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A Patchwork Quilt: Writing towards the there-not-there of Family Secrets with Hélène Cixous

Jan Bradford

Doctor of Philosophy – The University of Edinburgh – 2021
Abstract

The reader is invited to view the piecing together of a patchwork quilt. Unfurling carefully tacked-together professional, academic and domestic family stories, the quilt is created from disparate pieces of writing material which come together to show-and-tell a writing-story. Methodologically informed by a deconstructive approach, this writing-story illustrates how writing to inquire with Hélène Cixous écriture féminine leads the researcher to engage with family stories and, in particular, how she is pulled towards the storying around a tragic event that takes place decades before her birth. There is a deliberate turn towards the feminine body as a way of knowing-in-tension as a series of evocative stories grapple with and bring to life Cixousian concepts in the practice of a method of writing to inquire which is seen to be alive, vital and dangerous. As feminine writing takes on the role of transgressive data, the patchwork quilt illustrates that whilst fly-steal-writing with Cixous takes the researcher on nomadic-adventurous writing-journeys, ultimately, in her coming-to-writing, she is destined to be homeward bound: challenged by writing to approach her birth home, to claim her inheritance and to touch-feel and explore a muffled harrowing scream and an unsayable fear which emerge from and through her texts. Recognising she has always already known this sound and fear which have fallen through gaps and cracks of well-told stories, becoming secrets, as they are simultaneously kept by family women from each other but also silently passed between each other, the researcher visits Cixous’ ‘Three Schools of Writing’ to paint a picture of the lives of over five generations of women from a Scottish mining town. Psychoanalytic, sociological and folklore literature is drawn upon as the patchwork quilt comes together to explore the unbearable silenced pain from past generations that has called out for justice as it seeks to be heard, voiced and acknowledged so it can be put to rest.

Keywords: writing to inquire; écriture féminine; family stories; family secrets; birth home; inheritance; silenced pain; justice.
The reader is invited to view the piecing together of a patchwork quilt. Unfurling carefully tacked-together professional, academic and domestic family stories, the quilt is created from disparate pieces of writing material which come together to show-and-tell a writing-story. Methodologically informed by a deconstructive approach, this writing-story illustrates how writing to inquire with Hélène Cixous écriture féminine leads the researcher to engage with family stories and, in particular, how she is pulled towards the storying around a tragic event that takes place decades before her birth. There is a deliberate turn towards the feminine body as a way of knowing-in-tension as a series of evocative stories grapple with and bring to life Cixousian concepts in the practice of a method of writing to inquire which is seen to be alive, vital and dangerous. As feminine writing takes on the role of transgressive data, the patchwork quilt illustrates that whilst fly-steal-writing with Cixous takes the researcher on nomadic-adventurous writing-journeys, ultimately, in her coming-to-writing, she is destined to be homeward bound: challenged by writing to approach her birth home, to claim her inheritance and to touch-feel and explore a muffled harrowing scream and an unsayable fear which emerge from and through her texts. Recognising she has always already known this sound and fear which have fallen through gaps and cracks of well-told stories, becoming secrets, as they are simultaneously kept by family women from each other but also silently passed between each other, the researcher visits Cixous’ ‘Three Schools of Writing’ to paint a picture of the lives of over five generations of women from a Scottish mining town. Psychoanalytic, sociological and folklore literature is drawn upon as the patchwork quilt comes together to explore the unbearable silenced pain from past generations that has called out for justice as it seeks to be heard, voiced and acknowledged so it can be put to rest.

Keywords: writing to inquire; écriture féminine; family stories; family secrets; birth home; inheritance; silenced pain; justice.
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Nana – I love you.

Maw – I dedicate this thesis to you.
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Room 101: A Patchwork Quilt

A sign on the door invites you to view a patchwork quilt. ‘The Patchwork Quilt’ is a ‘writing-story’ (Richardson, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 2001, 2011; Richardson & St Pierre, 2018). This writing-story is pieced together using disparate pieces of material that each tell a story. There are family stories. Births. Marriages. Deaths. Stories of faith, hope, love, loss and longing. There are ghost stories that transcend time. Embarrassing, shameful and dirty stories. Happy holiday stories. Professional-academic-and-domestic stories mingle. Unbearable pain and grief linger. The stories told are situated in specific socio-historic-cultural contexts as well as reflected upon in reflexive liminal spaces (Speedy, 2008).

The Patchwork Quilt will draw attention to the lives of over five generations of women who were born and bred in a Scottish mining town. It will illustrate how the storying around the tragic events which unfolded on one particular day back in June 1949 draws one of these women to discover what has been a secret all the women have somehow simultaneously kept from each other and also passed between each other. The secret is their worst fear. It is a curse they inherited from somewhere that remained unspoken but somehow seemed to act itself out across the generations. It is heard in the text as a scream. But the fear itself is unspeakable – it is the fear of the death of their child.

If you accept the invitation and choose to come in, you will enter a windowless room with gallery whitewashed walls. Greeted with a brochure containing a ‘Table of Contents’ and two pieces of writing - ‘Prologue’ and ‘Epilogue’. You are asked to read the ‘Prologue’ before meeting the writer-reader-researcher who is waiting to say hello.
Prologue: Through a Glass Darkly

This research arose from the ashes of a phenomenological research project I conducted in 2009 for my master’s degree exploring the first-person account of a lived experience of ‘tornness’. That project focused on the overwhelmingly bleak sense of hopelessness I encountered when faced with the ending of my long-term intimate relationship, my dread of breaking-up the family unit and my apprehension at discovering-rediscovering a secret kept within my intimate relationship that I sensed but tried to avoid. A specific question was left hanging at the end of that research, and it nagged at me for an answer: as traditional family structures change and primitive anxieties about what it means to be a family threaten conventional attitudes, is it possible to explore how political ideals and psychic experience, as well as cultural expectations might be imprinted on the body as well as the mind (Maguire, 2004)?

Typing ‘intimate relationships’, ‘secrets’ and ‘embodiment’ into PsychINFO as the inaugural high-level search for this project, I was surprised to find a raft of literature on paralysis and ‘broken’ bodies included in the results. This challenged me to think about how or what I took for granted in my own body and it reminded me of the double amputation my maternal grandmother underwent shortly before her death. Unexpectedly revisiting memories about the death of one family member pulled me in to recall other memories and family stories leading me to wonder just how much and in what ways I might be marked by my family history. And I wrote. A myriad of words, phrases and snippets of stories flew from my body as a runaway train of thoughts, feelings, ideas, imaginations, dreams and hunches – a cascade of rampant free associative musings – and they left me with unanswerable questions and pulled me in a variety of methodological, theoretical, conceptual and emotional directions.

Thought happens in writing (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) and there is an imperative to write to the extremities of thought, experience and life in a bid to move towards the “direction of truth… ‘to unlie’, not to lie” (Cixous, 1993:36). And as I wrote – in the direction of such a truth - wildly- deliberately wandering lost in a methodological field (Lather, 2007), existing simply on a diet of privilege and trust in the writing process (whilst secretly hoping I might find some way back to the shelter of a more ‘traditional’ research home), I recognised I was on a nomadic writing journey exploring mental, textual and theoretical spaces (St Pierre, 1997a, 1997b). And somehow, no matter what direction I headed towards, or how much effort I put into trying to avoid it, unconsciously I always ended up, physically and mentally rooted, back in the same spot - frozen - bearing witness to a primitive unspeakable
unwritable haunted sound that could no longer be unthought or unheard because it had risen to the surface of my writing and left its indelible mark on me as it sought an outlet to be acknowledged and 'sensuously known' (Gordon, 2008).

Writing is a faithful tool that allows the sparks of the not yet thought to surface from the depths of our bodies to become ‘a thinking’ that can be formulated, repeated and grasped and it allows us to set a scene, to put a border around something mysterious (Cixous & Heathfield, 2010). Sitting next to me, on the desk where I write, there is a snowglobe. Its shiny plastic surface acts as a border to the frozen wintry scene encapsulated within, where a miniature patchwork elephant stands – glued down - next to a tropical tree. It is a cheap, somewhat tacky childhood toy, but I like it because the gaudy colours of the patchwork elephant – vivid-oranges, russet-reds, mustard- yellows and forest-greens – randomly clash together and it reminds me of the visually-ugly but comforting softly-well-worn hand-me-down flannel quilt I slept under as a child.

Appearing on the surface to be trite or trivial, closer reflection reveals snowglobes can be read as oneiric and mnemonic objects that magnify our human dramas, inducing melancholia and nostalgia, and their air of entrapment can act as a means to prise open the memory vault of the past (Freeman, 2016). My fingers pause from thinking-typing-dreaming-recalling-remembering as I pick up the snowglobe and idly shake it, watching as the glittery snowflakes come alive, flurrying confetti-like over the patchwork elephant that stands timelessly trapped inside the plastic dome.

The elephant lives in a small closeted away miniature world, protecting me, its viewer, from the threat of materiality whilst enhancing my sense of transcendent vision (Stewart, 1996), simultaneously making me aware of my strength and vulnerability in the ‘real world’ that I inhabit (Freeman, 2016). Grasping the snowglobe, I move past its surface borders to travel into a different space and state (Leslie, 2010, 2016) as I stare into the silent captured scene inside the impossible small whole wide snowy world I hold in my hand.

Physically existing in this particular time and place as an object, the snowglobe I contemplate and shake is ‘real’. It sits – carefully placed - alongside other meaningful objects that have found their way to sit on my desk, surrounding me as I write. There is a white faux-leather keepsake bible that both Mum and I carried on our wedding days; a Matryoshka doll; a gold-plated charm bracelet; brown sheepskin mitts; cubic-zirconia-emerald cluster earrings; a yellow-gold locket and a Newton’s cradle executive-toy
I write at this desk with these objects surrounded by my books in the tiny boxroom study in the detached family house I call ‘home’ in the commuter town where I now live. Just ten minutes’ walk downhill from this home, in a much less privileged area and in a different time and place, there was once another family home where a damp-riddled marital bedroom in a block of council flats in a colliery town was the scene of my birth. I cannot wander the short distance down the path from home to peer up at the window of that damp-riddled bedroom because those council flats and that colliery town do not physically exist any longer. Declared structurally unsound and demolished within months of my birth, my first family home no longer stands tall and the collapse of the British mining industry saw the pit’s winding wheel vanish from the smoke-filled skyline it once proudly presided over. Nevertheless, they have an invisible protective border around them that somehow keeps them real and alive to me.

Emotionally real and forever present despite their absence, the home of my birth and the millions of tonnes of millions of years old coal that now lies in a deep unmined sleep beneath the ground of my hometown are part of me. They are where I come from. I carry them wherever I go. I do not need to see, because like Cixous, “I ‘know’ they are “ (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:179). They live and breathe their way into existence through their significance in the family and community stories that have been passed down through the generations to become part of my narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005). They are markers of the historically generated social space I inherit (Skeggs, 1997). They are my roots, the beginnings from which I write, not to find or know myself, but like Cixous to “go further-than-myself because there is further-than-myself in myself” recognising myself as the first other, because when we begin to see ourselves in the other, we look at ourselves gaping and we see the magnitude of our gapingness (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:57).

***

Personal and mass, miniature and cosmic, kitsch and sublime - snowglobes are curious contradictory objects, used for both contemplation and play (Leslie, 2010, 2016). The miniature elephant trapped inside the snowglobe on my desk reminds me of the idiomatric metaphorical ‘elephant in the room’ whose presence is so huge it is undeniable as it screams out to be acknowledged and heard. In a bid to draw attention to poverty and political hypocrisy, Banksy (2006) installed a literal giant elephant and painted it to blend into the wallpaper in a domestic living-room-setting to raise awareness of our ability to avoid talking about problems we know exist. To ignore an ‘elephant’ is to ignore the obvious, but it is not only individuals, couples and families who deny the obvious as organisations and sometimes whole nations are capable of collectively denying there are elephants in their midst (Zerubavel, 2006).
When the gigantic is ignored, fails to mesmerise or threatens to overwhelm, we can turn to the miniature to make us feel larger and in control, but, as Freeman (2016) goes on to argue, the miniature also shrinks our bodies as we place ourselves in its landscape. As I stare into the snowglobe, a small world within a world (Leslie, 2016), I might be comfortably cocooned in my own small world in my cosy boxroom-study, but I am able to travel far and wide with rapid ease around a vivid world as inner thoughts, imaginations and dreams course through my body. But somehow – still – like the elephant, I find myself paralysed – frozen – silenced in some way too: something in my past holds me back.

My maternal grandmother- Nana - liked to say oh aye an elephant never forgets, and apparently there is truth to this old saying. Elephant families are matriarchal in structure with the cow, who presides over her herd of mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts, holding a store of social knowledge that her family cannot do without for survival (Ritchie, 2009). What - I wonder - might the wee plastic elephant in my snowglobe remember; what social knowledge might she hold; and what might she say if she could talk and there was someone waiting to listen?

The laws of gravity arrange the plastic snowflake particles on the bottom of my snowglobe, creating a light sheet of snow. Momentarily I am drawn to pause and close my eyes. I feel something… a yearning… a longing… desire? Perhaps it is loss? I do not know. But I feel the power, force and weight of something unfathomable and intense stir in the depths of me. Something - soulful-bittersweet-raw-secret. Something - heavy-tethered-tamed. Something impactful is agitatedly creaking softly to-and-fro as it prepares to unleash itself. Something I want to avoid – pretend does not exist – is in the wings, waiting for its moment to be heard, felt and given voice.

I open my eyes. I cannot reach through the plastic to touch the elephant inside my snowglobe, but the globe itself is designed to fit neatly in my hand (Leslie, 2010) and, as I hold and shake it, moving past the border of its contoured surface into a different time and place, I am aware it has disorientated and shaken, just as I have shaken it (Freeman, 2016). Encapsulating the problem of depth and surface, phony and real, I see the miniature world inside from different perspectives (Thompson, 2015), the visual imagery evoking an intensity of feeling belonging to the pre-symbolic realm of the unconscious that cannot be otherwise expressed (Olalquiaga, 1998).

I shake the snowglobe again before laying it back to rest next to the Matryoshka doll. A moment of quake or shattering is enacted whenever a snowglobe is grasped (Leslie, 2016). As the snowflakes
flurry, I take a deep breath. And the desire to simply just jump into the middle of the beginning calls. I focus my eyes on the grey-white of my computer screen. And with god speed – I type-write...

10 March 1971: My maternal great-grandmother Maw dies. It is three months before I will be born. We do not meet in person. She does not hold me. I do not lie in the curve of her arms. But Mum always tells me that as Maw lay in bed, puffing up with ‘dropsy’ - slowly-surely dying - her fingers did not sit idle. Notorious in well-told family stories for being a hard worker, Maw is industrious to her end as she crocheted and knitted, her elbows-and-wrists rhythmically-jerking to make needles and wispy-fine lace-weight wool click-and-fly together, creating soft white matinee jackets, bootees and shawls that anticipate my arrival.
Introduction

I am waiting to greet you warmly. I am wearing a T-shirt with the words ‘poststructural’, ‘feminist’, ‘writing to inquire’, ‘Cixous’ ‘woman’ and writing-stories discretely embroidered at different places in the fabric. I imagine you asking about the words on my T-shirt. I tell you what they mean for me….

Positioning and Aims

I acknowledge there are many feminisms. Feminisms and qualitative research are “highly diversified, contentious, dynamic and challenging” (Olesen, 2018:151). Feminism is a movement in many senses (Ahmed, 2017). A primary strength of contemporary feminism is the way it has changed shape and direction (hooks, 2000). Cixous says “there will not be one feminine discourse, there will be thousands of feminine words” (Cixous & Clément, 1986:137). Through my reading-dialoguing and writing towards the “there-not-there” (Cixous, 1991:3) of family secrets with Hélène Cixous, I have been moved by my reading-writing-researching to position myself and my research as ‘poststructural’ and ‘feminist’. In doing so, I agree with St Pierre and Pillow who, noting that whilst many feminists believe poststructural feminism is overly concerned with language and discourse rather than working to improve the everyday oppressions women suffer, conversations around the poststructural subject in feminism are complex, and as poststructural feminists work at keeping the subject in play this does not need to be resolved, “after all, what kind of women and what kinds of feminism might we fail to produce if we define ‘woman’ and feminism’ once and for all” (2000:9). As Davies asserts, “feminine poststructuralist theorising in particular, has focused on the possibilities opened up when dominant language practices are made visible and revisable” (2000:179).

Methodologically informed by a commitment to put deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) to work in order to ‘get lost’ as an ethical imperative of working the limits of what can be known and how we can know it (Lather, 2007), the patchwork quilt I will piece together uses personal writing materials generated through creative analytic practices (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) and it has been heavily influenced by a desire to practice ‘écriture féminine’ – “a feminine practice of writing” (Cixous, 1976b:883) – a writing style which embraces the difference of the other (O’Grady, 1996). Writings-in-progress (Richardson, 1990) are treated as ‘transgressive data’ (St Pierre, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c) as I tell the story of how this leads to an exploration of how seemingly insignificant, missing or unquestioned details’ in family stories might come to be inherited and accepted by future generations as they take on the role of ‘secrets and myths’ (Pincus and Dare, 1978).
Working closely in-dialogue with the writings of Cixous, who called women to pick up their pens and write and to write herself and to write Woman because “woman must write woman” (1976b:877): I have picked up my pen and written towards the face of Medusa who Cixous tells me is “beautiful and she’s laughing” (1976b:885). This quilt has been written and tacked together in “white ink” (Cixous, 1976b:881) and has been pieced together as a ‘writing-story’. Richardson (Richardson, 1999a; Richardson & St Pierre 2018) says writing stories offer critical reflexivity about the writing self in different contexts and are stories which honour the location of the self and contextualise our writing in personal history as we blur the boundaries between family-academic-social worlds and cross disciplinary-lines as we seek to show social movements and community structures.

A poetico-philosophical approach (Bray, 2003; Calarco & Atterton, 2003; Cixous, 1976b; O’Grady, 1996) has allowed writing to blur into the spaces between genres, and I draw upon a variety of creative literary techniques to embrace a narrative ethic (Speedy, 2008) that does not claim to tell the ‘literal truth’ in the detail of the stories being told, but instead creates space for an imaginative approach, offering a different kind of truth - the verisimilitude of the story - which remains accountable to the spirit and value of the original telling (Bruner, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Speedy, 2008).

In a deconstructive move from linear narratives which freeze events and lived experience, (Denzin, 2014), and which tell and inform rather than actively interrogating what might be the limits of knowing or being known (Lather, 2007), I avoid creating “a tidy text that maps easily onto our usual ways of making sense” (Lather, 2007:87). Derrida (1993) says all experience is an experience of the aporia and explicitly defines deconstruction “as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible” (1993:15). By avoiding linearity and a tidy text, I seek a dialogic approach in the telling of stories to allow aporias to emerge as moments of doubt. Within the textual space of the quilt, ellipsis is used not so much as a literary device, but to give some sense of the rhythm–pace–stallings-and-falterings as writing has flowed from-and-through – almost escaping my body - to appear on the page: sometimes the ellipsis are natural pauses of doubting-wondering-wandering-questioning but at other times they are gaps where I censor my voicing of escaping thought. Chamarette (2007) suggests that Cixous uses ellipsis as a textural space with semantic, affective, aesthetic and material qualities to offer both the potential for rupture within the written text, and a sense of how perception and meaning interrupts my body in the world, and I have tried to work towards this and... I’ve talked too much...

I am embarrassed that I am trying to compare how I write with how Cixous writes...my cheeks redden, my mouth dries up as I stutter-seek a breath – to find my next words. I police myself – stop!... stop talking...STOP. Now!

I reign myself in: I am talking too much; making bold claims that are ‘bigger’ than me...
and I take a deep breath…

and I start again…

Also, as well as being a poststructural feminist researcher

I am just ‘Jan’…

woman-ex-wife-career-girl-mother-daughter-sister-aunt-cat-lover-writer-researcher-reader…and –

I am one of the women whose stories are written into this patchwork quilt…

one in the line of ‘over five generations’ of women whose ordinary lives this patchwork quilt seeks to highlight and bring to life…. and I take a deep breath…

but ‘I’ am lots of things…a bubbling muddled mass of labels and contradictions!

But right now I want to talk about ‘the patchwork quilt’ – not me…

The quilt I will piece together is colourful - awash with blue sunny skies – from home and abroad…but there are dark twinkling starry skies too – as well as dark suffocating mythically menacing tar-black gloomy horizons. Flower motifs – budding-alive-decaying-dead make appearances. Hope-filled rainbows glisten symbolic promise. And abundant pastoral greens seep into blood-smereared crimson reds…

The quilt is lively - in-movement - as it stretches and unfurls, like a newborn awakening to the world after the tight constraints of the womb. And like me, the quilt is a lively bubbling mass of contradictions - because although I say I want to talk about the quilt rather than ‘me’ - the quilt is imbued with me – embodied – it came to life through me – as it was written -whispered-spoken and – sometimes – screamed – through my body into textual life.

Thinking with my patchwork quilt as textual and textural, and acknowledging it as written material to be visually read, I note that many voices emerge from my text. Voice and who can be voiced and how it is heard are complex matters (Denzin, 1997). There may be moments when I address the reader of the text as though we are in the room together as ‘we’/’our’, whilst at other times ‘we’ is being used by the author whose texts I cite, but, as the text moves towards storying family stories, the ‘we’/’our’ referred to in the text will usually emerge as the ‘we’ of me and the women in my family as I seek to draw the reader into the intimate messy entangled world of my relationships with these women from whom I come and whose stories are told.
Family women are also known in the text by the names I have always known them. My maternal
great-grandmother is ‘Maw’. ‘Nana’ is my maternal grandmother…. And ‘Mum’ is Mum – or
occasionally ‘Gran’, as she is known to my children. And, Jan – ‘I’ - am mostly Jan the researcher-
writer… but occasionally, ‘I’ am simply Mum in the text too as this is how my children know me.

‘I’ is complex…

Poststructural theories unsettle taken for granted notions of a subject as capable of self-knowledge
and articulation – they “stress the (im)possibilities of writing the self from a fractured and fragmented
subject position” (Gannon, 2006: 475)…

St Pierre (2008) encourages poststructural researchers to deconstruct and ‘decenter’ the concept of
‘voice’…

Jackson and Mazzei (2008) argue for a ‘decentering’ of a narrative voice which moves from the
certainty of a narration to a less confident performative ‘I’ which progresses through and looks for
openings to cast doubt on our knowing…

Sellers argues the hallmark of an écriture féminine is an ‘I’ “which refuses the glorifications available to
the self and which seeks, instead, to encounter and inscribe the other” (1996:xv)…

Cixous says the writer’s ‘I’ gives itself to the world’s difficulties as it goes through the ego to “make a
descent into the agitated secret of this self, into its tempests” (1989:24); elsewhere Cixous says that
whilst “the origins of the material in writing can only be myself. I is not I, of course, because it is I with
the others, putting me in the other’s place, giving me the other’s eyes” (Cixous and Calle-Grüber,

In this thesis, a performative–haunted–embodied-messy ‘I’ emerges as, like Richardson (1996), I
practice my poststructuralist feminism by deliberately layering and displaying my presence in the text
and I demonstrate rather than talk about situated contextual lived experience. As professional
academic and family stories mingle, I am aware that I become a storyteller, and the lived experiences
demonstrated in the text are experiences that have the source from which Benjamin (1964/2015)
claims all storytellers have drawn upon: it has been passed on from mouth to mouth. And the ‘I’, I
write from in this research recognises that ‘I’ am “a mixture of others and myself. Traces of others, the
voices of my others” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:56), and surrounded by an unconscious network of
feelings, attitudes, wishes, beliefs, longings, fears and expectations, ‘I’ am inextricably linked and
bound to past, present and future families (Pincus & Dare, 1978).
It should be noted that I recognise many tensions belie the use of a word like ‘poststructuralism’ and that the notion of a methodological approach informed by ‘deconstruction’ is complicated. Whilst Cixous is commonly referred to as ‘a poststructural feminist’, Blyth and Sellers point out that Cixous is not so easily categorised as she “is a writer of great variety” (2004:5). Whilst I label myself as a ‘poststructural feminist’, this is in order to position this work within the academy, and to describe something of my reading-writing-researching in dialogue with Cixous. But I recognise that Cixous would not label herself as such, instead seeing herself as a poetic playwright of fiction.

In terms of my deconstructive approach, I am mindful of Cixous, who when talking about her relationship with Derrida, notes that for Derrida “deconstruction is the approach, the axe, the means” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:82) and she claims that “de-construction is the gesture of thinking that permits the discovery of the quick of life under the immurements” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:82). In a recently published conversation between Cixous and Derrida, they talk in dialogue about deconstruction being both ‘animal’ and ‘childlike’, with Cixous laughingly asserts that ‘the animal’ is “the principal character of deconstruction” (Cixous & Derrida, 2019:154). Royle (Cixous & Derrida, 2019) notes how this foregrounds the kind of poetic thinking Cixous and Derrida both share. In this thesis, I have thought about deconstruction in this way rather than as an abstract concept or philosophy that needs intellectually exalted or described in overly formal terms.

I also recognise that, at points, pieces of the quilt will appear unmatched….and conversations around poststructural, feminist and postqualitative may appear to clash. But this is in keeping with the nature of this thesis which is deliberately presented as a ‘writing-story’. These points of mis-match and clashing are to show my research journey in action, as they show rather than hide my frustrations at the dead-ends I wander down as I find my way towards writing this researched patchwork quilted writing-story into life.

As the writing material in this quilt comes together, it works at becoming an example of academic feminism, seeking knowledge which has a human face and a feeling heart (Hochschild, 2003) as it acknowledges, listens and follows the women in the stories told in a bid to not only create space for their stories to be heard but to seek justice for them: a justice they could not claim in their own lifetimes.
Structuring

Cixous invites us to spend time in the school of writing “initiating ourselves in the strange science of writing, which is a science of farewells. Of reunitings” (1993:3). Metaphor is the backbone of social science writing (Richardson, 1990) and Richardson (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) encourages researchers to not only use metaphor in their writing but to also think their theory through different metaphors. What, Richardson asks us to consider, might happen if instead of experiencing theory as a ‘structure’ where we ‘build’ and have ‘form’ and ‘foundations’, we experienced theory as if the metaphor were “theory is a feather” (1990:18)?

Similarly, Flannery (2001) notes that the majority of scientific metaphors hold masculine connotations and tone (explore – hunt – probe – penetrate) and as she argues for a feminist view of science with less aggressive and alienating metaphors, Flannery (2001) proposes the patchwork quilting metaphor, not as a ‘holy grail’ of knowledge, but as a sensuous-touching-feeling tacit knowledge which allows for the emergence of different scientific voice; and she turns towards Gilligan (1982, 2010) who advocates for more ‘feminine’ voices that welcome warmth, connection, context and caring – honest voices recognising that as humans we are all emotional creatures. But as hooks (2000) argues, women are not necessarily more caring and ethical in their relationships with less powerful women or those they do not identify with, so the notion of quilting as offering space only for soft and comforting voicing does need to be troubled.

Nevertheless, taking forward Flannery’s (2001) metaphor of quilting as a way of making some kind of order out of a multiplicity of pieces of writing material, I draw upon Koelsch’s (2012) notion of a virtual quilt whilst also noting Royle’s (2010) point that ‘quilt’ is a queer word with many associations like quilt- quilt-will-ill-kilt -quit thus proving what can seem so ordinary and warm can become less comforting and strange in word-play…and…

I have pinned-and-tacked my disparate pieces of writing material together into four chapters….

And, to allow a sense of the messiness and fluidity of my research process to remain, the four chapters are not distinctly divided into the more traditional chapters (Wolcott, 2001) of literature, methodology and methods, findings, analysis and discussion. However, to offer some sense of direction for the reader in a text which continually time-travels, disrupts clock-time, and weaves and winds-juxtapositioned stories together to give a sense of a decentered narrative, the writing-material in each of the chapters has a leaning towards a more specific focus. Chapter One provides context and a general sense of the project coming to be conceptualised as a patchwork quilt; Chapter Two focuses on my methodological and reflexive journey as well as a short section on method (which continues to flow through the seams of the text); Chapter Three moves into a presentation of ‘the findings’; and
Chapter Four seeks to find ‘a conclusion’ as a dialogical discussion. Literature from various disciplines is used on a “when-and-as-needed” (Wolcott, 2001:72) basis for making links to theory or literature, and a sense of method and methodological approach is also incorporated throughout all chapters of the thesis.

And, as I invite you to sit with me, to watch me piece this handmade quilt with the disparate material in my basket, I note that in the spirit of the work, this will not be a finished piece: many questions will be left unanswered as they are unknowable and this reflects the messy uncertain quality of the lives that are storied into life in this thesis. And, as I dialogue with you, as a reader/viewer of the text – showing-telling you something of the stories as I piece the quilt together – I will also pause between each chapter to give an overview of the next chapter that will be unfurled.

Richardson (1997a, 1997b) writes ‘pleated’ texts. I see the four chapters I have pinned and tacked together as a ‘quilted text’ which will unfurl… and I begin by taking a once pristine but now slightly crumpled linen bedsheet and throwing it into the air and letting it fall to the ground…

and as I do so, I explain that in my mind’s eye I am both my childhood and motherly self as I imagine myself with my Mum as a child and I imagine myself as a mother with my children as I do the thing Mum taught me and I then teach them… OK now – hold each end – hold tight – OK and tug-tight – and then fold- and then fold-again and then fold into me… and then we have a perfectly folded sheet ready to tuck in the linen cupboard. Except here – instead of tugging and folding – I have allowed the sheet to float…

and rest on the ground.

This layer is the lining. Like the batting – which like Royle (2010), I think allows space for layers and pockets of voices - this backing lining might not usually be visible, but it is fundamental to the structure of a quilt.

The Lining: Background Stories

The linen backing sheet has three ‘pictures’ printed on it. Each tell a story that forms the background structure for this quilt:

A True Story: Wee Jim dies

Firstly, there is the well-told family story my feminine writing to inquire with Hélène Cixous led me back towards in my research. It is a family story I found myself “confronting perpetually [as] the mystery of
the there-not-there” (Cixous, 1991:3). It is the well-told central story of Mum’s childhood: a story Mum tells so seamlessly and beautifully it becomes an entrenched unquestioned ethereal story. It is one of those family stories children are told that are so compelling, traumatic and dominant that even though the stories are about events that preceded their births, they do not seem to be life stories told of others but memories of their own (McNay, 2009). Mum lives through the events in such a story. And she goes on to tell me this story, so I grow up with it...

The story unfolds almost always the same way:

My Uncle is knocked down and killed by a bus when he is 7 ½ years old…
Although this happens 22 years before I am born, I have always been part of his story.
Mum is 2 ½ when her big brother, my Uncle Jim, is knocked down and killed by the bus…

It is a compelling story… it is about a child who dies before he grows up.

My Uncle’s wee dog was knocked down and killed exactly six weeks to the day after he was knocked down and killed…

It is a traumatic story.

