could because all those poor dead people have been waiting for decades and I understood now that they were relying on me. I would, I promised, pay attention. The cuts on my arm started to throb. I would type well. *Who is dead?*

### #3

as far as we know.<sup>12</sup> It doesn't stop.

From watching Feilding drilling her head open in the mirror of her bathroom cupboard we're brought, by only a little leap, to a different kind of medicine cabinet. Trepanning isn't the kind of intervention that will either cure or kill you, instead it is a kind of *pharmakon* that does both. A quantum poison that is also a remedy.

Time works like this too. Is another kind of *pharmakon*: each second both an unfolding gift and a boot in the back towards the

open grave that waits for us. John B. McLemore, the nasty, paranoid, friendless suicide who is the subject of Brian Reed's S-Town podcast, understood this well. He, depressed and mad, alienated everyone who knew him by his constant carping and complaining about the local corruption of his small town the wider decline of society, the American economy, the environment, and the increasing unsustainability of life – everyone's/his – on earth. He had a talent for noticing this: the doom of climate change, the impossibility of healing. He was a clockmaker and spent longer than most of us regarding time – the gift and the poison of it.

In the last episode of the series, we learn that the clocks he made: intricate, beautiful, one-off gifts for the people he cared about, the people he could almost bring himself to love, and who loved him, once, had been fire-gilded in his quest to make them – to make time itself – beautiful. Fire gilding involves heating mercury and gold, painting the liquid gold onto the item to be gilded, and letting the mercury evaporate. When making such beautiful things you can't help but be poisoned: mercury vapour drives you mad and makes you suicidal. Though everything he said about the way the world is and the way people are is true.

#### #4

in my head.

Yet eventually it is the head-doctor – a psychotherapist – who is able to tell me what is wrong with my body. ~~It isn't my body.~~ He says he started his career as a surgical nurse and saw it all the time on the wards.

'Here,' he says, 'have a tissue.'

He gives me a percentage. So many post-surgical patients. I forget what it is. It's a lot. The pains and pullings I feel from the inside are common. Unremarkable. He was surprised nobody had told me to expect it.

*'Barely worth writing home about,'* he says – and the italics are mine because he hardly notices what he's saying at all.

He knows I am a writer and he says exactly that. The cheek of him.

'What is happening to you,' he says, 'happens all the time.'

I take a tissue. I am unremarkable. Not to be remarked on.

This week he is using crutches: they lean against the wall next to his chair and I want to ask him what's wrong with his leg, but osmosis is the spontaneous net movement of solvent molecules through a semi-permeable membrane into a region of higher solute concentration, in the direction that tends to equalise the solute concentrations on the two sides and in this room, I am the higher solute concentration, not him. ~~I have weak skin, is what I mean.~~

'It's a real pain,' he says. 'Or at least, some of it is.'

Apparently it is very common for a surgical wound to heal with a great deal of scar tissue, and this tissue is tough and sticky. In the abdomen especially this tissue can grow persistent and over thick. It can adhere, sticking and knitting organs together, fusing muscle to skin. He says tissues that normally remain separated in the body become physically attached to each other.

'I can show you a picture if you like?' he says. He can look it up on his phone. Right this minute, if I want.

I take another tissue.

He says he'd draw a diagram but it wouldn't be as clear as a picture. Wouldn't be as obvious that these adhesions – like wraps, they are, he says – form not only between organs that come in contact with a surgeon's gloves and instruments, but they also form between tissues that are not handled by the surgeon.

'It's the kind of thing that can spread.'

Like wildfire. Like gossip.

There was a poster, stuck up in the room in the earthquake-proof building I had my Sunday school lessons in – two pairs of

hands, one passing on fistfuls of sticky tar to the other set, waiting, white and pristine. GOSSIP. DON'T PASS IT ON. We weren't to talk about each other. Weren't to talk to each other. What was gossip? What wasn't? The Bishop came once to shout at us because his daughter had got herself pregnant and he'd imagined we were talking about it but we weren't, we didn't know - how could we know, nobody had told us? Better to say nothing.

'You sure you don't want to see a picture?'

He really wants to show me a picture.

'There's nothing to be done about it,' he says, 'and the pain is minor, really. But at least now you know.'

It makes me laugh, this. All of it does. Even my body has apophenia; knotting itself together where it shouldn't, and growing its bad connections in the dark spaces under my skin. It's a good joke. Neat. I will write home about this.

## #5

Woman) he upped the ante and twice, in print,<sup>13</sup> offered to pay Christabel or Sylvia Pankhurst £20 a week to go under the saw. Of course he did. He was desperate. And perhaps he wanted to chop up a suffragette/his estranged wife/any old thing in a skirt: lots of people did.

I think of her often, this lady in the black lace dress, but not as often as a good feminist should. She's the site of all that barely disguised misogyny - that overwhelming desire the world has to saw a woman up, to cut her into pieces, to stab her to death - that all of us who are female feel directed at us at some time in our lives. I do try to keep her in mind; to meditate on the sacramental object of worship Selbit has presented to us on his stage.

But too often I lose my flow - it goes, it's gone, there's something wrong with my head again - and I wander into the audience, and observe these watchers - some of them, I think, not too long

from the front. Those men who had passed through Flanders with the mud of the trenches caught under their fingernails. Some of them amputees, others with burns on their faces, missing fingers, tapping knees that won't stay still, propensity to murderous rages, nightmares, loss of time, pains where no pain should be.

I try to feel what this spectacle would have looked like to these men, in the present tense of their aftermath – to see the dissection and the injury then the miraculous healing, the box and the body inside it being brought together again, and the pretty lipsticked woman (Betty!) jumping out of her coffin whole and hale and hearty, full of vim and vigour, in the pink, all together and in one piece, her skirts swishing around her legs as she twirled, with not so much as a run in her stockings.

This woman, in her divided and undivided body, dangled before these men the terrible fantasy of time running backwards. Of the scapegoat returning to the city unharmed. Welcomed, even. Of the possibility of un-woundedness. The slicing open of a great healing.

'Look, all better now!' this woman says, with her white teeth and her black dress and her shiny shoes and it is a lie and it is no wonder the poor bastards hate her and want to cut her up over and over and over and over again.

## #6

doesn't exist. It isn't just a bad object, it's a missing-in-action object. AWOL. About a third of the way through *Calamities* Renee Gladman has a strange thought about poetry, specifically Ed Roberson's poetry. *Calamities* is both the name of Gladman's collection and the name she gives for her daily fragments of thought about writing – a la Mary Cappello's 'detours.' This strange thought she has while teaching is to do with grids and emanations and where the meaning of the poetry lies. She wants to share the

thought but she discovers either it is too complex to draw out on the whiteboard for her students, or her skills around representing space and perspective in a diagram are not up to it – she’s not able to locate for her students ‘that subterranean container, where some meaning might lie – the actual story of the poem.’<sup>14</sup>

I don’t know how to imagine the subterranean container she has in mind either. A kind of underground bunker to cower in while the end of the world happens above ground? Alice’s rabbit hole? An abdominal wound big enough to put a fist into? A mine – unexploited, like Woolf’s? (When I first read the alternative title for ‘On Being Ill’ I thought it was: ‘An Unexploded Mine’ and remembered Princess Diana tiptoeing through the minefields in chinos and a visor, *Raising Awareness*. That’s about right, I thought, and proceeded with the essay with care, lest it blow off my hands.) Gladman is unable to clarify the shape and location of her container and when she calls up a volunteer from her seminar who also fails to draw the grid atop the container that she has in mind, she realises there was a flaw in her thinking. ‘The place from which the emanations arose was not intact,’ she says, ‘it was not a container wherein lay meaning.’ (I imagine this makes it no easier to draw). Later, in another essay, she hints at why this place of origin is not intact – is broken, or perhaps just never came in one piece in the first place. I think she is trying to show us that *memoir* writing itself is molten, that it shifts and has moving parts – it lacks form, perhaps, because ‘the person you needed to be to write the book never settled into form.’

In part, *Calamities* is about the place on the page where the line of drawing turns into the line of writing, and where both start to stutter and peter out. It’s no coincidence that the book she consults for guidance with her writing trouble is called *The Atlas of Novel Tectonics*. Disappointingly, it is not about novels but ‘engineering in architecture.’ It might also be about the thin broken skin of the earth, those tectonic plates the shape of cornflakes, badly tessellated, that move and float and bump along those fractures

and fault lines where earthquakes and volcanoes happen. That grid on the globe beneath which there is no intact container.

The poet and artist Christine Friedlander has no truck with containers nor the contained, though her approach is characterised by rage and refusal in contrast to Gladman's rather endearingly puzzled pedagogical curiosity. Friedlander's book, *Avant Gauze*, is a prose/poetry/art/memoir mash-up in which she seeks to 'write around the space where the erasure took place,'<sup>15</sup> an erasure caused not only by a violent and widely reported family tragedy – (her relative, the prominent lawyer Sam Friedlander 'beat his wife to death with a rolling pin and shot his two young children in their sleep before ending his own life') but also the daily accretion of wounding and holding of woundedness involved in Friedlander's listening work in her role as an emergency first responder to women who have been raped and sexually assaulted.

The pieces are called 'gauzes' and they hover on the interstice between art and poetry. Some of the images are constructed from collaged newsprint and the lines leak into their facing pages. In the parts made of text the typography of the words becomes a visual reminder of flow, of pause, of intensity. The subject matter shares a passing similarity to Gladman's in that Friedlander is interested in the struggle and difficulty of bringing writing into being and in how narrative and structural containment damage the 'erasure' she seeks to represent.

Hands figure prominently. Like my great-uncle Eddie from Glasgow, Friedlander's narrator has hurt her hands. In 'Gauze For Backstory' there's a memory about a burn so severe that her palms 'peeled for weeks.' There are images of bloodied hands, cut hands, hands in surgical gloves blotting blood and bandaging wounds and the book seems to ask what are hands/what is writing really for in the aftermath of a trauma that leaves a writer 'useless.'

In this work hands become both faulty containers – the objects that try and fail to hold the narrative (I imagine cupped palms at the communion rail, an out-pouring of white-hot lava/blood, the

stuff is too hot to hold but we hold out our hands for it anyway because you get what you're given and beggars can't be choosers and what else is there anyway?) and weapons of physical and literary abuse. 'FOR YEARS I'VE FELT THIS EPISTEMIC HAND ON MY ASS' it says in 'Gauze For Inheritance,' written upon an image showing a watermarked family photograph of a young girl holding a gun. The reader points a finger at what they want to know. They nudge. They grope for the facts, for the answer. They want the gap plugged up. They are the avid watchers of *Dr. G: Medical Examiner* and they want to measure the injury, determine the cause of death and identify the corpse (*who is dead?*). Friedlander's work is disobedient. It not only enacts a refusal to tell but also demonstrates that even the attempt both hurts and damages. It shows us the marks on the hands caused by 'this pressure to construct collective violations through metaphor. / To participate in the new construction known as *narrative repair*.' The spectre of the acquisitive, intrusive reader is always there: some of the poems quote lines of 'advice' from the creative writing workshop.

'What if all I can offer is a narrative without a container? / What if a long pause is all I know?' she finally asks in one of the later pieces in the collection, 'Gauze For One Eye Shut.' She's dealing fairly with the reader here. What she has to give them is what she has to give them. It's neither fish nor fowl, it isn't pretty and it does not stroke that epistemological itch that fiction panders to so well. But it is what she has. 'I repurpose my hands' the speaker says, and the writing starts to move towards a different kind of making. I imagine Friedlander's speaker squinting, winking, caught in the double act of turning back and looking away. Lot's wife. Orpheus. The terminally uncertain. 'A being treading between healing and un-healing.'

I don't know how to end this essay. My friend reads a draft of it and when I ask him for suggestions he gives me a note in which he writes: 'in rhetoric the term for when a speaker comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of a sentence is aposiopesis, literally, "becoming silent."' The intended rhetorical effect varies, but includes making it

appear that the speaker is overcome by passion or to allow the listener to determine her own understanding of what has been said.'

Q: Knock knock.

## #7

life – the rate at which the substances would break down and eventually disappear – might be able to catch up. We weren't curing them, that was the message. Only delaying the inevitable – the delayed poisoning from the bang. But it was still worth doing. My family didn't have a spare room so my mother's contribution was to canvass local shops and business owners for donations: we expected the children to be poor. The charity told their parents to send them as they were, no need to buy extra clothes or toiletries. I remember sorting out new toothbrushes and bars of soap into gift bags. We donated our old clothes in case they could be of use.

I remember a couple of them: Oxanna, who had thick lenses in plastic glasses, like I did. Her mother had sent her with two tomatoes and a bottle of vodka in her suitcase as gifts for her host. The tomatoes hadn't made the journey intact and the vodka was quietly poured down the sink when she was asleep. There was another girl who had waist-length red hair, and her host parents took her to a hairdresser and had it cut off because they decided it was easier for a poor family to maintain. None of these kids could speak proper English, but more than a couple could recite phrases from American films. One boy could say anything at all, clear as a bell in an American accent, so long as it was from *Back to the Future*. We didn't know what kind of life they'd come from: that the Chernobyl evacuees had problems at their new schools – the other kids called them 'glow-worms' and turned the lights out on them to see if their shaved heads glowed in the dark: if they had green halos. We only knew we had to be kind without making them feel special or strange.

On the night that the children were due to arrive, driven across Europe in a sage green minibus that belonged to one of the women (she had six children) we – adults and all of us kids – waited in the church built to withstand an earthquake with the sorted out gift bags. Someone had a Russian phrasebook, and some of us kids were set to the task of making a sign – we had felt-tip pens and a roll of wallpaper, and we'd write the Russian words for 'welcome home!' on a length of the wallpaper, and tape it to two bamboo canes we found in a cupboard. We kneeled with our felt-tip pens on the shiny wooden floor and I imagined what we'd look like to them, our rich and healthy smiling faces under the banner, bright in the darkness.

But even though we didn't mean to, we'd made a terrible mistake. The phrasebook we'd been given had all the words written out in Cyrillic and again, underneath, a phonetic version in the Roman alphabet. I didn't know there was such a thing as another alphabet – alternative ways to spell out sounds. None of us did. So we ignored the Cyrillic characters and where we should have written добро пожаловать instead we spelled out *dobro pojalovat!* in cheerful bubble writing with smiley faces inside the 'o's. We spent ages colouring it in.

'It'll mean nothing to them,' one of the adults told us when we saw our banner. 'They won't be able to read it. You'll make them frightened.'

We threw the banner away before the children arrived. I remember our pen-smudged hands on it, rolling and folding the paper up tighter and smaller then shoving it to the bottom of the bin outside so they would never see it.

## #8

ture, a layering of containment, of sticking plasters, of fig-leaves. Back in 1986<sup>16</sup> when Reactor 4 first exploded, it sent a stream of ultra-reactive uranium and graphite kilometres into the air from a

gaping hole in the reactor. Witnesses commented on the colours: a night rainbow, they said. It was beautiful, they said. The fire burned and burned.