When the puppy is found dying on the road, the neighbours try to console his Mum, my Nana.
‘Your wee boy must be lonely in Heaven… so God took his wee puppy to keep him company…’

It is a dominant story that needs to be toned down…

‘There, there’, they say to the mother who has lost her child. ‘Your wee boy is dead and the wee puppy he loved is dead now too… but they are keeping each other company in Heaven… there, there’, they say in a chorus of soothing reassurance… ‘there, there’.
And Mum will tell how aged 2½ - she sits on the outside toilet on a summer’s evening, swinging her legs to-and-fro. And she points to the brightest star in the sky and with wheedling wide-eyed innocence asks my maternal great-grandmother - our Maw…

*Is that oor Jim’s star…?*

*It is, isn’t it?*

*Is it Maw…is it…?*

*It is…isn’t it…?*

Again-and-again, Mum remembers asking…

And Mum will say – *oh – how Maw cried!*

But Mum’s little girl-self continued asking…

*It is Maw… it is… isn’t it… that’s wee Jim’s star…?*

And it is an endlessly incomplete story…

It is a story that I will find myself rewriting in this text again and again because - endlessly - I come to hear myself listening to and repeating it again and again in my head… searching for answers. And each time - again and again - it is futile…

It is about a child who dies before he grows up. It is an abrupt ending. It is childish innocence wiped out in a swift fatal bang-crash. But it is more than that too. Because life - as everyone says - but everyone knows is never really quite true - goes on... endlessly.

And this dominant story – so oft-well-told – but somehow still so full of gaps and secrets of what has not been spoken – “the visible and the invisible” (Cixous, 1993:3) merges with the next image on the lining sheet I have laid on the ground. It is the main writing-story.

**A Writing Story: A Matrilineal Scream**

Blurring the edges of the personal-familial-academic, the writing-story that threads through this text tells the story of my research as I come to a feminine writing to inquire with Cixous, and I find myself journeying to her ‘Three Schools of Writing’, where she specifically chooses ‘school’ rather than goals
or diplomas, because schools are “places of learning and maturing” (1993:156) and where I find myself exploring the true story of wee Jim’s death…

It is a writing story that will tell a story of how many years after Mum – the wee girl on the outside toilet who wheedles at Maw for an answer as to whether it is wee Jim’s star in the sky - gives birth to a little girl – me – and she will tell me the story and will guiltily admit that she thinks she almost enjoyed watching our Maw silently weep as she stared into the bleakest brightest star in the sky.

It is a writing story that will tell how many years later again, as I grow up to be a ‘good little girl’, I watch Nana – the mother that the neighbours console with their chorus of ‘there, there, there, theres’ – agitatedly rock back and forwards on a 1970’s brown and orange striped velour chair with an endless cigarette in her nicotine-stained fingers and the foot of her crossed over leg involuntarily twitching with nerves as she sits in front of a three-bar gas fire in a mining town.

It is a writing story that will tell of how many years later again, I will find myself sat outside the home where I was born and the place where Mum’s brother died, and I will watch my great-grandmother arrive first at the scene of the horror.

And it is a writing-story that tells of the many hours I find myself staring into the privileged luxury of a computer screen and wonder if it is possible for me to transform the unspoken stories that I have heard – and that I have seen but no-one talks about – into a transformative story – and I sit back and silently join in with Mum, Nana and Maw before me as a sound emerges from our lips – is emitted from our bodies… it is a sound that I will come to recognise later… it is a matrilineal scream…

And this writing-story merges with a story that first comes to life in my research journal…

The Red Paragraph

This is the paragraph that appears – printed in red text - in the ‘Prologue…

This story is about the moment when I discover in writing that although I am told a truthful straightforward story, there was more behind the scenes. I may have grown up knowing Maw dies before I am born, but I do not realise that the women must still have been mourning her loss even if they never speak it to me. I imagine they might have said…aye one has to go out of this world to make way for another to come in…
And in unfurling and placing the background-lining piece of this quilt together, I will tell something of how I come to search past platitudes that plaster over the gaps of consoling ‘there-thers’ as I try to paint some colour onto the deathly pallor of my maternal great-grandmother’s lips – to seek her touch - her smell – her voice – as my writing to inquire reveals her screaming grief after her wee grandson is killed and she too is no doubt silenced with platitudes – and I hear this echo across-through the generations as I hear Maw’s daughter – her granddaughter – and eventually me – her great-granddaughter – who is ‘privileged’ with the task of writing back in time to this haunting sound – to acknowledge her strife and her unacknowledged griefs – and take time to listen to – touch-feel her silenced pain.
CHAPTER ONE: Contextualising

This chapter shows the metaphor of the patchwork quilt as it comes-in-to being, deliberately making visible rather than hiding the process of writing and the decision-making behind the structuring of the text (Richardson & Lockridge, 2002). I am not a “disembodied objective knower” (Lather, 1997:229): instead, acknowledging my classed, gendered and raced body in the production of this text (Goode, 2019), I turn towards writing my feminine body as a way of writing which recognises that writing is, as Cixous says, both work and is being worked: feminine writing is a way of writing which is not done “without danger, without pain, without loss (Cixous & Clément, 1986:86).

Noting Turner (1992), who points out that writing is a concrete product and is of the mind, whilst performance is an ephemeral activity that is of the body, and Cixous, who clouds the difference between writing and performing thus calling women to perform when she calls them to write, this chapter will show how I grapple with what Bray (2003) refers to as major Cixousian concepts. Bringing to life such concepts as ‘the gift’, ‘generosity’, ‘libidinal economies’ and ‘jouissance’ in performative embodied evocative stories (Madison, 2005; Pelias, 1999; 2007; 2013; Pollock, 1998; Spry, 2011 ), I think-write-play-struggle with these ‘concepts’ as I try to get a feel for them as I write them into situated contextual domestic real-life stories rather than reaching out to grab and own them as straightforward theories or concepts to be cited on an academic page. This is deliberate, as, in the spirit of écriture féminine, I seek to avoid a marked authoritative language and allow doubt and wonder to surface as I move towards a space that “can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous, 1976b:879).

Nevertheless, this is all seen to be a struggle as I navigate finding and owning something of an academic voice of authority whilst negotiating tentatively speaking from the voice of what will become my turning towards an écriture féminine – which I also find difficult to language as I struggle to find a way past – a letting go of - the voices of my childhood: the voice of the patriarchy - the word of ‘the law’ in the world into which I am birthed. I recognise my fear in leaving past spaces – moving forward – and wondering where think-writing-inquiring will take me. Caught in an in-between, I want to write – to speak – to bring forward justice and allow silenced voices – my own and the silenced voices of my foremothers - to be heard…

All these tensions, which will remain throughout this thesis, emerge in this chapter as I manage the personal, academic and social worlds I live in and as I also begin to recognise, complicate and question the social, cultural and economic capitals (Bourdieu, 1979; 1986; 1987; 1989) I inherited or have acquired or earned and might profit or lose from as I go through life.
The intergenerational nature of the work that writing takes me towards begins as I cast on some stitches and begin the knitting-together of stories from ‘the long line of strong women’ who come before me and the inheritances I receive from and through them as these also come from the social-historical-cultural world I inherit and am birthed into. As I write from and through my body and the women whose stories I heard-felt-touched-have-been-told and wrote towards start to appear in the text, I weave in the story of my writing to inquire as I begin piecing and quilting what will become a ‘layered text’ (Rambo, 2005; Rambo Ronai, 1995,1996) as I put myself - an intersubjective, social and dialogical ‘I’ - "into the text and into history in the movement of my words" (Cixous, 1976b:875), always already acknowledging that “there is always a little of the good mother’s milk” within me (Cixous, 1976b:881).

The underlying and ongoing theme of ‘secrecy’ emerges and lurks in this section (and throughout this thesis) alongside the passion, love and the fear of writing – and where it might take me - as ‘the curse’ that is ‘unspoken’ in my family and becomes central to my research, confronts and frightens me as it rises up through my body and demands to be acknowledged and written.

As part of my patchwork process of piecing together this writing-story, I acknowledge that at points I draw on others along with Cixous. For example, where I write of Richardson (2001) using language as her sword and shield, Cixous too, writes rebelliously of an ‘I-woman’ who is “going to blow up the Law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done right now in language” (1976b:887). This drawing upon others highlights something of the other books and authors who have informed this thesis in my process of read-write-researching as I pieced together the writing-story that shows my researching-writing to inquire with Cixous.

It should be noted that whilst this text has been woven together differently and anew, some paragraphs in ‘The Matryoshka Doll’ have been previously published in the book chapter Between a Rock and a Hard Place (Bradford, 2019).

26 February 2009: The Bloody Affair

I’m having an affair – How could you? When did it begin? Do you remember the sales event weekend? How could you? Wait, what date was that again? And it sinks its greedy teeth in – but that was an anniversary of Nana’s death.
Inward - reverberating tearing screaming shrieks from me. *No-No-No-No*. Outwardly - soft-sobbing emerges from numb lips.. *How could you, how could you, how could you… and on that date…?*

I need to pull myself together. Stay focused. What next? We swither: stay–go–stay– go? We don’t know. But I’m OK. I’ll be OK. It could be worse. Something horrible could have happened to one of the kids. Imagine if one of the kids were ill or hurt. Now, that would be terrible. Unthinkable. Impossibly unliveable. My husband leaving… that’s just a blip!

I’m working part-time after a career-break and I’m in the middle of training to be a Management Accountant. Is that what I want to do now? I don’t know. Concentrate. Think.

OK. I decide! I’ll sit the economic exam for my management account qualification because I’ve prepared for it. Then I’ll apply to volunteer - at a children’s hospice - it’s miles away, but it feels right because it will remind me how lucky I am to have my happy and healthy children even if we do go on to become a broken family with me downcast into the oft societally reviled role of ‘single mother’. And then I’ll apply to train to be a counsellor like the couples-counsellor who helped us in the aftermath of the affair because they had their shit together – and I want to be like that in the future rather than the snivelling crying wreck I am today.

Decisions made. It will all be OK.

2 February 2019: The Bloody Curse

A decade on – these three decisions come together in an unexpected way: I’m not a ‘counsellor with ‘their shit together’, instead I am a doctoral researcher in Counselling Studies who is ‘losing their shit’ at the writing-up stage of their research project because, just as I’m sighing with relief that my research is coming to a close - I find myself – in the process of writing a conference paper - uncovering - or perhaps more accurately rediscovering - something ‘new’. But no – I realise it is not new. It has always been there. But when I see it glare out at me from my own text – in the words I, myself, wrote on a page - it hits me afresh - again. It confronts me. I hide it from myself. It is too raw. Secret. Unspeakable. Unthinkable. Untouchable. I know it well. It is a curse – a curse that the women in my family fear. It is a sour hot potato that is passed around amongst us. And I cannot hold it. And I certainly cannot allow myself to write about it. If I write it then it might come true. The horror!
And I feel my weakness. I scold myself. Superstitious unsubstantial nonsense. There is no such thing as a curse! It does not exist. But it terrorises me anyway.

Damn it. Ignore it. I just want the whole bloody project finished. Boxed up. Done and dusted. Gone from me. I want to escape it. I don’t want to think about it anymore. I don’t want to feel it anymore.

Irritated-exasperated-overcome, I am rapidly losing faith in writing as a way of knowing because I cannot find any possible ‘ending’ to my writing to inquire when I cannot face writing about what I have come to know. How can I write about what cannot be spoken – written – contained - what Cixous claims she fears “will never be written” (Cixous & Jeannet, 2006:250) as it forbids and forces her to “approach it through detours, reveries, dreams (Cixous & Jeannet, 2006:251)? For Cixous, it is the ‘bookthatidonotwrite’ (2007:9; 2013:vi), and her other books orbit around the ‘nonwriting’ of this book that becomes her unknown companion-invisible shadow-secret ally – the book she wonders might be "the book left for dead at the expense of each book that I write instead of a book I do not write (Cixous & Prenowitz, 2011:193). But for me the stakes feel even higher. I need to produce a thesis – it is a time bound project. I need to present something – give an account of my research – show where it has taken me – highlight what I have discovered and come to know on the way. But how can I write-present-speak aloud what cannot be voiced because it feels like tempting a fate worse than death? And if I don’t write it…? Well, what do I have? Nothing.

And from this questioning there is a collapsing and coming together of a series of moments in time…

…from that moment when I am despairing – with the bloody horror of a curse confronting me – which I know is likely present – a trace of it somewhere-everywhere – secret – hidden – in all the other words – the letters on all the pages I have written over the years…

…from that moment when I first picked up my pen back in 2009 when I was faced with the bloody affair and I found myself writing - without knowing anything about qualitative research or writing to inquire or ways of knowing – but, like Richardson, who notes that it is one of her favourite sentences (1997a; 1999b) - I found myself ‘writing for my life’…

…from that moment of recognition when I know there is definitely ‘something’ in the material weight held in the trace of all the words I have written in my inquiry –
but they are all just bits-and-pieces scraps – fragments of material – little itty-bitty pieces of both new and well-worn and frayed remnants of – different weights of material - wool-silk-leather-denim-the brocade of a wedding dress-velvet-fur-different clashing noisy-silent-sounds-textures-colours-tones-wild exotic flowers and rotting weeds…Nothing matches or fits together. Written through the body. Uncensored. Some of the material is grubby – soiled – stained - and some of the material actually smells bad.

There is no rhyme-nor-reason. No obvious way of piecing them together. Bringing them to life.

Cixous meditates on ‘blood’, ‘breast’ ‘milk’ and the relation of the text and ‘the milk’ and the breath – something that touches the very production of the text which passes through the feminine body and advances a narrative – a feminine text which “cannot fail to be more than subversive” (1976b:888). Richardson (2000) says writing is material, and likens it to ‘wet clay’ which can be shaped in any way. And I wonder…

Wonder – as MacLure asserts – is relational (2013) and, felt in the body as well as the mind - wonder is resistant to capture by ideology or language and could be “the proper business not only of philosophy but of qualitative inquiry itself” (2011:1004).

And it is in this moment of despairing wonder, where I wonder how the scraps of writing stories – family stories of marriages, births and deaths – and reflexively written process stories of writing and where it has taken me – can be pieced together to tell a bigger story – a story that shows my research - when I find myself remembering an early spring morning day…

Early June 2010: The Angel on the Door

It’s a Monday morning rush hour. I’m driving to the hospice where I volunteer with the car roof down and the radio blaring. Cars trickle slowly across a suspension bridge. I’m sitting in a traffic jam. The sky above is a sheet of bonnie blue. The river below glistens glassily against the shimmering sun. And I feel the vague cold ‘blueness’ that comes and goes – a blueness that I fear might permanently settle in me if I do not work hard to prevent…dissipate - as my heart beats rhythmically in tune with the music as the rays from the soft morning unpredictable Scottish sun hit my skin. A creeping warmness fills me. I am awed by the lavish stunning spectacle that is the world in which I live. I inhale the wonderful magic of nature. Yes! It’s going to be a beautiful bright sunshiny day.
I pull into a layby and respectfully close the car roof and turn down the volume on the radio before I swing into the road that leads to the hospice. I am glad I did because a small ornamental angel hangs on the front door. A child has died. A family will be gathered in the carefully cooled ‘Rainbow Room’ with their dead baby as I hang up my jacket and make my way to sit at the reception desk that I will man today. I bid people in the office a suitably cheery but subdued ‘good morning’ before getting on with my first delegated task of the day. The whiteboard needs updating. It details the names of families in each room as well as details of families arriving and leaving. There is a new arrival today. Each child who comes to the hospice is given a blanket that is theirs to keep. I open the box filled with patchwork quilted blankets waiting for a child to comfort and I begin unfolding them.

I marvel at the exquisite beauty of the handstitched creations. Each is different. Some bright. Some pastel. Some bold. Some more muted. Each had a larger fabric patch in the middle which visually depicted and drew attention to the well-known nursery rhyme or bible story that was the theme of the blanket. I picked one out to look at in more detail: ‘Noah’s Ark’. Looking closer at the smaller patches that at first glance looked like decoration or embellishment, I saw each one individually told a story before being pieced together to contribute to tell a bigger story. Looking closer at the stitching, I wondered about the person whose hands patiently sewed the patches together with teeny-tiny almost invisible stitches. Almost certainly, I imagined a female hand behind the stitches, but it could have been male. Did they think about the child who would receive the blanket as they stitched? And I wondered - did they sew in love? Briefly I wondered - what is love…? But then, feeling the soft downy imperfectly-human-handstitched comfort of the quilt –feeling its quality – I knew I was holding a priceless product - and momentarily, I was aware of myself bearing the intense weight of love in my hands as I heard my soul scream loss. Fragile and abundant, the violence of love pierced my heart. But I wait until I am in the car driving home under the still beautiful blue sunny sky until I softly cry for the parents who have lost their baby.

August 1971: A Labour of Love

The bedroom is musty-fusty with rising damp, but the soft white garments that lie in wait to clad my naked body have been carefully laundered in Dreft so they are freshly fragranced…

It was Maw who knitted and crocheted in the months leading up to my birth and her death. Maw was a braw knitter. I imagine Maw taking pride in her work as she created a ‘beautiful layette’ for the great-grandbaby she would not live to meet. Maw’s crochet-work was second-to-none. I imagine Mum and Nana taking pride in dressing Maw’s newly born great-granddaughter in the fruits of her
labour. Aye… Maw might have always loved the wee boys best… but oh she would have loved this wee one too… a wee girl – oh another one of ‘us’…

But Maw is not here to hold my newborn body. Cradle me in her swollen plump arms. Instead, it is Nana who cares for me. It Nana who - shushing and soothing me - paces the living room floor. I am securely wrapped in the plaid, so Nana can puff on endless fags as she uses her other hand to carefully insert the crook of a finger into my mouth to remove the steady stream of post-birth mucous that stops me nursing. ‘There-there…’ - Nana sing-songs as she cradles her first granddaughter’s body against her - … ‘there-there now, wee Jan… shush now… shush…’.

December 1999: A Still Life

Smile Nana – say ‘CHEESE’! Click. We are gathered as a family together and none of us know as Nana stares into the camera, cuddling her three-month old christening-clad great-grandson swaddled in a shawl that Nana herself knitted for him, that this will be the last time she will hold him. Moments later Nana will ‘take a wee turn’. Dad will reassure me once he drops Nana home. Your Nana will be fine hen… it was just a wee turn… nothing to worry about. And the christening party goes on. But three months later, lying dead in isolation in a hospital room of her own, the grating howls that roared through Nana as her skin festered and wept in the weeks leading up to her death are silenced. No camera bore witness to those final days of flailing screams, but something of them somehow remains captured in my body. The smell lingers. Gangrene. Impending death. And I shiver as I fast-forward to that time….

February 2000: Plastering over the Cracks

Nana is creating an almighty unbecoming shrieking fuss. Now – Nana – Nana – I placate – my futile hopefulness still believing that she is not actually dying - you’re ok – you’re ok – and I attempt to paper over the cracks of unfaced traumas as they rise up deep from the sealed off crypt where she keeps her secrets – the unspoken giefs, the shame, the lack of, the poverty, the disgrace, the being looked down on, the railing against the misplaced pointed fingers –’it was my fault – they blamed me – I should have been there – they blamed me for my wee Jim dying’ – I shush her – ssshhh Nana – now come on now… And I try to settle her so I can moisturise her drying hands and paper over the cracks on her crepey soft face with Yardley – now Nana, that’s not true – that’s ridiculous… it’s just the morphine talking – of course it wasn’t your fault – it was an accident – a terrible accident – such a long time ago – of course nobody blamed you… shush now, Nana – now sit still and shush – what will people think! Will I put on a wee bit of rouge on – get you looking good for your visitors. I silence her – I refuse to listen – acknowledge her: I pop a lid on the box of her messy
March 1999: The Anticipation of Love

My husband and I dismantle the desk, box up our books and paint our beloved regent-green boxroom study in the palest of tasteful lemons. Overnight it becomes ‘the nursery’. Over the coming months we will come home from work and open its door, to stand – together – and admire our handiwork as we congratulate ourselves on the choice of colour and stare down in awe at my burgeoning belly - as we wait in nervous expectation for the new life we have created to arrive.

Like Maw before them, Mum and Nana pick up their needles and knit-knit-knit when I tell them ‘I am expecting’ and, although we do not know the baby’s sex, they are desperate to shop too because ‘our wee one’ is already very much loved and must have everything they might need waiting for them ahead of their arrival into this world. The nursery quickly fills up with baby paraphernalia: wicker baskets overflow with nappies, shampoos, powders and creams that Mum and Nana pop in their trolleys with their weekly Thursday shop; the chest of drawers is laden with neat piles of brushed cotton sheets and soft crocheted shawls; and the tallboy is cram packed. An abundant row of gender-neutral soft-white baby gowns and woollen garments Mum has laundered in Dreft hangs on one side of the tallboy in contrast with the more starkly modern denim items I have purchased and adamantly prefer on the other side. I hear Mum and Nana’s tutting – they know better-dismay…you’ll change your mind later because that’s too rough for a wee baby’s skin!

September 2015: The White Woollen Blanket

_Do you remember that white woollen blanket?_ Mum is asking a rhetorical question because she knows full well I will not have forgotten that blanket. Mum has handed it in to a charity who are desperate for more blankets to provide emergency aid for refugees. Mum wonders if I might have any blankets lying around spare? Mum wonders if I remember the other white woollen blanket…? Yes. It is carefully folded, wrapped in tissue, and safely stored in a box in the loft along with my wedding dress. Mum wonders if I might want to donate it? Mum thinks Nana would want it to be given to people who need it. _WHAT?_ Point-blank. NO! I refuse.

November 2017: He Loves Me...

He confronts me with love. Just say it! His tone wheedling – playful-but-demandingly-serious – persistent. He says it to me. I must say it back! Awkward. I playfully zip my lips together in an
attempt to lighten the mood…and to stop people-pleasingly giving in to his demand. He will tickle me until I say it. No! Say it. No! Why not. Because my words are my language – my route into the world. Cixous says language is the biggest thing in the universe and we have it at our disposal, and “what one can do with language is … infinite” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:22) even if it is terrifying…and intoxicating…and powerful…it’s like I have the whole world in my hands and I don’t know how to write-it-speak-it-make use of it… and well I just cannot say it to him…Because it’s not true. Because that’s not how love works. Because that’s not how ‘words’ work. I can’t say what I don’t feel-mean. He tutts. I want him to understand. Words and how I use them are important to me. Words are fresh – alive – they bear something of me …the force and weight of me…they bear what I feel – what I think – and who I am being and becoming in the world – and ‘love’ is too big a word for me to say to him - to give to him…. He cannot demand it. Exasperated-frustrated-annoyed, he questions what I know about love. I do not know how to love or be loved. If I knew anything at all about love then I would accept his love and then give him my love back.

Sharp irritation stirs, whispers for voice. He wonders what I’m thinking. What’s behind the blank depth of my eyes. Tell him what I am thinking. Tell him. Now. Nothing. …Everything…I need to go. He gets my coat. I shrug it on. Playful again…he loves me…he loves my coat. He strokes its faux fur. He says it is soft and feminine just like me. I remind him of a cat. My birth sign is Leo! I fake a giant ‘Roar!’ He laughs. No. He thinks I am more of a domestic cat. A little kitten. He could keep me here and look after me. Feed me kibbles and milk. Let me sleep on his knee. I pretend laugh, gently shrugging him away from me. I feel myself tense. Kitten-domestic cat…? A pent-upness stirs… wild thoughts course - racing words-phrases-images-books I have read… authors whose insights have gripped me flash fast…

Winterson (2012) loves how cats sit on doorsteps – a liminal space - half-in-half-out - wild and tame… she says she is wild but can be ‘domestic’…but only if the door is open. Cats pad-purr-prowl-growl their way through Cixous’ oeuvre. The Cixousian cat, as both beloved and prophet, is often the privileged being through which the reader and author access the seemingly exclusive human sensory world of writing, representation and images, influencing artistic and literary creations- especially the ability to generate poetic writing (Giguere, 2013). Cixous tells us it is with the aid of poetic writing that we see naked life – life most true… “the world written nude is poetic” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:3). But my fur is fake. And my playful zipped lips and raging roar? They are fake too. I am hiding. Am I fake? Where is my truth? Cixous calls me to “kill the false woman who prevents the live woman from breathing (1976b:880). I am caged in here…Suffocating. Breathless. False. Cixous says

What is most true is poetic because it is not stopped-stopable. All that is stopped, grasped, all that is subjugated, easily transmitted, easily picked up, all that comes under the word concept, which is to say all that is taken, caged, is less true (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:4).
He does not know me. I am not a kibble-eating kitty-cat. The Cixousian cat might be domestic as it shares daily life with humans, but it keeps a distance and mystery that remind us of the irreducibility of difference and alterity making the cat both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, like the Freudian uncanny (Segarra, 2010). Highlighting the futility of Freud’s (1919) efforts to offer intellectual certainty around the uncanny, Cixous argues that “every pursuit produces its own cancellation and every text dealing with death is a text which returns” (1976a:547). ‘Uncanny’ experiences arouse people, producing in them a mixture of shivering pleasure and anxiety (Frosh, 2013). And I shiver. Involuntary. Panic. Anxious. Not pleasure. And I – I … I falter-stutter…

*I want to go home.* I walk to the door. He follows me. Persuasive. He wants me to stay a while longer. He touches my arm through my coat. Soft, like me. He pats my shoulder. Soft. Pretty. He moves to take my coat off. Stay. Beautiful. No. Stay. I shake my head. *I need to go home to study.* I am such a clever little kitty-cat. My faux-fur is my second skin. A pelt. Stay. No! I shrug him off. Hug the coat tight around me. Block him and his demanding greedy blue gaze out. And I stare into the impenetrable wooden door I need to walk out… walk through: its panels remind me of the treads on a stage…

…and I find myself staring at Spry (1997; 2011) as she stands on stage performing an autoethnography. Words are being coaxied out onto the surface of her body, the site her story is generated from. Words write themselves on and in the layers of her skin. I hear her speak them. Wrapped tight in the dead skin of her mother’s mink coat. I feel her perform a ‘textual pelt’ as she cries blood tears for her mother’s death and mourns her own life now she is a motherless daughter… And I see myself as a child, dressed up in Nana’s musquash coat. Musty. Furry. Brown. Ugly. But grown up. Ladylike. I play ‘pretend’. I play-pretend at being a woman. But now I am a woman. And I write my self – as Woman. But I stand here like a little girl. Tamed. Mourning? Perhaps ongoing grieving for a loss I do not understand. I am lost…

And then I see Cixous in my mind’s eye as she gathers up cat fur in the pages of the ‘guardian notebooks’, without whose help “there would not have been an odyssey, but one single wailing mess” (2018:7). Cixous’ ‘guardian’ notebooks tell her everything of the story that she herself forgets even though she wrote those words because it is too painful to bear in the moment and too impossible to remember in the aftermath of her mother’s long interminable wait in the ‘Medicalisedbed’… “that – thing - that vehicle of arrest” (2018:45) for the longest of times as they both endure the terrible page – a textual page of “helpmehelphelpme” (2018:77) which permeate a text that slices across the skin of a language that traverses the
depths of her-and-her-mother’s journey towards death with its love and loss and longing for that voyage to both end and never end. …and her heavy tears that flood when she fears death is never satisfied and oh… oh, how Cixous is overcome as “a flood of tragic visions abruptly flows” (2018:78) as she questions… what if death takes her cat as well as her mother?

…and I am back at Nana’s wake, where we all listened-told-re-heard ourselves repeat those cemented in funny family stories about Nana - stories that Ballard and Ballard (2011) speculate on as creating an imagined future where the past and present are already writing a future that is yet unfolding but exerts huge influence on the way the family makes sense of their unique identity and culture… and- oh - how we laughed as a family about Nana and her witty ways because we could not be with or bear to feel ourselves in the murky depths of Nana’s suffering-death or look in the mirror of our own black mourning… And I know I could not begin to face the fact that one day I might have to face loss and grief – not neat tidied-up describable stages of grief (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005), but a grief that calls for a climbing of the glowering unscalable heights of a mountain that has no summit.

And in my mind’s eye I see Nana’s tiny stud emerald earrings gleam-and-twinkle on my desk at home. Mum must have removed them from Nana’s pierced ears in the hospital. Or maybe it was a doctor or nurse. I do not know. But Nana dies alone in hospital. She chooses to – I think…. she waits until Mum and her brother leave the room – just for a moment. Nana leaves Mum with regrets. She wishes she had stayed in the room and been there for Nana at the end. Don’t be silly Mum…. It’s ok… she probably waited on you leaving so she could die quietly - quickly pain-free with the morphine – without you fretting. And I console Mum with an expert who confronts death every day: Black says that even the most diligent round-the-clock vigils fail because whatever plans or promises we might make “Death works to her own timetable, not ours” (2018:86).

And as the emerald earrings gleam and twinkle-twinkle still in my mind’s eye - shreds of the debris of life come to mind as I see flecks of Nana’s grey dead skin ingrained in the cubic-zirconia clusters and the butterfly clips. Ashes-to-ashes-dust-to-dust… and I remember…

Gannon (2002) claims skin is dynamic and bears the marks and layers in the shapes of our years and our lived experiences. Brewis and Williams (2019) claim the skin as interrogative, as permissive, heft, loft, as inscription and site of rupture - and they argue that as material, the skin is an active participant - shifting, altered - an adaptive tissue. We can speak of toughening up, of being callous or calloused.
We learn to harden to it, to secret our wounds…. And they suggest making a fist with my hand…And I imagine myself holding Nana’s earrings in my fist right now. Brewis and Williams (2019) then suggest opening up my fist – watching the suppleness as I open my hands up to a welcome - palms up greeting…. and that beautiful line from *Midnight’s Children* rushes to my mind… “Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came” (Rushdie, 2013:3) and I feel my fists grip my body tighter as he reaches for my hand…

No! *I want to go home*. He says nothing. He tries again to hold my hand. *No!* I want to push-kick-punch the closed door open. Walk out. But I unhug myself instead and put my fisted hands in my faux fur coat pockets. I feel my fingernails clench tight against the palms of my hands. Brittle. Brutal. I feel the tautness of my knuckles. Tense. Tight. Not supple. My body language must surely speak for itself. And my prickly skin? Skin is a border that feels (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001). I feel my fingertips soar when I type-write. And I will not let him hold my hand because it will make my skin crawl and worse still it would make my soul howl right now. Raw. And as I stare back into his demanding eyes, I do not dare speak. No. I do not. Because I will sound like I am ranting and raving and…

I remember Mum tells how she watched in horror as frothy foam bubbles once overflowed from Nana’s shouting lips. Mum doesn’t remember why or who Nana was silently shouting at. But she knew Nana had lost control of her words – her body – and her mind. That image of Nana – rabid - foaming at the mouth lodged itself in Mum’s memories, locking in a warning: a frightening fear that one can become so overcome with emotion that it is possible to lose control of oneself…become mad! Cixous says it our business as writers to translate our emotions into writing… “First we feel. Then I write. This act of writing engenders the author. I write the genesis that occurs before the author (1998:189). But that image of Nana is too primal. Nana. Mad. Out of control. And oh how Nana feared ‘going mad’. It was her ‘nerves’ you see…her hysterical nerves needed to be both consoled and concealed…and… I see myself as…

I walk round and round the local loch for exercise most mornings – ear buds in listening to an audiobook. I think of Nana as I listen to Mr Ramsay in *The Lighthouse* (Woolf, 1927/1964). Oh how he strives-and-struggles to reach all the way to the end of the alphabet of knowledge whilst my Nana got stuck at ‘A’ because of her fear of ending up in Bangour or Belsdyke – the local ‘loony bins’ – who folk knew sent out vans to pick up madwomen like Nana…

Cixous says madwomen are the ones compelled to redo acts of birth every day – writing – dreaming – delivering
the affirmation of an internal force that is capable of looking at life without dying of fear and above all of looking at itself, as if you were simultaneously the other – indispensable to love – and nothing more than less than me (1991:6)

What acts of birth do I re-do when I write? What madness do I fear….? I want to embrace the madness of writing. To give birth to a new way of thinking-knowing-becoming…. but I cannot dare lose control and speak now: the fear of sounding incoherent.. the hysterical sounds of the ongoing remnants of a hysterical feminine fury are marked on me…and about what do I rage? Love? The love he says I lack? I do not know. But I do know that I do not lack rage. Oh no! But I’m not sure why my rage is overflowing and I’m all at sea with myself…

…and suddenly I am in the water with Levy (2018) as I read her memoir where she writes of surfacing after twenty years swimming in the deep only to find a storm above her…

She sees a boat. The boat is her marriage. And she swims away from it because if she swims towards it she knows she will drown.