Within hours, the Soviet government called their pilots back from the Afghan front and set them to deal with the fire. The pilots took turns flying over the breach and dumping bags of sand and boracic acid into the hole to smother the flames and neutralise the radiation: the water the first fire crews had sprayed into the reactor glowed as it ran along the ground. It took 6,000 tonnes of the mixture to plug up the gap, and that same night the first set of pilots started vomiting. They were told they had a psychosomatic illness called 'radiophobia' and they should continue.

After only a few days the sand started to melt, cracks in the 'plug' started to appear and the pressure and temperature inside the reactor began to rise. Next, the pilots started to dump lead into the crack. In the short term, over 600 pilots died. In the longer term, the vaporised lead is still being found in the bodies of Chernobyl's sick children. But the lead seemed a satisfactory although temporary solution. The flames were smothered, and with the immediate crisis – the threat that there would be a second explosion, one with enough force to wipe out the Ukraine and make Europe uninhabitable – contained, attention was paid to the ground beneath the reactor.

The radioactive lava inside the reactor was sitting on a concrete slab that was cracked – there was a chance if the fault in this slab worsened, the burning liquid fuel would seep through it, spreading downwards and contaminating the water table. Over the next month miners flown in from the Moscow basin dug a tunnel beneath the station to approach the reactor from beneath, and assisted engineers in installing a complex cooling mechanism. It was hot as hell down there: most of them took off their jackets and facemasks as they worked.

Above ground, Lev Bocharov had begun to design the concrete lid for the breach. The radiation around and immediately

above the reactor was so high that the structure had to be built elsewhere, transported to Chernobyl and assembled on site. Bocharov hastily designed a pre-fabricated jigsaw puzzle of curved parts that would last a couple of decades and buy some thinking time. In interview, he consistently refers to it as a tomb, a sarcophagus or a mausoleum. When the 'liquidators' prepared the last piece to be lifted into place, they all wrote their names on it.

I'm still in bed. The man who I live with clocks what I am watching and tells me about the radiation counter he needs to wear pinned to his tunic when he's in the radiology department at the hospital.

A chest x-ray, he tells me, has about as much radiation in it as you'd get from standing in a field for a couple of days absorbing the radioactivity that still hangs around after the Big Bang. It's more precise than that and he knows all the numbers but the training he's having now is in how to explain it to a nervous patient. People worry about getting a dose, he says. Scientists call it 'Chernobyl syndrome' - patients who watched too much news in the late 1980s and now don't want to have their broken legs x-rayed in case it gives them cancer.

Practise on me, I tell him. Convince me.

An abdominal CT scan, he says, is like having hundreds of x-rays in one go: more like standing in a field for four years. But you could have lots of them - people do - and they're less likely to give you cancer than using a mobile phone. But the numbers aren't always helpful, he says. Brazil nuts are 1,000 times more radioactive than most other foods, but you can eat as many of them as you want because the radiation just pings right out of you.

I want to ask him, what if you're the person sitting next to the person eating Brazil nuts? What if the radiation pings right out of you and hits the person nearest? Does that happen? Is there a radius of safety beyond which it is too dangerous to get close? I want to ask how many Brazil nuts? How big? How often? (*Who is dead?*) but he's getting ready to go to sleep now and I've given him

too many sleepless nights already. He asks me to dim the screen on my laptop if I am going to stay up late reading.

Most of the 500,000 people involved in the containment and cleanup – from those who flew overhead to dump the sand, to those who shot the abandoned pet cats and dogs roaming in the exclusion zone – were civilian ‘volunteers’ known as ‘liquidators.’ They complained of aching eyeballs, numb hands, strange tastes in the mouth and wobbly teeth, but they continued. The latency period for radiation sickness can be decades long; subtle changes in the blood that last forever but take years to manifest.

In *The Battle of Chernobyl* there’s a scene towards the end of the documentary, where a group of former liquidators – men in their late forties who look like old-age pensioners – gather together to discuss the government cuts to their benefits. One unnamed man stands and recites a poem: ‘sadness fills me / nostalgia and anguish / like a bullet in the temple / nothing makes it stop,’ he says. My zone of interest follows his: not the big bang that hurts you, but the hole in the head you learn to live with.

## Attempts on the Life of King Lear

I really hate *King Lear* because I really hate King Lear. I like telling people that. 'He's a horrible old man who deserves everything he gets.' I even say this, hypocrite that I am, swift on the heels of the bad-tempered and impatient lecture about 'relatability' that I give, annually, to my writing students. The lecture where I try to share my belief that we don't have to 'relate to' – that is, we do not have to like or be like a character – in order to be interested by them, that if we fail to be interested because a character isn't like us, then the failure is in us, as limited and lazy readers, and not in the writing. Our job as writers is to look at everything. Looking is the way writers love the world, and we have to look – to pay attention – to find a way to be in relation with (to make Mirk's messy, bloody kind of contact with) – *everything*. I have said all that to my students many times.

The matter of relation and relatedness is of particular interest to the memoirist, of course. Not only because we become the character we ask the reader to relate to, not only because we often write about people to whom we are related and ask readers to relate to our relatives too, but because our own failure to relate or to be related demonstrates something. It tells. As Will Eaves writes in his own poetry/essay/fiction/life writing collection *The Inevitable Gift Shop* (a 'memoir by other means'), 'I didn't relate to any of the characters' means 'I caught sight of my rage in the mirror.'<sup>1</sup> Relatedness is of interest to the scholarly writer too: the genealogy of citation is meaningful. When Sara Ahmed in her essay 'White Men' says that to be in relation is to restrict a relation, she's talking about exactly this kind of limitation. But despite the difficulty, I cannot write this book without citing the white men I am related to.<sup>2</sup>

I suppose one day I will be made to eat my words because I do not, or rather, I will not, be related to King Lear. I will not be related to that man. Even a good little gavage goose with a talent for the tube, as I am, has a limit to what she can take in and I find my limit here. I wrote a story about *King Lear* once. It was a quasi-fictional-autobiographical-reworking, rather than an adaptation of the play, and it was published in *Litro Magazine* in 2014 to coincide with the Bard's 450th birthday. A scripture from the book of Proverbs that I learned off by heart as a child comes in handy here. 'As a dog returneth to its vomit, so the fool returneth to his folly.' This is the first part of my story, which I named 'Doted':

*Doted is a strange word, isn't it? On the one hand it means a fondness or an uncritical affection; the feeling an adult might have for a small child or a pet dog. A couple newly in love might dote on each other too. When our hypothetical couple get to know each other better this dotting wears off because the honeymoon stage is just a stage and once it passes there's a tendency for the cold light of day to get into things. The relationship is never the same again; scientists on the internet say you get two years: tops. That first dotting is immaturity and foolishness. A kind of infirmity; a lack of sound judgement: caused by love. The word is related to dotage; an archaic expression denoting madness, senility, dementia. When Lear curses Goneril, first with sterility and then, if she must have a child, with an ungrateful one, she dismisses his ranting as merely a product of his dotage. Her father's cursing doesn't count because he's too fond and too old.*

*When I was little I was close to Mum's parents and never met Dad's. It came as a surprise to me that they were dead. When I found out, I asked him when and how his Mum went. I'd never known anyone who had died before.*

*'It happened some time previously and from a lack of breath,' he said. Then he slapped at his leg and forced out a laugh. It was long and loud; a machine gun rattle.*

*When I was really little, I used to join in the laughing. He had a reputation, amongst people who didn't know him, for being a good fun kind of guy. Life and soul. Something like that. When I was a little older, I noticed something. This laugh, be it ever so loud and out of control, was something*

*he performed with his eyes open. He kept his eye on you because he wanted to make sure, perhaps, that you got the joke. That there would be no more questions. He fed himself his own punch lines too, well prepared and wedged into the conversation whether they made sense, or not.*

*'Did you go to her funeral? Where was it? In a church?'*

*I'm like a dog with a bone sometimes. That's what people say about me. I didn't drop it. I never do.*

*'The only thing you need to know is this,' he said, 'the good Lord said to Lazarus, "come forth" but he came fifth, and only won a bag of nuts,' he bent over laughing, yelping with it. It sounded hard. Like work, like pain.*

*I asked him what his favourite subject at school was.*

*'Noughts and crosses,' he said, then the laugh. This time, it sounded more like what it was: pleasure at my frustration.*

*I asked which colour was his favourite.*

*'What's yours?' he said.*

*'Red.'*

*'Yes, that's mine as well.'*

*I wouldn't hold his hand. Even then I knew that laugh was too loud, too long. He wasn't in complete control over it. Other people walking through town that afternoon turned their heads to look at us. He became shameful.*

'Relatable' also means 'that which can be told' and while I worked on 'Doted,' I learned that sometimes it's safer to say nothing, and that there's a relation between adaptation and silence. Once set into a story, the paragraph will replace the memory. Even as I reordered and shaped the material (which is second hand, which has already been chewed and spat by the maw of my mind) I know that I will not remember what actually happened (this is not about what actually happened: what actually happened is lost and gone forever and even my journals turn up nothing of use at all - nothing). I will remember the paragraph, this coming paragraph, which I am about to write now, or rather, a paragraph about to be typed up from the scrawl and churn in my notebook, which I first wrote while pretending to listen to something in a department meeting. I return to my notes to correct my grammar - to say 'I,' instead of

'she.' 'I' cannot decide if returning to folly and rewriting it is an act of authority or the shakiest of subjectivities. If it flickers between them both – between me and not me, then and now – then so be it.

*The mornings I went out with Dad he strode too fast for me and I had to trot alongside him to catch up. He had a routine and the dogs – Mad Max and Earl – knew it. Off the leads here, stop to collect sticks here, pause to look at the river and check the weather here, perhaps a cigarette and a chance to do your business here, turn and come back here. I was additional, an imposition. He mainly ignored me, walking fast and, as he walked, gesticulating and muttering under his breath. Sometimes he would lose himself completely and start speaking out loud. It never made much sense, but the odd phrase or two became clear: picking his teeth up off the floor and time and time and time again and have it out once and for all and no need to get so aerated and told you, more than once, to stop creating. He'd get all worked up and walk faster and faster, jabbing his finger in mid-air, droplets of spit flying off his lips and building up at the corners of his mouth.*

*What was he doing? Replaying, perhaps, a scene of injustice he'd suffered at the paper factory, or allowing himself the chance to say something to a superior he'd never be able to get away with in real life? Maybe he was talking to his Mum, getting off his chest things he should have made time to say before she'd had her lack of breath and been called forth. He could have been hearing voices: paranoid, nasty little accusations about his wife, his eldest daughter, about how people always seemed to be staring at him, judging him, wanting something, maybe planning to steal or kill something that belonged to him. Why would they do that? The bastard, ungrateful kids. Or the clever fucks writing newspaper articles. Smart Alecks on the telly, every night, without fail.*

*It frightened me. I wanted him to stop doing it. His rages, tantrums, his smashings up of things and people were evidence enough that there was something not quite right. Worse after drink, but not much better without it. But this muttering to an invisible audience was worse, somehow. It was public and embarrassing. I asked him about it. Of course I did.*

*'What are you talking about?'*

*He'd frown, wave me away, tell me to shut up. Sometimes, I would insist.*

*'You're arguing with yourself. What are you thinking?'*

*My demanding infuriated him and however I worded the question, smartest of all Smart Alecks, a little bastard fully determined not to be frustrated this time, he waved me away or ignored me entirely. He would carry on ranting or he would explode and drag me back to the house by my shoulder, my arm, my hair, throwing me through the front door and complaining to Mum that, yet again, I'd managed to ruin everything and would she do something with me, once and for all, otherwise he wasn't going to be responsible for the harm he would do to himself or someone closer. When I was with him he was beside himself.*

*Alone with Mum and complaining about him, reporting what he'd done, she'd only sigh wearily.*

*'What did you say to him this time? You must have said something to set him off,' she'd ask.*

*'Nothing,' I'd reply. 'I said nothing.'*

I do want to be careful. The only thing I want to correct from the extract of the story, so far, is that the dog's name was Duke and not Earl. I don't know why I changed it.

*I go to the best Uni that will take me and study English Literature because he can barely read and it will piss him off. But all reading King Lear does is make me want to call Mum. I stand at a payphone and we skirt around what I want to ask, giving it plenty of room to breathe; to come forth.*

*She says, 'of course, you were his firstborn,' and, 'when you came along and up until you were two years old, he doted on you.'*

*'Doted' is the actual word Mum uses when she tells me about this, the word she uses to batter back the memories I have.*

*This man who doted on me until I was two deliberately slammed the front door on my hand. Then he did it again. My sister called 999 and told the operator he was killing me. When the police arrived he spoke to them in the kitchen and denied everything. Later, when invited again to answer questions, he told a social worker that I'd been 'creating' and he'd been trying to pull me into the house, to close the door and stop me from running away.*

*This man who doted on me until I was two was cleaning his shotgun in the living room when something I said or did angered him and he held it*

*against my head and told my brother and sister to watch. Told them about leprosy. I thought that was what Lazarus had died of but I wasn't sure. I knew better than to ask: he didn't read The Bible. He told them it was very catching and they had to treat me as if I had it from this day forward. He hit me on the forehead with the end of the gun. Pushed me over with it. Told me if I ran out of the house and got run over he would stamp on my dead body and laugh.*

*I am ten years old, in pain, irritable. We are all at the kitchen table, eating. My mother has just taken me into the kitchen and told me that I'm not ill: this is a good thing. I can have a baby now.*

*I am wet between the legs and I get up to fetch my water glass from the living room. When I forget to close the kitchen door, this man who doted on me until I was two takes my plate off the table and throws it into the sink, where it smashes spectacularly, gravy hitting the window.*

*Mum asks him to show some patience.*

*He says: 'I showed enough patience when she first started; the dirty little bitch. She can't use it as an excuse all week.'*

Incidentally: that thing my dad accused me of doing. *Creating*. It was a kind of catch phrase of his and I've never heard anyone else use the word in quite the same context. He meant, I think, something akin to 'making a fuss.' Concocting a drama out of nothing – as Lear quite literally does. It is such a strange way to use that word and I would hold myself responsible for making it up and putting it into *Doted* for poetic effect – to mark little Jennifer out as a novelist in embryo (I do know writers only ever want to write about writers – we're all disgusting narcissists, mystified by the futility of our own compulsions), except I have the minutes of a meeting with social services where I was placed on the Child At Risk Register and during this meeting he repeats the charge by way of exonerating himself. *She was creating*. The minute taker (I remember the shiny table, how huge it was, and the click and whirl of the old-fashioned tape recorder resting in its centre) might have found his usage odd too, because in the midst of bloodless, carefully neutral paraphrase she transcribes his word exactly and puts it in double quotation marks. "Creating".

In *King Lear's* case, the entire action of the play is created from what Cordelia did or didn't mean when she said 'nothing.' Nothing is the problem. It is hard to relate to someone when they won't answer your questions. Lazarus wouldn't tell either: wouldn't answer questions about what it was like in the place where he'd been before he'd been 'called forth.' Lazarus keeps his secrets and Cordelia will not join in with the game and say she loves her father, very much. Is it more important to relate to Cordelia or to Lear? Can you get away with not relating to one if you can relate to another, or does the lack of relation spread, like a case of gangrene, as soon as you let it take hold? Is acting out – dramatising your sorrow – a way of relating, or telling, without using words?