But she recognises the boat as the ghost that will always haunt her life and she wonders if her wish for an enduring love that does not reduce either person to something less is just a phantom…?

And I laugh-cry when Levy (2018) writes how she rants and raves at the men in her local Turkish newsagents when they run out of the ice lollies she needs to buy each day as she heads to the hospital. Those ice lollies were not just ice lollies. They were vital. She absolutely needed them to hold against her dying mother’s lips in a bid to stave off her thirst…

And time collapses as I think about wee Jim who cried with thirst as he bled internally… did Maw or Nana hold water to his lips? I cannot think about this because it is a horror to think they might have inadvertently helped the remaining blood escape his little-boy-body so I push that aside…

and I remember cry-smiling at the memory of Levy (2018) who – in the midst of wading through a culmination of losses - returns to the newsagent to apologise-explain her apparent irrationality and the men seem to always already somehow understand. And I picture Levy (2018) in my mind’s eye as she accepts the Turkish coffee cup the newsagents give her later. There is no need for explanation, because she understands why they are giving her a gift for no reason: the cup is a symbol of their understanding of her love for her mother and a mutual mark of respect for the
messiness of mourning and the cost of our mortality. And I smile when Levy (2018) writes of remembering it all – no doubt feeling the flashing heat from the ongoing pain of it all - as she routinely sips bitter Turkish coffee out of the gifted cup as part of her writing ritual – a cup I think must overflow as a gift of condolence – a gift – an object imbued with excess – a cup she says will always mark her mother leaving the world.

Bitter coffee – like bitter chocolate - sometimes so bitter it tastes sweet. And I purse my lips – no trace of playfulness now - tense-tight. ‘Bittersweet’. The word catches against the dry roof of my mouth. I surface briefly, aware of him – his eyes piercing, waiting for me to speak – answer his demand. And I bite back the bile of bitterness… I want to scream and… I run away to escape in books again and I

… remember McAllester’s memoir, Bittersweet. He writes of the storm that moves like nausea through his chest when he finds out his mother has died even though he tells his therapist he feels his “fits of animalistic grief were disproportionate” because life-death is a common sequence and “billions of mothers” have died (2010:24). Opening his ‘memory pores’ McAllester (2010) sets out to conjure up something of the good mother in his dead mother, as he reads-cook his way through her treasured recipes as he negotiates grief. Shortly before the birth of his first child, McAllester concludes his culinary project by making the strawberry ice cream of his childhood from his mother’s recipe book and, as he looks forward to the birth of his baby and becoming a father, he imagines his mother ‘somewhere’ smiling at his grinning face as the past and present blend for him with “the gift of strawberry joy successfully passed down from the dead to the living” (2010:124).

He searches for me. He has lost me. Where have I gone? I am mute. Speak! I must tell him what I am thinking. Tell him! Now! The mute body is ignored, troubled, forgotten, spent – troubled by its lack of composure (Pelias, 2004). And I search his demanding unwaveringly certain blue eyes. He has not lost me. He never found me. Nothing. I need to go home. He wants me to stay. He wants me to know how much he loves me. He needs me. He has been searching for me. He found me. I make him feel like he has found home. I am the home he was always searching for… and I want to interrupt… to ask him what he means by home…? Am I lover? Mother? Comfort? Pleasure? Woman? Other? But I hold myself back. Composed. I bite my tongue…

Milk and honey. Keep it sweet, I think. Save your words for your writing where you can spend them wisely-wildly-madly. My tongue flows with the unique and universal language of poetry that Cixous says is “milk and honey” (1991:21). He might find me lacking with all his wants. He wants… wants.
But in writing woman – writing my self – I am not afraid of lacking because Cixous says “we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in the banks of lack (1976b:884). Cixous says that “a feminine economy” (1991:149) is at stake and she tells me that I cannot fail because the economy of my drives are “prodigious” (1976b:882)…

And I overflow. And I know I do not lack love. Generous. Abundant. More than. I can freely give without return if I choose to – want to – need to. A gift of a different love. I know I can do this because writing has led me towards this place…

So I say nothing. But inwardly I am stamping and shrieking, furies shake my insides. Yes. I am “stormy” (Cixous, 1976b:878). But outwardly poised – I control myself. But I have had enough. I need to go. I want to go. I need to get home. To my home. To where I belong. I need to get back to make the kids their tea. He tuts – exasperated – disappointed. Is he mocking me – my class - because I say ‘tea’ instead of ‘dinner’? Is he mocking me for being ‘mother’? I have failed him. But I don’t care. When I get home, I will unfurl my clenched up hands and give myself not just to the needs of my children but to my own needs - writing. I will greet overflowing words with open welcoming arms…

But for now, instinctual unwaveringly good girl polite, after he opens the door and my mouth swerves his lips so it is my cheek he kisses good bye – I let myself down: I turn back at the top of the stairwell and I apologise for myself – I’m sorry. And I do not know why.

Running to catch my train, my boots pounding wet pavements, and my heart thumping too fast - I feel – what? Nothing? Silenced fury? Misunderstood? No, still just pent-up. Words-thinking-silencing myself overcomes me. There is too much sensation coursing through me to gather up anything of a feeling that might be verbalised in language other than a shrieking vacant scream. But it grates. He has told me I know nothing about love. I am almost certain that my doctoral research has love at its core. But now? He makes me doubt myself. And I question myself – yes, indeed - what do I know…?

August 2018: Game, Set and Match

I sit at my desk and open my email ready to start my day. I agreed back in June to present a paper at a conference in February and I open my email to find a second and not-so-gentle reminder from the panel convenor that I need to email them an abstract for the paper NOW!
Damn! It’s only August. How can this be the most urgent task for today? February is ages away. I’m working three different itty-bitty underpaid jobs and I’m still unpacking all my books after moving house for the second time in six months so my wee study is a mess and -I’ve-got-my-youngest-to-taxi here-there-everywhere and I’ve-got-elderly-parents-that-I’m-worried-about-and-a-man-has-arrived-to-install-a-smart-meter and I had to clear-out-all-the-mess-from-the-under-stair-cupboard-in-front-of him and-I-felt-embarrassed-by-the-clutter-and-ashamed-at-the-dust-and-dirt that shows up just how messy my life has been and how slatternly I’ve become and I’m stressed and I’m overwhelmed and I’m ‘put upon’ and I’m trying to write up that thesis that everyone wonders why it’s not already been written and I know myself that I should have just written long before now and I breathe... FFS pull yourself together, Jan. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Get yourself a cup of tea at the same time as you are making one for the meter man and then go back and sit down at the computer and just think-just write-feel…

OK. I look at the panel proposal. It is a call to activism. To pick up Chomsky’s (1967) call to see things in their historical perspective. I close my eyes. I feel for a word – JUSTICE – leaps to my mind - I want to make it happen – in my words – I want justice to come alive – to make a difference. I want ‘change’…

And quickly, I type:

My paper will focus on ‘righting the wrongs’ of the lingering past, recognising that the social space we inhabit is historically generated (Skeggs, 1997). Drawing on psychoanalytic and sociological literatures around hauntings and the transmissions of traumas (Abraham and Torok,1994; Coles, 2011; Fromm 2012; Frosh, 2013; Gordon, 2008; Schützenberger,1998) which Prager (2015) argues is one of the most pressing problems of our times, I explore how working-class women are silenced across generations, leaving secrets and truths unresolved and unacknowledged… and I will consider how this impacts those who live in the aftermath.

Bringing classed and gendered voices back into the picture I will demonstrate the ways in which silenced/ passive/unheard voices from the past remain active in our present. In this instance, my activism is a way of arguing for grounding research in ways which take a step back from what can seem at times to be a discourse of methodological elitism in the academy where, as Skeggs suggests, a kind of playfulness is theorised, which is in sharp contrast to the lives of ‘ordinary people’ which are “regulated, circumscribed, denied and criminalised” (1997:15).

I type fast and loud – bashing the keys with a confident attitude that I do not own but know I must muster up to get the task done. Lucey (Gillies & Lucey, 2007) says we carry insecurity from our past
into our research because of deeply ingrained beliefs we cannot fully leave behind. I imagine a snail – the silvery trail it leaves behind – a trace of where it has been as it moves slowly carrying its home with it wherever it goes. Bachelard (1958/1994) says we carry our lares with us… I stop and stare at my flying-writing fingers: I have Mum to thank for them…

Mum wanted me to be a secretary ‘not a skivvy like her’ so when I am 13, she insists I take secretarial studies at school. But perhaps that is only part of the story that I tell myself, because I’ve only got to dig just a wee bit further to see that this narrative of Mum’s desire for me to be a secretary – to do better – is perhaps always already sat in the little-girl body of the 7 year old ‘me’ who posts her letter to Santa on the roaring coal fire, asking… *please, Santa… bring me a desk and a typewriter!* And I see her delight when she borrows the ‘Teach Yourself to Type’ and ‘Learn Shorthand’ books out of the local library…

Diligent. My little fingers patiently-endlessly-practiced asdf – ;lkj in the binary world of my childhood. Then they stretched to reach out to carefully thud surrounding letters with the correct fingers. Then I type words. Then I type sentences. Always other peoples’ words. Type-typing-bashing on a clunky manual keyboard with my eyes shut tight.

Cixous always handwrites – scribbles, choosing to exclude machinery – writing instead on all different weights and shades of paper with pens that do not resist because she sees writing as a corporeal and she wants to write as if her body envelopes her own paper – as if she were “writing on the inside of herself” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:105).

Handwriting allows space for “a free arrangement of words and phrases on a page” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:x) and Cixous uses dots – dashes – hesitations – falterings in her texts and notebooks as she tries to keep pace with the seeds of writing – a style that is both alien to the tidy order of word-processed text and challenging for her translators (Cixous & Sellers, 2004; Sellers, 2004).

Writing by hand assumes the speed of the body and is linked to the personal (Stewart, 1996).

Sometimes I want to be like Cixous and to write on all different shades and weight of paper and to take the time to handwrite my words. But my adult body seems to only know how to write herself – to write ‘me’ – my becoming woman-self – by typing - at speed – with those typing fingers I nurtured as a child as I practiced learning to type-write. It is the fastest way for me to record my thoughts and Cixous
says speed of writing is imperative before immediacy and truth are “lost or veiled over by time” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:xi).

And I type…with my eyes wide-awake but tightly shut… I type-write from and through my body. Sometimes the speedy click-clicking of my fingers hitting the keyboard reminds me of the click-click-clicking of the pointy high heels I once wore with a mini-skirted power suit back in the hey of ‘my having the whole wide wonderful world at my feet’ career-girl days where I forgot who I was and became more than me. A grittier me. Not powerful per se. But confident. Professional. Comfortable enough in my own skin as I take on a man’s world in the financial services industry.

Responding to Seller’s observation that she writes in shorthand like a galloping horse in a race to catch words before they disappear, Cixous says “If I could film my thinking it would be better!” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:121). Elsewhere, she talks of the painter as being “the combatant of enigma” (Cixous, 1991:110) who races at speed with the challenging audacity of light, and she notes that a true painter does not know how to paint but looks instead for the secret… And I feel the rush of wanting to paint-type-write-sing-dance– it feels like my childhood/ professional/ personal /academic worlds crescendo and collide in the body that typed the abstract - playing the computer keyboard like a well-rehearsed pianist plays their piano. A body that has written towards the ‘there-not-there’ of family secrets. And for a moment, I feel a steady satisfaction of accomplishment in the speed of unleashing thinking onto the screen. Ten minutes to feel-type-write. Ten more minutes to search the computer for references. Bish-bash – and bosh - the abstract is done!

And I sit back and re-read it. I tinker with it a tiny bit as I revel in ‘the high’ that only comes to me with the sheer loveliness of words – my words-ideas-ways of thinking about the world mingling with the words-concept-theories of those who have come before me – their languaging of words that I inherit and pick up to make sense of, to help clarify my research: and I bask in the glow of words. This passion – this high – it is a ‘more than’ – I think it is jouissance! There is no equivalent word in the English language for ‘jouissance’, but Wing (2008) suggests otherwise, noting that it is a word with simultaneously sexual, political and economic tones. And I see ‘jouissance’ in my mind’s eye like a burning fireball with sparks leaping…

It is full of feist. And I hold this in my hands – this jouissance when I pick up Cixous call to write – “an insurgent writing” (1976b:880)! I feel its power as it sparks and snaps at my fingers…it’s in the speed – the unfiltering – the writing from a body that keeps up with the unpoliced mind – the fingers that type
the words faster than I can think them - where it remembers what has been read-thought-written before and it sets it down without fuss – without thinking – just feeling …it…and

Yes! I bloody love this feeling! And I bloody love this abstract! It makes me sound authoritative. I feel the contradiction. But anyway, I love it regardless. Yes. It’s written. Done and dusted. Yes! Tick! It is a small victory – but it is one that I have won. I attach it to an email reply to the panel convener and quickly press the arrow to send and then I go downstairs to see how the meter man is getting on.

February 2019: Risky Business

February has rolled around fast. How can it be here already? How can I be here already with a still unwritten conference paper? It’s the night before I need to present my paper. I’ve struggled to write the paper. I planned to write it over Christmas. It’s not bad time management. It’s not for lack of trying. I might not have written the paper but I’ve walked, driven, pondered and written the paper time and again in my head and on the page. I’ve fought with words, theories and concepts. And now – today – with no paper ready to present – just lots of disparate bits and pieces of half-written paragraphs and shifty moving words and sentences I realise that I’ve got nothing of substance because I cannot face where my écriture féminine writing to inquire has brought me and what it asks me to stand up and say...

And I’ve been sitting at the computer staring at words -moving them about – trying to make them fit together as a conference paper and I can’t remember what I was going to write this paper about. It is obvious – I know it - it’s based on my thesis – I know it in my body – felt it – read it – written it - and I have spent the last two years living it as I took up the call to sit in three key scenes of writing. Nevertheless, I might know it but I do not want to face it. I have avoided it. And somehow I do not know how or where to begin to make my conference paper end the way I want it to.

I fight with words. I want to master them. Make them reflect my ‘cleverness’. Richardson (2001) says language is her sword and shield. But language and my ability to speak it – to speak what writing from my body thinks – feels overwhelmingly suffocating right now. Stifling. And I feel the panic rise as the hours to go until I need to present my conference paper creep closer and I struggle to strut my writerly stuff on a still undone page where my wish to control threatens to silence what my research has revealed to me. And it’s in these moments of panic-desperation where there is the threat of crashing and burning – where writing renders us speechless…where Cixous calls me “descend into the sea” (1993:5)... where Cixous calls me to “swim in language” (1991:114)... where Cixous calls me to “be
carried on the dream’s mane” (1993:107). And I think of ‘white horses’ – the breaking waves of the river near my home… And I think we can sail too close to the wind – too far out at sea – but as Cixous argues - you’ve got “to descend and work against the current, against the earth (1993:6), become an "airborne swimmer, in flight" (1976b:889) because "seas are what we make of them.. and we ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beach, tide, swimmers, children, waves…”. And I know I need to dive in if I am going to go beyond the transparent to the heart of any opaque moving matter. Berlant and Stewart call me to write the sentence “Matter has a heartbeat” and let it be a guide for rethinking thought’s air supply” (2019:82). I have no air to breathe-to think. I sink. Don’t panic – I tell myself - but I’m in too deep. I am a poor swimmer. I am afraid of the water. And I can’t tread water. I panic. Don’t drown. Focus - breathe. I am afraid of what lies beneath in the depths below - but I have a strong survival instinct so I lie on my back and focus on not wondering-worrying for now – instead I stare into the infinite mysteries of the dark night sky above – and as I stare at the stars it is all quite clearly revealed once again in their twinkle-twinkling brightness– and I touch the fear – the fear of what has always been unsayable – the ‘what has been taken’ from us before - the ‘what if…’ – the fear of the unspoken family curse that sits at the heart of our central family story – the central family story that is passed down along the line of ‘strong women’ from which I come…

I stare at the wooden Matryoshka doll sitting in its place on my desk. I pick it up and open up the nested dolls. And I click onto the ‘Finder’ app in my computer to search for old words...

August 2017: The Matryoshka Doll

We live in other people’s pasts whether we know it or not, or whether or not we want to do so (Tonkin 1992). Stories we inherit from our ancestors offer a framework for understanding our identity through theirs (Goodall, 2005) as stories ask us to consider our connections and relations to a particular time and place (Brockmann, 2017) and children listen and learn to situate events and place family members in relation to ‘before’ or ‘after’ they were born which offers a finite sense of intervention in the world and helps family identity to be built up (Tonkin, 1992)…

Mum told me stories about ‘our past’ as I grow up. You are a lucky wee girl, Jan…you’ve got so many opportunities I never had…we struggled just to make ends meet! There was plenty of love and always food on the table, but it was a hard life…your Maw and Dey didn’t have two ha’pennies to rub together when I was growing up. You don’t know your born these days with all the opportunities you’ve been given…just make sure you use them… but always remember where you came from mind – that’s important – and you’re a lucky wee girl because you come from good stock…. And then, there is a pause before the inevitable punchline that I have come – over the years – to recognise as the family story that establishes ‘me’ as who ‘I am’, ‘who ‘I have always been’ and who ‘I will always be expected
Four generations of women feature in this ‘long line of strong women’: me, Mum, Mum’s mum (Nana), and Nana’s mum (Maw). Each of us in this ‘long line’ were birthed at home into the arms of a close-knit declining mining community. Each of us were named and christened ‘Janet’ after each other, although each of us is given (their own ‘pet name’: I am ‘Jan’, Mum is ‘Janette’, Nana is ‘Jennet’ and Maw is ‘Nettie’. Each of us are also gifted the maiden names of our maternal grandmother and great-grandmother as middle names. At school, other girls have sensible middle names like ‘Catherine’ or ‘Margaret’ whilst I have two silly-sounding middle names that induce schoolgirl-giggling and, to top of it, the teachers call me ‘Janet’ because that is my ‘official’ name. Derrida (1995) philosophically questions ‘what’s in a name? I practically question the seeming senselessness of lumbering a child with a name they are not called. Mum remains unreservedly unrepentant…Don’t be silly Jan, you were named after Nana and Maw and you couldn’t be named after two better folk!

The history you share with family begins before you are even conceived. In our earliest biological form, an unfertilised egg, you already share a cellular environment with your mother and grandmother.

When your grandmother was five months pregnant with your mother, the precursor cell of the egg you developed from was already present in your mother’s ovaries. This means that before your mother was even born, your mother, your grandmother and the earliest traces of you were all in the same body – three generations sharing the same biological environment” (Wolynn, 2016:25).

This biological fact plants a rather beautiful image of a set of Matryoshka Dolls in my mind….

Conceived in September 1922, Nana grew, in the aftergloom of the Great War, safe and snug, cradled in the womb of Maw’s belly before making her entry into the world in June 1923. And Mum, not even a twinkle-in-the family’s eyes was already there too, hidden within Nana in pregnant Maw, as the precursor cell of the egg she develops from is already present in the ovaries of the foetal life Maw nurtures in her swelling belly. Born into the general austerity of post-war Britain and a loving but neglectful and meagre childhood, Mum makes an unexpectedly quick entrance into the world in January 1946. Maw, popping out to the coal bunker to stoke up the fire, hears a loud scream from Nana as she labours and bustling back into the bedroom she says Aye, a few more screams like that
and you’ll have the bairn! But she is greeted by the Midwife’s smiles ‘Aw away with you… she’s just given birth to a fine baby girl!’.

That fine baby girl - Mum - already silently holds the key to the cells that will become ‘Me’ before she is born. Just as Mum lay within Nana nestled in Maw, so I lie cradled -a one in two million chance ready in waiting to be conceived - snug inside Mum nestled in Nana. And in the fullness of times, I will roar into the world whimpering Mum says like a ‘wee sheepy-meh’ – just after 8pm on the Glorious Twelfth 1971, three long weeks past my due date and three years before the threat of a Miners’ Strike that will force the Heath government to impose a three-day working week. Born a Thursday’s Child – wrinkled and blue – and Mum will earnestly assert with no hint of superstition ‘Lucky to be alive! – I am plunged into a hot bath to revive me. Scheduled to have her labour induced on Friday 13th Mum is relieved when the Midwife arrives a day early to ‘start her’ because she knew if they waited any longer I wouldn’t be here… and I was right… your afterbirth was black and rotting … just one more day and you would have died!’.

Thirty years will pass before I give life to the baby girl who, born destined to be another chain in the link of the ‘strong line of strong women’, was already in the ovaries of the ‘Me’ that grew, nestled and cradled in Mum’s womb in the long-hot miniskirted summer of 1971. And when my youngest glides silently into the world, her slippery body beating against my chest in March 2002 – ten days after her due date, and one day and a whole new century before-or-after what would have been the 102nd birthday of her great-great grandmother, Maw – it is the sterile harsh glare of neutral hospital striplights and the latex-gloved fingers of a textbook-wise wide-eyed Student Midwife, still awed by the messy realities of a labour room and panicked at the relentless speed of the delivery rather than the experienced arms of the community Midwife neighbours and the strong family women who have come and seen it all before that lie in wait to greet her birth-bloodied body.

I tell my youngest about the nesting Matryoshka dolls. And then I remember … Do you know … when I was pregnant with you… I am told to ‘Stop!’ but I carry on regardless as I share my image of the nesting dolls. And do you know… when I first felt you move –my fingertips tracing your first flutters through the stretching skin on my belly it was the 11th September 2001. Your brother was playing on the floor with the wooden train set and I was sitting on the sofa watching live television coverage of the Twin Towers. I was overwhelmed with love as I felt your quickening and I was so glad you were safe and secure inside me but I remember wondering what kind of world I was bringing my baby into… but I suppose there has always been wars and I had money and security and a nice home and I was lucky – and you were lucky too because you weren’t ever going to have to go without - and now I wonder what it was like for Maw and Nana giving birth after wars with no money or security and… My voice
trails off as I falter for what to say next…I feel something…but I’m not sure what? Pain? Shame? Judgement? Anger? I do not know…so I gloss over it and continue chatting to my youngest…anyway, I just thought you might want to know where you come from… and you come from me and Gran and Nana and Maw… you come from a long line of strong women… and don’t you forget that…!

And I click back from old words – my ‘writings-in-progress’ papers that Richardson suggests I keep to allow my future research self to claim a research territory and improve my self-reflexivity as they help me find my “frame, tone, narrative stance, metaphors and audience” (1990:49).

February 2019: The Curse

…and I am back staring at the unfinished unravelling conference paper. And I see the unwritten family curse stare back in the midst of one of the central family stories that places me in the world. Mum knows it. Nana knows it. Maw knew it before them. And I remember the fear – invisible – silent – unacknowledged. An Aunt lets it slip. We all know it. It is one of those unspoken family secrets (Pincus and Dare, 1978). But Aunt ‘marries in’ to the family so perhaps she misses out on the vital piece of information that invisibly seeps through the blood line and dictates what I picked up at birth or perhaps knew before in the womb: there are things we know in our families – that we are born into - that must not ever be spoken…. And this is one of these things of which we do not speak. It is something unspeakable that McNay (2009) might agree with me is one of those secrets that serves one of the many purposes she says secrets in families keep – and its purpose is protection. Yes. I need to protect myself from this secret that ‘we know but do not talk about’. It is too bad. Unthinkable. I must not write it in case I speak it into life and it comes true. Avoid it. Yes. The long line of strong women I come from has made what Zerubavel would likely agree with me is very much a concerted effort to avoid this secret like a giant boulder is in the room but cannot be spoken about and “one always must walk around it, tiptoe on eggshells, it is a minefield – furniture is to be rearranged to walk round the elephant” (2006:84). Yes I think - it is like the elephant in the snowglobe in the wee room of my own: patchwork – chameleon like – it is an elephant that has lived and blended in to so many anaglypta-wood-chip-magnolia and sticky-nicotined brown hessian domestic ordinary wallpapers over the years.

And I see Aunt as she sits in the memory lane of my mind. Loving. Kind. Fun. I adore her. But I watch her carelessness. She spills it all over as she feeds my baby cousin who suckles at her breast. I remember sitting against the kitchen door in Nana’s kitchen. Aunt – my beloved godmother - is lovingly nursing her baby. My brother is on the other side of the door because he is a boy and he is not allowed in with ‘the women’: he has to sit with ‘the men’ in the living room. I feel privileged. I like
being with the women. I observe them carefully as I learn from them as they teach me to become a woman – like them. Aware of me, they talk above me. Like all those little girls before me, I am already in training – learning- becoming a little women in my undeveloped little girl body. And I am careful in my practice of averting my eyes from Aunt’s breasts – whilst at the same time my eyes are eager as I colour in my drawing book whilst carefully stealing sneaky intrigued glances at them as the baby suckles - because I do not want Mum or Nana to notice my interest and banish me from the room. Nursing is private. It is ‘women’s business’, but I already know – because the women have taught me – that it is a wee bit taboo – actually that’s not the word – my little girl-self knows that it is a wee bit ‘dirty’ even though it is ‘natural’. And I am a good little girl. And ‘good’ also means ‘clean’.

And this is the scene when the curse is actually spoken out aloud – given voice – makes its leap into air space. Aunt says it in the midst of the mundane routine of Mum and Nana making another one of the endless cups of tea that we all drink – milky and sweet - in my childhood.

I sit there – just like Mum before me - as Hochschild (2003) suggests - I am a little sociologist-in-the-making as I eavesdrop and watch the adults around me in context - Ouch! - The nursing baby has bit Aunt. Ouch! Nana and Mum sympathise. Oh aye it hurts when they bite like… their wee gums are sharp…but oh… you still love them so even when they hurt you. It is a matter-of-fact tacit fact and Aunt nods and agrees. oh yes…ouch – yes… it does hurt, so it does … but oh how much I love him – oh yes – Mum and Nana agree again – oh yes how we love our wee babies so – and then Aunt slips it in - gives it voice – she just says it - quietly - oh but she could not bear anything to happen to her wee baby… oh she could not and she knows it’s silly but she envies Mum a wee bit because – you know…

– and Aunt’s voice trails as she nods to me as I sit on the kitchen floor – my brother’s back visibly sitting behind mine at the other side of the opaque glass door – I mean – you know – Mum is lucky because we are ‘past the age’ – and of course it is silly superstitious nonsense – I mean - she knows this – but still… she will be grateful when her tiny wee baby is older – has turned 8 – because well you know…And there it is – it just hangs there – just for a moment. And I watch the women as their eyes all meet in the middle as they continue to make the tea and I know they are already preparing to hush-hush-brush-brush the unspeakable under the carpet quickly – to paint the elephant over so it blends back into the sticky ingrained greasy chip-pan tiles of Nana’s kitchen. And they nod – quick – oh yes - oh aye And Mum is careful to nod that she knows she is lucky – oh yes she is lucky my brother and I are both over 8 years old but of course it’s just silly superstitious nonsense – nothing to worry about.

Yes. The women agree. Nonsense. And hush-brush – it gets swallowed all up - as they agree and the room goes quiet - oh aye but the wee babies oh how you love them so. And of it goes. But it was there just long enough for me to catch something of it…I saw-it-heard-it-felt-it…already knew it - the fear that something might happen to a child: what if a child dies – doesn’t reach their 8th birthday –
that is something we worry about as women in our family – and… it is the fear that lurks – the terrible fear – it lurks even when it is swept away.

And as I stare away from memory lane back to the unravelling paper, I feel it wound me. I feel it flood and overwhelm me - the fear – it bites me with sharp teeth – my words hurt me - my efforts to write are too difficult and beyond my strength… and I find myself remembering another story… it is a little threadlike story – it is almost fairy tale like – ethereal – unreal - but it’s stitches have deep roots. It is an old story. Not often told as part of the main story. It is the story of wee John… and of an ‘Aunt Winnie’…it is a story I often forget…but how could I forget it because when Mum tells it to me she is careful to remind me not to forget wee John…?

...oh do you know… Mum says – not often – but sometimes when we are at the cemetery – and we go for a walk away from wee Jim and Maw and Dey’s graves, Mum will point out another grave….see there – that’s where Maw’s wee boy – wee John – is buried. Oh he died – young – I don’t know how old and his name is not on the gravestone because there was no money for that sort of thing but – do you know- I remember they always said that when he died your Maw’s sister – your Nana’s Aunt Winnie - well – she said to Maw and Dey – ‘oh aye may every wean that goes in that crib go the same way as that one’… and oh – it was a terrible thing.. and your Dey took that crib and – ...And then depending on the way I re-hear or Mum tells the story - Dey either burns or breaks up the wooden crib – because as Mum says…oh your Dey promised that no wean of his would go in that crib or go that way ever again!

Staring at the in-process-of-being-written-but-still-unwritten unravelling conference paper – I wonder about the story of wee John and Aunt Winnie’s curse. Why did she wish the wee boy dead? Did she really speak this curse? Was it actually said or was it something that she might have meant but not said but Maw and Dey knew she felt it? Did it never exist? What went on behind the family scenes of a story where Maw’s sister sounds glad wee John is dead and has the audacity to wish death on more of Maw and Dey’s future offspring…? But I have no time to wonder because I need to finish the conference paper – it needs to be written and all I know for now is that perhaps unlike my Aunt who ‘marries into’ the family and marries into the fear - I have always known it. And I have heard it. Witnessed it. Seen it – and heard it in the scream – as it invisibly materialised in my unpolicing writing. But as I stare at the conference paper on my screen I know that somehow I cannot yet type it. Maybe I never will. I will forget it. Will not acknowledge it. What if I say it - write it - acknowledge it and make it come true? Ha. I think of Papa. A voice of reason. Papa who would laugh at ‘The Red Paragraph’ that sits in the background of my thesis. Papa whose voice would laugh out loud at women who believe all those Old Wives’ tales and superstitious nonsense or curses.
Boyhorn (2013) says her life is dominated by Old Wives’ Tales. I do not think mine was dominated by them but the importance of these tales was instilled on me by Mum – and especially Nana. *Ha.* Don’t be ridiculous. *Ha.* You are being ridiculous. I hear Papa mocking. And I repeat it to myself. Ridiculous? If you are being called ridiculous it is because you sound it – look it – are it – and now you think your words are so powerful – so magic – they can make things happen – come true. Really? That is what your research is about? That really is ridiculous…. Enough. I need some sleep.

And I go to bed setting an early alarm that I do not need because no doubt ‘my age’ will wake me with its regular creeping flush of heat before 4am. Ping. The messy menstruating-menopausal female body in its almost predictable untidy mess glory. And I close down words and settle to sleep. And I wake in the tunnel of early hours betwixt night-and-day and again I do battle – I write, delete, re-write the never-ending unravelling conference paper.

Then I shower-dress and paint my nails with a coat of sheerest pale pink that gives them a natural sheen. Clean and presentable. Tick.

And I travel to the conference and I write-and-rewrite. Hardworking and industrious. Tick.

And I chair a session with competence. Professional. Tick.

And then I find a quiet place away from all the other delegates so I can do more battle with the think-write-rewriting patience that Speedy (2008) reminds researchers wishing to write to inquire must need – but it’s not patience that’s needed here, I think – it’s a grit to dig to the core – the bloody core.

And so I find myself – ‘in a quiet place’ - sitting on a hard plastic chair in the swimming pool complex next to the conference centre. It is busy with human bodies playing, swimming, exercising. The heat coming through from the swimming pool is stifling. And I panic again –the paper is still not finished. I’ll have to read what I’ve got. And I don’t like it. And what if I am overcome when I present and I cry. I will feel silly, pathetic, exposed: I am unprofessional and ridiculous. I think around the theory around ethics when we tell our stories and Tolich’s (2010) critique of current practice. And I hear children scream in the soft play. And I realise that what I’ve written has been here before me – it’s not something brand new – it’s come from me. I’ve already written it before, felt it before, forgotten it before – just like Cixous and her “guardian notebooks” (2018:7). But the unconscious remembers – and my past writings in progress remember- even if a safety valve located somewhere inside me actively works hard to ensure that I forget.
And with time ticking down, sensibly, professionally - I set a timer to check my paper will not overrun as I practice reading what I’ve got aloud – calmly - not to myself – but properly aloud – because no-one will hear me amidst the din of the children’s playful screams and the chit-chatter conversations of the café-goers.

I type a final few sentences...

Time is up! It's got to be done now even if it is still undone.

And the presentation goes well. It was almost pitch-perfect. I stood tall and spoke with a confidence that I owned. Somehow, I weaved in the right amount of light and dark - and just enough theory. The women – ‘the long line of strong women I come from’ - shine through. Their voices are real – and they are heard. And the ‘curse’ that reaches from my text and thrusts its weight on me – it is still there – but I managed to ringfence the terror that the fear evokes – and I protected both myself and the audience from its impact. All I did was tell a story, but it was a polished-enough last-minute written-to-the-wire performance. And I am relieved as I head for the train to go home and I pick up fish suppers for dinner.

Later, exhausted from the day, I am completely spent as I sit in the cosy wee room I made my own when my marriage ended. I take stock of the day. I reread my presentation. And I let myself cry with an almost cheerful abandonment. Damn the body – the working-classed questioning body with its thirsty insatiable longing for always wanting to work harder, do better, read more, write more with a bid to seep it all up like a sponge to know more – for what – to prove it is learned? Damn the typing body that keeps up with the mind – that lets flowing revealing feminine words overflow. Damn Cixous and her call for Woman to read - to write – and then to stand up and open her mouth. Damn Cixous –and her not political –always poetical and not theorisable - and the fear of not being up to the task. And I let tears flow down my face and watery snot run down my nose. And somehow just when I think that I might have reached menopause rather than be endlessly menopasing I realise that after over six months without it - I am bleeding again. It's too much. God is laughing at me. But I'm OK. Because I’m just hormonal. That is why I am being silly. That is why I am being ridiculous. Tears plop on to my keyboard. A material symbol of my despair – my perceived weakness. Blood flows down below. A material symbol of the female curse. People may no longer believe a menstruating woman can spoil meat or turn milk sour: but they once did (Houppert, 2000). And it's somewhat still all a wee bit taboo. I laugh and cry at once. I wipe the tears of my keyboard. I wipe my runny nose on the sleeve of my top. Disgusting! Hysterical!
Writing brought me here. And I realise that I both love and hate being here. My research takes me places. Places me in an ‘entredeux’ – a true-in-between – a nothingness – it has taken-placed and then made me sit-and-be in what Cixous says is one of those moments in life where “you are not entirely living, where you are almost dead” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber: 1997:9). Yes. Mum-Nana-Maw – visiting them in my research and hearing the curse – my words sat me in past scenes of their lives... and I realise there is nowhere else I would rather be or no-one else I would rather be in this moment of becoming with – even if I am a snivelling mess. And I run a bath to wash away the day.

Later, as I sit with my night-time-tea- fresh and fragrant in my fabric-conditioned laundered and ironed linen jammies - I recall last September when I was confronted with love. And I search back through my research diary to re-read my ending to that day...

November 2017: I Love Him Not...

... and it was unremarkable at first ...when I arrived home, I had already attended to stilling the bigger rages that bubbled and boiled in me during the commute and I settled quickly into my domestic rhythm and routine and I let my pent-upness and doubts just ‘be’ and I focused on just being ‘me’ in the present. And I felt truly happy and at peace with my little world of family as I flipped burgers and air-fried chips for dinner and chatted easily with the kids about their days. Like Winterson (2012), I am tame – not wild – but that is because the door was open. I briefly think of Didion (2005) who, when she sets the fire the morning after her husband’s sudden death, notes that she is aware that frozenness to come is hovering and will soon settle upon her.

And as I sit in my own domestic mundane - it is not until much later into the night - when I sit cosy, wearing my jammies, in the dark with the candles lit and only the cat for company, when I am safely cocooned in my own space in the wee room at home where the cheap electric fire whirrs, when I allow myself to unwind back to earlier in the day and I unpackage and release the pent-up-ness...

I bristle at first. Inwardly, I rage and seethe and debate against him as words fly onto the screen... How dare he talk to me about love! A veritable tirade of words roars through me. Of course he does not love me. He wants me. Desires me. No. Not even that. He lusts after some kind of a centre – a belonging – a home. But that is not love. And I am not his home. And I bristle again. He is weak. I am sanctimonious. If he loved me he would not have made a demand for love. That’s not how love works. And what does he know of love? And he dares to question me? I tut. Love is not a word to be so carelessly used. Love is a word that is too delicate and too strong to be so carelessly thrown around and demanded. And suddenly I stop. My fingers pause from typing. Do these words match
anything real or true of what I felt in the spirit of the moment of the confrontation with love? No. Do these words match what I feel now? No. They are scripted words. A mask. A veil. A screen behind which something deeper lies unsaid. Writing has a complex and luminous quality that is always just eluding definition and “the roots of language go deep supplying the essential nutrients of writing” (Blyth & Sellers: 2004:5). Cixous is a believer in the power and potentiality of language, which is a language based on “a knife’s edge of possibility” (Blyth & Sellers, 2004:7). A knife-edge. Yes. A cliff edge.

Life-death and the spaces between. Where my research took me. Right back to my roots. To Maw. The Red Paragraph. Mum on the outside toilet pointing at the twinkling star. Life. Roots. Distance. The universe. I write on a knife edge. And love – yes love: love that Angelou talks towards in her Prologue to *Mom and Me and Me and Mom* as she writes of the love of her mother and grandmother and says it was a powerful love that informed, healed and liberated her. She does not use the word ‘love’ to mean ‘sentimentality’, “but a condition so strong that it may be that which holds the stars in their heavenly positions and that which causes the blood to flow orderly in our veins” (Angelou, 2013/2014:ii).

And I feel it now – And I’ve felt it before – in a poetry class where I write-rapid – blood writing flooding through me – when I write about a twinkling star. A children’s nursery rhyme. And I break down. Publicly – unprofessionally – pathetically - in a classroom. Sometimes – I think - we teeter at the brink of an unfathomable unknowable immensity: but we have to have the courage to let ourselves go there…

and tired, I decide to go to bed. I click my laptop shut. And I notice the cat is staring intently at me from his favourite spot on the arm of the chair. Seemingly indifferent and independent, he makes few demands on me and I know that I am expected to make few, if any, demands on him. And the two of us get along well enough together in this way. I stare softly back into his eyes. He blinks. I smile. It’s a cat kiss. I reach out to pat him. Touch him. I feel his wee heart beating small-animal fast against my hand. He is a living, breathing furry wee enigma. I do not know what he is thinking as he sits purring away beside me.

And I think about Cixous and her cat: the cat’s instinctual desire - the wanting – the murdering for the want. Cixous recalls sparing a dying bird from the mouth of her cat and later thinks ill of her action, and she notes how she is called to be “an accomplice to murder with her” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:122). It reminds me of the day my cat sits with his little paws tucked contented under his favourite tree in the garden with lips blood smeared from the dying bird that lies next to him — *bloody cat – bloody bad cat* - I yell at him – angry – and I think about writing – writing like a cat – a cat that hunts…
And I remember a colleague texts me a picture of the new leopard print coat she has purchased because it is the type of thing I always wear. I tell her I like her new coat. I agree my wardrobe is filled with animal print. And then I say that I almost-sort-of try to employ the cat as a trope for ‘desire’ in my thesis. My desire to write. She responds that this sounds intriguing. But I know it is not. And I stare at the cat beside me now. Domestic, tamed, but still wild: he has sharp claws that he regularly hones; numerous uneaten field mice and baby birds dangle regularly from his blood-smeared lips. But he’s a cat. It’s what they do. It is I think – like writing. You write – you follow the cat – to the scene of murder – to something you do not want to see – and once you see it you cannot unsee it – undo it. Writing might seem ‘playful’, but I have found myself sneaking glimpses of the horror it leads me towards even though it startles me anew each time… maybe it is just me that finds it to be like this…? But I think there is something unstoppable about writing once I start - just like Cixous who says to stop the cat’s desire to catch and kill for play is “incattable” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:122).

And I think about my faux fur coat again. My second pelt: the supposed feminine softness he talks of - and I think about desire. My desire. The desires of the women in the long line I come from. And I re-open my laptop. I try to grip and hang on with tenterhooks to the slippy skin of a world that I try to language but cannot quite grasp: and I feel the density and the intricacy of love – a generous maternal overflowing love - the let-down love – the love that flows through the breast when the mother gives it to nurture her child. Aunt’s love to the baby who bit. Like the love Cixous writes about when she strokes the cat it is with emotion and nostalgia that I touch the sweet, ferocious touch of Thea the cat whose cat I am. The night strokes me. I stroke the night. I stroke the way she wants. This is perfection, I am caressed from my hand right to the tip of my soul the stroking spreads out warm soft small gathered seamlessly into the yoke of an impersonal goodness. It has its effect. My heart opens into a flower. Why isn’t there any warm and soft adjective formed from the word well-being. I am in well-beingness. It is not in the least sexual. We are representatives of love’s gifts, a tenderness which knows hungers and feeds on it. Hunger to give and be received. The reflexive form of gratitude, the well-being that hides in the doing good…. I feel a kind of goodness that nourishes the body’s staving soul and from this touching emanates an intoxicating gratitude, sublime beverages. Sorts of magic. The act of grace is without acknowledgement (quoted in Messiah in Seggara, 1976:166-167).

And when I left the actual scene of my confrontation with his love it is my silence that offers my truth… I go to bed knowing – that when he made me doubt what I know about love– it will be because I will always doubt the kernel of love that sits at the core of my research: the love that the insatiable unstoppable desire for writing – knowledge –leads me towards. But it is a love – a love that I know because I have seen it – felt it – heard it and have written it. Love is an exchange that involves giving without receiving. And that involves some sacrifice and some pain with no expectation of return or gain.
February 2000: A Rightful Inheritance

When Nana dies, Mum (as the eldest and only daughter) is ‘given her place’. Apparently, it is ‘only right’ that her younger (and only living) brother takes care of the official paperwork and funeral arrangements whilst Mum is tasked with clearing out Nana’s clothes and ‘divvying up’ her personal treasures.

Nana never had much - but Mum –in the midst of the shock that will settle in to reside in her as a hollowed out deep decade long tunnel of daughterly grief - manages to take pride in laying out the bits and pieces of jewellery and perfume that Nana left behind on the kitchen bunker. As the eldest and only maternal granddaughter, I too am rightly given my place when Mum grants me first pick…

I want the string of beads. And the charm bracelet. I want the emerald earrings. Oh, and of course the gold locket should be mine! Careful! There will be nothing left for anyone else! Mind that you’ll inherit more of Nana’s things from me when I pass on! Stop it Mum! I don’t want to think about that! OK. No Mum, of course I don’t want Nana’s fur coat. Even the charity shop won’t take that. Dad will have to take it to the tip. But Mum I must have the sheepskin mitts. Nana held my hand in them. And I want the pink toiletry bag, after all that was mine and I only lent it to Nana when she went into hospital. And I want the bottle of ‘Anais Anais’ because I bought that for Nana at Christmas. OK… is that you done now… enough? Yes.

Feb 2014: From the Cradle to the Grave

Mum and Dad move out of the ex-council house that was our family home to live in an assisted care housing complex. We moved when I am 2 ½. The dismantling of my childhood home feels like a big event but I don’t have time to take it all in. This will be my parents’ last move together. I think it feels a big event for them too but they don’t say anything because they don’t want to burden me and there is no time for any of us to think about it in the midst of the busy-buzz of the packing up to move. And I don’t know how I feel about it all yet. It is one of those things that just takes you over – like a ball rolling down a hill – we are running after it trying to catch up – but it has momentum – like the little click-clacking balls on the Newton’s Cradle on my desk at home - and it’s not going to stop and wait for me.

There will be no room for sentimentality in their tiny new home, so decades of family belongings have been placed in the hall for my brother and I to sift through to decide what we want to keep and what
Dad can take to the charity or dump. I come across a stuffed toy I made for Mum at school to give to Mum as a gift when I am just six years old. A deep injustice sits in the clumsy little girl stitches of this toy I gifted to Mum. I pick it up and stare back in time at my little-girl-self facing injustice and hurt. And I feel her anger. And I feel a red flush slowly make its way over my cheeks. And oh, how I know that right now I am holding ‘shame’ all over again. Burning shame. My little girl self knew shame before she could name it. She was born into it.

After Mum and I walk through the hallway and out the front door of the bare emptied scrubbed-clean shell of a house for the last time, I remember the stuffed toy gift and the way it took me straight back to injustice and shame. But I smile at Mum as I lock the front door for the final time on my main childhood home because Mum is bursting with pride as she tells me she knows other people laughed and ridiculed folk like her who worked hard and took pride in making ‘wee palaces’ out of their council houses, but she is proud of the home she made for us. And - because her and Dad made sure they had sorted things out with a lawyer and gifted the house to me and my brother many years before - she is proud that once I deposit the keys with the solicitor to pass on to the new owner, it will be us – their children - who will inherit the money when we split the proceeds of the sale. Mum and Dad might never have had much - but what they had - they wanted to give to us.

There is no room to swing a cat in Mum and Dad’s new flat, so I agree to store things at mine. I am tasked with being especially careful with a box that contains the family photographs. I am to store it in the house not the loft or the garage. And Mum is keen that one day we must sit together - her and I – to look carefully through the photos because she wants to show and tell me more about my maternal great-grandparents, Maw and Dey. I want you to know them because I want you to know what good folk you come from! And Mum is keen to show me pictures of herself as a little girl. I want you to see what a different world it was that we lived in back then. I’m not particularly interested. I’m certain I’ll have heard the stories and seen the photos before at some family gathering. I’ve always been told ‘Now remember Jan you come from a long line of strong women… blah blah’. I’m not entirely sure there was a long line or that they were strong and I’m not sure how much more I need to know other than what I’ve already heard so I am lukewarm. OK Mum. But you know I’m really-really busy right now so I’m not sure when I’ll find the time …but yes…let’s look through them together… one day. Mum nods. OK… but one day soon?

June 2015: The Madwoman in the Attic

I climb up the loft to bring down the box with the wedding dress. I forget that two of my ‘special Fair Day’ childhood dresses are in the box too as well as an envelope which has a small press of a couple
of snips of the flowers Mum kept from my wedding bouquet before she placed it on Maw’s grave the day after my wedding.

Then I unwrap and unfold the white woollen blanket lying nestled in layers of tissue. It is almost identical to the woollen blanket Mum donated to the refugee aid appeal, but Mum knitted that one: this other one was knitted by Nana. Knitted from the same pattern, the difference between the blankets was a focus of good-humoured family banter. Mum, a more lackadaisical knitter, got ‘carried away’ and forgot to stop knitting so she produced an oversized irregular rectangular blanket that was single-bed-sized in comparison to Nana’s perfectly-measured beautifully-finished pram-blanket-sized square.

The white woollen blanket Mum knitted was borrowed one day from the drawer in the nursery and taken to the hospital so Mum could cover up Nana’s amputated legs. People still cry and feel pain when their limbs are lost. Phantom limbs. Phantom pains. Phantom writing, I think as I bring the box down the loft…

Despite careful wrapping, both the blanket and wedding dress smell a wee bit fusty and their whiteness has faded to take on a yellow hue. I shake out the dress and hold it to me and then I pick up the blanket and hug it against me too. I stare into the reflection of myself in the bedroom mirror. I think the dress might still fit me. I think I look sad…pathetic…vulnerable…? No. I look wild. Like a mad woman. I avert my gaze to avoid meeting my own eyes. And I bundle up the dress and blanket and dried flowers and the dresses Mum saved from my childhood and I stuff them back in their box up the loft.

I pause a second as I come back down from the loft, stuffing fragments from my childhood, my wedding and my tentative steps into early motherhood away. And as I prepare to unfurl the second chapter of the quilt, I want to take a moment – to ponder the gifts – love – generosity – and fear in the material I have placed on top of the lining and batting of my quilt, because as well as little bits of ordinary everyday life in the patches of material, there were some big words and concepts and theories that are impossible for me to pin down…

Cixous uses economic metaphors throughout her oeuvre highlighting the link she makes between sociopolitical and libidinal economies. Cixous argues that a woman writer does not give to get a
return on what she has given because she has the capacity to give without self-interest, “it is why, who, what, I write: milk. Strong nourishment. The gift without return” (1991:49) And as I contemplate notions of the gift, generosity, libidinal economies and jouissance, I look back to Cixous’ words on ‘love’

you entrust yourself to the other. And contrary to what one might think, this is not at all abstract. It is true that one deposits oneself. There is a deposit and one is deposited in the other person. And if the other goes off with the deposit, one truly cannot recuperate the deposit. What was given can never be taken back (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:36)

And as I look back to the bits of myself woven into the fabric of the text: the woman – I am – was – in the process of becoming in light of Cixous’ words and the certainty I sought in the security of a new career as I emerged out of early motherhood into management accountancy and the study of economics, I see that I was caught in the whirl of it all - an endless chase to balancing the books whilst knowing that actually that is not how the real economy of the world I was born into or continue negotiate works.

Cixous says that écriture féminine is

a place (…) which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds (Cixous, 2008:72).

As I move into unfurling Chapter Two, I will be showing the beginnings – the seeds – the germs, “the first glimmerings” (Cixous & Sellers, 2004:119) - of how writing takes me to new worlds and I find myself reinventing my own small world as I quilt the patches of my writing-story with the family stories told through the women in my research as I think with writing to inquire and Hélène Cixous. But as I leave the first chapter – little patches on the floor - the overall picture that jumps out at me…? I think that the overarching theme this section talked towards was the labour – pain – generosity from the remnants of the good milk of a Cixousian ‘maternal love’.
CHAPTER TWO: Methodology and Method

Blending personal and family stories with musings of methodology around a coming to writing to inquire with Cixous, I lay another chapter of tentatively patched together pieces. Home-abroad appears as both the idea of adventuring in writing (Badley, 2015; Dewsbury, 2014) and finding myself on a nomadic journey of inquiry (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) that takes forward absence and presence and strangeness with the Cixousian concept of the “entredoux” as the strangeness of “being abroad at home” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997:9). I tentatively open ‘the uncanny’ (Freud, 1919/2003; Cixous, 1976a; Derrida, 1994) as less of an intellectual construct but as a feeling-sensing – which will be developed further in Chapter Three.

Methodological issues are grappled with in the presentation of a conference paper which gives a sense of context as my thinking-writing behind-the-scenes emerges as I seek to tell a writing-story showing process rather than a final product as I struggle - as Cixous predicts – to stand as woman and speak – as “the woman arriving over and over again [who] does not stand still” (1976b:893). Vulnerabilities-fragilities – the sense of a self behind the scenes of the professionalism we work hard to present (Goffman, 1959/1969) are brought to the fore as I negotiate honouring the women in the stories that my writing takes me back to – even if I know – somewhere deep-down – that this might be a futile attempt because I cannot ever capture everything… or actually know what I am being called to speak-tell-show.

There is a very colourful patch in this section: ‘The Word Cloud’. This is a visual depiction of where writing to inquire took me. Theories-personal-political-space-time-concepts mingle. Many of these things – put under erasure – disappear and become invisible from the main text that becomes this thesis as an academic product… but they remain – a trace - as a piece of material in the patchwork quilt. And they are visually represented here to give a sense of how they informed the work of this research.

This research comes to life as it gathers a myriad of patches of my research-writing journey as a patchwork quilted ‘writing story’ (Richardson, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 2001, 2011; Richardson & St Pierre, 2018). As such, it weaves together a fluid writing-storying of my research that shows me in the process of writing-thinking-reading-speaking-presenting in my writing to inquire with Cixous, but it also includes the words-concepts-ideas of others in my research process. In presenting patches of writings-in-progress in this chapter, I acknowledge that, in hindsight, I could have invoked Cixous at various points, for example where, Cixous writes of the ‘uncanny’ not just in her questioning-critique of Freud (1976a), but in her own ‘sensing’ of the ‘uncanny’ where she writes of the secret of ‘the-ability-
‘to-write’ where “there are the people who want to write and cannot. Who put on the brakes. They are dealing with themselves, there is a stranger living in them, inhibiting them, countering them” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1999:39), or, where Cixous writes of “doorkeepers, who while closing one side ‘give’ way to the other” (1993:7) at the gate of death…

However, instead, the patches here are stitched together as patches- of moments-stops – in my research-voyaging-journeying with Cixous’ helping-hand along with the helping hands-words-literature of others- because, as Blyth and Sellers note

at its heart, Cixous’ theory is an encouragement to others to write and read for themselves, not to follow slavishly in her footsteps, but to set off of on their own journeys, their own quests, to search out and explore their own questions (2004:114-115)

It should be noted that whilst this text has been woven together differently and anew, some paragraphs in ‘The Matryoshka Doll’ have been previously published in the book chapter Between a Rock and a Hard Place (Bradford, 2019) and some of the storying in this chapter relates to writing included in the book chapter Writing to Inquire in the Midst of Thin Air (Bradford, 2019).

May 2014: Follow the Yellow Brick Road
My research takes me far from home. Less than one year after my marriage ends and six months after my doctoral research programme begins, I found myself onward bound as I travelled from my home in bonnie Scotland to present at an international conference…

There is much excitement at home.
I want to go –
I want to stay at home.
Mum wants me to go – go!
The kids want me to stay at home – don’t go!
I do not know it, but this will become a familiar theme as I research-write and am led to travel and present at conferences and step outside the domestic comfort of the family home. I do not know then – that over the next few years- writing into the there-not-there of family secrets with Cixous - will find me feeling exposed…
July 2018: The Reflexivity Paper

I have travelled for a writing retreat at an academic friend’s home to write a chapter for a book showing my reflexivity-in-action. I am tired from an early rise to catch my flight even though I always wake early with menopausal-sleeplessness. I am not at rest. My brain is foggy. A fog that has settled. And although I should be writing, I struggle to write without reading first. It is annoying. Time-consuming. Sometimes I worry it is a form of procrastination. But as Segarra notes, Cixous invents a word for this – *lirecrire* – (‘readwrite’) which shows that “both activities make one single gesture” (2010:23) Cixous says she loves “reading-writing” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:57) and claims “A real reader is a writer, A real reader is already on the way to writing” (Cixous, 1993:21)…so, feeling like Cixous has given me permission, I pick up my well-worn- grubby-sun-cream copy of *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* that I packed for company, and let it fall open onto a page and I read…

Between the writer and his or her family the question is always one of departing while remaining present, of being absent while in full presence, of escaping, of abandon. It is both utterly banal and the thing we don’t want to know or say. A writer has no children; I have no children when I write. When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself, I am a virgin; I leave from within my own house and I don’t return (Cixous, 1993:21).

WHAT! I have no children when I write! I’ve read these words before – highlighted them in the book - but have clearly not taken them in…fear gnaws…I have not felt these words hit me like this before. I need to make contact with my kids. And I quickly shut the book. Tearful, I pick up my mobile and phone home. I speak to my youngest. All OK at home…? Yes. Are you missing me…? Eh no…not really. Oh. OK. Remember to phone if you need me! Yes. OK. Love you. Chat soon… And the line goes dead. My eyes swell. I stare at the small carry-on suitcase opened but unpacked sitting on the floor next to me.

I was born on a Thursday. Thursday’s child proverbially has far to go. Mum often tells me this when I am a child. I imagined all the places I might travel to as I travelled far into the world. Now, lying stretched out on the bed I will sleep in tonight, I seek comfort. The duvet cover is pretty. Floral. Homely. Comforting. I like it. And I stare out towards the open window. The afternoon sky is so beautifully cloudless – a sparkling blue. But the air is muggy. Like my head. And I look back at the book in my hand. I touch the words I’ve highlighted. I sniff the book to see if a hint of coconut-sun-cream remains. And I inhale a memory…
The memory takes me back to reading the typeset words of this book under another blue sky – a foreign blue sky where I lay on a sun lounger as my children splashed around happily in an infinity pool where the chemically filtered contained water connived to give the appearance of lapping up against the Mediterranean Sea but it was in fact miles away down below in the distance. And I remember feeling far from home then too. And I wonder: am I infinitely always destined to be far from home as I research. I feel a gaping void.

And I reach out to see-hear what is in the invisible echoing gap. Cixous catches everything by the ear – and eyes are second ears … “the murmurs, the most enigmatic phrases and the angers also that convulse all my being when a drop of poison is served to me on the tympanum’ (1998:189). I remember the conch seashell Mum told me to hold to my ear as a child so I could hear the ocean.

Right now, I hear the rhythmic beat-beat-banging drum of the marching bands back home in my mining town – where the mining wheel now stands stagnant – a statue – a monument to a past that still lives through the life and veins of our town. My town. Where the strong women I come from have always lived… or so Mum says. I don’t know how long this line of women are or how strong really. All I know is what Mum tells me about Maw and what I learn from Nana who I know. I wonder if I am stagnant. Do I stand still? Never moving forward…?

Cixous talks to an Air France employee on the telephone who tells her that she likes her books because they touch her and she says “We all like to touch - to be touched” (1998:188). I re-open *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* and I reach out to touch Cixous (1993) through the typeset words on the page– seeking to let her touch me. Reading-Writing. Mingled. Reading is a “clandestine, furtive act” (Cixous, 1993:21). Yes. I should be writing a paper on reflexivity rather than reading. But “reading is a provocation, a rebellion” (Cixous, 1993:21). Yes. And “reading is escaping in broad daylight” (Cixous, 1993:20). Cixous say she does not think we can write “without having benefitted in childhood from a gift of language…. ” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:38). And language is all powerful because “you can say everything, do everything, that has not yet been said, not yet been done” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:22). Cixous say childhood memories of mouth and tongue have power over our hearts because “they hold secrets about who we were then” (Cixous, 2008b:26)…

My language…my words feel powerful as they reach across time and place and space to touch me…

…and I am transported back in time… I am a little girl – aged 5 and I am sitting on the carpet in Nana’s house….
September 1976: The Word Tin

My little-girl-self sits cross-legged on the brown-orange swirly carpet…. I open the Golden Virginia tobacco tin that once belonged to Papa but has now been fashioned as my Primary One school Word Tin. I inhale the smell of tobacco that hits my nose amidst the already chain-smoking filled room. With reverence I take each crinkle-scissor cut out word that Teacher placed in the tin and I practice saying each word aloud before placing them in sentences on the carpet.

It is a potent powerful memory that pulls me back to the familiarity of my childhood; but it is somewhat ghostly too. I am that little girl. But she is a stranger to me. Scraped-back pony-tail, a good little girl. Pretty. Feminine. Bland. Working-class non-descript. She sits seemingly unaware of the ways the world she lives in has already policed her in to growing up to be pleasing as it hands her a script of gendered-raced-classed respectability. She does not know anything about the technological practices (Foucault, 1988) argues produce the caring self that she will become “through the negotiation and performances of subject positions” (Skeggs, 1997:56) available to her. She sits still innocent of how one day she might play around with different words to describe the world she is growing up in a different way. She is happy there in that moment with her small tin of worlds. My adult-researcher-self would always wish to leave her there – content…

And I touch Cixous' words on the page in front of me again...“Reading is eating the forbidden fruit, making forbidden love, changing eras, changing families, changing destinies, and changing day for night...true reading [is] readings we cannot dissociate from our lives” (1993:21-23)… And I reach out to touch the emptiness. It is palpable. It is stagnant. I rehear-think about the scenes that my writing takes me to – scenes in my hometown-senes back-in-my—past-waiting in the foreshore road at the bus stop next to the billboards – waiting to rewind time – to time-travel back to meet my maternal great-grandmother – waiting-wanting to meet her eyes – to touch her… And momentarily I let myself long for it – it? – What is ‘it’. For what do I long? Something. Anything. Home? Love? The void? The emptiness? Movement. I want just some movement forward. Words to describe how ‘I feel’. I don’t know. And I wonder – where or what is home? So many homes weigh in upon me – offer themselves up to me in my research. So many loving homes. Lost homes…. Overwhelmed… I feel…. what…am I homesick? Perhaps that is the word – the feeling … ‘homesick’...

But back in May 2014, the scene above when I lie on top of a strange bed and I want to speak to my children back home was yet to come….
Back in May 2014 I was nervous with anticipation as I packed a case – when I was in the early adventuring stages of my research as I tried to piece together a conference paper and prepared to fly – for the first time ever – on an international flight – on my own!

Freedom!!!!....and

…I remember that conference paper. I wrote it all - word- for-word - the week before I flew out. ‘I can sing a rainbow’… I printed it on bright rainbow coloured paper I ‘borrowed’ from the office where I worked as an Administrator. I even punched holes and tied the ‘script' with a ribbon. No last-minute writing back then when I was not sure what direction writing might be taking me in. But it all felt hopeful and I felt like I was in control and could contain it all. Oh no! That was before I knew that writing would take me back in time to sit in a playpark – waiting – watching – reflexively-writing into a place where I was waiting to hear a terrible scream – a scream – the scream where hope departs – leaves the body – escapes.

And now - when I remember that rainbow paper script I presented at my first conference, I realise I have no fondness for that paper. It was a bit ‘stodgy’. I need something of the ‘fight or flight’ panic – where I am moved, as Cixous suggests, to wander-roam-fly, because “flying is woman’s gesture flying in language and making it fly (1976b:887) – in order to get something of the beating heart of a moving matter rather than the dependency of solid printed and bound words.

But then I remember the abstract for that paper and the day I wrote it…

January 2014: I can sing a rainbow

This abstract is written on a sunny winter’s day, here in ‘Bonnie Scotland’, known for beautiful landscapes and unpredictable, often ‘dreich’, miserable weather. Yet, today, the sun shines. Then, blue skies turn grey. Then rain. Then, sun again. I search for a rainbow, but to see a rainbow, the conditions must be right: the observer must be between the sun and rain.

I don’t want to be ‘between’: I want to be ‘here’ or ‘there’. Yet, my heart seeks the promise of the rainbow: like Dorothy, torn from her black-and-white life in Kansas, to the colourful Land of Oz; like Noah, releasing his dove, to seek for signs of land.
Between ‘Today’ and ‘Conference Day’, I cannot be sure what direction my research will take: like Dorothy, I can follow the yellow brick road, but could reach the end and discover it’s all an illusion: like Noah, I can be patient and trust, but could spend a long time bobbing out at sea.