Her name might come from the Latin for heart – *cordis* – and whenever I revisit *Lear* (because oh yes, I hate it, but I cannot leave it alone and have returned to it dozens of times and will no doubt go back again and again) I wonder if there's something wrong with her heart: some congenital malformation or injury that means she cannot love or cannot speak her love, or whether it is her heart, in the end, her brave lion's heart, her jewel, that saves her. But Cordelia doesn't die of her rotten heart and Lazarus, whatever I wrote in 'Doted,' did not die of leprosy. Either the little self in the story or the big self who wrote the story is mixing resurrected Lazarus up with the man who died outside the city gates and had the dogs licking his leprosy sores.

I only learned about the two Lazaruses recently: while reading Richard Beard's book *Lazarus Is Dead*. At the centre of that book – which is an intricate study of how stories are made, as well as a meditation on brotherhood, faith and the terror of miracles – is a startlingly horrible scene where Lazarus, swimming with his little brother Amos in Lake Galilee, gets into deep water. There's some larking about. The water is choppier than it looks. Lazarus swims back to the shore but Amos doesn't make it.

It stuck with me, this scene. Extra-biblical. Extra to everything. It radiated a traumatic glow throughout the rest of the work, which both set it apart and made it difficult to relate to the whole. Why place it in a book that was about second-handedness? About retelling and filling in of historical and mythological silences? I admired the writing greatly but could never make sense of Beard's design decision until the summer of 2017, when Beard published his memoir, *The Day That Went Missing*. On the day in question, Beard's nine-year-old brother Nicky drowned when he and the eleven-year-old Richard were swimming together in a cove on a Cornish beach. The memoir is in part about the perils of saying nothing. In the days and hours after the tragedy Richard forgot, or at least, opted not to return to the place where he kept the memory. The memoir traces the life-long aftermath of this stiff-upper-lip model of grieving. Like buried uranium, material like this tends to leak out a glow.

'The memories I've wanted to suppress refuse to stay down, especially in stories I think I've invented,'<sup>3</sup> Beard writes. The language here – 'stay down' brings a drowning to mind: the way what is submerged tends to resurface later – it is, as we learn in the passages of the book where Beard interviews the life boat crew member who retrieved Nicky's body from the sea in the hours after his death – the natural way of things.

Later in the memoir Beard comments on what function fictions adapted from life might play for a writer – about the way they might be, as I think they are, a way of saying something and nothing at the same time. 'My unconscious mind had been stalking the non-fiction event for some time – I'd been closing in, then veering away, testing the pain, attempting to treat the wound with fiction.' He doesn't say this, but given that the memoir exists, I think Beard might agree that fiction's *pharmakon* didn't provide a remedy for him this time. He comments too on the way nothing and making relate to each other. 'Fiction isn't shaped from thin

air. All novelists say this, if pressed. The subconscious must be persuaded to open. Fictions aren't about creating something from nothing, but something from everything.'

*After Dad threw us out we visited my uncle and borrowed clothes from my cousins to tide us over. A bit later, Granddad and Jackie visited Dad at the house. Apparently they held Dad down on the couch while he thrashed and ranted and foamed, just to give Mum a chance to duck in and grab our things. She'd let us know there wouldn't be time to collect everything. The three of us – me, my sister and brother – made lists. We weren't to expect to get everything from the list. I asked for Toby Bear, and my Ian Livingstone adventure game books with the lime green spines, which, I argued, were numbered and came as a set and so counted as only one item. For herself, Mum took a pair of peacock feather patterned curtains she wanted for making into a quilt, a dressing table set made of irradiated green glass and a banana box she'd covered with brown paper and thumb tacks to look like a treasure chest. Inside were the family photographs. In the emergency accommodation we're put into, Mum lies on the couch under her peacock tail curtains and sifts through her treasure box, touching our paper baby faces.*

Maybe it is a wilfully strange thing, for a writer to be so interested in a pair of people – Cordelia and Lazarus – who point-blank refuse to narrate. Less strange when I remember all the ways that writing is a kind of refusal to turn up and tell the truth. When a writer writes well, her body, her physical presence in the room – the sound of her voice – are entirely obsolete. You don't need me if you have this book.

What is it we do when we say nothing? It is both an act and a failure to act. Speaking is relational but so is remaining silent in the face of questioning. Saying nothing both erases an event ('nothing to write home about') and preserves its power.

There's a death wish contained in the 'nothing' of writing, which we see in the Herman Melville story *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Bartleby's withdrawal from the world, his refusal, is enacted in the

gradual, malignant swelling of all the things he does not prefer. Now I come to think about it, he's tightlipped about his past too, just as my father was. The only thing we really know about Bartleby is that he is a writer. It's no coincidence his colleagues are named after foodstuffs: Bartleby wants to seal himself closed and he does not want to let the world inside – his self-starvation is a gruesomely vivid metaphor for a fatal state of mind.

Lazarus won't say what happened during his missing days and I assume the stories he might have told were too frightening and terrible to put into words, but they might not have been: maybe the Celestial City *was* worth writing home about – he just preferred not to – his refusal was a death wish of a happy kind because he wanted to go home and would not attach himself too firmly to the world while he was here.

Anne Boyer works at the boundaries between poetry and memoir. Diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer in 2014, she was commissioned in to write some short essays for the Poetry Foundation. One of these essays is simply entitled 'No.' In it, she lists the joyful truants, refusers, decliners and naysayers of literature – the 'pantheon of those who won't' and notes in particular that 'saying nothing is a preliminary method of *no*.' Boyer also reminds us that stillness – the anti-narrative properties of poetry and some forms of memoir – is akin to refusal. Not all writing aspires to the status of page-turner. She writes: 'Poetry is sometimes a *no*. Its relative silence is the negative's underhanded form of singing. Its flights into a range-y interior are, in the world of fervid external motion, sometimes a method of standing still.'<sup>4</sup>

My writing came from this kind of refusal. It was the tiny fragile shell between my mother's church and my father's anger. 'No to all of this,' I said, 'no, no thank you. None of this. I do not want these things,' and I put my fingers in my ears and pressed my lips together and wrote stories instead. That tiny shell was my container: the hazelnut I had my bad dreams in, my bunker, my little mineshaft. Not my journal – there was no solace or refuge in

writing about myself so directly, not when I knew the angels would be quoting from it. But my stories. My stories were the place I said no. My stories were the place where simultaneously I made myself invisible and allowed myself the freedom to think about anything. They were the place where I lived, safely, and the place where I waited for life to begin. They were somewhere and nowhere.

Let's go on. These are extracts from both 'Doted,' and my imperfect recollections of what was inside the banana box of photographs – an abbreviated archive of childhood – that my mother brought out of hell with her.

*In this photograph I am nine months old and improbably blonde. Wearing a silver christening bracelet. On a swing, laughing. The sun is bright: I'm wearing some pale, striped cotton thing. There's a tall privet hedge behind me and the depth of field renders my skin breath-takingly perfect; the hedge is a whirl of dense green against a late-spring sky a shade of blue that belongs to the eighties: you just don't get it anymore. Dad isn't in the picture because he is lying on the grass under the swing tickling my feet to make me laugh. The swing-park is a park-and-ride now.*

*I am a toddler, perhaps eighteen months old. Wearing a duffel coat and sitting in a ride on Blackpool Pleasure beach. The ride consists of a seat (into which I am strapped) attached to a red and yellow plastic disc that rotates, flashes lights and plays 'It's a Small World After All.' At the height of the disc's rotation I am four feet off the ground, in arm's reach of Dad who is in the photograph, holding my hand and smiling.*

*I am two now and I am wearing a pink dress and white Clark's shoes and white ankle socks with a frill around the top of them. The dress has a yellow kite and a blue balloon appliquéd onto it. Dad is holding me up. He is wearing a vest and brown corduroy flares. He is standing in front of a blue mini car on the street in front of our house. I am frowning and pointing at the camera. Go away. He is doing the laugh: I can tell by how he's holding his shoulders; the way his tongue is raised out of his mouth.*

I retrieved the photographs years later, from my mother. Thirty-four years old and on my hands and knees on her living room

floor. Sliding the photographs about on the carpet, looking for something. Looking for plot. Why did this happen? I sorted the photographs into piles. Ones to take away and copy, ones to leave behind. The pile I didn't want grew quickly.

'Not that one. Not that one. Not that one.'

She asked me what I was looking for, wanted to know, perhaps, the criteria for rejection and selection so she could help me sort the photographs. I was looking for the photographs I'd written about from memory, in 'Doted.' I was looking also for a reason. Which would have given me a purpose. A plot. I was hunting for my first mover. His first mover. I wanted to know. I know nothing. When I didn't answer her she said, 'I don't think you'll find what you're looking for here,' but as she speaks it appears: the photograph of me on the red and yellow ride on Blackpool Pleasure beach.

O.

No duffel coat. It's a pale yellow anorak. I don't look like me, I look like my son. But that doesn't matter. The other misremembering is more pertinent. He wasn't holding my hand. It is more painful and embarrassing to admit that than anything else. More frightening to wonder what made me imagine or invent that, and even more frightening to see that I imagined or invented without knowing I was doing it. *Punctum* doesn't quite cover it: this isn't a little wounding, a detail to snag the attention and bring me into contact with the image. It's a fist round my heart. If I am inventing things, I want to know about it. I am a poor writer because I am not in control of my material. Folly.

Onwards.

*I am still on the phone to Mum. I am always on the phone to Mum.*

*'When did he stop doting on me?' I ask.*

*Except I don't use these words. I can't bear to say them out loud. I say something like, 'what changed?' or perhaps I do the laugh I have learned and say, 'well that's not quite how I remember it.'*

*The receiver is slippery in my hand.*

*'You learned to talk,' she says, matter-of-factly. As if it's obvious. Family common knowledge. 'You started talking, and asking questions, and you wouldn't stop.'*

We return to the thing we cannot find a way to relate to – a character from a centuries-old play, a box of photographs, the minutes of an important meeting I was allowed to attend but didn't really understand at the time, a memory that hurts, and returns often in dreams – in order to know it more deeply. And we manufacture this knowing by interacting – by making whatever jagged contact we can – with what remains of the record.

Apparently I learned to ask questions when I was two years old. When I was two years old my mother decided to return to her church after a brief period of non-attendance when she'd fallen away and married my father then had me. When I was two years old my father changed his mind about me. There are three facts here that are sisters to each other, but the quality of their relationship otherwise I cannot determine.

That's another question I would like to ask.

Q: What was I creating, Dad?

Q: What am I creating now?

There are two other pieces of evidence I would like to include. First, a scene in the building built to withstand an earthquake. A Sunday, I think. My father is there and he is wearing a shirt and a tie, and this might be around the time that my mother convinced him to join our church, to get baptised and become a Mormon. The Sunday school lessons are taught by lay members, and the people taught are sometimes asked to participate in the lessons by standing and reading scriptures aloud.

My father is standing, the Bible in his hand, and he is reading aloud. He's really struggling. The back of his neck is red. He puts

his hand in his pocket, and the heavy book topples in his hand, the tissue-thin pages wafting backwards and forwards. LDS bibles are massive because they come with additional notes and added extras – the Joseph Smith translations – which are extra parts added in by Smith to clarify and interpret troubling passages that seem to disagree with peculiarities of Mormon doctrine.

It looks like he's going to drop the Bible, but he takes his hand out of his pocket and nudges the book safely into his palm, then scratches the back of his neck and pulls at his collar (it is very unusual to see him wearing a shirt) and doesn't stop reading. He carries on, through all this fidgeting, reading aloud in that halting, staccato style that new readers sometimes have (I will meet it again, that way of reading, when my children start school, and I will think of this scene then, and it will hurt, worse than the memories of being hit, so I will put it away) but he can't still be reading, because the pages have turned and he has surely lost his place.

Then I see (I am sure I see this) that my mother is sitting next to him, her hand light on the back of his knee, and her Bible is lying open on her lap and she's reading too – reading to him very quietly, almost under her breath, and very slowly. She is feeding him the words one by one. He takes them from her, these words, and gives them to the room, and he is sweating and he is trying so hard, so very hard, to be good.

My memory of this is clear. The shine on the wooden floor of the cultural hall and the way the polish cracked and lifted at the edges of the room. The fold up metal chairs that we all sat on. It was a sunny day. My mother was wearing a white blouse. I wore a purple dress with a red and yellow collar and a picture of Minnie Mouse on the front. There was a baby being fed something green from a glass jar right next to me, and it kept missing the spoon because I was pursing my lips like a goldfish – o-o-o-o – and making it laugh. I remember it all.

But I don't think I could have done. The facts of this don't add up. On Sundays the adults and children were taught separately

from each other and I would never have been in the class with my mother and father. There's no note in my journal, because I hadn't started keeping it then. No photograph, because nobody would take a photograph of an adult Sunday school lesson in a little church in the rough part of Preston, sometime in the early 1990s. I couldn't have been there (maybe I was misbehaving or refusing to go to my own Sunday school class - maybe I'd been sent up from the basement classrooms to sit with my mother because I wouldn't settle, wouldn't behave, wouldn't be quiet. It sounds likely and I hope, very much, that is what happened), which means perhaps I was told about it, by my mother. Told about the reading, or the lack of it, about how hard he was trying, or what a mess he made of it. I don't know. I don't know how I know these things, or even if I know them at all.

Another scene. This is just after we've left my father alone in that little terraced house. The circumstances of the leaving are murky. I know we went to church, and he wouldn't let us back in. I don't remember getting home and knocking at the door and finding it closed. I do remember going from church to someone's house - a longstanding member of the congregation (her son was the same age as me, and for a while we were best friends and painted Warhammer Figures together after church each Sunday) where we lived for a few days - maybe longer - until we were housed in emergency homeless accommodation by the council. We had very little: I was wearing my friend's big sister's clothes.

The accommodation (that's what we called it, while we lived there. Not 'home.' The Accommodation) was a tiny self-contained flat in a larger building full of flats which were generally meant for single people transitioning from prison or hostels or rehab or refuges or hospital: people who did not only need assistance with housing and benefits, but also needed assistance or at least advice with things like bills and cooking and laundry. There was no phone, for example, but there was an intercom system and each morning and night we needed to use it to report ourselves

present and awake and safe to the warden. We could use it to ask for help. We weren't supposed to press the button just for company. And because there was no phone and my father was not supposed to know where we were, we were allowed or encouraged (I don't remember which) to use the public telephone opposite the building in order to phone him. Which we did, sometimes.

I remember holding the phone in my hand while he cried down the line at the other end – and though I had seen my mother sob very often, I had never ever heard a man cry (except my granddad, who wept drunkenly at *Little House on the Prairie* every Sunday, but that was okay, because he liked us laughing at him) – and didn't ask us about how we were doing, or if we wanted our clothes back, or if we had enough money, but he just cried, and told us to tell our mother, who would not even cross the street to stand at the phone box with us, but only watch from the kitchen window of the flat, to tell our mother that he had started reading the Book of Mormon every day: first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and he was going to get through it all no matter how long it took, and he'd start going to church again more regularly, and would we make sure to tell her that? Please? and at the time I remember thinking, *as if that's the problem*, but I didn't say anything at all (o-o-o-o-o), just waited for him to stop, then handed the phone on to one of my siblings.