I will be far from home, abroad and foreign, when this abstract is transformed from the written to spoken word. I will, ‘all at once’, be excited to be ‘(t)here’; yet, desperate to click my ruby slippers and magically be back ‘(t)here’.

In my ‘homeland’. With family.

That rainbow, which appears with natural ease, is only always ever, an optical illusion: I cannot grab its proverbial “pot of gold”; I cannot catch up with it, because it moves when I move; I cannot capture it, because I am infinitely bound by its encompassing circle, that hidden arc, which the earth I stand on prevents me seeing, blocked by my horizon.

This paper is concerned with the fragility and abundance surrounding the depths and dimensions of that infinite space-in-between, that I can and cannot see or feel or ‘know’, and the shadow within it. It queries my desire for adventure and longing for some promise of home. It is concerned with a space for innocence. It will ask more questions than it answers, even if the answers are bound and held within me.

Oh how I loved that abstract. It captured something of the very ‘realness’ of the ‘me’ I was in that moment of writing. There were no bright blue skies with rain and sun. It would have been impossible to have seen a rainbow in the sky because it was dusk. It was a winter’s evening. I was sitting in a rapidly emptying car park waiting for the kids to come out from an after-school club. I was cold. My heart spilled with longing. I wanted my marriage to not be over. I wanted to go home to love. I wanted ‘normal’. And I needed to write the abstract because it was overdue. So I felt for myself through words. What story could my abstract tell? And I tried to tell a ‘truth’ that Jenson says is “a term of movement as it relates to the constantly self-displacing, yet ultimately irreducible nature of the author’s signature, the trace of the body in writing” (1991:192), because…
I had actually had seen a rainbow that day. I pushed my foot slightly further down on the accelerator and I chased it as I drove home from work to pick up the kids from school. And that is what I was trying to capture when I wrote the abstract... I wanted to catch the uncatchable... the unknowable – the beauty of the world and the sadness and I was writing playfully – lightly - with a little bit of ‘theorising’. I already felt weight of the balance between the academy and theory and questioning and the language of my childhood and the new worlds that might be mine if I reached out and grabbed them – like Richardson (1999b) when she talks of Rose (1992) who encourages us to find the living language for our world as we word our worlds into being...

But I didn’t want to grab – to take – to use - I wanted to feel – to feel through the feminine-the femininity of my fingers - my raced-classed-gendered body and its longing heart – and yes... it was a ‘femininity’ that I recognised would need put to be put in curves to indicate that it is not unquestioned...like Cixous, who puts ‘femininity’, like ‘truth’ between “150 quotation marks to prevent it from being used in the mode of a ‘feminine woman’” (Cixous & Conley, 1984:56). And as I typed alone in an emptying car park – my hands balanced weight in the curve of writing– the curve of my fingers as I wrote-typed-felt - felt for that rainbow – the always-already there symbol of hope...and it felt to me that in my research – my writing - there could always be an eternal warmth and sun with just enough rain to feed the land and quench parched tongues. Looking back – I knew in the moment – despite the still sadness of my soul – the wailing that my failed marriage and ‘broken family’ wrought in me – I knew that I was in a moment to be treasured – a writing moment that moved me.

April 2020: Stay Safe: Stay Home

This is not a treasured moment. It is a horrible questioning moment. St Pierre and Pillow ask

If writing is a method of inquiry what kind of data does it produce. If we believe writing is a research method are we then obliged to analyse the data it produces – everything that we write during the course of a project – and if we do that – can we ever complete a project – and how do we account for the thinking that writing produces (2000:10).

Good questions! Stuck at home during a global pandemic – cooking-cleaning-caring I find myself doing more than what might be my actual fair share of domestic chores. Numerous newspaper articles suggest I am not alone. Women somehow still seem to be bearing the burden of ‘care’. And I am not sitting at my desk writing – piecing together my thesis – ridding myself of all the excess patches of writing material that will not become a part of the final quilt I present. But I am thinking-writing in my head... almost all the time. Mainly I am think-writing with Maw in mind.
But I am in despair: when will my writing to inquire end – how can I let go of this research? When?!

Endless. Ceaseless. Infinite. Forever, I think. I am living in a groundhog-day. There will never be an ending. Everything in my thesis points to the past in the present. And I’m not working on it like I should because I am trying to protect the future – the future of my loved ones – in the present. I am caring more than I would wish to. But as the pandemic has highlighted, no-one can afford not to be concerned with ‘care’ (Bunting, 2020). And I’m trying to work. Earn money. The ‘writing up’ of the thesis is stuck. I am stuck. Physically. Mentally. Textually. There is no rain for my parched tongue to speak of as I reach for words…

During the pandemic, I find myself sleeping under a weighted blanket at night to stop myself tossing-turning when I relentlessly find myself wide awake before 4am. I blame my still-menopasing body which never quite seems to completely stop and menopause, instead choosing to wait 3 – 6 and once even 9 months before – bang – reset the clock… the science says one whole year is needed before I have officially ‘gone through menopause’. But maybe it’s not the menopause that wakes me - maybe I am just weary of the weight of the world – being stuck at home – the pandemic – the worry – the caring…

Mornings are difficult… as Cixous says, “they dig their heels in” (2009:111). And this morning, wrestling with the weighted blanket at 3:16am, I thought about the blankets of my childhood.

Each blanket I lay under was originally a wedding gift to one of my foremothers and was well-used before it was passed on to the next generation…

When I marry and leave home, Mum and Nana each gift me a new set of blankets, and Mum – as per our family tradition - packs up my childhood blankets so I can place them in the linen cupboard in my new marital home. My 22 year-old-self – newly graduated and newly married with a sparkly new career in sight, has no care for family tradition. My new husband and I have gas central heating and plush goose down duvets. Blankets are old-fashioned.

I think about the discourse of the new world I live in right now. New words that are words of the moment, talked about on endless newsreels… ‘the coronavirus’, ‘Covid-19’, ‘following the science’ and ‘flattening the curve’. And as I think about new words, I think about old words – words from the past – words I learned in my undergraduate Old English studies class. Vivid and vital – old words that I did not know or speak in their time – but a strong depth of emotion lay implicit in their wake.
Highlighting that perhaps not everything progresses for the better in the passage of time, Nicholson (1995) suggests emotion has become less rather than more sophisticated over the years, and he cites Old English words such as *uhtcearu* (anxious care at dawn), *sohrlufu* (sorrowful love) and *sinsorgh* (perpetual grief) as examples that signify emotional states arising in particular circumstances that Modern English cannot differentiate to such a fine degree by a single word. Oh, such heavy feelings to bear, I think as I hear the starlings nesting in the eaves above my bedroom window start-up their noisy daily sing-song indicating that twilight is giving way to dawn.

Later, I stride out with my youngest on our now daily early morning daily ‘prisoner’ exercise walk. Aged 18, stuck at home – with no school – no exams to study for – no rites of final-year-at-school passage to look forward to – like the many much younger children who live near us – she draws a picture for me to place in the window. It is a picture of a rainbow with the words ‘STAY HOME’ and ‘STAY SAFE’ written in big cloud bubbles. What’s that – I ask as I point to a perfectly drawn rodent-like animal climbing over the top of the rainbow. *That is a chameleon. Like the virus. It blends in. It’s invisible. You can’t see it. But it’s still there.*

We compare my youngest’s picture to the other pictures in the windows. I talk about hope. Her plans for the future. Going to university. Not being in lockdown anymore. Going to a shop to buy new clothes. Going to McDonalds drive through. Her hopes for when the pandemic is over and she doesn’t have to stay home to stay safe. I do not say anything to her but my hope is that her Gran and Grandad will still be alive by the end of the pandemic as I have to watch news of thousands dying in care homes. Instead, I tell my youngest that I have a section in the thesis I write called ‘When hope escapes’. She shrugs. But I keep talking to her. Hope is complicated, I think. But, I say, hope doesn’t really escape – forever – just in the moment. And then life goes on.

She tells me to *stop talking!*

OK. I pause… but I say – do you know, when I woke up this morning and thought about my day – stuck at home – and …. ? And I keep talking even when my youngest has stridden way ahead of me and cannot hear me as I say… And I wondered what it was like for all the women before me – like Nana – Maw – women in our family as they coped during pandemics and wars and… Cixous says “wars cause entredeux in the histories of countries” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:10) and I wonder if the pandemic has caused an entredeux…I think it has definitely caused a pause – for me anyway and I wondered if Maw woke up anxious at dawn with perpetual grief on her lips or sorrowful love in her heart…?
When we get home, I want to go and work on my thesis, but the washing machine cycle is complete so I decide to hang out the washing. I think about Reynolds (2019) who keeps her roots and her accent and her voice and her drive to rehistory the past for women like Maw as I peg out the line: towels, pants, socks, t-shirts, leggings. A mixed load. I hang it outside on two washing lines – all in a colourful jumble with no regard to placing the items neatly like Mum taught me to do – like Maw taught her to do. Both would be disappointed in my slatternly ways. Mum might tut. But my washing is clean and fabric conditioned sweet-smelling. Nevertheless, I hear Maw say don’t be hanging your dirty linen out in public…. I worked hard for respectability…be respectable woman or you’ll be talked about…

November 2016: Writing to Inquire as Alive and Dangerous

I am excited! I have been invited to participate in a ‘Writing to Inquire’ panel at the next ICQI conference! Laurel Richardson herself might even be facilitating the session. I am beyond excitement and terrified in equal measure as write my abstract:

Methodological-musings on writing-as-a-method-of-inquiry from a barefoot-nomadic-doctoral-researcher who has misplaced her ruby-slippers and can’t see a-way-home. Writing-as-a-method-of inquiry has caught me in a whirlwind: it displaces me; it takes me to places I don’t quite know how or where I am or can be. I find myself negotiating the strange but somehow still, quite familiar – it’s uncanny. This paper explores both the practice and theorising of creative (psycho)analytic writing practice in doctoral research.

I don’t love this abstract but I feel it gives me an opening to write something. But from the moment it is written – I know that always when I come to write this paper – in the whole process of writing it - I will be keeping in mind that ‘important people’ from the ‘academic world’ might attend this panel. I need to do well. Not make a fool of myself. But also, I need to speak towards the truth of my research – for me – for the women in my family who have worked hard – whose voices mingle-linger with/in mine: my women – the women I so often claim as mine “we” in my research. Women who have been like so many other women – hurt and shamed and silenced. These women who made me and make up all that I will be able to talk about in my research… women who I both adore and find a bore and before I know it I am there…
May 2017: Barefoot Musings on Methodological Madness

...Home-abroad – again – awash at sea - I find myself at the International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry... and I am in the conference room... and I am listening to the other presenters – and I am assessing their presentations before I give mine because mine is absolutely terrible – and I am terrible – and then I am there – at the front- facing a sea of faces as I prepare to read aloud my presentation....

I stand tall. Nobody knows that I have been writing-editing-writing-deleting endlessly for days trying to get some order to this paper. Nobody knows that when someone comes to my hotel room to service it this morning, the amused smile the person wears when they insist they be allowed in to my room to replace any used towels is smiling at me because I got distracted by writing in my head halfway through straightening my hair and one half is perfect-sleek – and the other is bunched in a hairclip. Nobody knows that when I think that I have forgotten to wear my earrings – my lucky earrings –that I panic and start to run back before a colleague calms me and tells me they are in my ears – and even if they weren’t I wouldn’t have time to go back for them. And I say – I would – I need them – I need them more than being on time. No – when I stand to present – paper in hand – I read my words – shaky – nervous – but with a conviction that I both feel and do not feel.... But I need to speak it anyway…and although Laurel Richardson is not here, I hear the words that she says risk being practical and motivational, but she says them anyway to encourages researchers to take risks and to keep taking risks... “Believe in your projects. Become Gatekeepers who open gate for others. Be permission givers. Have the ‘nerve of failure’ (2014:69). And so shaking – I begin the presentation – timed to be spoken (too fast in a too Scottish accent that people always tell me afterwards they struggle to keep up with....) in exactly-ish 15 minutes …and I speak:

The first year I travelled from my home in bonnie Scotland to present at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, back in May 2014, my flight from Chicago O’Hare to Willard airport in Urbana was delayed due to a storm. When we eventually took to the blue-sun-shiny-post-storm skies, the teeny-wee plane I boarded was jigged-and-jolted around in the flix-flux-force of turbulence, carrying my seatbelt-signed body in its wake, whilst I looked out the window, surveying from on high, the storm-flooded fields below in a land that was foreign to me, caught, as I was, in the whirlwind of a magical anticipation, an excitement in travelling somewhere anew to attend and present at my first ever international conference, whilst also feeling apprehensively far-away, strangered and distant, all-at-sea, far-adrift from home.

Patty Lather was a keynote speaker that year. She encouraged me –we, us — the congress audience - from different continents, different disciplines with different theoretical and onto-epistemological
outlooks - sitting and standing amidst each other in the crowded Illini Union Ballroom – to ‘trouble thought’, and ‘get lost’ (Lather, 2014). I wasn’t sure what this meant. She spoke in a language that was new to me. My ear tried to tune in to the frequency of new and habitual words coming together, connecting, intermingling, temporarily entwining, creating sentences, phrases, evoking theories and concepts – a somewhat alien discourse - that baffled and intrigued me. I was confused. Uncertain. Unsure. But affectionately moved.

I bought a copy of Getting Lost: Feminist efforts towards a double(d) science (Lather, 2007), and a few weeks later I read a chapter from the book every morning, along with a chapter or two from Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences (Bochner, 2014), Fields of Play (Richardson, 1997a) and Coming to Writing (Cixous, 1991), as I lay on a sun lounger, feeling the heat of the Cretan sun rise high above the shadow of my body, under the almost perpetually holiday-blue-Greek skies - in yet another foreign land, distant and still abroad, far from home. And I tentatively commenced my engagement in a learning, a becoming-to-learning, that has slowly burned its way through the well-established protective layers of the foundational assumptions imprinted on my body, to burrow in, to plant – under my skin – fledgling seeds of different possibilities of becoming-and-knowing.

Now. Having confessed to being the type of person who takes academic textbooks on my summer holiday (and actually does look forward to getting up early to read them before sunrise!) – I’d like to offer up another confession. I like certainty! I like certainty – a lot. Deep down, secretly, I desire certainty. If I saw ‘certainty’ walk past me in the street I’d reach out to embrace it. But, I’ve come to recognise – as I’ve questioned what ‘knowledge’ might be or where I might find it - that my hugs with certainty can only ever be fleeting – because certainty is too wriggly-slippery and elusive to be captured and pinned down, held captive under lock and key: I cannot hold my own in a dance with certainty – too often it walks off and leaves me standing – all alone – exposed – and uncertain – shadowed in doubts.

And all of this has created a tension for me as a doctoral researcher, seeking to reassure, most importantly myself, but also my supervisors, colleagues, review boards, ethics panels and academic institution, that I have a viable deliverable research proposal and a sense of focused direction, whilst at the same time talking about deliberately seeking to get myself ‘lost’ and admitting that I have moved away from the temptations and supposed reassurances of “writing up what I already know I want to say” (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018; Speedy, 2008), to embrace a world filled with ambiguities, where I adopt ‘walkabout strategies’ (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) that deliberately involve me wandering into the wilderness, leaving behind the relative safety of following any kind of yellow brick cemented
path that leads to the glitzy-vivid-glamour of an Emerald City – because I’m no longer so easily seduced by the illusion of the all-knowing power of the mighty Wizard who hides behind a curtain.

My research focuses in on the politics and structure of how family ‘secrets and myths’ (Pincus & Dare, 1978) might be created and maintained, and unwittingly and/or intentionally transgenerationally transmitted (Abraham & Torok, 1994; Coles, 2011; Fromm, 2012; Gordon, 2008; Schützenberger, 1998; Schwab, 2010) within families and communities. It has involved storying, memorying and dreaming. It evokes Old Wives’ Tales, superstitions and the legacies, of childhood fairy tales, love stories and horror stories. It recalls, relates and reinvigorates remnants and rememberings of the abundance and poverty of a working-class childhood in a declining Scottish mining town. It digs down deep through the surface skin of language to slice through, to mine through seams of layers, in a bid to overturn and disrupt, to chip into and splinter the tellings and re-tellings – of hand me down oft-well told family and community tales. It seeks to feel instead for something of their material weight: the soft whimsical wisps of their fleecy-flimsiness; the burden of their respectable hardbound working classed rigidity; the depths of glaringly obvious and well-concealed nooks, crannies, gaps and resounding silences. My research wonders and imagines what more might be there; gauging what was missing; feeling the silence and remaining mindful of gaps.

As I write, hold, touch, feel, dig over and walk into the aftermath of the domestic fire and poker down the visible flames of oft-well told fact but mystically fabled fictionalised family stories, I wondered what secrets and untellings might be hidden, invisible in amongst the ashes as I sift through the remains for traces.

Along the way my research has questioned just how dead the dead really are, as it explored sociological hauntings (Gordon, 2008), ghostly transmissions (Abraham & Torok, 1994; Frosh, 2013; Gordon, 2008) and the strange-familiarity of negotiating the uncanny (Freud, 1919/2003) in unquestioned family stories. And it found out that all the while I have been searching for ‘home’ something has lurked there that I don’t want to belong to or own.

And, as I summarise what my research has been about in the snap-reduction of a paragraph, I am aware that contrarily and contradictorily, with at times taut tension, I seek simultaneously to speak with the security of an authoritative academic researcher voice that knows where it is going and what it wants to say, whilst acknowledging that this conceals what has really been happening, and is still happening, behind the scenes as I wander-writing from those places where I am both lost and
unwilling to be found because I do not find the answers I want and expect so I go on an endless futile search.

As my research evolves what has been vital to my work is an ongoing faith and trust in writing and reading that refuses and undoes artificial partitions between literature and philosophy (O’Grady, 1996). As I have wandered around ‘lost’ in the field (Lather, 2007) that I do not know then will become ‘home’ – my birth home - I have engaged in what I think of as a feminist practice of reading where I dialogue with the key writers who influence my thinking across their oeuvre, and I have been inspired by Cixous’ call to write myself as woman, a universal woman subject who must bring women “to their meaning in history” (1976b:875).

The Laugh of the Medusa, (Cixous, 1976b), written back in the early 1970’s when I was just a new baby, is perhaps somewhat dated, old-fashioned, perhaps it is even politically controversial to speak of “feminine writing”, today? But I sense an understanding of why Cixous makes this call in the context in which she wrote. Cixous’ notes that her work has now become part of the mainstream canon in China, her texts and characters “have stopovers in Guetamala, Uruagay, Helsiniki… and, a lot of artists are using my texts and finding nourishment in them” (Zahm & Grau, 2015:12-13). And I seek to ‘Vive la differance’ as I feel myself simultaneously click my professional high heels and click the castanets Aunt and Uncle brought home as a gift from their Spanish holiday. Yes. I will step out of the shadow of the patriarchal world I was birthed and bound to as a child growing up in a small-town local community, and to stand in the spotlight now and write as woman, “laughing”, deliberately choosing not to cover up or seek to conceal myself by adopting a phallocentric “marked writing” (Cixous, 1976b:879) which speaks ‘Truth’, but to follow the charge instead to write myself through my poetic body, to direct my writing and to labour towards a ‘truth’ always already “over- there” (Cixous, 1993:6): To write myself in all my mess and glory; To allow for the possibility of a tentative emerging ethical strength in stepping beyond the fear, the fear noted by Cixous when she talks of a woman speaking at a public gathering “throwing her trembling body forward” (1976b:881) and laying herself bare; to allow for the potentialities in the fragility of a whispering decentered voicing (St Pierre, 2008) of an ‘I’, a feminine deconstructed ‘I’ that approaches research as a coming to writing, coming to learning, coming to knowing – a sensuous poetic imaginative excessive knowing – that recognises how desire, voice and power coalesce to produce a performing ‘I’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2008).

Nevertheless, at the outset of my doctoral research I was not sure methodologically where, and also how, I wanted to stand. I felt I had had not read or written or thought widely, closely or in ‘enough’ depth. I felt philosophically ignorant. I sensed that I wanted the ground underneath me to be as solid as possible, perhaps with just enough ‘give’ to open and swallow me up, make me invisible, at those
moments in time when, inevitably I felt – I feel - like I make mistakes, speak naively or out of turn or don’t know what to say, when I look or feel academically ‘foolish’. But I’ve come to recognise that it is difficult, and continues to be difficult, negotiating and engaging in academic conversations when you feel that you have not “caught up” with where everyone else is already; when you have not yet recognised that in the field you are lost within, where language is slippery and representation impossible, where “writing is not about arriving” (Cixous, 1993:65), and everyone else is somewhat ‘lost’ too, that we are often engaging in a dialogue where any offerings we each might come to voice are from a tentative, precarious ‘I’ which cannot be captured because we are all always already arriving too late to catch up with ourselves.

Perhaps understandably with previous experience of hermeneutic phenomenological research, I was not overly keen at the outset of my doctoral research to leave the security of standing safe and tall on the shoulders of giants such as Husserl and Heidegger and the research approaches built upon them. I wanted the philosophy, theory and authority of the masterful voice of dead white men (Bancroft and Fevre, 2016) to back me up. But I wanted to think and feel something of what I wrote too. Like Cixous, I wanted to write truth, not ‘the truth’ but a poetic imaginative visceral truth, to write as Cixous declares “to see the world nude because that is what is most true” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:4). I felt compelled to follow my intuition and to follow the call to write the feminine. I wrote about these confictions as I dialogueed with my supervisors in monthly updates on my progress and wrote in research diaries and personal journals questioning what ‘my methodology’ might be. Slowly, terms like ‘poststructural’, ‘postqualitative’ and ‘écriture féminine’ began to emerge within my writing. I started to wonder what it might mean not just to question and critique on paper, but to actually practice unravelling foundational concepts like ‘data’, ‘analysis’, ‘validity’, ‘reliability’, ‘voice’, ‘experience’, ‘empathy’ and ‘reflexivity’: What if I were to question words like ‘theory’ and ‘concepts’ (or perhaps let them go altogether)?; Where might I end up without the certainty of using these terms in an authoritative way when I discussed my research?

And I wondered: What would my research look like?; Where would my ‘data’ appear from?; What if I couldn’t find it or it refused to magically appear?; How could I analyse data if I couldn’t find it?; How could I write a methodology chapter?; How could I write up my findings?; How could I explain my research to others? My feminine fingers were trembling as they hovered over the keyboard as the ground below me was shaking.

But it is in the risky task of doing ‘what comes next’, breaking free from pre-determined empiricist ideals, and allowing a “normative affirmative, experimental, idiosyncratic nonreplicable style” (St Pierre, 2013:226) to emerge in the doing, and in keeping going, in amongst the uncertainties and
lostness of writing–reading - reading with-and through the body and writing-thinking-questioning with-and-through the body, in the mix and flux of reading-writing-thinking, and of diving down, writing-striving to find the philosophical underpinnings of my research, postponing what St Pierre refers to as the “leap to application” (2016a:111) and turning away from the lure of adopting an economy of writing that commands authoritative certainty… a “marked writing” (Cixous, 1976b:879), that I recognise, in hindsight, that unintentionally my writings-in-progress were writing as a method of inquiry all along: I was writing methodologically, where methodology is not fixed like a stake boxing me in and creating boundaries. And, whilst I might already have walked too far down what St Pierre calls a ‘well-trod’ path (2015:89) of conventional humanistic qualitative methodology and am probably ‘trapped’ by the language of qualitative methodology and will struggle to find the confidence to declare myself postqualitative or new materialist…and maybe I am too methodologically ‘old-fashioned’ in my language… but I think I am just in the process…?

Maybe I am too ‘old-fashioned’ – I think I am just in the process of trying to catch up (with myself – with those whose words and theories and concepts, I read). But I am happy to be where I am. St Pierre (2015) suggests we begin with theory – concepts – and to an extent I feel I have – but, also I have not. Écriture féminine might be my theory or concept but it is not theorisable or a concept that can be owned or grasped: it is a way of writing self – coming to self – a way of being…

…and where I have ended up, where I stand at a specific moment in time and place here as I type-write-speak, still ‘lost’, still barefoot and still a nomadic researcher who finds her ruby slippers and clicks her heels three times to go home…? well I seek instead – as Cixous commands to “vole… fly…steal” (1976b:887)… “to write in voltes. In volts” (1997:9) around and amidst fluid, contextual and fragile uncertainties.

With jouissance to dance with undecidability.

To enter turbulent air space and to make my language fly… !

Every time I write something that will be read or presented to others, I go back and read it aloud so I can hear myself speak. When I speak the words above out loud, I feel the sense that I am being swept up, caught and carried away with the fairies, like a madwoman or a witch - as I fly the coop, dash and steal, in the passionate storm of a whirlwind of being lost and uncertain. It sounds like methodological madness. But, throughout my research project I have not been nomadic and barefoot or flying high in the sky in an ‘at peace with the world’ hippy-chick daisy-chain’ type way: I’ve been aware that I am researching to present a doctoral thesis – and that’s a serious business.
A thesis is a final production, a “product” to be submitted and defended. It requires some structure. Eventually it will become a ‘thing’ that is put out there into the world. A thing that will leave me…. and as I write towards family secrets, I remember Tamas (2011) who says that whilst we might have the freedom to write what we like about our own secrets, we have to remember that writing them always involves writing about others and I do not want to make my children – my babies cry…but I know that I hear other babies – children – mothers cry in my emergent writing and…

…..well… writing to inquire, I believe, places an ethical and moral responsibility on the researcher to remain faithful and to research with integrity in the process of writing to inquire: it is writing to think what I have not previously thought; it is writing to unthink deep-rooted unquestionable assumptions; it is writing that does not promise to take me to a final destination or a comfortable destination, but takes me adrift on the process of becoming; it is writing which takes me aback, renders me speechless; it is writing into the blank empty dark hole spaces when sometimes there are no words to be found and no body to speak from. It is, as St Pierre asserts, writing without knowing and sticking with writing there even when you desperately seek the security of a certainty (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018). It is remembering that my hugs with certainty are only ever going to be fleeting, but as Cixous says, brief identifying hugs and kisses in writing can allow a woman writing – infinitely – “to know from within where she, the one excluded has never ceased to hear what comes before language reverberating” (Cixous & Clément, 1986:88).

As a doctoral researcher, I write to inquire, using creative(psycho)analytic practices. This is an ongoing process of becoming (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018). As Richardson (1997a) suggests, I have tried on different modes of writing. I write, free associating, following Freud’s belief that creative writing allows space for an openness, a gap where reason stops policing the imagination and allows the unconscious to find a space to be heard (Freud and Gay, 1995). I write with a freedom and belief in Cixous’ assertion that it is knowing that it’s about “being unknown to myself that I live” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:8). I write playfully, poetically, philosophically and experimentally – writing into the literary-theoretical-practical-experiential places - with space for a movement which is not a transition, from one place to another, but is what Cixous calls “a sort of strange material which could be called ‘entredeux’” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:10) - an in-between, a passage, the place of strangeness, a “being at abroad at home” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:10); a thoughtful-reflexively-critically-engaged drifting that allows poeticphilosophical whisperings to emerge from a place of curiosity, incredulity and doubt, a writing into dream-spaces. For my research, it is a time-travelling and cryptographic writing (Abraham & Torok, 1994) that carries hindsight with it into pasts, presents and futures (Freeman, 2010) seeking to letting myself go in the strife and flux of writing, a writing that, like Cixous, finds me moved – to “have an obligation” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:5) - to leave my own ground - escaping into the reflexive liminal spaces (Speedy, 2008), the creaky times-places-
spaces-in-between, the magical realistic (Speedy, 2008) and the imaginary where we see that the immense is not overwhelming, and "the maternal in us can manifest itself; as the imaginary possibility of taking a mountain in one’s arms" (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:21-22 ). It is picking up the call to write the feminine, writing above, beyond and all-around excess, "without the fear of ever reaching a limit" (Cixous, 1976b:893). For me, writing as a method of inquiry is engaging with a writing in movement that allows for a becomingness that breaks bonds, opens conversations and accepts the possibility of dialoguing from limitless (im)possible positions, seeking openings and feeling for gaps rather than foreclosing and imposing hierarchical structures in advance (Law, 2004). It is writing that comes from softer, untouchable, unseeable unfolding ways of my being that evolve through the turbulence of the flix-flux of reading/ writing/ feeling/ touching/sensing and emotional, and sensual dialoguing…

And I return again to places of theoretical and conceptual difficulties, to the readings that I don’t understand and might never understand as terminology eludes me, and the theories that I might try to grasp but, like certainty – are too slippery to be held - except momentarily-fleetingly – flee and escape from me. It is in those detours that leave me lost and the deserted spaces where I wander alone and dialogue with so many others that I know I will never properly be able to cite and acknowledge how much they inform my work because it takes time sometimes for what we read to settle-sink-in…. And it is only when I start to piece fragments and scraps together, where I gain some kind of practical as well as theoretical perspective of how what I am doing in my writing to inquire fits in to the wider research picture that I will realise just how complicated all of this is…

Flyvbjerg (2001) says methodology is a practical concrete matter…

Mason (2002) says researchers should be clear about the essence of their inquiry…

St Pierre asks “Does thought need a method to steer it? Does inquiry need a method to control it? Imagine if it were methodology-free!” (2016b:10)…?

My research is continually seeking a ‘becoming’ in the process of an openness to writing and reading and inquiring as thought happens in the writing rather than writing what I have already thought (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018). But this is easier said than done sometimes. And, if I am barefoot, it is because I need to feel the grit of earth between my toes because, as Speedy (2008) says, writing to inquire is not an efficient method; rather it is a risky and slippery practice. For me, the practice of writing as a method of inquiry is messy dirty work. Infuriatingly (for someone who secretly desires certainty) I have had to accept that I might not have a high-level plan detailing distinct sections or chapters that might fit together. Writing in flux to jumble, disorientate and dislocate space, order and structures and de-hierarchise the “dual, hierarchical oppositions” (Cixous, & Clément, 1986 :64) that in
hindsight are everywhere in the binary system laws of my childhood. This inquiry takes place in the creative movement of my writing: sometimes this comes in pacey-bursts, fast and sharp, and other times it is slower, more contemplative piecing together rewriting work. Writing to inquire involves playing with fire and then digging in – writing, rewriting, rewriting again (Speedy, 2008) and getting my fingers dirty.

St Pierre (2012) says our quest for certainty is tenacious. And whilst I desire certainty, I think of the possibilities that a deconstructive Cixousian writing to inquire offers me as it feels live and dangerous. And there is a vitality to this that I desire more. Writing to inquire does, I believe, need to have ‘theory’ plugged in because it involves thinking with theory. But it is a troubling-trembling theory. It is, for me, a theory that is perhaps too hot-to-handle in that it is untheorisable and impossible to hold and speak and tell and teach. The hotness of it can only be felt. It hurts. It is theory – writing – that hurts because it talks to something deep within that we might not already know how to speak. When we are alive and writing we question if we are alive and questioning…”every language artist is an artist of the struggle against the condemnation to death” (Cixous, 1998:xii).

And whilst I practice ‘plugging in’ theories and (non)concepts playfully, knowing that they cannot be held, because writing to inquire is about writing under erasure: a writing that does not grasp and hold theories and concepts to have and hold and keep them, but instead lets those theories and concepts go at the point they are needed (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2018; Lather, 2007; Richardson & St Pierre, 2018), I find myself deciding to switch off the electricity metaphor. Because perhaps it is less about me ‘plugging in’ like electricity with an on-off switch – but instead turning back towards the domestic fire – the home and hearth not as a source of comfort – but a source of energy. I remember the coal fire in my childhood home – flickering-spitting-uncontrollable. And this is what I think perhaps my writing to inquire is about - setting the fire – watching it come to life – then tending – stoking – and sifting through the ashes to see what remains before rekindling the fire and beginning again. And this is what I think makes writing to inquire energetic and vital: it wriggles and moves. It is not about adopting a ‘marked language’ that contains and holds and fixes me to the spot in one place, staking me to the ground and imposes limits whether that language be domestic or academic; rather, it is writing, that Cixous refers to as writing in ‘voltes’, where we are the place of a structural unfaithfulness and “To write: we must be faithful to this unfaithfulness” (1997:9). It is a writing that we cannot control that writes to the excess of what will forever remain unknowable. Writing to inquire as writing that brings theory to life, theory which is not an intellectual construct or a means to power, but as a way of being, speaking and seeing – of researching – perhaps practicing ‘la reserche feminine’ (Hoult, 2012) - as a way of tentative knowing…
And I sit down. Shaking. I have thrust my body forward. Put myself out there. I am tentative-terrified – numb. In the questions someone notes that I call the paper barefoot musings but I wear high heels. I do not say that I wear heels because if I present in my comfortable everyday ballet-flats I rock myself to-and-fro – comforting myself. And I wanted to stand tall at the conference.

When it is time to go home, my flight home is cancelled and my rescheduled flight lands in the wrong terminal at Heathrow. I am desperate to make my connection. I run between connections. Fast! The heel snaps of my shoe. I run barefoot through security. When I reach my gate and stand in the queue, I dump the high-heel platform shoes I’ve worn to travel in (because I couldn’t fit them in my small travel bag of luggage) in the bin and I rifle through my belongings for my ballet flats. People look at me. I am wild. Dishevelled. But I do not care. I’ve made my flight home. Home to my kids – my family.

June 2021: The Word Cloud

In hindsight, I think of my research as having four key ‘phases’. These phases are not distinct, but they are perhaps helpful to offer some kind of explanation of how my research unfurled over time. Almost like a baby finding its arms and feet, stretching its fingers and toes – finding its way world….

Phase 1: Writing as nurture:

I write trying to find a research question, a methodological ‘home’: a way forward…and I weave and wade my way through the ‘what exactly is my research question’ as I embrace various creative analytic practices, and somehow I always end up back writing about the childhood death of my Uncle. This was unexpected. Both the accidental death – which was sudden and unexpected - and also the fact that this would be a story worthy of writing about. - there is no apparent mystery to this story and it has regularly and well and truly been told and done to death over the years. It was an accident. It is a well told and familiar story. I locate the short newspaper reporting of the fatal accident in the local newspaper via the British Newspaper archive. The details in the newspaper seem to correspond with the family story.

At this stage, I have an abundance of writing – which I refer to as ‘writings–in-progress’. It can be difficult to know when to ‘stop’ when writing to inquire is the methodological approach. A project could go on and on. But, with hundreds of thousands of words of writing building up, I take an intentional break from writing and commit to reviewing my writings-in-progress…. And I move towards Phase 2
I have so many writings in progress. Like Richardson (1997a), I gather all my writings-in-progress together and collate them in chronological order... perhaps thinking of them as 'data', accepting that whilst I am intrigued and wish I had the confidence to step away from conventional humanist qualitative research, I do still struggle to think outside these terms. As Lather and St Pierre note, "We always bring tradition with us into the new, and it is very difficult to think outside our training, which, in spite of our best efforts, normalises our thinking and doing" (2013:630). And, as St Pierre strongly recommends "we do not force our new empirical, new material, posthuman, postqualitative studies into the structure of conventional humanist qualitative methodology" (2015:92)-- because she cannot imagine how it will fit. So, I grapple with coming to accept that I conceptualise my research as qualitative and that I will be using terms like 'data' and 'analysis' within any explanation of my research -- but always in a loose manner that puts them under erasure.

My writings-in-progress ‘data’ consist of research diaries, supervision updates, dream-notes and responses to literature. I print them all as material and I work my way through them three times.

On the first work through, I handwrite some notes to myself in the margins of the printed pages and I highlight anything that jumps out. I also keep a dated diary during this process where I write in response to my writings-in-progress. My reflections at this stage are usually rapid and unfiltered comments and I do not dwell too much on trying to make sense of my writing or analyse my responses. Nevertheless, quite quickly, I am struck by how unaware I am that much of my writing talks about death and grief -- in particular, the grief of mothers who lose children and lingering unvoiced grief. I am also taken aback by the number of books I have read since the outset of the project relating to death and grief as I was unaware that this was an area of interest for me.

On a second work through, I re-read the original writings-in-progress and the reflexively written writing very closely, treating my writings as text, mindful of Cixous who encourages close reading noting that when she reads she asks questions "Questions of origins. Where does it go? How far? What stops? What arrests? My questions are of, and concern, human beings" (Cixous quoted in Conley, 1992:153). As Juncker suggests, such a receptive rather than aggressive mode of reading shows how Cixous "teases a different sort of knowledge from the text through her desire to touch and listen to the textual repressed" (1988:433).

Later, I will come to think of this as ‘embodied analysis’ -- as I reread, as Cixous suggests, using not just my head but a “knocked of my feet” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997:90), all of myself, as a first other: I look at the text I have written – writings in progress - with my ears. I listen to the text with my
eyes – I look in detail – from a distance to see how it is – the architecture - where it breathes or where it gasps – where it arrests – the cadences within my bodily response – and like Cixous suggests, I “crawl on each line…I stop on each small depression , or elevation in the text… scrutinize the signifiers [because] a text is woven. And it’s woven along the threads of meaning” (Cixous and McQuillan 2002:186). And this second read through of writings-in-progress is a much slower, denser more intense and concentrated process. I continue to keep a reflective diary for ad-hoc writing in response, but on this second work-through, I set aside substantial dedicated periods of time to sit quietly and focus on the writings-in-progress and my initial response during the first work-through, and I handwrite a reflexive and dialogical response. At this stage, I become increasingly uncomfortable as I feel a physical response to my own writing as the sound of screaming seems to repeatedly emerge from the stack of pages I am working through.

I then do a third work through of my writings-in-progress as well as all the other writings that have emerged through my first and second work-throughs: this is a stilted and faltering process.

At this stage, I want to stop reviewing my writings-in-progress and focus on ‘writing up’ my research as I want to complete my doctoral research so I can graduate, and I want to ‘put the scream away; but I find myself somewhat stuck in ‘the story’ emerging in the text and I am overwhelmed by the sound. I am simultaneously curious about and terrified by the scream that has emerged. Intellectually, I can focus on containing the scream in a neat and tidy manner by adopting theoretical and conceptual models to write around it; however, this becomes a messy process as I find the scream physically impossible to handle as it is formless, leaky and relentless. Breaking down in embarrassing convulsing tears as I read aloud a poem written during a rapid-writing free associative exercise in a Poetry and Psychotherapy class, I feel the force of my research bear down on me and I am aware of being overcome.

At this stage, I retreat to what I have come to recognise is a ‘safe space’ for me – books. Books, I learn as a child, are a lovely means of escape.


And at this stage, I create the Word Cloud. It is a moment in time. It is like trail of writing-thinking of where I have been – a trace – like a visual trail of white ink showing something of all the doubts-wanderings-eureka-intellectual-theorising-soft-faltering moments.
‘The Word Cloud’ (Bradford, 2020) somehow takes everything from my head onto paper. It is both overwhelming and also like a security blanket. It shows me where I have been in my research and offers a sense of being able to move on.

I return to read Richardson (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) and Cixous (1976b). I am comforted they still ‘fit’ my work.

But some things no longer ‘fit’. Although ‘postqualitative’ and ‘plugging in’ remain central on the word cloud, I gradually let go of them as I move forward into Phase 3 of my research.

**Phase 3: Writing as reflection and reflexive**

I am unsettled because I want to write. But I cannot write. There is a lull. Writing has paralysed me. I feel burdened by the scream and feel it has cornered me. There is a love-hate relationship with writing at this point: I want to write my way out of a corner; but it is writing that has put me in this corner. What started as playful adventure – writing to inquire – poeticphilosophical approach to thinking – has left me stranded: I don’t want to face where writing has taken me; but I have nowhere else to go.

Sitting with the awareness of a scream emerging in the writing and what has felt like the central story – the death of my Uncle – I revisit the details of the family story. Despite the tragedy of the story – a young boy being knocked down and killed by a bus – there is a mythical, almost ethereal quality to the telling of the story. It is strange because it is a predictable story: growing up, it is always the same story almost always being told in the same cemented-in way. Jim’s death becomes part of our lives. At this stage I am still focused – at a high level – on ‘Family Secrets’ and I toy with changing it to
‘Family Stories’ - but it doesn’t quite fit. I can’t change ‘secret’ to ‘stories’ - and I don’t know why because I am ‘writing stories’ and there isn’t a secret. Re-opening the story in reflexive writing, I work through the events surrounding Jim’s death in chronological order but I come to realise that ‘real-time’, in the clock-time sense, is almost irrelevant to the story that is told. Time is not directionally facing forward and I am consistently aware of time-travelling in my research. Gradually, as I work back to write the story in the ‘sort of order’ it is has been told, I find myself writing in three specific local locations in my hometown: a cemetery, a playpark and the foreshore road. And I write back towards the events of the one particular day as it has been shaped by the days that came before and after – to engage with the women… and this takes me to phase 4.

**Phase 4: ‘Writing up...’**

Gannon invites readers “to experiment with data, with texts and with the ‘selves’ we bring to writing” (2004:123). I take this invitation forward in this phase as I work out how to structure my thesis into a writing-story that shows the process of my research, moments in time where I grapple with concepts and theories, and I find a way to present and discuss ‘my findings’… and ‘Our Town’ comes together at this stage… not with ‘writing to inquire’ as a process of mopping up (Speedy, 2008), but as a continual dialoguing with Cixous into the “there-not-there” (1991:3) of family secrets...
CHAPTER THREE: Our Town – ‘Findings’

Our Town continues the theme of home-and-abroad and strangeredness and the ‘entredeux’ as it shows the process of my writing towards three performative modes of writing places (Grillner 2012) as reflexive liminal spaces (Speedy, 2008). These places are locations in the town where I am born and where the familiar becomes unfamiliar as I situate myself in different spacetime contexts.

I imagine myself approaching these scenes of writing through Cixous’ (1993) ‘Three Schools of Writing’. On one level, I approach each scene through a specific school of writing, and I separate Mum, Nana and Maw; however, the schools of writing and Mum, Nana and Maw are blurred across the scenes as, like Cixous, I leave space for what Rye suggests is an “active reader’s imagination and multiple interpretations, made possible by means of the uncertainty inscribed in the fabric of the texts” (2000:302): chronology and narrative voice deliberately slip between times, dreams and realities and the reader is given insight into my domestic-researcher-self mingling in snapshot daily moments of life within the text. I also highlight in the text how I come to an understanding that it is impossible to separate myself from things I have invisibly and silently inherited. To this end, I as I show myself and the women in my family in situated stories, I write towards an understanding of our classed and gendered bodies as ‘policed’, ‘longing’ and ‘respectable’. And whilst, I show the sense of possibility of a striving to ‘move forward’ – there is always a sharp contrast of being pulled back: back to a class I cannot – and come to realise do not – want to move myself out of… but in terms of inheritance, I am moved back to a pain that I would want to move away from and disown. Writing is the material used to trace the secret that is imprinted on my body, and it can be seen in the tension of leaky messy writing in this chapter as subtle small ‘secrets’ (Pincus and Dare, 1978) emerge and the physical terror of both wanting to meet and avoid meeting Maw is made visible, as I negotiate writing towards the muffled scream which is palpably touchable in the batting of my quilt.

My writing approaches ‘The School of the Dead’ as I day-dream-dover-fly into the scene of a cemetery. The cemetery where wee Jim is buried. I meet Mum - wee Janette - as a child in her time. I re-hear the story of her brother’s death through her eyes captured in both stories and photographs. The innocence of the stories remain faithful to their original tellings to give a sense of how the scream might have become secret – distant and hidden away – as Mum created beautiful mythical tellings to pass on to me as a child – tellings which belie and deny some of the feelings of shame and blame that may have written themselves onto her little-girl body as she embeds snapshot memories of her life in the immediate aftermath and also the time preceding her brother’s accidental death.
Nana is approached through ‘The School of Dreams’. Unlike Mum – a keen and forthcoming storyteller - Nana was not a storyteller: Nana passed her wisdom onto me through adages and old sayings. But I knew Nana and loved Nana in the flesh and this comes to life in embodied writing that seeks to give a flavour of who she was and the life she lived. My storytelling of Nana unfolds through my writing as a series of ghostly still-lives as I work at injecting some life and humour into the ‘character’ of Nana as she comes to life as a woman of her time even though – as the writer-researcher – I show myself struggling to write towards what I know is coming as I wait – write-rewriting-reflexively in the playpark - filled with dread and despair and tension as I approach the terrible scream ‘they say’ Nana makes when she finds out her son is dead. Nana’s section also begins to play with ‘anniversary syndrome’ (Schützenberger, 1998) which already began back in the first section in the patch labelled ‘The Bloody Affair’ when the idea that ‘dates matter’ is already known to me without me realising theory around it exists. Again, looking back at a previous patch of writing from Chapter One, ‘A Still Life’ is repeated and retold in this chapter highlighting it as a key moment that repeats itself and pulls me back within my own writings-in-progress that have served as ‘transgressive data’ in this research.

Maw’s section is the ‘School of Roots’. I question who Maw actually was behind the scenes of her being the stereotypical background ‘nag’ in family stories who only exists for the reproductive labour (Hochschild, 1983, 2003) of looking after the family and ‘keeping things going’. In my writings to inquire through the body with Cixous, Maw is brought centre stage as I travel back in time to meet her on the afternoon of the terrible day when wee Jim is knocked down: I seek to meet her eyes and acknowledge her silent scream that I felt emerge in my writings-in-progress. This attempt fails leaving Maw a disappointment to me. A patch of the quilt shows me breaking down in a poetry class and highlights that this is where I came closest to Maw.

Psychoanalytic and sociological literature around ghosts and haunting is drawn upon in a questioning manner rather than in a way to set in stone some kind of theory which is the only way the secret scream could be explained or employed to analyse the women.

It should be noted that whilst this text has been woven together differently and anew, some paragraphs in ‘Nana: Where Hope Escapes’ have been previously published as part of the book chapter Between a Rock and a Hard Place (Bradford, 2019).
Mum: Where faith lives

August 2016: Heaven is a place on earth

I lie parasol-shaded under a mid-afternoon sun next to an infinity pool in a mountain-top Greek villa appropriately named ‘Infinity’ and when the sun hits a certain point in the sky, the large curvaceous ‘Infinity’ statue that graces the poolside casts a larger-than-life silhouette onto pool water.

Balancing at the side of my sun lounger is an ‘I’m-not-really-enjoying-it but am-persevering-and-skim-reading-my-way-through-it’ copy of Plato at the Googleplex (Goldstein, 2014) which sits on top of a sun cream-grubbied copy of Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing (1993) which sits on top of the stack of three books I jokingly refer to as ‘The Ghostly Trio’.

Dozily-debating whether to write or sleep or read Seven Minutes from Home (Richardson, 2016) which rests opened on my stomach at page 7, I inhale the rhythmic beat of the cacophony of crickets who croon the sound of summer anthem that buries its way in to warm my soul. Perhaps I won’t read or write. Cixous sometimes just lets books ‘be’, allowing them to “beam obscurely” (1993:58) at her, which she claims is a form of reading. Perhaps I will let my mind wander back through the books around me…

I’m struggling with Plato at the Googleplex. I brought it on holiday as I liked the idea of reading about ancient philosophers under the same sun and on ground they may once have walked upon. Earlier this morning I read about what makes human lives matter… “do some of us matter whilst others of us don’t… are those who matter born into mattering or is mattering a state that must be achieved?” (Goldstein, 2014:132). Such big questions to ponder. What is matter. Who matters? I feel for answers… but I think it is a logical answer that the philosophers searched for. And it’s difficult to connect with something so big under the heat of the sun… or perhaps I’m just not logical. I laugh at myself as I think – well there is definitely nothing that felt logical in ‘The Ghostly Trio’. I remember the lines I underlined this morning…

Gordon says ‘haunting’ describes “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings are on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive” (2008:xvi)

Frosh claims “haunting is the space not only of the meeting of personal and social, but of past and future” (2013:168)
Abraham and Torok (1971/1994) talk of the ego acting as the ‘cemetery guard’ at a crypt where submerged family secrets seal of actual events – treating ‘Reality’ like it never really happened…

And… well – I love the books. Dynamic. Interesting. Confusing. A wee bit ‘out there’. I remain intimidated by the secret language of psychoanalysis. I am not clever enough for it. But the books speak to me. I ask them questions. And they don't give me easy answers. It is thinking work – feeling work. So many things in their words resonate… but ghosts and crypt and haunting and well, maybe just psychoanalysis in general - it's all a wee bit too ‘dark’ – too far from reality – a wee bit too magic-hocus-pocus – not provable…but also too marked in its language and well… I don’t think I believe in it all – really I don’t – and it's not because I’m scared of ghosts or the dead. And it’s not because in my research I need to have ‘evidence’ – hard ‘proof’ – well, I don’t think I do… as St Pierre (1997a; 2008) argues we can put ‘transcendental signifiers’ such as ‘validity’ under erasure and we can trouble ‘data’ – it can be emotional, dream, sensual… but I wonder how could I begin to explain – far less prove – all that lies in my visceral ‘response’ to these books and where they take me…

St Pierre (1997a) asserts ‘response data’ is even less tameable than emotion-dream-sensual. I agree. And my response to what I do not understand in what I read is complex. Professionally-academically-studiously I note that I need to check up on the psychoanalytic language to understand the complexity of the points being made. But my gut response – well I know-feel there is a secret in my family – a woman’s secret - and although I know I will not go on to study ‘trauma’ in my research as the main topic as I focus on ‘family secrets’, I feel that the secret I am being led towards might be like one of those traumas “whose very occurrence and devastating emotional consequences are entombed and thereby consigned to internal silence, albeit unwittingly by the sufferers themselves” (Abraham and Torok, 1994:99-100). I feel the secret. It has been emerging in my research. There is an unacknowledged maternal scream – wailing to get out – but it cannot be spoken – and it definitely cannot not be written about now because it is emerging – but it cannot be written either… it just lingers…insidious… guarded… by who, I wonder… perhaps it is in ‘a crypt’ (Abraham and Torok, 1994) perhaps it is in there like a ghost waiting to be acknowledged (Gordon, 2008).

Cixous says to give ourselves to writing means going to school and she suggests three schools: The School of the Dead, the School of Dreams and - the most advanced – The School of Roots – where everything “Ends with Flowers” (1993:151). I wonder about my roots. My fingers touch the book on my stomach. Richardson suggests that it would be brilliant “if everyone meditated or wrote about how they live their lives seven minutes from their homes, everyone would be connected in time and space’ (Richardson, 2016:7). Cixous says women’s unconscious is “worldwide” (1976b:889).
And in this luxury picture-perfect villa where I relax-read-write—untouchably far from my everyday reality - I think about how even in my wildest imagination, I am so much farther than seven minutes from the home I grow up in. Nana liked to say aye home is where your heart is… Where is my heart? Right now my heart beats with words and writing and inquiring and discovering… and I find myself drifting back to my childhood… like Cixous “my life begins with graves” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:189) - graves that I suspect, like Cixous’, go beyond the individual…

I remember when I was a little girl, my primary school was just across the road from the cemetery. Every dinnertime and home-time, I ran through the cemetery as a shortcut to get home to Nana and Papa’s sometimes cutting along the grass to say hello to Maw and Dey and wee Jim on the way. Some people avoid cemeteries. My youngest thinks cemeteries are spooky places where ghosts and ghouls live – the dead frighten her. Foucault (1967/1998, 1984) says cemeteries are heterotopic spaces and I might agree with him. With their profound spatio-temporal disruption they do break from traditional time; and as death and health are viewed differently over time in history, the cemetery does mutate (Foucault, 1967/1998, 1984). But I wonder…perhaps they are ‘entredexxs’: “a nothing” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:9): a space which takes us towards life-death-nothing – the beyond what we know… after all, what happens to us after we die is something none of us can write of and know… as Black (2018) says, it is a threshold we cross alone.

Light (2014) points out cemeteries are meritocracies not democracies. In hindsight, I would agree: but as a child, whilst I might have been well aware of the importance of money and the desire to have enough of it… as long as it was enough and it had been hard worked for and earned…then really there should be no complaining… and I never registered that the size of graves indicated anything of someone’s wealth and standing in society. Yes…as Mum and Nana would say… aye… well…you cannie take it with you. And as I wonder about heterotopias and entredexxs and meritocracies, I remember being my childhood self who was unequivocally certain in her unspoken belief that the cemetery I spent a lot of time in might actually be the undiscovered Eden the Sunday School teachers taught me about...

Nana and Papa lived just along the road from this cemetery. Pensioned-off early with a bad back, Papa whiled away his days with the cemetery groundsmen as they mowed the grass, drank their tea and ate their pieces, and dug up and then covered over the ground that would become people’s final resting places. Papa would take me with him in the holidays so I spent a lot of time with him in the cemetery too. I read the notes on the flower sprays friends and
families left at graves and watched as the groundsmen would clear them away when they decayed. And I watched as the freshly dug up grass slowly-steady-surely knit back together with the sheet of grass around it.

Papa spent so much time at the cemetery he ended up going to everybody an’ awbody’s funerals and Mum and Nana used to laugh and say he was ‘the toon’s chief mourner’. I remember Papa seemed bolstered with extra-pride when he got to hold a cord at the burial. Sometimes he didn’t even know the person being buried… *Pair soul…* Papa would say with authority, shaking his head sadly, quietly puffing and preening himself … *aye…it was a gey pair turn oot… there wisnae enough men-folk there…so they asked me to take a cord …* and then Papa would nod with a quiet authoritative dignity at the goodness of himself. I didn’t know what ‘taking a cord’ meant, but I knew it was a solemn and important thing to do. And, of course, I knew it was something that only a man could do. When Nana dies and then Papa, there is no question that it will be my husband who will stand in his black suit and take my cord. But at least I got to go to the funerals. Mum says *oh no…women didn’t used to go to funerals….I mean your Nana and Maw didn’t go to wee Jim’s funeral. Not a place for women. Too much distress…too much…too much…!*

And I remember – recently - Mum attends a funeral for a toddler whose Mum she knows. Mum’s heart is broken at the sight of the upright dignified stoic mother who buries her child. And I remember a colleague tells me that at a funeral she attends the mother throws herself on top of her teenage child’s coffin as the pallbearers respectfully prepared to remove it from the church. The Minister and family have to pick up her wailing body so the ceremony can commence to the cemetery…

I shiver. Goosebumps. The meltemi winds that have already seen pages of my notes fly into the pool and then out over the cliff is picking up. I need to warn the kids… *The wind is picking up! Be careful in the water! Don’t go near the edges on those inflatables!* They laugh. But I walk over to the edge of the pool and point at all the blue landscapes that melt-merge around us to emphasise my warning. The infinity pool looks like it flows directly into the sea: but that is an illusion. This villa is so inaccessibly far up a mountain there are few drivers who will take the fare because the sharp inclines and bends on the dirt-gravel track are difficult to manoeuvre and the unlevelled surface scrapes the underside of their cars. We once stood down at the sea, looking up through binoculars, and noted how the villa seemed carved into the mountain and how the pool was most definitely precariously dangerously dangling over the cliff. Cocooned - safely tucked in behind electric gates and a panic
buttoned alarm system - yes…I know all might be still and peaceful in my little luxury picture-perfect holiday-postcard paradise – but I need to remain always already on the alert.

Satisfied the kids will heed my warnings, I settle back on the lounger. Sipping lukewarm water, I recall the crisp lush rose wine I drank at lunch. It tasted so much like Turkish Delight it reminded me of Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1989) and I think about little Lucy - famously immortalised in a children’s story – who - hiding-and-seeking, finds herself stepping through a wardrobe of long fur coats - until she unexpectantly wanders over the threshold into a strange new land… a cold land, permanently stuck in winter….

And it reminds me of the story Richardson tells when her class leader at a meditation says that the snow she talks of symbolises “frozen thinking or emotions” (2013:21). I was sipping scalding hot tea in a Starbucks the first time I read that article. The burning of my lips as I read about frozenness reminded me of the binaries Cixous talks about – sun/moon; culture/nature; activity/passivity – those hierarchies which she asserts are “a metaphor wherever discourse is organised” (1986:63) ensuring a correct superior/inferior order in logocentric thought. And I think about the patriarchal world I grew up in – when mothers did not attend their children’s funeral… were these women to be protected or just not allowed – was that normal for the time or just for families ‘like mine’? And where was the pain going to go if it was shuffled away so it could not be heard – unleashed -seen – witnessed? And I think about the snowglobe with the patchwork elephant that sits at my desk at home… And despite the heat – my body shivers again…

Where would I be, I wonder if I had not discovered Cixous?

Heard her words talk to me.

Picked up my pen. To write. To find out more through my body. I am greedy for words. Knowledge.

Where will my insatiable desire to know more lead…?

I shiver again. Involuntary. I look out at my surroundings, soaking them all up. And I step-out-float-above-myself – my privileged polished body lying here – comfortable - in the cushioned warmth of a luxury sunbed in a villa that only money can buy. ‘Idyllic’. ‘Heaven’. ‘Paradise’. These are words used to encapsulate the essence of this villa in advertisements targeting the discerning traveller…
And I time travel back to the annual Blackpool holidays we went on as a family during the first week of every Fair Fortnight. I see myself with unkempt hair and sleepy eyes happily walking along the promenade with Papa at 5:30am to get a really tasty fry-up at one of the back street greasy spoons Mum and Nana deemed ‘dirty holes’. Later Mum would brush my hair and make me wash my face and brush my teeth before we sat nicely as a family and ate a proper breakfast in the hotel dining room at 9am. Respectable. Tidy. And Mum’s ultimate compliment. You look like you’ve just stepped out of a bandbox. I can see the labour Mum invested in my appearance in my mind’s eye now – as she gave me – what Kuhn (2002) asserts is a prized possession - ‘femininity’.

There was an orderly routine to my childhood. There was comfort in the hard work Mum and Dad put in to giving my brother and I access to ‘better lives than they had’. What – I wonder - would they think about the messiness of my ‘feminine writing’ now – my feminine leaky untidily written body – and where it might be taking me – it goes against the grain of the old stories of struggle and respectability – and doing-being better… an onward- upwards success story of social mobility that has its limits (Hanley, 2016).

And I find myself thinking about Mum and the idea of ‘onward and upwards’, and how she never wanted me to ‘want’ like she wanted – and I smile at myself in the midst of dozing off – no…that’s not the right word – I am dovering off…dovering over – I remember it… that’s the right word…a word from my past…

Mum and Aunt (with Nana sometimes helping a wee bit) did oh so many Christmas’ – Fair Days’ – Hogmanay’ nights- New Years days - and it was always the same… Makeup long-since melted off by the heat of the kitchen, they eventually tired of their women’s work: the reheating of frozen sausage rolls and the spreading and cutting into triangles of tinned red salmon sandwiches and the arranging of baker-bought strawberry tarts onto lacy paper doilies; the mashing of potatoes and boiling of carrots and turnip and the assembling of traditional homemade steak pie; and the scrubbing clean of plates and pots and pans and the airing of dishes sinks full of dishes waiting to be soaked – washing up that could be left - just for a moment - because with everyone’s stomachs filled for now and nuts and chocolate and crisps sitting in bowls to be nibbled on… and Mum and Aunt could take off pinched-toe shoes and remove dishevelled pinnies that covered their Sunday bests and sit down for a moment – their eyes shutting, their mouths opening, gentle snoring - sleeping – But oh no! They would deny it! They were not sleeping… just resting their eyes – and Nana would proclaim… I wisnae sleeping, I was just dovering…!
And as I dover off towards a daydream …

relaxed – nowhere to go –

briefly, I think that Cixous would approve of the word ‘dover’…I word-play…dover-hover-the Louvre – I went there on my honeymoon…oh how I would love to go to Paris again, the city of love – magic and I think about Cixous who asks how we will get to the School of Dreams noting that we cannot go via the city or bus or our own willpower… “because dreams await us in a country we cannot get tickets to” (1993:58) – and under the heat of the blue sky – with no distance between my body and the melting landscapes where blue skies-pool-sea seem to meet…

I remember sitting on Nana’s carpet with my word tin – a little girl reader escaping into a magic carpet of different words and worlds …

and I find myself float- flying – dive – stealing… and I know I am day-dream-writing towards the core of my research…where my thesis will begin… and I am there, Cixous – describes the beginning thus …

there is ground – childhood flesh, shining blood, - or background depth, a core unforgettable forgotten, and this ground covered by an infinite number of strata, layers, sheets of paper – is her sun (sol… soleil). And nothing cannot put it out (Cixous & Clément, 1986:88).

And just like the pages of my notebooks that get caught up in the wind - flying-diving-stealing –I have time-travelled – back to a place of depth – a familiar place … and it hits me:

Yes!… it only always ever began here in this dream-scene where a pure white blizzard falls from a black thatched sky and I will land – pitch bloody perfect - like one of those white feathers I keep in the plastic tub on my desk at home. Mum collects them at the cemetery and sometimes gives one to me to keep safe and I don’t know what to do with them. I don’t get what they mean. Are they messages from the dead? But surely they are just bits – feathers - from birds? And here-now – back in time - the parasol that shaded me on the loungers is now a familiar oak tree. A tree that as a child I thought was The Magic Faraway Tree (Blyton, 1943/2012).. a tree that I read and told stories about to my children…a tree that offered the promise of pleasure and peril… which could take me to different lands….

And in this place - my own children are not in the pool – instead I have travelled back to my hometown – and travelled back in time – and it is Mum – childhood Mum – wee Janette who is with me… and we are in the cemetery lying on top of her brother’s grave.
Momentarily I think again of Cixous’ assertion that those graves that her life begins in “go beyond, the individual, the singularity” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997:189). And I think how much I love the beauty and stillness of the cemetery – the peaceful promise – Solnit (2014) says we often talk of our love for places but seldom of how places love us back. I feel the privilege of Cixous’ assertion that not all of us are given access to this world and are “guests of the dead” (1993:59)…

And I reach out to hold wee Janette’s hand…

The sky is pitch-black except for the snow which falls softly upon the ground.

Wee Janette and I make snow angels in the ground together before the snow stops. And then she points out wee Jim’s star in the sky.

And we hold hands again as we stare at in wonder.

Asked what is the best kind of interview, Cixous (responds it is “an interview with a child, because it prompts total innocence. Or with God…” (2008a:xvi)

Wee Janette is a child. Just 2½ years old. And by virtue of her dead brother, who is safely tucked up in the arms of Jesus, she feels very close to God. But I don’t want to interview wee Janette. Just like I don’t want to interview or ask Mum any questions in a research capacity. In fact, sometimes as my project progresses and Mum gets a fuller sense of it, she wants to tell me things – offers snippets – stories – things I might find ‘useful for my research’. But I close her down. Stop her talking. No Mum… No! It’s a writing project… don’t tell me things – make it artificial – I want it to unfold – unfurl – come to be - naturally! I am fiercely guarded with it. There is some kind of irrational sense of wanting to keep it ‘pure’ – untouched. But it is writing - only in writing that I place my trust to give me answers… no not ‘answers’ – but direction… . Unguarded writing. Focused only on writing through my body. But heading towards no fixed abode. A humble word like ‘wandering’, Cixous says is the right way to put it… close to the earth – a drive – a step-by-step – word by word quest that “bespeaks the humility of writing” (2008a:3).