See, I'm talking about this as if it happened all the time. And it didn't. It happened once, twice, perhaps. That's all. We lived in that flat for about five months and then we got a council house and I decided to start going back to school and things settled down and became a lot more normal. I started to work on forgetting or, like Richard Beard, just not going back to the place where the memories were kept.

*Mad Max died before I went to university. He went quickly, during the night. It was probably a heart attack caused by old age and neglect. Can a dog die of mange? Earl went a couple of years later. Dad telephoned me to*

*tell me what had happened when I was in a pub in Sheffield, having lunch with a friend. I hadn't spoken to him in months and I tried to make my excuses but he talked over me, ploughed on, insisted I listen while he told me what the vet had told him.*

*Earl still slept outside, and Dad had been woken in the night by the sound of his metal water bowl overturning and scraping against the paving slab as the dog thrashed and yelped, its mouth foaming. He'd carried him in his arms – a 50-pound baby – into the back of his car and turned up at the emergency clinic wearing only his vest and some old cords.*

*Dad went off at a tangent here. He talked about the mess on the inside of the car; the difficulty in driving with the dog having seizures beside him; the bite on his hand the vet had advised him to 'get looked at.' He digressed further and described what a gentle nature the dog had; about how well disciplined and loyal he was, about how this bite on the hand that had fed him wasn't evidence of anything to do with Earl's character but only how affected he'd been by whatever sudden illness he was suffering from. A brain tumour, perhaps.*

*What he didn't tell me but found its way into his story anyway: the dog had a crate in the back of the car and Dad was assiduous about using it but this time, for Earl's last journey, Dad had him in the front passenger seat, stroking him as he turned the steering wheel with one bloodied hand.*

*Too dramatic?*

*As he spoke, going on and on in grief-stricken circles, I made apologetic gestures towards my friend; wiped curly fries through a puddle of mayonnaise on the side of my plate; signaled for another pint. You could still smoke inside pubs then. I worked my way through my packet, smoking one after the other until my eyes were dry and my throat stung.*

*Dad told me about our street; how it had gone downhill since we'd moved out. Scallies and junkies had taken to hanging about in the back ginnel to do their deals. Maybe one of the scallies was worried about being caught with something on him he shouldn't have and had chucked a bit of contraband over the wall. That was the word he used: contraband. And guess what? The dog really did have something in its stomach, some piece of latex, which implied he might have eaten something he shouldn't have. Perhaps cocaine or amphetamine, the vet had suggested, judging by the symptoms of its death. The vet was very curious about it all. Was going to do*

*a post-mortem. Maybe even get the police involved. She'd know for sure in a day or so. She was a woman but she was still very good. Very sympathetic, but women are, aren't they?*

*I said nothing.*

*Dad started from the beginning. He wanted to tell me the story again right back from the time he was awoken in the dead of night by the metallic noise of the water bowl being tipped over and hitting the flags in the yard.*

*'I'm out, Dad. I can't talk anymore. I'm with a friend. I'll ring you back tomorrow, yeah? Let me know what the vet says.'*

*I didn't phone him back, even though Mum, who had been divorced from him for seven years said she was worried about him, that she felt sorry for him.*

*The new dog is another black Labrador and its name is Princess. I haven't spoken to Dad in several years now and I doubt, very much, that I will again. But I still live where I used to and so does he. Very often, as I am driving my children around I see him crossing that main arterial road on the way to the river, wearing camouflage gear with a lead in his hands. Princess is trotting fast, trying hard to keep up, and Dad is shouting as he walks. He is gesturing to himself. He jabs the innocent air with such force that people have to cross the street to avoid him.*

The new Labrador's name was not Princess, it was Dipper. And Dipper was a dog and not a bitch. My dad told me once he'd never have a bitch as a working dog because when they come into season they aren't reliable. That spaying them is expensive, and even when they're spayed, they still look around for puppies to mother and even, sometimes, turn stupid and try to nurse and coddle the dead or injured birds they've been sent out onto the marsh to retrieve. He told me he'd seen that, once: out on the marsh he'd watched in disgust as a golden retriever bitch lay curled around four geese, their blood smeared on her soft yellow under parts, nudging them gently with her muzzle to urge them towards the nipple.

He had lots of words for 'mad,' did my father. *Tapped. Puddled. A right nutmeg. Soft in the head.* The words were partly to do with

stupidity (though he didn't like cleverness – especially mine – either) and partly to do with softness and sentimentality and love. To love – to love beyond logic – was a softness and a madness all at once. It was rot. The doctors checked my heart and lungs for damage with an ultrasound and an ECG and they told me that everything was fine. Just so you know. My heart is not rotten, it is fine.

*I had to stop at two kids. Medical reasons. I have one he barely knows and probably wouldn't recognise and another he has never met. Mum says he's opened savings accounts and divided my inheritance between the two of them all the same. Sometimes I want to stop the car and ask him a question but I always drive on and leave him to it. My father dotes. When a tree's heartwood rots botanists describe the trunk as 'doted' so perhaps I dote too.*

I'm obviously not the only one who likes to meddle with Lear. On one of my train journeys I read Bond's *Lear* and when I get to the part where the mad de-crowned king is presented with his daughter's dead body, I start to cry. Sometimes I fear I am going to be asked – perhaps in some kind of research assessment audit – what the 'frame of reference' is for this book. I will answer: anything that I have read or thought about in bed or on a train, and that has made me cry. Bond names Lear's daughter Fontanelle – after the hole in the head a baby is born with.

In life, Fontanelle struggles to relate to her father – she can't understand him at all and she has no sense that she – her voice, her words – exist for him in any meaningful way: 'For as long as I can remember there was misery and waste and suffering wherever you were. You live in your own mad world, and you can't hear me.'<sup>5</sup> The lack of knowing between Lear and Fontanelle comes right from Shakespeare: Lear, in his madness, mistakes a stool for his daughter and starts talking to the furniture. He doesn't know himself, never mind anyone else. There's a thirst for it though: the

savage intimacy of knowing. The puns on kin and kind and kindness and relatedness that Shakespeare riffs on throughout the play demonstrate a near constant preoccupation with family connectedness.

This drive to know, understand, to read someone intimately, feels violent sometimes. In Shakespeare's play, Lear fantasises about what an operation might reveal about his daughter: 'let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart.'<sup>6</sup> If cutting her open is what it takes, then he'll do it. He'll take that.

Edward Bond ensures his Lear gets his wish. While he is in prison, Fontanelle's dead body is brought in to her father, and the doctor slices open her abdomen to perform the autopsy in front of him. Lear watches – not recognising her, as the prison doctor lifts out her stomach and liver and inspects her lungs. Even with her ribcage cracked open and the bullet wound that killed her excavated, Lear doesn't quite believe this is his daughter. There's some essence – something he's wanting to see, that isn't there. He watches, mainly in silence, as the autopsy proceeds and when he does speak, it's her womb he wants to see. The prison doctor obliges and finally, once her abdominal and chest cavity is opened and the inside of her body is entirely exposed to him, he realises he is looking at his daughter.

'I have never seen anything so beautiful. If I had known she was so beautiful... Her body was made by the hand of a child, so sure and nothing unclean... If I had known this beauty and patience and care, how I would have loved her.' It's too late though. He knows her – or he thinks he knows her – knows that they are related – 'I made this..' – and is able to relate to her – but she's dead. She can't know him back because to know, we have to be available to be known. The only intimacy Lear can have with his daughter now is to bury his hands and arms in her opened up body and demand that the prison guards look at them, covered as they are in her blood and viscera. He might look like a surgeon.

He's not a king anymore. Like a writer, Lear calls himself a Fool and demands that his guards regard him.

*It is eminently possible, given the realities of Early-modern theatrical practice, that for some early productions of King Lear, Cordelia and The Fool were double cast. My poor fool is hanged, Lear says, and the audience in the know, the audience who have, just for the moment, suspended their suspension of disbelief and allowed themselves to notice that the actor playing Cordelia is also playing The Fool, are allowed the tiniest of morbid chuckles. They're allowed to pat themselves on the back: they weren't fooled after all; they always knew Cordelia was an idiot in disguise, and a poor one at that.*



# **I Was Here: Suspicious, Pathological, Normal**

After Lazarus 'came forth' out of the tomb, glowing with grave-light, he wouldn't or couldn't say what it was like. But while he was in there he wet his finger with his tongue and wrote his name in the grave-dust that clung to the curved underside of the sepulchre roof: a self-portrait in letters. His hand shook and the writing was badly formed. The hope – that someone else would pass that way and pause to read it, and the arrogance – that what he'd give them to read would be his own name – both astonish me. I was here. / I was dead. He never spoke again (was that the price? His voice?) but he did find his way out.

Glaswegian artist Alison Watt gives us a self-portrait in triplicate in her 1995 triptych *Anatomy I-III*. In the first, the artist is standing naked, a folded sheet gathered around her calves and ankles. Her breasts are hidden behind an x-ray of her ribs and upper pelvis which she holds over her body: modesty and exposure all in one, as all self-portraits are. Next to her a dead pig hangs by its ankles, its flesh the same colour as hers. The comparison we're asked to make is stark: butchery and the sacred are close together here. A bowl sits on the floor under the pig's head. The animal's throat is uncut although there's a wound lengthwise across its abdomen: as clean as an autopsy. Something has just happened. Or is about to happen. This is a triptych so the moment depicted is about to move beyond itself.

I was due to give birth to my second child in the summer of 2010. Late on in the pregnancy it became clear that not only was the baby in the breech position, but my son's pelvis was lodged firmly within mine; his feet wedged either side of his ears. So

I was scheduled in for surgery, though everyone around me kept respectfully calling it the 'birth.' In revenge I began to count down the days to 'the disembowelling' or 'the extraction.' I enjoyed horrifying my midwife by using these words in front of her, though it was clear to everyone except for me that the purpose of my half-joking was to cover up my almost overwhelming sense of foreboding about the procedure. I wanted to draw attention to the fact this was not something I was doing: birthing a child – but something that was being done to me. The name the surgeons gave it – *elective* – reminded me and everyone else that I chose this and I got only and exactly what I asked for. Sometimes I am still paranoid enough to believe that I called what happened into being by the names I gave to it.

When Margery Kempe has her first baby the birth is so difficult she thinks she is going to die. It's the late fifteenth century: her fear wasn't unreasonable – birth was to women what war was to men. But she lives. The baby lives. A son. After the crisis to her physical health passes, something happens to her mind – her fear and paranoia manifest in demonic visitations: 'develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumed wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as þei sculd a swalwyd hyr in, sum-tyme rampyig at hyr, sum-tume thretyngher, sum-tym pullyng hyr & haling hir þothe nygth & day.'<sup>1</sup> Margery suffers. She rages. She shouts, screams, swears and slanders her family and friends. She claws at her own skin with her fingernails, and at her lowest point, 'sche bot hir owen hand so violently þat it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr.' She was locked up: placed in chains. They didn't know what to do with her. She didn't know what to do with herself. In her own words, Margery 'went owt of hir mende.'

When I awoke from the general anaesthetic they put me under to mend the haemorrhaging, I was wearing an oxygen mask. I was still in theatre and two nurses were doing something at the foot end of the table I lay on. Cleaning the floor, perhaps, or making

notes and recording observations. I don't know. One of the nurses dropped something or knocked it over (there was a clatter) and the other nurse said, 'you're dead, you are!' and they laughed and I thought they were talking about me. I couldn't breathe.

They were wheeling me somewhere. I tried to tell them I couldn't breathe but my throat – scraped raw by a tube, was starting to close. They tapped on the mask I was trying to remove.

'Leave this on, sweetheart,' someone said, and moved my hand away. 'This one is a bit of a worrier, isn't she?' someone else said: a porter or a nurse, perhaps. There was laughter. I pulled at the mask again. The elastic that held it against my face was getting tight. I couldn't breathe. I heard the squeak of wheels on the hospital corridor floor.

Perhaps (I remember thinking this) the breathing would be better in the room they were taking me to. A change of air. I'd forgotten there was a baby in there waiting for me: that this was what it had all been for. I forgot about everything: only the fact that perhaps I was dead, or dying. I think I was drowning.

There was chatting as the trolley moved: nobody was in any rush. I couldn't breathe. I started coughing: the kind of coughing where you can breathe out, but not in. The backs of my hands were covered in hives and I was beginning to have trouble opening my eyes. My eyelids were swelling though I didn't know this at the time. Instead I thought I was passing out, but somehow staying conscious – that my eyes would be closed and I'd look like I was asleep, but inside I'd be awake and able to feel everything, and they'd start cutting me up again and this is what death would be like: time quite broken, and everything would always be pain and panic and falling and there would be no way to make it stop. I couldn't breathe.

Where did Margery go? What was her left-behind mind doing while she was not in it? She stops eating meat and refuses to have sex with her husband. She sees, hears and smells things that other

people say are not there. She cries – all the time – for years. It irritates just about everyone she meets but after a while her visions take on a kinder quality and in them Jesus comes to console her, to tell her that her tears are a gift, and eventually asks her to leave her home and her husband and to travel abroad in Europe and the Holy Lands. She does, then Jesus tells her to write about it. What an unreasonably loving request. Margery can't write and she can't read – not even in her visions, where anything is possible but literacy: her name in the Book of Life has to be pointed out to her because, without help, she is unable to decipher it. Yet once her wandering years abroad are over she hires a scribe to take her dictation and begins to transfer a portrait of life to paper.

Instead of writing, I lay in bed behind my closed curtains surfing web forums and reading about other people's marriage problems. I watch these anonymous writers suggest recipes for dinner parties to each other and gather together to encourage one poster to stop enabling her husband's cocaine habit. I wonder if doing some cocaine would help me with the writing. The forums and discussion boards I lurk on have their own etiquette, but those rules of engagement rarely have anything to do with decorum. People seem to be able to say anything they like when they're online and posting behind a username. For example, there's a woman here writing all the way through her miscarriage. She's uploaded a photograph of the tissue she's wiped herself with. 'It's not blood, is it?' she asks. (I imagine her sitting on the pan, her jeans puddled around her ankles and her smartphone in her hand.) The tissue is just a little pink. It's more mucus than blood. 'Do you think it's blood?' (The hand holding the tissue has blue fingernails. The bathroom is modern: sand-coloured tiles and the mirror above the sink has a built-in light.) Four posts and two photographs later there is, indisputably, blood. It's smeared across the tissue, bright red and undeniable. Strangers reply to her pictures by confirming what she already knows and by posting flower emoticons. They

offer this bleeding virtual woman a hand to hold. They literally type that. 'Nothing to say but here's a hand to hold there'll be someone up all night.' The miscarriage woman doesn't come back: the thread is a very old one and it peters out with a few well wishes and requests for updates.