And so it is a day-dream-dovering-writing on a lounger which finds me in the cemetery with childhood Mum rehearing her well-told stories. These are selectively-told stories that might be what Dolby-Stahl (1995) calls personal narratives that invite intimacy. I get bored of these stories as a child. I do not think my brother is as privy to them as I am – the daughter – as Mum invites me in to know her – her life – the life of women - intimately and up close… and I think about the places of the telling of the stories – in the kitchen as we wash up or in the bedrooms as I help her make the beds… Mum is a female storyteller, confiding as we work together (Edwards, Thomson and Ely, 1996). And Mum is a
wee girl storyteller here in this cemetery. Those stories might have bored my little-girl-self but they burrowed under my skin – and when I write – I realise they bored into my soul…

I observe wee Janette in my head for moment as we hold hands and the snow melts. I wonder what she is thinking. McGlashan observes that:

The mind of a child is a mystery and a paradox. Outward - Ignorance and dependence, rainbow tears and laughter. Inward – rapt secret communion with realities of another order – with opposites and correspondences of which the golden key is lost to us – world of witch and dwarf and monster – the archetypal fairy tale world… a child lives largely in the Unconscious, and is more than a little mad (1966: 39).

I smile as I watch wee Janette. She is familiar in and with this cemetery. Almost entirely at ease in this place filled with death. Cixous observes, “To begin (writing, living) we must have death” (1993:7). And I realise that whilst I might not look to interview and question others in my research – I interrogate the invisible writers whose words I read. Why, I have questioned Cixous often… why must we have death to begin-write-live? And it’s not just any old death! Oh, no, Cixous is very specific - it must be “young, present, ferocious, fresh death, the death of the day, today’s death” (1993:7). And I watch wee Janette – a wee girl, maybe more than a wee bit mad…she is familiar with this kind of death. Young – ferocious. She sits close to it. An intimate death that hurts permanently – indelibly – a death where scars might fade but will always remain…

And I reach back in time to see-hear her in her own words – in the intimate stories that she will grow up to tell me – her little girl – as she invites me into her world – where she came from…

And as I begin to rehear Mum’s earliest memory seep through my skin into words on a page, I remember my earliest memory…

I am 2½. The same as Mum is when wee Jim is taken. I think Mum and I like our own first memories – those that we remember but are not given my others – as Forster (1995) says, it allows us to stop splicing oral story with local history and start instead lettering our own version of family lore: Me – Mum – we can be there ourselves at the centre of stories no-one else can tell when we tell such intimate stories. My earliest memory is a ghost story…

My brother and I share a room. We are supposed to be sleeping but he stands at the end of my bed where the wooden dolls’ house sits on a chest of drawers and he brings the dolls alive…turns them into characters… ghosts – and they fly around – as ghosts not dolls - and he tells me stories. It
is fun even though I am frightened by the ghosts… and then Mum comes in and tells him off – he is to go back to bed and we are both to go to sleep….  

Noting the nature and quality of remembrance need pondering, Augé (2004) asserts childhood memories like remembrance are a picture: ghostly appearances that fleetingly or insistently haunt our existence and sometimes we find vanished landscapes or faces in our dreams as well, incongruous details, surprising in their apparent insignificance. But Augé (2004) goes on to note that it is strange and disappointing to go in search of our oldest memory because we rarely settle with attending only to what is there – instead we seek the validation of dates, times and contexts to fix memory into a narrative…. And I think – yes! I do this my earliest memory. I recall the layout of the room. The way the beds faced. I am on the bed at the left hand side of the room – the door is on the corner farthest from the door. Mum is this right? The location of the dolls’ house? My age – was I the same age as she was when wee Jim dies – 2 ½? I ask Mum. Demand answers. She confirms. Yes! I was right. Yes! I do remember the room correctly. Yes. We moved when I was 2 ½ - the dolls’ house was a special Christmas present. I am happy. But – I think about Mum and her memories – of the stories she tells – they seem different. Quite different. I think it is because in some of them there is no-one around to witness the stories – to confirm… sometimes I wonder if it because although I know them to be very real to her and they are her truth - they have a daydream-like quality to them. Bachelard (1958/1994) distinguishes between memory and daydream… Chawla (2014) says stories begin in memories… and I picture myself daydreaming with wee Janette deep-diving the picture-images of the childhood world she stories…diving into what might be the land of a 'motionless childhood' (Bachelard, 1958/1994).

**Wee Janette tells stories**

The Stel Steps: was it meant to be me?

It is days before wee Jim’s death.

Wee Jim stands with wee Janette in her pushchair at the top of a narrow set of winding steel steps known locally as the stel steps.

As wee Jim readies himself to bump the go-chair down the steps, a well-dressed young couple coming up the steps intervene. The blonde lady lifts Mum from her go-chair and carries her down and the man carries the go-chair and warns wee Jim to be careful.

This is a vivid memory for Mum. She always wondered what would have happened if the couple hadn’t been there. She is certain her brother would have been unable to negotiate the pram safely
down the narrow winding steps. Very occasionally in the telling of the story, Mum will add in as a whispered guilty afterthought that she has always wondered if it was her that was meant to be ‘taken’ instead of Jim.

The Emerald Mouse: thou must not covet
It is days before wee Jim’s death.
Wee Jim is given an emerald green clockwork mouse.
Wee Janette is given a mouse too. Hers is a dull grey colour.
Mum’s toddler eyes are jealous of the vivid colour of her brother’s mouse. She wants it. She cries. And Nana tells her off. No - she cannot have the emerald mouse because it belongs to Jim.

After Jim’s death, Nana gives Mum the emerald mouse. Wee Janette can have it now.

She no longer wants it.

Even as a child, when Mum tells me this story, I heard the sharp warning lurking within the tale. Even in our innocence we must not covet. And the unspoken foreboding undertone. What if our wishes and desires have consequences? As an adult-researcher now, I would want to ask Mum if she ever talked to Nana about this story – asked her about the mouse like I ask about the dolls’ house. But I know Mum could not have done this – I do not know why but I think she would have felt guilty or fearful of upsetting Nana.

The Sweeties and the Shells: it’s a kind of magic
Mum’s beloved Dey takes her to visit wee Jim at the cemetery. He encourages her to give some of her sweeties to wee Jim. Wee Janette places sweeties in the shells next to Wee Jim’s grave and he always came to get them because when they check the shells the sweeties are always gone. It was magical.

Mum encourages me to put sweeties in the shell when I am a little girl. But I never think of it as magical. It is not real. I know wee Jim cannot come and get them because he is dead. I grudge giving him my sweeties. But I don’t say anything to Mum. I am brought up well. I am a good girl and good girls are expected to share.
But now I wonder. Sweeties would have been rationed when Mum was little. Essential food was paid for on tick. They lived week to week. Dey would have bought the sweeties for wee Janette with the small amount of ‘pocket money’ Maw gave Dey back from his wage packet. Why waste the sweeties? Mum… were the sweeties wrapped? Yes… well… do you think Dey maybe got the sweetie out the shell when you weren’t looking – rationed sweeties (and money being tight) would make the sweeties a precious commodity for a little girl – and well… then Dey made sure you got your sweetie back to eat without you knowing. Mum is adamantly horrified. No! She gave a share of her sweeties to wee Jim and he came and got them. But Mum – obviously wee Jim couldn’t actually come to get the sweeties– it had to be Dey who if nothing else at least removed the sweeties from the shell…. No! It was wee Jim who came and got the sweetie. Really Mum? But I realise there is no sense making – no rationality – nothing other than an absolute ingrained belief that Mum holds – close – careful – dear to her heart. It is a faith that wee Jim can be both safe in the arms of Jesus but also able to partake of some life on earth. And that even beyond the grave, she can give him something very ordinary – precious to her – and expect no return.

And as I lie on top of wee Jim’s grave with wee Janette, I think about Mum’s words as she looks back at photographs - describes the ‘what is going on behind the scenes’ – beyond the frame of the lens – what is going on in wee Janette’s mind. As Stanley (1992) notes, photographs are powerful. And Berger, noting that photos are not mechanical records, asserts that “every time we look at a photograph we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other sights” (1972:2). And I look at the screen – and how easy to delete an airbrush an image of the past – but how difficult to remove them from our memory.

And I picture the sight Mum describes of her little girl self…

**Wee Janette in the photographs**

**Heat Spots**

Wee Janette is sitting on wee Jim’s grave. She has big healing heat spots on her chubby toddler legs. She remembers the itching and how she scratched round and around the spots to satiate the itch but oh how it nipped and hurt.

She remembers the photograph was taken just weeks after wee Jim is taken.

**Fair Day Best**

And another photograph of wee Janette I do not remember seeing but Mum tells me was also taken just weeks after wee Jim dies. It is the Miners’ Fair so she is dressed in ‘best’. And Dey captures her on film – SNAP - just before another family come to take her out to enjoy the fun of the day. But when the photograph is developed and printed, wee Janette cries to Dey – but why am I alone – why did
everyone leave me on my own? Oh now, Dey comforts her – you weren’t on your own wee hen – who do you think took your photo…?

I was there!

And suddenly, I am brought too with the kids deliberately sprinkling pool water over me as they head towards the stairs leading up to the villa. *Fuck off!* Then I yell to warn them not to slip as they climb up the shiny marble steps with wet feet. *Careful!*

I sit up. I recall a newspaper article I read. Talking about the death of her eldest child, former British Prime Minister’s wife, Samantha Cameron, talks about the death of her firstborn son and how it overshadows everything (Thomson, 2017). She keeps his photographs everywhere and her youngest child – born after he dies – grows up with her dead brother. Mum’s younger brother grew up with a dead brother he never knew. I think about how I too was a child who grew up with a child who died. But wee Jim was never a ghost. He is real. And I think about Mum and her childhood stories. Stories that sound so mythical. Eliade (1975) defines ‘myth’ as narrating a sacred story. Yes. There is something sacred in Mum’s storying. But they are stories that seem to be so often told and set in stone, it surprises me when I listen to them again, how they are full of gaps. Mum’s paints pictures in her stories. Vivid. Dark. But they are snapshots. More was happening behind the scenes. More was not being said.

I think about the other stories Mum tells as I lie back on the lounger. Births. Marriages. Deaths. Stories of family women in a domestic history. And I think about how Cixous (1981) says woman is usually found in history in bed and “her trajectory is from “bed to bed” (1981: 43)…and somehow this always reminds me of Dad’s Father of the Bride speech….

Dad remembers the way he felt the day the nurse handed me to him – perfect – all wrapped up in a white towel – a wee white bundle –and Dad – eloquently makes the connection – between that day – and today – my wedding day – as he hands me over now – a beautiful white bundle in my princess style gown – to my husband to take care off.

I smile at the memory. It might sound like I am a piece of property being handed over. But that was not Dad’s intention. Really Dad was pointing out what a precious gift I was – a gift he felt he was given from God and a gift he wanted to be loved and cared for just like he loved and cared for Mum.
And I think about Mum as a bride – beautiful – the photograph – ‘Proof only’ – no money to buy a photograph – and as a child I think that ‘proof’ means evidence – it proves that Mum was a bride – she got married…

Mum always tells how she got married 10 months before she gives birth – count it on your fingers – and people did because my brother is born the same year Mum and Dad marry…there is always the subtle undertone – children should not be conceived out of wedlock – it’s not the law – of God – the Father – it sounds innocent – but really it is not – it is a bit foreboding… but I want to distract myself from it so instead I smile as I think about how Mum will tell a different story about Dad’s ‘bad behaviour’ on the day I was born. Do you know… I was right at the late stages of labour and of course men weren’t allowed in the room when you were giving birth back then…but your Dad just went off to the Masons and it was one of the other men who said he needed to go home because his wife was in labour…. And as I think about the story Mum tells me of the day I was born – a story so well-told I could recite it myself – but it is always Mum’s to tell…

and I dover off again – to dream – to hear – what is probably the biggest story of Mum and my lives entwined together… my roots…and it is told at least once every year… most years it is told more! It is my ‘birth story’…

The Glorious Twelfth: Performing birth stories

Every year, without fail, Mum loves the opportunity to retell the story of my birth on my actual birthday. It is a performance (Pollock 1999). Birth stories are always – perhaps like the women who tell them - everywhere and nowhere all at once (Pollock, 1999). As sanitised comic-heroic retellings, perpetuating sociocultural desires and expectations for grander normalised narratives, birth stories paper over the cracks and gaps of embarrassing, inappropriate and taboo stories of birthing that are shamed and hushed, hustled into the margin of decent conversations (Pollock 1999, 2009), emphasising that if there is one place to find the repressed, it is the “taboo of the pregnant woman” (Cixous, 1976b:891). Women’s leaky bodies – burgeoning, birthing, menstruating, menopausal – make themselves present, leading to their appropriation in medicalisation (Edwards, 2005) as the rise of the hospital, in line with the larger history of industrialisation, unravelled bodily life from the social rites and economies in which it was traditionally enmeshed. And as birthing, like dying, was removed from domestic public spaces, shifting authority from the home terrain where a flux of Midwives, relatives and neighbours – all women – reigned supreme – traditional birthing was cast aside isolating women from each other, and sacrificing the rich social history that brought them together across family and community lines (Pollock, 1999).
Maw’s sister, Aunt Teenie (who attended all the family births), terrified Mum with gory birth stories from her years of birthing-room wisdom experience... ‘Oh aye...you leave your dignity at the door when you’re giving birth and you pick it back up on the way oot...Oh aye... it’s is all fine when the heid crowns but it’s when the shooders come out...that’s the worst!' ...oh my goodness, your Aunt Teenie frightened the life out of me!

Mum is relieved when I am born safe and well after a straightforward delivery...Oh, I had just such an easy time delivering you... but oh I had a bad feeling before... I was almost four weeks overdue with you and the midwife was coming to start me on Friday 13th and...well thank goodness she came a day early to start me because... well, you know...

And then, there is a pause...before Mum, with no hint of superstition, delivers the punchline of the birth story that has – over the years – settled in place the notion that I was lucky to be born alive –that I am lucky to be here today...I knew...I just knew that if they waited to start me and you were born on Friday 13th you wouldn't have survived... you wouldn't be here now.

As a child, I listen - eyes agog - to the dramatic circumstances surrounding my entry into the world. They give ‘me’ meaning: I am a ‘special little girl’ who is lucky to be born alive. I do not question until years later when Mum delivers her annual performance, but it is different: I am pregnant and am preparing to give birth and I know - because I’ve entered into the world of ‘maternity’ and I’ve read the books – doctors won’t let you go 4 weeks past a due date... ‘Really Mum, are you sure you were almost four weeks overdue...?’ But Mum is adamant....You can laugh all you like, but I know – because I was there… and I was right… your afterbirth was all black and rotting and you were blue… you had to be put in a boiling hot bath to warm you up!

I think about the women – Mum – the Midwife – Aunt Teenie – Nana – three of dad’s oldest sisters – and a doctor – and dad – all crammed into a tiny flat. That tiny flat where I am born is demolished just months after my birth. Mum shakes her head with disappointment when she tells this part of the story... It was a damp dirty hole. Water from the river was seeping up under the foundations of the flats and it was built on a mine shaft so they were declared structurally ‘unsound’. But there is a positive. Mum is a private person...always best to stay a wee bit reserved and keep yourself to yourself...but oh the neighbours were lovely folk. And then Mum will say – with a sense of dignified pride...as soon as you were born and I was tidied up the neighbours were waiting outside to admire you and to collect the bedsheets… and they were handed back the next day all beautifully pristine
clean. You know, we might not have had much and we all had to make do but we all did the best we could! You know, the bedroom you were born in might have been hanging with damp but it was spotlessly clean…you could have ate your dinner off it!

…I sit up on the sunlounger. The sun has moved and the infinity statue looms in the infinity pool. I stand up and my shadow looms beside it. I stare again at the blueness of the world I sit in here. Solnit says the world is blue at its edges…blue is the light that gets lost…“but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue” (2005:26) Bachelard (1958/1994) says humans would be dispersed figures without the shelter of the house which collects and contains past-present-future, allowing us to daydream, it integrates our thoughts, memories and desires. My birth home – so far from where I lounge in the sun today – is where ‘I’ come from: is it the back to which I belong?

I wonder about my ‘I’ that thinks-writes-researches. Winterson (2001) says filth, cold, hunger or trauma do not matter to writers - it is only dinginess and the damp confines of a compromising mediocrity which chip away at beauty and light and bring death to a writer. I think about the stagnant water and mine shafts under the foundations of my birth home. My sunkissed skin shivers with the feel of creeping damp that riddled the walls of the room I was born in. I feel the dinginess of it. It clings to me. The home we are born in is physically inscribed in us (Bachelard, 1958/1994). I shudder at the poverty of the damp, peeling, structurally disintegrating walls. But I am also lulled with the security of being born into a home where respectable women afford each other dignity with their service as they quietly launder a neighbour’s bloodied bedsheets.

Mum was the first visitor to the hospital after my children are born and I remember she brings in a black bag in her handbag and she makes it a priority to ensure she does not leave the hospital without my nightdress and clothes so they can be washed and ironed and folded neatly in the bedroom for when I get home. Mum is proud that she bleaches out the blood because there was a lot of it after the haemorrhage. Really Mum – you could just have left it – I’ll probably never wear it again anyway. But she tells me…it’s good to make do and mend – reuse….

And as I stare into the blueness that envelopes me here in paradise, I think about the world of luxury my children are born into. What different lives they lead from my childhood – from Mum’s. But we carry our ancestral genetic line, other bodies, other stories, in our body (Allegranti, 2014; 2017). I wonder what stories my children will tell as I think about the tightly woven connection to Mum - Nana
those strong real fleshy women whose hands loving rocked my cradle or coortied-me-in-tight in the plaid. And Maw… I wonder about Maw who I never met…

March 2018: Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen

My youngest blows out sixteen sparkly pink candles on a shop-bought unicorn cake. Happy Birthday! Sweet Sixteen! Do you know it’s exactly 16 years ago to this very minute since you were born? You kept me waiting. Ten days late. I had to be induced. It was such a quick labour but it was absolute agony!… I’m being too dramatic. Eyes roll in embarrassment for me. I’ve told this story too many times before… But I don’t care. Écriture féminine might be untheorisable but it involves excess. Lather questions if it is possible to produce the maternal/feminine and be heard in the culture as it raises the politics of excess because ‘the eruption of the mother in feminist discourse was the unthought which was originally perceived as unreadable’ (Lather, 1993:682). Perhaps we need to stop silencing ourselves. Overflow in our embarrassment. Perhaps one day my children will remember these stories they do not want to hear just like I did not want to hear stories from Mum about her and Nana and Maw. So, as my eldest retreats upstairs with tea and cake, I catch his attention… Do you know I remember the day you were born like it was yesterday… you were born on your due date – thank goodness because a woman at work went over her time and the baby was stillborn and I was terrified and …and I am cut short as he heads upstairs laughing that it’s not his birthday so it’s not his turn to listen to me talking about ‘the good old days’ as I take one of my ‘wee trips down memory lane’.

Left with my tea and cake, my mind wanders back to the room I was born in and all the inheritances lying in wait for me …narratives, social-cultural-capitals, inspecting gazes hovering that will bore into my classed-gendered-raced nakedness and tell me who I am. And love – maternal love from the womenfolk too… and way out in the distance – thousands of miles and minutes away – Cixous lies in wait for me to read-write and dialogue with one day – to identify with her claim she is born in the skin of writing and has writing in her skin as she encourages me to distract my gaze from capturing, “to see the skin of the light” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1986:115).

Maw never gets the chance to hold me – touch my skin - because she dies three months before I am born. But last month I felt the yes-ness of a eureka moment as it came to me as I sat – drowning in my own words - that the crocheted and knitted shawls and matinee jackets that Maw’s fingers make for me to wear – touched and clothed my skin. Through the material of her labour, Maw’s hands touched me. And as I think- touch-feel for words as I type – write – feeling through writing as pliable material – it comes to my mind that Maw and I might actively have touched each other through the skin of Mum’s swollen belly. My eldest was an in-utero wriggler and sometimes Mum would sit beside
me to feel the life of her unborn grandson as he elbowed-kicked-hiccupped against her hand. Did Mum let Maw feel the awakening and quickening of my movements before she died?

I was named after Maw. And Nana. Given their maiden names as my middle name. They are my ‘given names’ (Schützenberger, 1998). But I turn to the law to have them removed before I marry. Deed poll is a wonderful thing. Silly middle names. But now. I wonder more and more about my namesakes these days.

And I think about my kids’ umbilical cord clamps. I kept them. The kids think it is disgusting when I make the occasional foray up the loft to bring down the small ‘memory boxes’ I have kept for each of them so they have a bit of their earliest past…but I argue against their disgust and I tell them it comes from the bit that physically bound them to me. I am Mum and they come from inside me. They are always part of me like I am part of Mum and Mum is a part of Nana and Nana is part of Maw.

And it is this invisible link – like white milky ink – the once sterile yellow clamp of the umbilical cord instantly contaminated by human contact which extends beyond me and disappears into one of the cracks on the white on white-grey page that I type into – that haunts me…And it is this invisible link that ties me - personally - to generations past and - as a researcher - to my computer screen as I contemplate how we keep quiet about what is not being said and how these imprint of previous marks have perhaps faded into an invisible background or have been papered over.

And I remember Nana and her knitting of the perfect woollen blanket. The one Mum wants me to donate for the refugees. That was Nana’s blanket that she knitted for my babies. I will not ever give it away. I remember the needles click-clacking in Nana’s arms…. And I decide to go up the loft to bring down my youngest’s ‘memory box’. I find the white woollen blanket Nana knitted. I hold it close against me. Then I knock on my youngest’s door. Look what I’ve found. Eyes roll. What is it? I’ve found your umbilical cord clamp! She looks horrified. But look. This is your baby blanket. Your Nana knitted it when I was pregnant with your brother. She died before you were born but I kept it safe. I used it as your pram blankie. Do you want to feel it! Nana knitted it. Who’s Nana? Good question. Who was Nana?

Nana: Where Hope Escapes

June 2020: ‘Nana was a Character’

Oh aye, Nana was a right character.
This is how we talk about Nana when we gather at birthdays and New Years and funerals and we look back at the past, sharing memories and stories.

Yes. Nana was indeed unique.

Mum settles on ‘Gran’ when her grandchildren are born although she desperately wants to be called ‘Nana’. But Nana is still alive and is Nana, and actually Mum must have known deep-down that she could never be named ‘Nana’ because she knows that Nana will always be our family’s ‘Nana’… I let Nana’s names settle on my lips. And I think…no-one will ever step into Nana’s shoes… except perhaps me as a little girl – because I loved ‘dressing-up’ in Nana’s shoes!

Nana’s shoes - beigey-grey, tatty smelly-unworn old pairs - were stored in the tongue-and-groove cupboard the rented TV sat on. Nana seldom wore shoes. Instead she sat with her baffies on chain-smoking in her chair next to the three-bar gas fire her crossed leg bobbing up-and-down. Mum would nag her – Mum, stop your leg shaking….stop it! But Nana couldn’t help it. It wasn’t Nana’s ‘fault’. It was Nana’s ‘nerves’.

If Nana were alive today – as I write - it would be her 97th birthday! And I smile through flutter-flying-butterfly soft curving typing fingers as I fly up high to sign and leave a message trailing in the sky wishing Nana the very happiest birthday up there in Heaven – Love you Nana – hope you’re having fun!…God knows – it has been said - Nana didn’t have too much fun on earth.

Even though I have written about it – noted, reflected and attempted to make sense of it- it never fails to shock me that in the first month of this research – when I am writing-reading with no direction – it is Nana and the surgical removal of her legs where the blood has stopped flowing and the brokenness of her body surfaces and brings death and the grief that resides in me that I know has not been dealt with but can only be chipped away at emerges on the screen. I was not aware of being either interested in, aware of, or perhaps – as literature might suggest – ‘haunted’ in some way – by Nana’s death.

And now – on an anniversary of Nana’s birthday and writing about her not having much fun on earth – I think how this is a story I am cementing in place that is not true. Nana was a character. Vivid. Colourful. Nana had many moments. Horrific. Depressing. Subdued. But fun and lighthearted and beautiful too. The Nana of my childhood and the Nana of Mum’s childhood are not the sum total of Nana. She was more than a betrayed wife, a grieving mother or a Valium subdued ‘hysterical’ woman of her time.
I remember happy times. Nana’s excitement when I tell her I am ‘expecting’ my eldest. And I remember staring into the Moses basket when Nana is dead and my youngest – just hours old – lies swaddled in one of Nana’s shawls. And Mum whispers to me how Nana hoped my eldest would be a girl. And now we have a little girl. And it takes me back to the peaceful October-November-December afternoons in the Autumn-Winter of 1999 after my eldest is born…

October 1999: Afternoons with Nana

Papa is in hospital. Again. Papa liked being in hospital. He felt safe. Cocooned. He liked the attention. But Nana had an abhorrent dread of hospitals. People went in them and they never came back out. The same with going to the doctors’ surgery. Nana instilled in us the same values as Forster’s: “keep away from all doctors” (1995:139). Nana had her Valium on repeat prescription. Papa took care of it all. He ordered up her repeat prescriptions and collected them from the chemist.

And now Mum is responsible for taking care of Papa. It's what women do – they care. It's expected of working-class women (Hochschild, 1983; 2003; Skeggs,1997). Mum keeps the world in order as she visits Papa twice a day in hospital, taking him his favourite home-cooked foods and his newspaper. Meanwhile, I am happy for Mum to drop Nana off at mine on her way to the hospital so me and the baby can keep each other company. Fresh from giving birth and new to being at home during the day, Nana helps me and the baby settle into a peaceful afternoon routine…

Nana make us cups of tea whilst I settle the baby for his afternoon nap in the Moses basket in front of the living-room window. While I set-up the ironing board, Nana – who always avoids holding her wee grandson for fear of dropping him – watches over the swaddled baby as he falls asleep… Look…! Nana would say…he’s got the hives… wee soul…! Then, once the baby is sleeping, Nana would get herself comfy on the two-seater sofa beside the cat and she would pull her knitting out and demand the Jerry Springer show be put on the TV. New to afternoon television, I am shocked… Nana! I’m not sure you should be watching this… …I hope the baby isn’t listening! But, oh how Nana laughed with glee at the almost continual ‘bleeping’ and the raucous fighting.

Nana – oh Nana – I think as I remember her then - seemingly so fine and fit and well – so high-spirited… but even then, both Mum and I knew already that Nana wasn’t quite herself… but we did not push the matter because Nana would just deny it – better not to think about it.
Those were precious afternoons– just me and Nana and the baby – the baby she thought I named after her firstborn even though it annoyed me and I told her she was wrong. No Nana – he’s named after a famous author whose books I love!

And I remember earlier precious Friday lunchtimes too when I am pregnant….

August 1999: I am Expecting

Late in my pregnancy –with an excess of holidays and a six-week block of antenatal classes on Friday mornings, I took Friday afternoons off work so I could pop in to see Nana who would be waiting for me in the same way every week… Nana would touch my bump to see if she could feel the baby move and Nana loved to feel ‘her’ kick and I would say it could be a wee boy Nana – we don’t know….and I’d like a wee boy…and then Nana would serve me up big bowls of thick homemade lentil soup and sweet baked carnation milk rice pudding. And I would protest…Nana – I’m going to get fat – got to think about getting my figure back when the baby is born and she’d say ‘och away with you..’ and she would point at my eight-month swollen-to-bursting pregnant belly… ‘there’s nothing off you…and mind you’re eating for two now … there is a wee one in there who needs to be fed’.

February 1999: Telling Mum I am pregnant

When I tell Mum I am pregnant…I made her promise not to tell anyway – apart from Dad – no mum don’t tell Nana – I want to tell Nana – and I’m not telling her yet – just in case - you know – I don’t want to tell anyone until I’ve had my 12 week scan and everything is OK.

Although I am just 27, Mum and Nana had ‘already given up hope’ …‘You’d left it so late I wondered if you were having trouble ‘down below” Mum says… ‘and your Nana was beginning to think you’d turned into one of those ‘career girls’ and you weren’t going to give us any great/grandbabies!’.

Yes. It was not spoken of but there was always an in-held breath-less-ness waiting for the announcement expectation that one day I would deliver ‘good news’. It was only six years ‘I made them wait’ but I think it felt to them like a lifetime.

Unlike Nana and Maw I did not ‘need’ to get married. I did things ‘properly’. Aged 22, I walked down the aisle on my proud Dad’s arm with a demure white veil covering my face, a string of pretty fake
pearls around my neck and Mum’s wedding-bible decorated with a spray of white roses and gypsophila in my hand. I was the picture-perfect young virgin bride and with a thick yellow gold band safely secured on my ring finger, I had the luxury of well and truly being established as ‘Mrs’ when I fell pregnant. But Nana was right. I had turned into (and loved being) one of those ‘career girls.’

A student-grant-funded first-generation university graduate, I spent my twenties knee-deep in paperwork not nappies as I climbed quickly to what in my family seemed like the unimaginably giddy career-ladder heights of being ‘a manager’ ‘Imagine that hen’, Dad said with quiet respect – ‘it’s you who is the boss – telling other folk what to do, not the one being told’. Dad’s disbelieving pride in me being ‘one of the high-heid yins’ not a worker like him, was less treasured by Mum who, whilst she was relieved I didn’t have to work like her - always skivvying after other folk – took her delight in my career success from the fact that my husband and I had a mortgage and lived in a ‘private’ (not a ‘council’) house – ‘I was just saying to your Nana – imagine – our Jan lives in a private house – a double-fronted house too! Imagine – folk like us are usually the ones working to folk like her!’.

I remember the year I hosted Christmas dinner in my posh brand-new double-fronted home. Mum and Nana oooh-ed and aaah-ed with approval, nodding – lovely…classy…! – Nana - gleeful that she had found four of the six ‘silver-styled charms’ I’d carefully sterilised and wrapped in greaseproof paper and mixed into the Christmas pudding sat contentedly – possibly a wee bit ‘sloshed’ from the champagne she’d sipped from my wedding-gifted Edinburgh Crystal flutes - and declared I’ve never had champagne before… You know, I never thought I’d be sitting like this – imagine – ‘me’ sitting here like this, in my granddaughter’s private house, in a dining room, eating my Christmas dinner at a proper table.

The mahogany-veneered table we sat around was purchased on a ‘pay-nothing-now plus 2 years’ interest-free credit’ deal. We were mortgaged to the hilt, terrified the interest rate tide might turn at any time. If you scratched under the surface of the generative ‘look how well I’ve done for myself’ which fed into the ‘look how far we’ve come’ family success story, you could see the almost invisible fault-line crack starting to appear. I work hard. I desperately want to be ‘a success’… but it feels tenuous… and I am always mindful that, as Mum and Nana liked to say, ‘Pride comes before a fall!’. I hear the unspoken voices speak out in my head…

Imagine – what if our Jan becomes all highfalutin…what if our Jan becomes one of those folk who forgets where they come from? I mean…have you heard about ‘so-and-so’ - Oh aye! – She never came back at Christmas to see her folks…
Terrible! She’s become all stuck up and ‘la-di-da’ now… but she’s all fur coat and nae knickers and we all ken where she comes from and she’d do well not to forget it.