I don't quite remember the hours after the anaphylaxis. A torch in my eyes and many doctors around the bed. There were injections. Blood taken from wrists, crook of elbow. Another cannula on the side of my thumb. My arms were streaked violet and mauve with bruises where they'd forced the blood into my veins while I was unconscious. Fingers or a tube or something else – something cold – against my tongue and my throat. Someone said, 'this is probably going to hurt a bit, love,' but whatever it was it didn't seem to. A chest x-ray, which they did using a portable machine they brought to me. I remember being told, forcefully, to lie down because if I carried on moving I would burst my stitches and have to go back to theatre again. It felt like a threat.

My body was limp: they moved my limbs, lifted me on a sheet from one bed to another. I was stuck inside the body like a butterfly in a jar, fluttering, battering against my edges. And at the same time, my edges were gone. I was fighting to breathe and a nurse who I am quite sure was trying to be kind held my shoulders down on the bed so the doctor could do something to my mouth or throat. The man who I live with was ushered out of the room. He was crying, which I'd never seen before. Something so terrible was about to happen that even the man who at that time loved me was not allowed to see it. I was not allowed to see it either.

A pathologically apophenic mind will imbue just about anything with meaning. Call it a gift of the (wounded) spirit. Through the course of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the bars and shapes in the wallpaper start to host a person with 'two bulbous eyes' and this person is ascribed a character with a

'vicious influence' – this influence in turn provokes anger in the narrator, who is, as her disintegrating paragraphs demonstrate, swiftly becoming unhinged in the face of the pattern's 'impertinence, and everlastingness' – its reluctance to be read. Before long, the figure starts to move, to 'sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.' Under the endless scrutiny of the under-socialised narrator, this shadowy figure eventually resolves itself into a crawling, clambering woman 'stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern.'<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this second woman was this narrator's own unacknowledged self; a double to the doppelgänger the narrating character was for the writer, Charlotte. She really had split in two: the woman made sick by motherhood, who could no longer work, and the furious woman who wanted to, and was kept away from her papers and forcibly shut up in a room with bars on the windows.

It is impossible to write a memoir when pieces of the story are missing. But there is a record, of sorts. The man who I lived with waited with me for as long as he was allowed, and while he waited, he took photographs. Snaps of the new baby of course: lots of them – because I was missing everything. But he also took pictures of me, pale and puffed up and uncomprehending. I was both away somewhere else and tethered to the world by wires: drains from my wound, a catheter, two drips, a heart monitor, and oxygen. I was congealing with the machines and becoming a woman made of wires. I have a mask over my nose and mouth and my hair is filthy and my face, still swollen and marked by hives, doesn't look like mine. My arms lay on the bed either side of me, arranged not by me, and there are pipes and bruises.

Apparently at one point while the room was filled with doctors still worried about my heart and lungs, a portable x-ray machine was brought over to the bed and I struggled to get up and move away from it. I am told that I cried and insisted that I needed to go home. I am told I flailed around and knocked one of the

other machines over with my arm. When I did this the nurse told the man who I live with that the machine cost twenty thousand pounds and I needed to lie still and the doctor working with her said that twenty thousand pounds was nothing compared to the cost of someone's life. There are no photographs of this and it is the only damage that does not appear in my medical notes. For a long time I thought guiltily about this incident. I am still capable of considering that broken machine and blushing, even though I have no memory of my hooliganism at all.

Triptychs are the visual artist's way of emerging from the tyranny of now, of stringing a few moments together, and using the space between the paintings to indicate a move in time or place, or of point of view (they're like comics, a little bit). Trauma stories might 'jog in place' but a triptych gets us going again. In the second painting of Watt's trio, the artist shows us what she can't possibly see of herself in real life - her back: she's curling away: she's foetal - perhaps sleeping - with her head wrapped up in a bandage. Is this still a self-portrait? Does it count, if there's fiction in it? The dodginess of the enterprise is hardly hidden: I'm being asked to be suspicious, I think. The pig lies beneath her, laid out unnaturally, as if in a butcher's shop. Perhaps she's giving us the pig instead of herself. Perhaps she's bored by our interest in what's under the sheet. Maybe she wants to get out of the way - as far as she can, in a self-portrait - and let us look more closely at the animal - food, sacrifice, something like that. What's happened between the first picture and the second? Did someone hurt her head? Did she fall? Did she take the pig down, or did someone else do it for her?

*But you can be grateful for a healthy baby*, they said. And yes, my son was fine. That was the main thing. That's what people kept saying to me, every time they came into the room over the next few days. I never asked. I'd forgotten about him. Forgotten about my

daughter at home, who was expecting to be brought to the hospital that afternoon to see the new baby, and was left waiting for days. There was no guilt: just an absence of curiosity. Maybe I didn't die, but the rest of the world seemed to wither and fade away and apart from the pain and my breath I cared about nothing because there was nothing there to care about.

For everyone else, the baby was the most important thing. When I was too weak to hold him and had to call a midwife to come and help me feed him, they told me he was fine. When I cried because the nurses carried on pulling at my bedclothes and tugging at my nightgown and inspecting the places they had cut me and giving me injections – sometimes without talking to me or looking at me at all – they only patted my shoulder and told me the baby was fine. When they moved me onto the main ward there was a woman across from me who cried and cried and cried because the baby she'd just delivered looked precisely like one she'd had the year before, only that one had died, and they said at least *my* baby was fine.

I fossick around the forum until, in the dog lovers' section, I find a thread about a brown Labrador bitch, taken to the vets to be spayed and brought home afterwards. The poster has taken good care of her pet, and settled her on a blanket in front of the Aga, on a tiled floor. She's particular about this: the tiled floor, the Aga – deploying significant detail with the heavy hand of a novelist – the nouns piling up and acting as second-best understudies for the missing smartphone photograph. She needs her reader to know there really was a blanket and the kitchen was warm and the vet told her to leave the bitch alone, to let her sleep, to give her peace and quiet while the anaesthetic wore off properly, which could take more than a day and perhaps overnight.

It has become clear to me that any principle of design is a form of self-portraiture, in that it makes nothing more visible than the

patterning preoccupations in the mind of the designer. Margery Kempe's book, for example, is shaped and in some places made symmetrical, as well as being haunted by, injury, illness, damage and her encounters with the sick. Towards the end of the book (and her travels) she meets a man while praying in the church of St Margaret. This is no chance encounter but a piece of rhyming action. The man has heard of Margery and has sought her out to ask for her help. 'hys wife was newly delyueryd of a childe & sche was *owt hir mende*' – this is the only other time the phrase is used in the entire book and the man's description of his wife's behaviour echoes Margery's own early illness with uncanny accuracy: 'Sche knowyth not me ne mon of hir neybourwys. Sche roryth & cryith so Pat sche makith folk euyl a-feerd. Sche wyl boþe smytyn and bityn, & þerfor is sche manykyld on hir wristys.' Margery's double-in-suffering is subjected to a brutal early version of the rest cure: 'Pan was sche had to þe forthest ende of þe towne in-to a chambyr Pat þe pepil xuld not heryn hir cryin & þernwas sche bowndyn handys and feete wyth cheyns of yron Pat sche xoulde smytyn no-body.' Margery visits this woman in her chains and speaks with her, and for a while, the woman recovers herself and is able to find some relief. I want to know what she said, but that part isn't included in the story.

It was there on the ward, between the 24-hour cries of the other newborns and the blood on the floor of the wet room we showered in and the bee-sting heparin injections and the *at least you got a healthy baby* that another visitor arrived: the dead baby – the one I'd had the dreams about when I was a child.

It was not quite a ghost. In fact, it was the opposite of a ghost: because I couldn't see it – not for sure – but every doctor and nurse that flicked open my chart and looked at me with a pursed lip and a furrowed brow knew about it. The phone rang in the nurses' station nearly constantly: every call a message from a GP or a Health Visitor or a Social Worker or a Child Psychologist or an Education

Welfare Officer or a Sunday School Teacher or a Bishop – they were all spreading the news, you see, about what I'd done.

I could go home, the nurses said, once I'd seen the cardiologist. But the cardiologist – a regular Mr Godot – never came, not for days and days, and eventually I began to suspect that this was just a ruse – there was no cardiologist, they just wanted me to stay in hospital under their watchful eyes (were those smoke detectors or a sprinkler system in the ceiling above my bed? It was hard to be certain. But they were above my bed and nobody else's: that was a fact) because they knew I was a baby-killer and they didn't trust me to take the baby home in case I became again the thing I always was.

Perhaps the frightening not-quite-seen figure behind the pattern on the wallpaper – a trellis, or a cage, maybe – was the reader Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagined or hoped for – the person who would listen to the story of what it was like to be doubled: unmoored and confined, held away from her words. The other one – the little mad one – races around inside the walls like a wild cat, and when the pattern moves, it is because she is behind it, shaking it, wanting to get out.

They are like separated lovers, these two – a frantic woman with full breasts kept away from her crying child. But even when the figure's movement behind the pattern and inside the wall is established – even when the narrator is convinced that the woman in the wall gets out during the day – her focus, her endless obsession, is not with the figure, but with the pattern itself. She describes its incoherence with horrified fascination and it is as if the pattern's irregularity infects her language: contradictions and paradoxes are littered through her lengthy account of it: 'I know a little of the principles of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.' Imagine her, this narrator, standing alone in her nightdress behind the barred

windows, her eyes squinted, head cocked to one side – no wonder she thought it moved.

I had other visitors too. They brought balloons and cards. I cared for my son elaborately, even ostentatiously, in front of them, and I knew my guests to be spies. At night, I started to dream. The dead one. My hands on its throat, or fingers through its fontanelle. In the morning I took the baby nail scissors out of my hospital bag and threw them away. In the afternoon I would sleep and not sleep, with the sound of *Dickinson's Real Deal* emanating from the television. I closed the curtains around my bed, and the midwives would come and open them again, because they liked everyone to be on view, especially those – I knew – they considered to be dangerous.

Every morning a midwife would tell me that I was on the cardiologist's list today, and that he was going to come and look at my notes and my scans and tell me what was wrong with my heart. And every day he never came, and I'd drowse through the afternoons then wake up sweating and already crying and tell myself that it was okay, because the baby in front of me was fine and there was nothing wrong with my heart. My heart was not rotten. I have always been grateful for getting a healthy baby. But grateful was not the only thing I was.

I click away from the forums now and look up the word 'spaying' – suddenly curious about why animals get spayed and humans get hysterectomies. I spend a long time on Wikipedia learning how the operation is performed, memorising the names of the parts that are removed, the parts that are left behind, the way the neck of the cervix (uterus side) is cauterised with a little silver instrument that looks like a sleek vibrator but is actually something more like a soldering iron. I am quite far into this and have wasted much of the morning watching instructional videos on YouTube posted by an American veterinarian college before I remember what I am

supposed to be doing, why I am up here in my bed, and what is passing for 'writing' these days.

It is strange to see a photograph of yourself with your eyes closed. The hospital photographs aren't self-portraits, of course. I didn't take them and I really wasn't in them, either. Writing about yourself is like trying to catch yourself unawares in a mirror – the only thing you get is the thing that nobody else sees: a view of yourself, looking back. How impossible, too, to offer the reader something to hold when one hand is holding the mirror, the other the paintbrush? In *Paradise Lost* Milton gives us a portrait of Eve as Narcissus. Tells us about how her first memories of coming to consciousness in that garden involve finding a pool of water and lying beside it to admire her reflection. I've always thought of the Garden of Eden as a kind of prison: a very beautiful prison, booby-trapped with a tree. Eve lies down in her enclosure and loves what she sees in her water bowl and why wouldn't she? Milton repurposes the Narcissus story to show us that while we might learn love (and fear, and disgust, and everything else) from regarding our own reflections, it is only by answering the disembodied voice in the garden that says 'follow me' that we escape the horror of that lonely, mad place behind the wallpaper.

I get rid of Wikipedia and the YouTube videos about spaying and try to shift myself to work. I try to make a pattern without repetition or symmetry or radiation and without the visual rhythm caused by alternation. A pattern that, all the same, repeats down its breadth, but has each breadth standing alone, and connects across the diagonal in a way that both slants and sprawls, and which, when looked at in a certain way, does seem to radiate from a common centre after all, though distractedly so. If I could write a novel in that shape, I might be able to get at it. From Charlotte and her doppelgänger's doppelgänger I learn three things: first, the artistic sins are Repetition and Distraction; second: these sins have a

tendency to depart or Radiate from a Common centre; third: their property is to cause horror and isolation. In other words, these sick principles of design can keep the writer away from her beloved reader. They are imprisoning.

For while Charlotte did find her reader – or at least, one particular reader – with ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ the finding was less of a virtual handhold than it was a two-fingered salute. When it was done, she posted a copy of it to her doctor – Silas Weir Mitchell – the man who had prescribed her the ‘rest cure.’ Her locked-up and wordless days drove her to dreams of guns and chloroform, and worsened a depression so severe only a divorce and the resumption of work could relieve it. He never replied, nor – despite Charlotte’s boasts in later years that he had – did he change his methods.

I’m drawn back to the forum. The Aga. The blanket. The tiled floor. The warm kitchen. And the collar is gone, away under the table, but as the bitch’s owner approached she saw and heard her tail hitting the floor: she was well, she was fine. The tiles were wet. Well, no matter. But it wasn’t piss; the fluid was pink, and the dog was licking at it. There was something in its blanket too. Like a pink telephone cord, a scramble of something, a mess by the Labrador’s side. And of course, all those fragments came together and slowly, as she typed her post for the lurkers, she let us in to the moment of her realisation: that the dog had slipped its collar and burst its stitches and the thing lying next to it was its liver, which it had nibbled at. She acted quickly then, of course, wrapping the too-happy dog up in the damp blanket, and rushing her back to the vet. She’s been sedated, she types, and is on antibiotics. The vet says that she – the pet dog – might very well be fine. That the tenderest organ wasn’t too damaged. That the liver can regenerate itself: ask a drinker. I keep thinking of Margery Kempe: biting away at her own hand – gnawing at her writing instrument. You wouldn’t want a dog like that back in the house though, would you? Cujo in the kitchen? Not once it had got a taste for itself.

When my students can't write I tell them to think of themselves as builders: as designers. I tell them they can draw the story out on a whiteboard, or fold it out of paper. I ask them to think about blueprints and architecture. I warn them not to get too clever: if literary patterning and construction don't help you connect – don't offer that little handhold – then they're just gimmicks. I do say that sometimes. The braided essay, for example, is a form that's all about interruption and rupture, about disconnection. And also about repair and recuperation, without the flattening out of coherence. It's a form that, when it works, seems to provide a frame for the disorder and the possibility of resolution, without erasing the truth of the mess or delivering an argument or narrative climax. These essays can dramatise different realities or moments of action and lay them against each other to do funny things with time and our sense of the real. These written triptychs are also strangely circular: we loop around them, not reading from left to right, but flickering our eye all over the place.

Readers can't reason with Margery's book. Like the wallpaper, they stand and stare and struggle to define precisely what it is. For some, Margery is the very first autobiographer. For others, she is a novelist. Margery's book is not only about wounds, it is a kind of a wound itself – or it shares a property with wounds: it is an aperture, a rent, a fissure. Through it the sacred, mad privacy of an interior world, one of music and merry heavens and bleeding gods incarnate, is brought into the outside world. Margery writes about herself in the objectively reliable third person: an external perspective coloured by the special knowledge and intimacy of reliable inward witness. No one else could write about her like that. Only God.

In 'Autobiography as De-facement' Paul de Man demonstrates that autobiography both is and isn't possible: 'We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences,

but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?'<sup>3</sup>

The pigment we paint our pictures with covers us, covers all kinds of things. Still, there was a more personal link, perhaps – a matter of wishful thinking or desire – between de Man's negation of history, of confession, of making an honest account of oneself, and what turned out to be a career speckled with deceptions. De Man's friend and colleague Geoffrey Hartman, in his memoir *A Scholar's Tale* relates a curious conversation towards the end of de Man's life. He noted that the critic had published nearly nothing before the mid-1950s, and asked him directly whether there was anything more.

'Only journalism,'<sup>4</sup> de Man replied, referring obliquely – there's always some self-interest involved in coming at it slant – to the anti-Semitic articles he published during the war. It all came out after he died. He wasn't a very good husband and had difficult relationships with his children. Further back, in trouble with the police. Those anti-Semitic articles. Before that, a mother who went mad during her first pregnancy and produced only a dead baby from her second: never the same again. A father who made x-ray machines and was often away. This is the way of things for all self-portraitists – the ones who refuse to do it, and the ones who suffer in the attempt.

Even Margery Kempe's own editor, on the discovery of the full version of her book centuries after it was written, remained suspicious of her and described her as 'petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously overstrained.' It happened to Charlotte too, when readers saw her suspicion and hatred of immigrants, her racist ideas, the limits of her feminism, reflected in the unpleasant odour and unappealing 'yellowness' of the paper she writes and has her character read. One of de Man's biographers, unpicking

his double life, doing detective work on his shoddy footnotes, misquotes, invented quotations and suspicious translations of his primary texts (he not only lurked within his own life, but was a shoddy, disreputable reader – disgraced as a scholar and as a man) opens her work by claiming, ‘Paul de Man no longer seems to exist.’<sup>5</sup> *Only journalism*.

There’s no page to turn with triptychs. In a gallery, we’d get all three of Alison Watt’s pictures at once – a surround sound of flesh and injury, of watching and hiding, flashing and peeping and covering all at once. In the book I have, the three images are laid one above the other: I read them downwards, waiting for the knife, for the butchery, the surgery, for the bowl to fill with blood. In the last painting the artist stands on the left, in place of the pig: her abandoned x-ray hangs on the right from the pig-hooks, the empty bowl beneath it. The sheet is back, covering her lower legs, though we see the parts of her she won’t see that often herself: the back of her head, her shoulder blades, her arse and the backs of her thighs. The Anatomy set are self-portraits that seem to question whether self-portraiture is really possible: a performance of evasion, of handing us our pound of flesh and turning away, eyes closed, when we take it. Or they’re hopeful: they show the way fiction moves into everything, blooming into whatever space we’re forced to leave for it. At the start of her career Watt painted portraits and self-portraits obsessively, working devotedly, addictively, to the point of illness and exhaustion. Now, her portraits have become more minimalist: she paints the fabric on the couch the sitter has risen from, the sheets of a rumpled empty bed, the whiteness of draped material without reference to the body that it covers: they’re more to do with God and death than they are to do with her now. Like Lazarus and Eve, she found her way out.

We do know this, though, already: the covering properties of story. We like peeling back the x-ray: the seduction of that, and

the comfort – there really is something underneath. A pair of tits or a wound – we’re happy either way so long as some titillation or horror is present and correct. It’s the part we don’t know that terrifies. I can say that there is one machine I do remember breaking. When I was sick I threw a laptop computer at a wall and shattered it, losing six months’ worth of photographs of my children’s lives on the damaged hard drive. That would be the worst thing I did: to take those photographs and those months away from the man who I live with. We never speak about it. The hard drive is wrapped in tissue paper at the bottom of a drawer and nobody touches it. But there will be other things.

The forum I am lurking on today isn’t the type of forum where the posters, when they register, choose a little avatar or profile image to represent their bodies in the shared digital space. There’s nothing like that: no selfies, not even fake ones. People choose their own usernames, but there’s a tradition of changing them often, in case the accretion of detail attached to a single name threatens to ‘out’ someone in real life: the tradition of the unstable, non-unanimous self is alive and strong here. But the new or ‘new’ posters are deemed to be suspicious. To get past this, you’re supposed to – if you change your username – tell everyone that you have, and quote a shibboleth of famous past threads and sub-cultural high-points to prove your credentials and get your readers to trust you: the display of secret in-group knowledge is a substitute for photographic ID. This woman – the owner of the cannibal dog, the tile floor, the Aga – has done none of these things. And now, one or two people comment on that. To note the stink of fiction in her story. ‘Strange thing to share on your first post,’ someone writes, and suddenly, nobody believes her. I refresh the screen. A torrent of doubt and smug joy. Someone has posted a reply to the description of the half-eaten liver making a fairly laboured and admittedly tasteless joke about fava beans and nice chianti. A few seconds later, the entire thread has been deleted and replaced with a link to

the board guidelines. It is not clear to me in which post the offence that merited deletion lies.

In the room where I slowly recovered, out of my mind and somewhere else, there was a roll of stickers on the shelf over my bed – red, green and yellow – and the stickers have writing on them, which say *suspicious, pathological, normal*. The man who I live with photographed them too, thinking that when I woke up and was myself again they would make me laugh, or that I'd want them for the title of the thing that he knew – before I did – I would end up writing. There are pictures of the bed and the machines and these are taken as lovingly as the snaps of the new baby. He's even got the computer that was in the room, on a worktop near the bathroom door: something I couldn't see from my bed. In these photographs I see him and not me. I see his worried collection of everything that was there that he thought I might not remember. I see him trying to find me a title while the words ran out of me. Those photos are a kind of love letter, I think: his way of saving and returning to me the lost fragments of time and place that he acknowledged were mine. They are his self-portrait: a means of showing me his was a mind that would pay attention to my life when I could not. It took a friend to suggest to me that perhaps the man who I lived with wasn't taking pictures of me as a service for me at all – but perhaps this was for himself, and the baby: a record of the days he feared might be my last ones. I never thought of that. His fear. Eve./Narcissus.

What kind of book does a sick woman who cannot write actually write? Margery Kempe's autobiography isn't a recovery narrative: she just gets madder and madder, more and more reckless – more joyful about the nutty sacredness inside her – but it is about escaping – about finding her way out of those manacles. Surprisingly, freedom comes after a disaster. After a long period of separation, she receives news that her husband

fell down the stairs in his house and was found, days later, by concerned neighbours. His head injuries are catastrophic and there are mutterings about taking Margery to the authorities – she must be to blame, because if she had been living with him at home where she belonged, the accident would never have happened. Her hurts have caused his. She returns and because her husband's head injury has left him incapacitated, Margery tends to him until his death, seeing her work as a kind of penance. Peace comes at last, after a period of wandering abroad. It wasn't her fault, not really, though now she holds his hand and sees how reticulated their two lives and types of suffering always were – how witnessing his pain was a way of lifting her attention away from her own, in the end.

Eventually, I become curious. The limitations of self-portraiture start to feel more like a ladder than a wall. There are other books to be written. The man who I live with might write a volume about his own disaster, where I am the antagonist. My parents too, if they wanted to, looking backwards for origins along the deepening incline of their own coastal shelf. The nurse who stayed on after the end of her shift to take care of me, who sang along to the radio on the way home, who bathed her younger kids and put them to bed, then fetched glasses of water and put them to bed again, poured her glass of wine then, before she could drink it, trudged up the stairs again and shouted at them – telling them to get in their own beds and stay there because she'd just had enough. Who retrieved her wine – warm now – and sat in front of the telly with a bar of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut, having her feet massaged by her eldest son. He's just dropped out of his A Levels and she's not sure whether to insist he gets a job, or to leave him alone for a while to gather himself. He's taken the dog out, at least. He rubs her feet and she smiles at him and they enter into a story that has nothing at all to do with me: I am appropriately and beautifully forgotten – and this woman has a book of her own too.

Even the surgeon with the pale eyes is no longer Jack the Ripper, but only Jackie, or Sue, or perhaps Amanda. She has a story. Perhaps, after a hard day at work, this Amanda sighs as she slips her aching and weary muscles into the cool chlorinated water of a nearly empty swimming pool at night. She dips below the water, adjusting her goggles, and as she swims – an uneven breaststroke that finally unknots the tension in her neck and shoulders – she thinks not of me, one caesarean section among many, but practises Italian verbs in her head for the long delayed honeymoon in Rome her wife has been promising her for three years. *Amo, ami, ama, amiano, amate, amano...*

## How to Fall Without Landing: Celestial City

A good few years ago now, a friend who'd helped me get into a taxi one too many times advised me to watch Reese Witherspoon in *Wild*. The film is a glossy Hollywood adaptation of Cheryl Strayed's memoir, which tells the story of her own falling apart and coming back together in the aftermath of the illness and death of her mother. Take this as a sign: when you've gone past eccentric and are now falling untethered through the outer darkness of madness, your friends start to recommend stories with strong female leads who let things fall apart a bit, sleep around, drink too much, take heroin and who end up landing safely. It's an insult to self-pity, this, the fact that your friends want a happy ending for you even when you're not able to want one for yourself.

'You'll like the film,' my friend said, knowing of my recently developed allergy to fiction. 'It's a true story.'

But when I watched *Wild* I felt only a mix of rage and nausea and envy as Reese/Cheryl finally sobers up, buys a better pair of hiking boots, goes on an extremely long walk and is able, eventually, to outpace her sorrow and land, sure-footed, at her narrative's final destination – The Bridge of the Gods. I paused the film to Google that name because it smelled like a novelist's trick to me – but no, Strayed ended her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail at a steel truss cantilever bridge over the Columbia River that really is called The Bridge of the Gods. At the culmination of a three-month-long hike – a walk away from death, the end of a marriage, and the disasters of grief and acting out that followed, she is able to look at, or be received by, the gods of her final destination.

I'm not sure what my friend expected to happen when I got to this part of the film. Perhaps she was hoping I'd catch an epiphany, or that I would be able to borrow Reese/Cheryl's safe landing.

Instead, I felt like glorious Wednesday Addams on her summer camp in *Addams Family Values*, locked into the reflection shed and forced to watch sing-along Disney films for as long as it takes for her to get a better attitude. *She'll learn to be perky*, is the message from her camp counsellors. *She'll learn to smile if it kills her*. Is this what a happy ending costs? If it involves denial, I don't want it. It's not that I'm not curious – I'm really not so different from my parents in that I have long since wondered what is wrong with me: a talent for sorrow or an aversion to joy? But all the same, I'm pretty sure, if brought to a destination that involved a religiously inclined bridge with a pleasing view of the surrounding landscape, I'd have chucked myself right off it. If only out of spite.

That was a while ago now. Another friend, who is an artist, has come to the house today to make some sketches of my face in preparation for a portrait he is thinking about painting. There's nothing for me to do. No walking. No researching. No striving towards a conclusion. All I need to do is sit there: raw material. This is, of course, the hardest thing. To make it a little easier on myself, I claim that this too, is work.

It is true that the sitting is happening during the hours of my life the university has bought from me. So I sit but I do not do nothing; I'm earning money. At least there's that. I'm looking at birds out of the dining room window while my artist friend works. We start with me sitting, but eventually I have to lie down, because he thinks it might be easier for me to settle into stillness that way. The anxiety around this not moving, not starting, and so not ending, is nearly too much for me. I realise that's why I love trains: the only place I can sit and do nothing, because I know I am busy being hurtled towards my destination. I notice that the window I am staring at needs cleaning. I make a joke: this sitting is practice-based research.

It is only half a joke. I do want to know what it is to be looked at like this: in the economy of attention paid, which of us is the one to leave in debt? The transaction of sitting and looking interests

me and I am wondering if there's a way that it is comparable, or not, to the positions a reader and writer go through as they tussle with each other. I'm interested in what painting a portrait and writing a biography of a sick person that is me/not me might have in common. I want to know what portraiture – especially of the naked, warts and all variety – and memoir might have in common. What better way is there to find out? The artist tells me that a model does not sit 'for' an artist, but 'to' – that the sitting is relational. Outside, through the dirty window, there are starlings chatting on the washing line. We talk, for a while, the artist and me, about a podcast I am listening to about Bitcoin and the dark web: the freedom and criminality involved in the anonymised transaction, the mysteriousness of the Blockchain, which records it all, and allows information to be shared, but not copied.

Zadie Smith, when writing about the work of her friend David Foster Wallace after his death, remarked on the way his writing was a gift – not only in terms of a talent but one that he dispatched, like faith, into the void. She characterises the moment of giving – of writing – as 'the moment when the ego disappears and you're able to offer up your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At this moment the gift hangs, like Federer's brilliant serve, between the one who sends and the one who receives, and reveals itself as belonging to neither. We have almost no words for this experience of giving. The one we do have is hopelessly degraded through misuse. The word is prayer.'<sup>1</sup>

The word prayer here very easily brings one towards precarity. 'Precarious' is related to the Latin adjective 'precaria,' from *precarius*, 'obtained by prayer, given as a favour,' which relates to 'precari,' 'to ask or beg.' It helps to remember that prayer is an entreaty, a request for both attention and care. If I understand anything about praying or writing, I have come to believe in a demythologised form of both of them: a de-enchantment of prayer and a making magical of writing. Neither process is a way of conjuring or manipulating necessary care or favour from a

separately existing power, but a practice which gently and gradually adjusts the self to the terrible truth of its own precarity – to its own need of care.

We like to pretend this is not news. We're obsessed by the precarity of others, of course. Their tendency to fall, that is. Look at Icarus. Look at the way Chaplin's prat-falls and the banana-peel gag still delight us: we hang out for the landing – the bruised backside and battered ego. Consider Franz Reichelt, not suicidal, but so certain that the efficacy of his invention would keep him safe that he threw himself from the Eiffel Tower wearing a 'parachute suit,' winning only a Darwin Award for his trouble. Our laughter is a symptom of both shame – we recognise our own egos in the attempt to fly – and relief, of course, that this time we're not the one falling.

But the type of remembering or witnessing of precarity that leaves us high and dry is not the type I mean. We are distracted from the fall by our focus on the landing. Just think of the way the bystanders at Reichelt's death ran in with a tape to measure the depth of the hole his broken body blew into the ground when it landed. There is another way to watch.

A few weeks ago my son (star of 'at least you got a healthy baby' – he's nearly eight years old now), was sitting on the living room floor eating rice pudding at the coffee table while watching the television. He's addicted to *You've Been Framed*. The videos almost always show people or animals falling: the indignity of cats missing the leap to the back of the couch, or a groom fainting as the bride glides up the aisle. I watched my son as he was transfixed by the thirty-second fragments of people falling off bikes, stepping into the water instead of a boat, slipping on ice, missing the high-jump, tumbling into birthday cakes or Christmas trees, tripping off the winner's podium, missing the chair, dancing off the edge of the table, snapping a heel on the catwalk. He is seeing a canned and often staged scrapbook of disaster, listening to the way the laughter track plays against the images of failure and ignominy.

I couldn't figure out what his interest was – he's certainly not laughing, but seemed to treat his watching as a kind of work. There is, admittedly, sometimes a little bit of suspense and misdirection involved in these clips: the set up of a baby in front of a Christmas tree suggests the tree is going to fall onto the baby, but no, bang! A cat leaps from the sofa and knocks the baby sideways. Perhaps the combination of repetition and surprise is what keeps it interesting to him because there's no narrative, just a gathering together of decontextualised clips around a set of familiar themes: weddings, Christmas, animals, sports days, summer holidays, birthday parties, troubles with tents. If there's a point to this, other than the soft pleasure of chuckling at someone else's misfortune, it's an unsubtle warning against hubris.

We are supposed to laugh and sometimes we do, but as I watched my son, spoon paused between bowl and mouth, something else started to happen. He shuddered, and rubbed his knee. Again, a man slipped backwards from a giant beach ball and landed awkwardly: my son's hands went to the back of his head. I offered to turn the television off, to find something on another channel, but he shook his head without moving his eyes from the screen and I saw something that provoked both my fear and my delight: this boy lets the world touch him with its ungentle hands and he can't help but take absolutely everything personally.

The word is empathy – which is also degraded, and become disreputable and unfashionable with overuse. Is this type of noticing – almost a co-experiencing – a kind of praying too? A bringing the heart into line with the inevitability of disaster, and the way all pain, properly felt, is shared? David Foster Wallace, not replying to Zadie Smith, who praised his prayer-work after his death, characterised good writing in term of the recklessness of the transaction – the way the sums don't add up. 'The big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to

talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved.<sup>2</sup>

The artist is using a pencil and ordinary paper: he's got a little tin of pencils and a knife to sharpen them, and it all comes in a big plastic bag. I'm a tiny bit disappointed by the lack of glamour here because my son, who has a talent for drawing and an urge to see everything, is very interested in me being *made into a picture* – that's how he puts it – and I was hoping to take some photographs of the sketches, and the equipment, to show to him when he comes back from school.

'I've been thinking about you being drawn all day,' he'll say, and he'll present me with a sketch of an imagined landscape he's drawn, with snow-covered mountains and a sunset cut in half by a wonky horizon.

Lying on the couch, I am reluctant to let the silence hold, and carry on chattering about Bitcoin – about how I don't really understand how it works, but the podcast I listened to explored how much power the computers tasked to check the transactions on the Blockchain used up, about how much this electricity, generated by Chinese windfarms, might cost. Bitcoin mining, it's called, and a way of making money out of nearly nothing. A sort of alchemy, in that the only people who really get rich are the people who make the equipment – the computer parts, the ventilating machines to cool the warehouses where they're located, the electricity itself. But when it works, it is a kind of magic. A way of making currency out of wind. On reading this I also remember that praise is one of the things that prayer does: from 'pretiere' – to set a price on something, to award it value. To spin gold out of thin air.

I came across something called Sick Woman theory: an idea generated by the writer and activist Johanna Hedva. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler, she argues for a more systematic understanding of the sickened self by pointing out that wellness is more accurately described as a flawless functioning within a capitalist economy, a state of being white,

unoppressed, invulnerable and available for work. Sickness, for the well, is a temporary deviation – a bad state, to be repaired as soon as possible. It's why 'get well soon' feels like commandment rather than care. The assumption Hedva uncovers here – that our 'vulnerability should be seen and honoured and that we should all receive care'<sup>3</sup> – is one not available to people of colour, to women, to the mentally ill, the poor, the undereducated and unemployed. It is these people – those who exist in 'illness, idleness and inaction' and the care that they both give and require that Hedva addresses. In class ideology, the 'sick woman' exists in 'the precariat' – a population existing within politically induced conditions of failing social and economic networks but in Hedva's fearless and generous attempt to define just what she means by both 'sick' and 'woman' she comes towards a more general and still useful truth – she is, I think, describing something about what it is to be a self in the world: the essential part of humanity, which is to be falling.

I want to be clear here, in case I cause pain when I do not mean to. We are not all of us struggling with chronic illness or pain and I don't want to let myself forget how touched with luck my own life has been. The world does contain facts, and one of them is that some bodies grant forms of immunity to some types of disaster: not all of us will be raped, will be oppressed, abused, imprisoned or attacked because of our race, sexual or gender identity and not all of us will be limited or injured or exploited by poverty or illiteracy. I do not advocate a position of submission before the injustices of late capitalism and white supremacy: some forms of disaster – of trauma – we can and should act to stop. To notice the ways my own luck is paid for by the trauma inflicted on others will be a lifelong and daily reckoning with a dark economy of pain I inevitably participate in. I don't want to elide the fact that Hedva's larger theoretical project was born from her desire to participate more fully in activism (the Black Lives Matter movement) while her personal disaster – an experience of long-term and unpredictable illness coupled by an unjust economic exclusion

from healthcare – confined her to her bed. The painful gift of her work has helped me consider the line between the unavoidable and the avoidable, and how self-interested my drawing of that line between the things I can change and the things I can't has been.

And yet, there's a difference between submission and surrender: one is a position that relates subordinately to real or imagined power – a toxic abasement – and one is an opening up to a truth: when you do it, it feels more like an expansion than a contraction – a loss of edge, sure, but the discomfort of that comes with a widening of perspective. It is a stance that does not nullify activism or recovery, but is the position that makes them possible. The additional truth to surrender to is this: no matter how effective and well socialised our healthcare, and how complete the results of our social and economic activism, all of us are still falling. No identity confers upon us total immunity from pain, grief and loss: from the knowledge that the world and other people and most of all we ourselves are not as we want them to be. No matter how the world measures our disasters – and yes, the pains of the white and well-taken-care-of have always inspired more noticing and care than the pains of the rest of the world – as Hedva points out – disaster is ubiquitous, and causes to each of us, according to the psychoanalyst and philosopher Robert Stolorow, 'a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being-in-the-world.'

My own experiences of medical disaster and bad religion and of being clumsily parented are nowhere near unique – that's not the point I want to make. The point (if there is one) is the opposite of that: the action of turning up to the world – of merely being alive dislodges us all from certainty. / Today the man who I live with and I took our children up Arnside Knott for a New Year walk. It was cold and bright. We went right to the top. / The danger inherent in this headlong lurch is how these ordinary traumas can isolate us. Stolorow goes on to elucidate the lonely and risky truth of this: 'The worlds of traumatised persons are fundamentally

incommensurable with those of others,' the action of falling – or of landing badly – can create 'a deep chasm in which an anguished sense of estrangement and solitude takes form.'<sup>4</sup> / The children are arguing with each other – something to do with the chickens that their grandparents used to keep in the field out the back before they moved house. / Our real work in this type of economy is to get comfy falling (which is not the same thing as accepting injustice without complaint), and to learn to both watch and speak from a position of precarity. / The ground opens up. We spent such a lot of time at that house: a cottage on the outskirts of Preston at the bottom of a lane, giving way onto fields. There were horses nearby. / The way Zadie Smith characterises it – that egoless dispatch into the void – or Martin Buber's in-between place – turns writing/prayer itself into a kind of hanging in mid-air – a tennis ball with an uncertain trajectory – which becomes a method of checking (reaching an awareness of) our precarity as well as our privilege. / But I don't remember the chickens.

There's a magic in this. An illogical or rueful reckoning with absurdity. A something-from-thin-air type of alchemy. / What else don't I remember? I let the children go on ahead and clutch at the arm of the man who today I live with, and soon, I will not. / The image of falling has always been related to spirituality – least interesting in terms of Adam and Eve's preordained tumble out of Eden, which is a rigged game I can't care too much about. / 'Did they really have chickens?' I ask. The ground is uneven – sometimes muddy, sometimes frozen – we're climbing towards a view of Morecambe Bay but the conditions are not why I want to grab hold of his arm. / Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling* described a conversion to faith as a dance that lurched between standing and falling and Julian of Norwich defined grace itself both as the fall and then the recovery from the fall – though even the recovery, the getting back up on your feet and dusting yourself off – the kind of action that novels about illness and suffering are made from – seems to rush through the interesting part and towards an ending

that tidies away the truth of the horror of the secret in the middle. / I want him to say 'no, there weren't any chickens, the kids are just messing about,' and the ghost of the dead baby blooms around me like fog. What else don't I remember? / Looking at the tumble as a failure - as the self-in-the-world gone wrong, feels unhelpful to me. Untruthful. The fall from paradise is no tragedy, and the arse-over-tit tumble from 'apparent competence' into unprotected life and interdependent selfhood is inevitable. / 'They had chickens. Hens. A fox got them.' I bat at his arm. 'You were really unwell then,' he says, in answer to the question I don't dare ask. / But to know there's no need to fear the fall - because the disaster has already happened? / I try to grab hold of him again but he's away, catching up with the kids, who are nearly at the top of the knot and looking out across the bay. / That's what prayer or writing or perhaps any type of creative practice is really for: not an ending, but a becoming.

The artist and I talk about the time our work takes - about the size of a novel and the dimensions of a large, three-portrait commission he's just accepted. About the craziness of settling years of experience and hours of sitting into a glimpse of a face or a block of text that will take only two hours to read. The fiction of pretending the work of months has been tossed off in an afternoon. I would have been more wary when I set out writing this book if I'd have known the texture of the place it would have brought me to at its ending/abandoning. I mention that my work feels like painting the Forth Bridge - that by the time I finish the memoir, it will have worked on me, and I'll be a different type of writer, and I should properly start over again, and retell it all from the perspective of the self that the writing has created. That the search for a still point in the turning world only turns the world faster. That the painted bridge itself might not look that different, but at the end of the slow crossing, the painter will. That the urge to start over is better directed into a new book: that finishing only means coming to an accommodation with failure. We enjoy this talk - the comparing

and contrasting – and both of us understanding that so much of what we mean is dropping into the air between us, untranslatable.

This kind of falling self – one that is interrupted and goes down the wrong track, is often mistaken, is self-serving, is delusional and manipulative, that can't bear to tell its own story, that requires care and help, a self that is deformed and shattered by pain and anger, that is unreliable, lost, and is unable to master or become an expert in anything at all – not even the narration of its own experience – the one that my interpretation of Johanna Hedva's work and my own experience has made clear to me – reminds me suddenly of something I've read elsewhere, about 'porous scholarship' – which is an idea that Paul Walsh has advanced as a possible solution to the atomisation of thought and work in the modern-day university. He's describing a way of working, sure, but also a way of being that sickness has brought me to.

Porosity is traditionally the measure of void space in a material, such as rock. However, redefined as a *pregnant* space, porosity springs to life as a space of possibility. Another common measure of porosity, or *effective porosity*, is the speed at which liquid flow takes place through a material. Therefore, two potential attributes of porous scholarship are as follows: *an attention to possibility*, and *a commitment to the flow and exchange of ideas*. In addition, porosity does not decrease with fracture and breakage; rather, it *increases*. That being so, another attribute presents itself: *acceptance of ideological difference and splintering*. Porosity also has a twin: *permeability* – the measure of openness to interpenetration and exchange.<sup>5</sup>

It feels important to me that in his essay Walsh is clear this isn't a new way of working that he's proposing, but a return to the way thought and ideas were manufactured in the first place – by lay thinkers, the dilettante, the jack-of-all-trades – those best positioned to make mistakes, and to see the connections between all things. His proposal reminds me it is possible – in theory if not in practice – to be a thinker that feels, a teacher that fails, a scholar

that can't help but misread: that there might be a homeless space available to turn up, flailing, in my entirety.

To fall into this space to finally accept as gospel (good news!) what was always true anyway: I have porous borders, my skin doesn't work, and I'm only playing at knowing things. I've come to understand this way of being isn't something that can't be held apart from my vocation as a teacher. This contact – the comfort (it pleases me to remind myself that the word means 'with strength') that comes from others knowing your fallibility and your deep knowing of the fallibility of others – is a distinctively social and human way to be. Some days I'd go so far as to say that 'well' – as in solitary, inviolate, expert and independent – is both a pathological and illusionary state. That 'competence' is only ever apparent. And some days I wouldn't.

There's a necessary contradiction here: that abandoning of tethering to safety that making a leap like this makes – and the sense of contingency and interdependence that we find as we fall – that is irreducible to logic. Hedva knows this, of course – and it shows in her writing. Elsewhere, she advocates 'thinking with holes in it, thinking that contradicts itself, that circles back, that reveals the knotting and fraying and re-weaving of an argument so that it contains all of its mistakes, so that you can see them, and so that I won't forget how I got here.'<sup>6</sup>

The point (there's no point) is not to fix this contradiction – not to straighten it out or tidy it up or clean it away. The point is to bear living in an unbearable and merciless state of koan. A koan is a riddle: a paradox or impossibility. It's a mess of a statement that a self schooled in logic feels the need to clear up, and it's also a knife – a near surgical tool for the mind, that reminds me most of all of Bunyan's blade – the way it cut him in two, cut reason away from itself, cut reality away from language, and so made room for everything – for, in the end, some kind of Celestial City that existed alongside and not apart from his nightmares. For Hedva, what the blade makes room for is a radical kinship borne from

both entreaty and the response: 'once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other's tales of trauma, prioritising the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies, and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much-needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt.' All of us, she says. Glorious.

While I'm lying there on my sofa, not working, the artist asks me if there's anything I'd like to do with my life that I haven't yet done. I wonder if he's asking me questions like this because if he gets me thinking of regrets, or roads not taken, I'll have an interesting expression on my face. If he wants to get me looking sad or morose or resentful or bitter because it would suit the mood or tone of his artwork - a cool palette (his nudes sometimes look like corpses - he works with and alongside death, or at least that's how it looks to me). It might be, of course, he's just making conversation - like the hairdresser does when she asks you where you plan to go on holiday this year.

I'm struck anew by how charmed my life has been, but I tell him that as a matter of fact I do wish I'd travelled more in my twenties - but having children young put paid to that. I hope to wander a bit more when they're older, I say. An island feels too small sometimes. I'd like to take the Orient Express as far as it goes. I'd love to hire an RV and try out America's toxic love affair with petrol and the open road. He tells me about a time he spent in Australia, before his own children were born. A moment he felt, when in possession only of a suitcase, and nobody knowing for sure where he was, he walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and wondered about leaving his life entirely behind. Not quite a suicidal impulse - though when I've felt this way myself it has been - but something adjacent. Something to do with shrugging off all the tethers the self feels when it is embedded in a family, a job, a life. Prompted, perhaps, by his tenuous position so far over

the water, at the mouth of the sea, at the edge of the world, so far away from where he was known. He went back home, after a while, of course – but he kept that moment.

To write or to pray or to find a home in falling means to give up hope entirely: to abandon the illusion that there's a future moment that can be striven to, or imagined, or drunk or eaten or earned or run or cut or dreamed towards. It means *here*. There's no cure for the chronic condition of human nature. These are the facts that I live with. I have always lived with them, but surrendering to them entirely is the thing that finally brings the fiction back: the will and capacity to imagine, the conditions of compassion and curiosity that are essential for inhabiting the mind of a sentence, a story, a fictional other. Still, I will always struggle, and I will probably always fail, to find a way to write fiction that honours these facts and does not attempt to decorate nor numb nor conceal them. Though now I've come to realise that writing itself unsticks me, when I let it. It is a process that, when its hopeless difficulty is adequately surrendered to, dismantles all forms of expertise, specialism and mastery. When I let the writing work, any carapace of teacherly or writerly authority swiftly dissolves into mere curiosity. It is a way of getting lost – between disciplines and subject positions. It lets me do and be, make and consume, be alone and connected – simultaneously. There is an ethical gentleness to writing: I get curious about what works, what's appropriate, and what helps, rather than what is right or wrong. When process and product, thinking and feeling and making become entwined, I become more tolerant of ambiguity and confusion. At its best, writing does not only allow me to try to report on what I have seen, experienced and felt of this confusing and painful world, but it expands my available range of seeing, experiencing and feeling. It becomes something other than work, is what I am saying. This type of not-work writing/praying – a holidaying, a truancy, a way of loving – is a move towards the type of implicated, uncontrolled attention seeking/paying – that Fanny Howe identifies in her essay 'Bewilderment.' Not a technique or a

method or a subject matter – though all of these things too – but mainly ‘a way of entering the day as much as the work’<sup>7</sup> – a matter of ethics and politics as well as a matter of craft. There’s a prayer in this too – and Howe quotes it at the start of her essay, ‘Lord, increase my bewilderment.’ There’s something reckless about this dislodging from certainty into fiction’s possibility: a fall into love.

The way I am trying to befriend my fiction – to make a homeless place for it both inside and outside the university, for it to be fully personal and fully critical (by which I mean, it looks out into the world and back at me at the same time), reminds me of something I read a long time ago – when Edward Said wrote, about amateurism, that ‘it is an activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialism.’<sup>8</sup> He was exploring the question of the professional intellectual – whether it is possible for a thinker to think independently, outside of the professions, outside of the institution or market in which he most often shelters/finds employment/exploitation/sells his hours. To get out of the Blockchain. His thoughts are connected, I think, to the ‘uneasiness’ Barthes rediscovered in the wake of his own personal disaster – the death of his mother – a state of grief that might have made it both easier and more essential that he notice ‘being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical,’ and his pervading sense of dissatisfaction with these discourses evolving into a ‘desperate resistance to any reductive system.’<sup>9</sup> We might, in the end, even find ourselves becoming grateful for the disasters that send us through uneasiness and into desperation – for how else would we have the nerve to leap/surrender to life’s shove into another language: an economy of giving without reward, of distribution without reduction?

The first set of sketches are finished and the artist lines them up on the coffee table for me to look at. My face in pencil. The artist, maybe a little worried about what I’ll think of his work – tells me that I shouldn’t be surprised if I don’t recognise myself. He explains that the mirror shows me my face the wrong way around,

that nobody's face is symmetrical and that my eye has learned my lopsidedness and imperfections from the mirror in reverse. He goes on to tell me that there's really no such thing as a candid photograph – that all the family photos and publicity shots will show me posing, or being posed. A captured moment. But the way portraits work with time are different from the work a camera does. Because a drawing takes such a long time (we have been here for two long afternoons and will be here again) eventually all posing and positioning drops away (I want to make a joke about 'resting bitch face' here and I file it away, to offer later, when he's finished speaking, then forget about it until now) and the face's natural self shows through.

'I have looked at you and know how your face works more closely than you've ever looked at yourself,' he says, knowing I am failing to write a memoir about the parts of me that have stopped working. I look at the sketches he's done and he's right – I do not see me. But I do see my son. He has the picture's eyes. I see my daughter too: she has this drawing's nose and mouth. Less comfortably, I see my father in the line from the nose to the corner of the sketched woman's lips.

When I settled down to write today and googled 'the bridge of the gods' because I was still not able to believe in Strayed's happy ending, I found out two things. One – the bridge earned its name because before the steel construction that spans the Columbia today, a natural bridge existed, caused by a minor natural disaster: a fall of rocks and mud that temporarily dammed the river. Two: there's a 'bridge of the dogs' too, in Overtoun in Scotland – famous only because of the tendency certain breeds of dogs have to leap to their deaths from it while being walked by their baffled owners.

Last night my friend and I were speaking about something terrible that happened to her: the worst possible thing. She was telling me not the story, just the scattered details that lie around her memory like shrapnel. I won't quote her: there's always violence in redaction, but there's kindness too: a respect for the

sacred. This type of cutting can be both. She told me that even a year after her derailment she was still stuck in her terror's present tense and when the doctor saw her cry he noted on her records that the patient remained 'labile.'

I didn't know what the word meant and so while we talked (we were on the internet, either side of a screen - most of my best conversations happen this way) I opened another tab and looked it up. While she described the details of the hospital room she received her pain in - the quotidian clutter that haunts and injures her still - qualia glittering like razors - I clicked away to learn that labile means changeable, erratic, difficult to pin down. An instability of form or nature. To be labile is to be both slippery and explosive. In chemistry, it means the bonds between elements are easily broken down or displaced. A thing isn't quite itself. Its edges aren't edges. A labile self is partly its own environment: it is only self-ish.<sup>10</sup>

I wondered if the word has anything to do with labia - the talkative woman parts - but it doesn't. Labile comes from the Latin word 'labi' - to slip or to fall. From this (the online dictionary informed) we get 'liability' - prone to lapse into error or sin and 'liable' - at fault. Our original form is perfect and whole, but the world breaks us and wears us out and we drop apart, into bad pieces. Nothing to do with fallible - from 'fallere' - to deceive - though my ear heard that in it too: the tendency to make mistakes, to be wrong, to tell untruths.

I was not attending to her well. She was in a room I've never seen and will probably never visit but also sitting right there with me, and I hadn't been listening. I closed the other tabs and went back to her and she had typed: 'I wanted to get up onto higher ground before I wrote about it,' while I'd been riffing smugly on the imagined origins of words.

I thought of her - of us - sitting in our foxholes in the lower ground but that's not right, and I'm not sure she thinks it's right either - that sense of landing, of being brought into contact with

the solid ground – because then she said ‘I am inside it,’ and I nodded at the screen.

Yes, I wanted to tell her. Yes, you are. Me too. How precarious we all are. And how to bear it? There’s no shame in not being able to bear it, only the relief to be found in knowing – and the sharing of the knowing – that we are unable to. We are still falling and our eggshell selves have not hit the concrete yet, but at least we have a moment or two to attend to the drop. I wanted to say that: it still hurts and I don’t feel normal. I wanted to say that maybe mid-air could become a good place to write fiction from for people like us.

# Notes

## How to Begin: The Cut

- 1 Kevin Belmonte, *John Bunyan* (Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 86.
- 2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin, 2003), p. 36.
- 3 Leslie Jamison, 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain,' *Virginia Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (Spring 2014), p. 118.
- 4 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 101.
- 5 Ben Shepard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (Pimlico, 2002), p. 28.
- 6 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin, 1979), p. 19.
- 7 Toby Litt, 'Why Write About Unimportant People? Part 3' and 'Why Write About Unimportant People? Part 4,' <https://toby Litt.wordpress.com>.
- 8 David J. Morris, *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 30.
- 9 Peter Brugger, 'From Haunted Brain to Haunted Science: A Cognitive Neuroscience View of Paranormal and Pseudoscientific Thought,' in James Houran and Rense Lange (eds) *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (McFarland, 2008), p. 184.
- 10 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin, 2014), p. 68.
- 11 Bessel van der Kolk and Charles Ducey, 'The Psychological Processing of Traumatic Experience: Rorschach Patterns in PTSD,' *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2 (1989), pp. 259-74.

## Off Topic: On Derailment

- 1 Jeff Dolven, 'The Schizophrenic Sentence,' *The Paris Review*, 14 December 2017.
- 2 Heidi Julavits, *The Folded Clock: A Diary* (Bloomsbury Circus, 2017), p. 3.
- 3 The term has been lifted from Audre Lorde, in particular from her memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name - A Biomythography* (Crossing Press, 1982).
- 4 Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters* by Harold Owen and John Bell (eds) (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 452.

- 5 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 6.
- 6 Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress: The Memoirs of George Sherston* (Penguin, 2013), p. 36.
- 7 Agatha Christie, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (Fontana, 1975), p. 186.
- 8 David Suchet and Geoffrey Wansell, *Poirot and Me* (Headline, 2013), p. 146.
- 9 My account here draws on the fuller explorations of Dickens's experience given in Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (Minerva, 1991), Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 2 vols. (Gollanz, 1953) and Claire Tomalin's *Charles Dickens: A Life* (Viking, 2011).
- 10 David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays* (Vintage, 2014), p. 32.
- 11 Mary Cappello, 'Contact,' in Jackie Stacey and Janet Wolff (eds) *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism* (Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 34–44.
- 12 Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Random House, 2017), p. 9.
- 13 Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch* (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 2.
- 14 Cappello, 'Contact,' p. 37.
- 15 This refers to Mary Cappello's book *Awkward: A Detour* (Bellevue Literary Press, 2007).

## A Lecture on Influence

- 1 Dodie Bellamy, 'The Bandaged Lady,' in *When the Sick Rule the World* (Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 79.
- 2 Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (Chatto & Windus, 1995), p. 97.
- 3 Adrienne Rich, 'On Power,' in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977*, new ed. (Norton, 1993).
- 4 John Mirk, *John Mirk's Festival: Edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A. II*, vol. 1, Susan Powell (ed.) Early English Text Society (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 135–6.

## Ground Zero

- 1 Quoted in 'Chernobyl Disaster Site Enclosed by Shelter to Prevent Radiation Leaks,' *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/chernobyl-nuclear-disaster-site-covered-with-shelter-prevent-radiation-leaks-ukraine](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/chernobyl-nuclear-disaster-site-covered-with-shelter-prevent-radiation-leaks-ukraine).

- 2 Jacques Derrida, Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),' *Diacritics* 14, no. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), p. 25.
- 3 Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (Penguin, 2016), p. 24.
- 4 *Ogonyok Magazine*, no. 17, April 1996, quoted in Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, p. 3.
- 5 Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill,' in *The Moment and Other Essays* (Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 14.
- 6 Tim Bascom, 'Picturing the Personal Essay: A Visual Guide,' *Creative Nonfiction* 49 (Summer 2013), <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/picturing-personal-essay-visual-guide>.
- 7 I have borrowed this term from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,' which can be found in her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).
- 8 Ben Lerner, *10:04* (Granta, 2014), p. 65.
- 9 Reina van der Wiel, *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma: Virginia Woolf and Jeannette Winterson* (Palgrave, 2014), p. 10.
- 10 My account of this evening draws on the research of Jim Steinmeyer in *Art and Artifice and Other Essays on Illusion: Concerning the Inventors, Traditions, Evolution and Rediscovery of Stage Magic* (Da Capo Press, 2006).
- 11 Jenny Boully, *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* (Sarabande Books, 2007), p. 54.
- 12 Lawrence Sutin, 'Don't Let Those Damn Genres Cross You Ever Again,' in Margot Singer and Nicole Walker (eds) *Bending Genre* (Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 24.
- 13 In the February 1921 edition of *The Magic Circular*.
- 14 Renee Gladman, *Calamities* (Wave Books, 2016), p. 34.
- 15 Christine Friedlander, *Avant Gauze* (Magic Helicopter Press, 2016), p. i, 'pre-face'.
- 16 Some of the following factual information comes from the documentary *The Battle of Chernobyl* (2006) written and directed by Thomas Johnson.

## Attempts on the Life of King Lear

- 1 Will Eaves, *The Inevitable Gift Shop* (CB Editions, 2016), p. 9.
- 2 Sara Ahmed, 'White Men,' *Feminist Killjoys*, November 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/11/04/white-men/>.

- 3 Richard Beard, *The Day That Went Missing* (Harvill Secker, 2017), p. 9.
- 4 Anne Boyer, 'No,' Poetry Foundation, April 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/>.
- 5 Edward Bond, *Lear* (II, vi) (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 57.
- 6 William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (III, vi, 74).

## I Was Here: Suspicious, Pathological, Normal

- 1 Margery Kempe, Sanford Brown Meech, Hope Emily Allen and W. Butler-Bowdon, *The Book of Margery Kempe: The text from the unique ms. owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon*. Vol. 1 (Early English Text Society. Original series, no. 212). (Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 7.
- 2 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Virago, 1981), p. 31.
- 3 Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement,' *MLN* 94, no. 5 (Dec. 1979), p. 920.
- 4 Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale* (Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 83.
- 5 Evelyn Barish, *The Double Life of Paul de Man* (Liveright, 2015), p. 4.

## How to Fall Without Landing: Celestial City

- 1 Zadie Smith, 'In Memoriam,' *Five Dials* 10, <https://fivedials.com/fiction/zadie-smith/>.
- 2 Larry McCaffery, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/>.
- 3 Johanna Hedva, 'Sick Woman Theory,' in *Mask Magazine: The Not Again Issue*, <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.
- 4 Robert Stolorow, *Trauma and Human Existence: Autobiographical, Psychoanalytic, and Philosophical Reflections* (Routledge, 2007), p. 16.
- 5 Paul Walsh, 'From Under the Volcano,' in *Hybrid Pedagogy*, April 2016, <http://hybridpedagogy.org/from-under-volcano/>.
- 6 Johanna Hedva, 'In Defence of De-Persons,' *GUTS Magazine*, May 2016.
- 7 Fanny Howe, 'Bewilderment,' in *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (University of California Press, 2003), p. 5.
- 8 Edward Said, 'Professionals and Amateurs,' in *Representations of the Intellectual* (Vintage Books, 1996), p. 83.

- 9 Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Howard, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 8.
- 10 I have borrowed this creative use of self-ish from Lisa Margreet Payne's essay 'Self-ish' which was published in *Lune: A Journal of Literary Misrule* (01: Disease) in June 2018.

## Acknowledgements

People who have had blood transfusions really should come trailing their bibliographies behind them. I have needed so much help, of so many kinds.

Brian Baker, Richard Beard, Carys Bray, Mary Cappello, Adriana Cloud, Louise Cole, Emma Darwin, April Doyle, Kate Feld, Sarah Franklin, all the Frizzers, Charlie Gere, Hilary Hinds, Sonya Huber, Toby Litt, Duncan McGowan, Blake Morrison, Liz Oakley-Brown, Andrew Ratcliffe, Elizabeth Reeder, Holly Ringland, Satya Robyn, John Schad, Jackie Stacey (whose generous and clear description of this book forms part of the cover blurb), Andy Tate, Imogen Tyler, Emma Jane Unsworth, Sara Wasson, Holly Welker.

A very adapted version of the talk dramatised in 'How to Begin: The Cut' was first given at the Greenbelt Festival, 2013. Some of the ideas about death in 'On Derailment' were first thought through during a talk and discussion at the 'How Do We Live with Death' Festival at the Southbank Centre in 2017. A version of 'Attempts on the Life of King Lear' was given as a paper at the Critical Subject Symposium at Lancaster University, 2018.