Families, like all social structures, actively collude to keep secrets as they deny that which they choose to or feel the need to ignore (Zerubavel 2006). Pincus & Dare (1978) define ‘secrets’ in families as unconscious beliefs or attitudes which, through their general acceptance by succeeding generations of a family, come to perpetuate themselves in determining their responses and behaviours. If family members challenge a secret, the attitude of other family members towards it also seems to change, and the collusive system is broken as new facts and fantasies come into the open. But in ordinary decent hardworking respectable upstanding Scottish working-class families like mine - where ‘keeping the peace’ and ‘hauding your wheesht’ is encouraged - this is easier said than done.

And Nana liked to say ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’. Mum and me would nod and agree with another of Nana’s old sayings ‘Least said soonest mended’. Even if Mum and Nana worried that I was in danger of being or becoming ‘something I am not’, it was never spoken of. Instead, we sat – Nana and Mum and me - in the featureless front living room of my little ticky-tacky house on its hill, happily chattering - ignoring the silenced magnolia-coated elephant that takes up residence in the middle of the room, blending seamlessly into the overpriced boxy walls.

Boxing Day 2013: Walking with Nana

It is the first Christmas since my husband and I separated. The first Boxing Day he will go with the kids to his parents without me. Family and friends, well-meaning with their ‘come and spend the day with us-no-one-because no-one wants to be on-their- own-over Christmas’ invitations have been politely but adamantly turned down. I plan to go for a walk. And if it rains? I’ll walk anyway.

In the end, the sun obliges to settle into an unseasonably sunny winter sky. It is a perfect winter’s day. I feel lighthearted – soft - and free – as I stride out in my sturdy walking boots with no clear route in mind. And I realise I am writing in my head as I walk – and that takes us places — to reminisce sometimes – to places we can enjoy a moment – where we can pause – awhile and remember what we once had… and even if it has gone – the people – the places – the feelings – to remember the goodness of them. And somehow- without thinking – other than trying to head towards quieter paths where I won’t see people – I realise that whilst I’ve been writing in my head, I am eight miles and thousands of steps after leaving the ‘separated-pending-divorce family’ home later – standing outside our previous family home.
I stand at a distance… so many memories lie in that house…

I remember my husband and I expectantly painting the baby’s nursery.

I remember shutting that white panelled front door the night before my due date, amniotic fluid dripping from me, my husband repeatedly asking, ‘Are you sure you’re not just wetting yourself?’ NO!

I remember carrying two tiny newborns in car seats over the threshold of that door

I remember how much I loved the rustic-ness of the dry stane dyke wall in the back garden…. Winterson (2005) says solid walls collapse easily but well-build walls have invisible spaces for raging winds to go through and a wall’s strength is not in the stones but the spaces between…

And I remember again back to one of those precious sunny Autumn afternoons with Nana after my eldest is born…

A neighbour is in her garden, cutting the grass. Her husband comes home. He walks over to her and gives her a cuddle and a kiss. Nana and I watch. ‘Aww that’s nice’, I say – probably a bit sarcastically. Nana tuts and humphs…aye well…they’re making a show of themselves deliberately there…you dinnae ken what goes on behind closed doors…

And I remember Mum telling stories of how Maw would tell Nana off and warn her you’re filling their ears...do you want to fill the neighbours’ ears with all your rubbish – And I wonder about all those stories that could be gossiped about by others…

It makes me think about Cohen (2013) who, noting the relatively recent distinction between private and secret lives in families, asserts that they once shared a common path and what had to be concealed from those outside the threshold of a door was as integral a part of the family bond as the open pleasures of hearth and home.

And as I walk closer to the outside of this house I once lived in – that was my children’s first home - I want to inhale memories…
The memory of walking out the door for the first time – my baby in his pram – warmly tucked in under Nana’s beautifully knitted blanket.

And those afternoons with Nana staring in at the baby in the Moses basket… the bloody ugly garish Moses basket that Nana herself picked on her last birthday… I was embarrassed by the hideousness of that mustard yellow Moses basket… it did not meet any kind of image I wanted to project of who I was – but I loved Nana and it was her birthday - and so it was purchased.

I remember the day well…

I am almost six months into my pregnancy, Mum and Nana – keeping themselves busy knit-knitting – expectantly - for the new arrival – their first maternal grandchild- great-grandchild – ‘our wee one’ – become increasingly vocal with their gentle nagging have you not bought anything for that wean yet…you’re in denial…you know that’s a baby you’ve got growing in there – poor wee soul is going to come into the world thinking its unloved because you’ve not got anything ready… you need to get organised … never mind your work, your work – that’ll be there waiting for you! Some things are more important than your work – It’ll all change when the wee one’s here – you’ll feel differently – you’ll see!

To appease them, and to indulge my swollen-baby-belly self, I allowed myself to be ‘taken in hand’ and I schedule a day off work to go ‘pram shopping’ with them. I will remember the exact date – Friday 18 June 1999 - because it was Nana’s birthday. I picked up Nana and Mum in my car at the back of 10 o’clock. We drove to a large out-of-town baby store crammed with everything anyone could ever need, want – or possibly really not-need-or-want – for a baby.

And staring in the window at my old home, I remember Nana - determinedly test-driving a range of prams up and down the store. Nana – naughtily disapproving of the pram my husband and I choose and pointing out her ‘favourite’ – Nana smiling – alert – her eyes mischievously alive and wide awake – embracing life. There is no hint of the woman she had been back in the 70s, the 80s – before then too – years before then Mum would say – way before – Mum remembers but she does not say - but in this memory of Nana’s birthday that makes me smile – she is not the woman I grew up alongside – the woman tasked with my care when Mum and Dad are at work – working all the hours that God sends just to make ends meet – there is no hint now of Nana’s ‘nerves’…..Oh no – No Your fine Mum –settle down - Mum would say to Nana. And me – I’d try to settle things too…it’s OK Mum – I say – Nana’s fine – she’s OK. Your fine Nana – aren’t you. Once, Mum tells me, a doctor gives Mum ‘a row’ for bringing us to see Nana because it is no place for children. And I think how dare some doctor want to stop Mum taking us to visit our beloved Nana!
But there is no hint of that Nana now in my recollection of her last birthday – certainly not on the surface – not now that she has ‘recovered’ – not now that a new young doctor came along and weaned our Nana – silver by silver - off her decades long Valium haze that like many other women of her time supposedly settled – but definitely silenced – her. No -there is no sign of that Nana when she test-drove prams. Nana had been all better for years at that point. Her golden years.

And walking closer to the old house – but still surreptitiously at a distance - I fast-forward the memories I inhale…

It is three months later – the pram – fate thankfully un-tempted – has been collected safely from the shop. And my bouncing baby has arrived. I return from hospital to my plush private home – where Mum and Nana are waiting – and they stand at a distance – because I am in charge – and they watch as I carefully place my new baby – swaddled in one of several hand-crocheted soft-white shawls - into the yucky yellow Moses basket, before calmly – confidently - clicking the button on the remote control of the fancy Bose sound system (another buy now pay later interest free purchase) to let classical music flood the room. And I explain to Mum and Nana… *Classical music is good for the baby… stimulating but calming*. I read about it in a book. Again, they are impressed – they might have ‘been there and done it all before’ – being daughters, being lovers, being wives – becoming ‘mothers’ – but I was doing it differently – and again, I was doing it ‘better’ - I was doing it ‘properly’. I was showing them how it was done. I was a ‘good mother’. And I was showing those people who thought they were better than us that we were good enough. I was showing them all. I was rewriting our history. Polishing us up. Making us better.

And as I turn to head home because the blue skies are darkening – and I’m miles from home – and I walk quickly, and I remember Nana’s last Christmas…

**Christmas Day 1999: Nana’s Last Christmas**

We - my husband and I - visit Nana with the baby. It is a displaced Christmas. Mum used to ‘do’ Christmas until I own the house with a dining room – and then I ‘do’ Christmas. But now we have a new baby – my husband and I - have made it clear that we want to do our first Christmas as our own wee family – a proper family of three - on our own. Maybe Mum and Nana are disappointed. I do not know. Nothing is said. But then – as Nana would say - nothing said is soonest mended. ‘Nothing’ would probably have been said – but not to me.
And then, in the lead up to Christmas, Mum is floored with flu and Dad is working long hours and although I drop food off to Nana and Papa – and I visit Mum – and I know for sure that something is wrong, and illness has uncomfortably settled and I need to do something. But I am too busy with the practical responsibilities of being a mum and a daughter and a granddaughter to worry about how anyone is actually feeling and properly caring for anyone other than the baby who actually needs me. And I know that I love the baby – desperately – but I also miss my work. I might still be paid maternity leave. But I miss who I was at work.

On Christmas day itself, we meet at Nana and Papa’s tiny house at midday. Papa is not long out of hospital. Mum is still unwell. My husband and I decide in advance that we won’t stay long. I did not know it would be Nana’s last Christmas Day… I want to go back and do things differently – but you can’t. So all I can do is stand myself in that scene

We can’t stay long Nana… we need to get the wee one home and get him fed and settled for his nap… yes…we’ll have some soup to keep us going…we’re going to have our Christmas dinner later… we want to have our first Christmas turkey dinner together as a ‘proper’ family at home. Just me – C and the baby. We eat Nana’s lentil soup on trays balanced on our knees. The festive atmosphere is subdued. The air thick with sickness. Mum does not want to hold the baby…”I’m still not right… I’ve not got over this flu. I don’t want the wee boy to catch something from me”. Nana does not want to touch the baby…”I’ve not felt too well hen… I’m hoping I’m not coming down with your Mum’s flu…I don’t want the bairn to catch something from me”.

And I picture the last time Nana held the baby – carefully sitting down - at his Christening two weeks before she is taken to hospital and she takes ‘a wee turn’ and Dad has to drive her home. ‘Nana’s fine!’, we all said…”just a wee bit too hot…” and the christening purvey – my dining table loaded with sausage rolls and triangle sandwiches and homebaked biscuits and cakes and plastic flutes of Moët and Chandon just flows on as though nothing had happened although we all need it had.

Papa puts his arms out now offering to hold the baby No Papa! You’ve had an infection. Of course you can’t hold the baby! And the baby – his big knowing eyes smiling contentedly sucking his dummy in the car seat – just watches us all. And in between mouthfuls of soup, I fake Christmas cheer as I entertain Mum and Nana – cooing as I smile at my eldest – and tell all the details of ‘what Santa left for the baby’.
Back home – the baby naps as I peel potatoes and put a small turkey crown in the oven. I feel unsettled with how strained the ‘fun’ of ‘baby’s first Christmas was at Nana’s. I had expectations for how excited Mum and Nana would be. What fun! Happiness is a form of emotional labour and can be equated with making others happy by appearing happy (Ahmed, 2017). Mum and Nana weren’t feeling well enough to put a ‘good enough’ mothering face on it for me today. I feel let-down. Disappointed. Later – my husband, our baby, and I sit around the mahogany dining table – just the three of us – a wee family together – and we have no idea that at the same time tomorrow I will be pacing a hospital corridor waiting for news about Nana.

Boxing Day 1999: A Family Emergency

Nana is rushed to hospital in an ambulance in the middle of the afternoon on Boxing Day 1999. I do not know if the blue light flashed and-or sirens blared. Emergency. Emergency. We do not talk about the day Nana is taken into the hospital in our family. Boxing Day 1999 lurks - unacknowledged.

Boxing Days past were always a day of celebration. My brother was born on a Boxing Day. Like me, he has a birth story that Mum tells. Mum’s waters broke in in the cemetery on Christmas day... we always went to visit wee Jim at Christmas ... and my waters broke… and I was so embarrassed... it was different then… you can laugh all you like... but I didn’t know what was going to happen… Mum just missed having a Christmas Day baby...And so my brother’s birth in the early hours of a Boxing Day morning is part of his well-established birth story. None of us ever notice that the beginning of my brother’s coming into the world is at the scene of wee Jim’s grave. Just like none of us ever notice that Mum and Dad got married on wee Jim’s birthday, which had to be deliberately chosen and surely acknowledged at the time?

When we – my brother and I - meet in hospital – to visit Nana – to find out what is happening – what’s happening... what happened...why is Nana in hospital...?- We are out of sorts and short on answers - I can’t believe Nana’s in hospital… I know - and on my birthday too… ‘Happy Birthday’ – I offer – a pathetic awkward attempt to lighten the mood. Neither of us smile. And I remember we – my brother and I – lock eyes in the midst of the lack of information about Nana. We are brother-and-sister again. Like children. Sad. Astounded. Disbelieving. We do not need to say anything. Our beloved Nana in hospital. How can this be? Not our Nana. Not our Nana who has never been in hospital before. Not our Nana who doesn’t believe in hospitals... who has never been admitted to a hospital before. This cannot be happening – not to Nana – not to us. We are like children again.
In the hospital – clever now – university educated – grown up – in the real world of work-family-life – we know – my brother and I - We know – I think – even then – that this is the beginning of Nana’s end. But we do not speak this aloud. And we do not speak of Nana being taken into hospital in an ambulance on Boxing Day ever again. Boxing Day is my brother’s birthday. It will not be the day Nana starts to die. Just like the day of my eldest’s christening. Nana just had a wee turn that day. We do not need to speak about it – because we know it – we felt it – we lived it – in the moment. Felt the heat of it. Burned by it. Some things are better left unsaid.

Boxing Day 2014: Returning to the scene

It is the second year on my own – another whole Boxing Day to myself. Still free – happy – settled – another year forward with my research – still just writing – wandering ‘lost in the field’ - still not knowing where I might be going. And with the luxury of another whole day to myself. I set off eastwards with a plan to do a full circuit of the town where I live. The sun does not shine. It is a pea-drizzly-soup sky. I plan to visit a range of vantage points around our town: I walk out to the ‘Witches Stone’, the ‘new cemetery’ and I walk past the house where Nana and Papa lived close to the cemetery – and then I walk further west towards Nana’s last home and I stand outside – gauging just how long I can stand here before I attract attention.

And I think back again to Boxing Day 1999. I cannot remember what the weather was like that day. But I remember walking over the doorstep to that house that I no longer have a key to enter. I cannot remember how I found out Nana was taken to hospital. Perhaps my brother phoned me? Who did Mum phone first? Who did Papa phone first? His son or his daughter? There would – I think now – be a ‘proper’ order to it. Probably my Uncle? But Mum lives closer. And Mum is more the day-to-day carer. But I do not know. All I remember is that when I am told, I am tasked with checking on Papa and collecting essentials for Nana just in case she is ‘kept in’. This is unlikely. My Nana is a fighter. My Nana is a strong woman… she’ll show us all that it was a big fuss over nothing… what a to do… I’m fine hen… just a wee turn! But I do as I am asked and I go to Nana’s house to pack a bag with some clean pants, a fresh nightie and a wee assortment of toiletries and make-up. Later Mum will say you can tell it was our Jan who packed Nana’s things. And we laugh ‘Essentials’ like hairspray and face cream and hand cream and lipstick! I laugh as I respond that you want your bits and pieces around you in the hospital… they are essentials!

Papa was in the house sitting in his chair struggling to breathe when I arrive to pack Nana’s hospital bag. Is it time for your nebuliser Papa? Sit down. Don’t get yourself worked up. I hook him up to the nebuliser so he leaves me alone in peace to sort through Nana’s things. I open and close Nana’s bedroom drawers quietly to locate what I need. I am conscious of invading Nana’s privacy. This
never worried me as a child. I spent many happy hours of my childhood raking through Mum and Nana’s drawers and jewellery boxes and make-up bags. You liked to rake…Mum will say. But so did you, I will laugh. Yes! It’s what little girls do. It’s like dressing up. Wearing your mum’s shoes.

And I remember throwing unworn still tagged slippers Nana received as a Christmas gift in the hospital bag. Settling Papa down – making him a cup of tea – getting back in my car – driving to the hospital with Nana’s bits and pieces. Bracing myself. It’s my Nana – she is a strong woman – she will be OK.

Hogmanay 1999: Walking in a Winter Wonderland

My husband and I bath the baby. I sing ‘Walking in a Winter Wonderland’ animatedly as I pat him dry and wrap him in mint green hooded towel. He smiles and laughs – engaged – a proper little human being that I have come to know-love-completely-impossibly adore so much that I know already I could not live in a world without him. My husband videos as I dress my eldest in red Tigger flannel pyjamas and I tell him all about how tomorrow we will be in the year 2000…It’s not just a new year – it’s a whole new century….! Briefly I wonder how the Y2K stuff at work will go, but I let any work worries whoosh past – I’m on maternity leave – it is someone else’s worry for now. No-one watching the home video now would know I was thinking this then – but I remember it – and I can still see a brief moment of disconnection – a moment of my old life – flood my eyes when I watch the video back.

Once the baby is settled, my husband and I have a quiet evening in front of the TV with a bottle of red wine. At midnight, we sip champagne. Cheers! Happy New Year! Here’s to the next 100 years! Then my husband checks in at his work – everything is still working – no Y2K glitches. Yeah! Cheers! Then we get ready for bed. As I fall asleep, I think about Nana. In hospital. On her own.

February 2020: The National Library

Twenty years after Nana dies. I collect a pile of books from the main desk, book weights and then settle down. These are the ‘final’ books on ‘grief’ – ‘loss’ - that I want to read. From the hard book copy I own at home, Greene, writing a memoir from his first-hand experience after the sudden accidental death of his daughter, asserts that

Grief at its peak has a terrible beauty to it, a blinding fission of ever emotion. The world is charged with significance, with meaning, normally so solid and implacable, suddenly looks thin, translucent (2019:83).
And I wrote in the margins next to his words a response: *like a liminal space – an entredeux?* But I know all I do is put conceptual words in the margins to capture something that would blind my eyes and burn my fingers and stop-arrest me if I spent too long thinking about it.

Today, I want to interrogate the academic textbooks I have ordered up to see if they speak of a ‘peak’ of grief like the one Greene (2019) describes. I begin reading Baddeley and Singer (2009) who note the importance of each family member sharing memories of their lost loved one together, so the family has a shared set of memories because the death of a family member is a challenge that recasts the family’s narrative and this can often result in silence....

But – I am unsettled, as I read in the privileged silence of the library... I am worrying about the stories I read on the news. News of a pandemic approaching. I am worried about my parents. I am thinking about chores I need to get done at home in case we have to stay home. And I don’t want to read about grief. I want to think about happy things... so I leave the books unread and find another section of my thesis to read through... and I return to the story of Mum and Nana giving up hope...

Although Mum and Nana might have given up hope of me having a baby, I always knew I wanted to be a mother: but I also wanted to be successful at work. I don’t tell colleagues until I am almost twenty weeks and ‘starting to show’ and even then, I determinedly refuse to indulge in idle pregnancy/baby chit-chat as I feign faux nonchalance and resolutely remain carefully poised in my professional ‘it’s business as usual’ role. But– behind the scenes - as soon as I fall pregnant, I am obsessed: I read endless books that tell me what to expect when I am expecting and what to expect when the baby arrives; I dangle my wedding ring from a chain over my stomach to determine if I’m having a boy or a girl; and I wait – impatiently – to feel the ‘quickening’ that confirms better than any scan that I have a new life growing, nestled, inside me.

Looking back at my 27 year old tidily-pregnant managerial self with the whole wide wonderful world of opportunities lying paved-in-gold in front of her as she determinedly teeters along (with her growing bump) in high-heel courts and pastel mini-skirted suits, shuttling back and forth between her hometown and the city-centre bank headquarters where she works – I can see that she always already knew what my little-girl-self always already knew - and what Mum and Nana and Maw before me always already knew too:

‘I want does not get’.
You can want it all. Perhaps, with the entitlement and privilege that the career-girl money you earn brings, you begin to think you can expect to have it all. But wanting and expecting does not get… There is no such thing as having it all. As Nana liked to say… ‘Something has got to give’.

Looking back, I could not imagine that one day – only 10 years but with a whole range of life events later - I would find myself enrolling on a Counselling and Psychotherapy graduate programme, starting the journey to becoming a doctoral researcher, indulging in playful adventures in creative psychoanalytic writing practices, quilting and unfurling a writing story….

Even when I could not imagine that one day my hands would write and my fingers would type words that would allow my personal, social and professional work worlds to collide - writing stories that would make sense in time as I come to recognise that the mastery of central interpretive devices do not tell the absolute truths of what things are really like in the dirty reality of lived lives (Steedman, 1986) and I come to interpret family stories rooted in particular periods of history, political contexts and particular geographies (McNay, 2009) – to reveal ‘new stories’ (Richardson 1999a; Richardson & St Pierre 2018)… Even way back then I always already knew that it might be very dangerous to allow your personal and your professional worlds to come together, safest – possibly - to keep them apart.

Even back then with no notion of theoretical concepts, when I could not imagine becoming a reflexive researcher (Etherington, 2004) or worrying if I might be accused of narcissism or navel-gazing or ruminating – or just – in general – of being in danger of being up my own – doctoral researcher’s arse –language – my Mum would intervene - you weren’t brought up to speak like that….

Even back then –living my life in the moment–with all the potential and opportunity that the future promised me – perhaps owed me – someone like me - hardworking, honest, reliable, well-presented – respectable – even then I always already knew – I sensed it –unconsciously– I felt it - a structure of feeling – what Williams (1977) describes as a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones - I just knew – even then – I knew that the angst of class does not rub off too easily… I knew what Kuhn (2002) so powerfully asserts is - beneath our clothes – beneath our skin – it is in our reflexes – at our very core… yes even without any academic language, I knew that I was negotiating two distinct – and profoundly incompatible worlds. And, in hindsight – that negotiation - was incredibly hard work.
Freeman (2010) believes that whilst events matter, we can benefit from hindsight to step free from chaos and contingency and to story as we hold the tension of both then and now, past and present, as we find non-sequential connections that allow past experience to make sense and to show how circumstance becomes meaningful from a distance.

And I think about my Nana again – Nana – such a character – unique – Nana and her superstitions – Nana and her sayings – Nana - like Freeman (2010) – who advocated the power of hindsight - aye – she would say quietly - her shaky voice heavy with what, in hindsight now – I might recognise as a deep vastly unfathomable and impossibly unspeakable regret –sorrow – oh aye ye ken what they say… hindsight is a wonderful thing.

And pregnancy – in hindsight – as I am on the cusp of the already known – but unknown -heightens the push and the pull – in the threshold of the two competing worlds I am already inhabiting. The Personal and the Professional.

The personal world – the private – my personal family life – ‘back home’ in the town where I come from – and where I still lived –where I could still escape from – most days – to the anonymity of the city – but where family and friends knew ‘me’ still – as wee Jan – oor Jan – and folk in the town knew me too - oh you’re Janette’s daughter , Jennet’s granddaughter – Nettie’s great granddaughter – oh aye – you take after your Mum…

Back home’ – where I knew where I belonged - where family stories –my narrative inheritance that tells me of those who come before me in my family providing a framework for understanding my identity through theirs (Goodall, 2005) and asks me to consider our connections and relations to a particular time and place (Brockmann, 2017)...Stories that dictate that ’I’ ‘come from a long line of strong women. Women who are the bedrock of care (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). This long line of strong women who worked, because working class women have also had to work (Skeggs,1997; Hochschild, 2003) - seeking jobs to fit in around their days – to put food on the table - but who were routinely expected to work what Hochschild (2003) conceptualises as the ‘second shift’ back home. A long line of strong women – who like Steedman’s (1986) mother who needs a written reference to attest to their cleanliness before they can be employed by Others - or like all those mothers who like Walkerdine (Walkerdine and Lucey,1989) recognises have no history, who lurk instead – invisible – giant elephant in the kitchen.
Women’s discourse – Cixous asserts - even theoretical or political is never simple or linear or objectivised or universalised – she involves her story in history and in feminine speech as in writing

there never stops reverberating something that, once having passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us – still has the power to affect us – song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive… The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one’s breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation (2008a:93).

I come from a long line of strong women who skivvied after other folk and cared for their own. A long line of strong women who cooked – aw aye - Mum and Nana will say - your Maw kept a guid meat house – not a penny to scrape together but there was food on the table – and cleaned – aw aye – your Maw kept her steps scrubbed like the best of them – and laundered – aw aye your Maw’s hands were raw with wringing but she was known for hanging out a braw washing line. I come – it seems - from a long line of strong working class women - who - in their social space – the social space I inherit along with their narratives - were unacknowledged – unappreciated – ‘othered’ - with little economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital at their disposal. Hanley (2016) notes that social and cultural capital works on a compound-interest model: the more you have, the more you get - and vice-versa – the less you have the easier to lose it – especially if you do not subscribe to what Skeggs asserts is “one of the most ‘ubiquitous signifiers of class’ – respectability” (1997:1). There is no point boasting of a long line of strong women if they have not proved their worth – if they are not respectable. And it hits me that if, as Skeggs (1997) asserts, that if class not only informs how we speak, who we speak to and how we classify others, it also affects what we study and how we know who we are (or are not). Is this why I find myself in the position where writing – even a subversive writing like écriture féminine promises to be – leads me to studying these woman – the strong women I come from – is it why I listen to hear the poetic truth in their silenced voices and their frenzied scream. But is it also why I am frightened also to be one of them at the same time as I cannot bear not to be because it’s not just class that’s under my skin – it is their silenced fears and screams too?

In hindsight – it is easy to look back at the vantage point of now to see why the ‘business’ world - my professional managerial career where I was on that seemingly endless upwardly mobile ladder of success –where I was competent, capable, well-regarded and well-respected – and – it seemed – automatically respectable – because my education – my clothes – the way I watched and walked the walk and copied the talk – allowed me to fit in – a forgiving professional world where you could go home in the evening and no-one need know who you really were - that seemed like an easy escape. And it is easy to see why Nana and Mum would want me to escape – the drudgery – the mundane – the dirt – the dinginess… but they loved me too – and they were afraid – they didn’t want to lose me. Perhaps, in hindsight, it would have been difficult for me to lose myself there anyway: as Hanley
(2016) notes, it is not easy to traverse class boundaries even if you want to; perhaps I would have got caught out there too if I had slowed down and stopped working-trying hard. Walkerdine (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989) writes of her terror of the slippery slope of going home to the suburbs and being caught there - ordinary with children bound to wanting and striving. As Steedman (1986) writes “there are people everywhere waiting for you to slip up, to show signs of dirtiness and stupidity, so that they can send you back to where you belong”. It feels like from the beginning my research has always been taking me back to where I belong… and I recall where the inaugural search for this research – where it took me – back to that initial search I write about in The Prologue – where typing ‘intimate’ and ‘secret’ in Psych INFO brings forward a host of academic article and those articles are filled with research on broken bodies and I am led – instantly – to straight back to Nana…. Nana’s broken festering body overwhelms me with the smell that I cover over with the sweet scent of Anais Anais. Because I am shallow. Because I am too afraid to dive into the depths of a grief that would drown me. Because I know that no perfume can mask the smell of it. And then I would scream. So, I’d rather sit in silence instead.

And I sit – still in silence at the NLS – academic professional – and I think of Davies and Dormer who write

breaking/holding silence requires thick skin that can stave off the howling winds of anger that follow when the matter-not-to-be-spoken is made visible by the words, the language, the music, the poetry, or just the momentary exhalation of breath (1997:12).

Speedy writes “How hard the shift and easy the slip and what a thin skin lies on the language” (2008:139) and I remember writing in the margin of my library copy of her book as I read– ‘like ambrosia cream rice – dig in’. I was thinking about the sweet ambrosia rice Nana fed me to nurture her unborn grandchild in the womb of her driven career girl granddaughter – a granddaughter who commuted into the city every day – a city Nana never visited. And I think. Do you know what? Richardson (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) calls for us not to flinch from where the writing takes us emotionally or spiritually, and to honour the embodiedness and spatiality of our labours. But I do flinch. Like Mum, like Nana, like the long line of strong women before me, I am oft-inclined to support the supposed lulling-comfort of silence. Nana and Mum do not talk about Maw’s death but I know now that she died – alone, in hospital – medically-shamed because of her swollen-bloated body. And I look back to that ‘Still Life’ I created when I just papered over the cracks of Nana’s pain with some Yardley foundation – seeking to make her respectable.

‘Home is where the heart is ’… I hear Nana whisper again. Nana who said ‘you never know what goes on behind closed doors’. Stewart says “Home is where the heart is. You can get inside and
slam the door” (2007:52). Yes. You can close the outside world out. But wild things happen in the domestic. Stewart says

Home is where the heart is. But take one foot out of the frame and things get sketchy fast. At the unwanted knock on the door, or the sudden ring of the phone at night, you can feel the uncanny resemblance between the dazed state of trauma and the cocooning we now call home (2007:55)

And I continue to wonder about that silence that I learned – the secrets I learned to avoid – learned at the hearth of closed family doors - where keeping face and not airing dirty linen was more important than evicting the elephants that were too big-bothersome to talk about in the living room.

**February 2000: Nana reunites with wee Jim**

Nana is dead. The Minister stands in the pulpit pronouncing sentimental consoling words. Nana is in a better place. She has joined her wee boy, her firstborn, tragically taken from her in a fatal road accident aged just seven and a half. And he’s been up there in Heaven, waiting for her. Nana will be happy to be reunited with him. Blah Blah. This is meant to be a comforting story. I think the other mourners in the rows behind me are nodding like sheep in a bid to keep us all comforted. But I bristle in annoyance. I hate the fake-comfort of this story. My Nana wanted to live. Nana fought for life until the end. My Nana did not want to die. And then we are asked to stand and sing wee Jim’s favourite hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers* (n.d) as the coffin is taken from the church and inexplicably I cry – silently –

I cry for the wee boy whose ghostly-ever-alive and present childhood self I grew up alongside – I cry for him. For Nana. Myself. A few years later, I will find myself listening to Mum tell me again about the funeral of a wee one she attends. *They played ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’. We all stood up and sang it. I never knew that other folk thought of the wee children taken too song to be stars in the skin…. just like wee Jim.* Yes. I will tell Mum. It’s a very common normal everyday thing that bereaved parents seem to do. Kübler-Ross (1983) writes about it in *On Children and Death*. Mum looks at me like I am hard. Tough. Impenetrable. Perhaps I am. I don’t like sentiment. I don’t like flowery comforting verses in cards – especially not sympathy cards. I don’t like the newspaper cuttings I search out in the British Newspaper Archive where I find that family members – for years after wee Jim’s death – have picked out verses and paid to place him ‘In Memoriam’ in the local newspaper. Sweet verses masking unspeakable pain and hurt. ‘Wee Janette’ is named by her parents as missing her brother. Grieving loss is ordered and glossed over. Sentimental. Soft. Family grief is announced to a local community who will mostly all pay for the local newspaper every
Thursday week. Hard-researcher – aloof – above it all – not affected… maybe yes – and also - no. I do not tell Mum that sometimes I wonder if that star is a wee symbol – a keeping of something real – even if it is unattainable to actually ‘touch’ we can see the stars with our eyes – feel the unknowable ‘magic’ of them - we can sing about their twinkling. Stanley (2002) writes about Olive Schreiner and how she moves the bodies of her dead baby and dog from home to home – normalising and keeping death close –thus resisting the law of mourning. And how – when Stanley (2002) talks about that boundary – life-death – as a ‘shimmering boundary’ – I think about those stars in the sky that so many parents have to plant in their own and their loved ones’ heads – a symbol – that we can almost but not quite touch – we can see it shine – twinkle and desire to touch it. Almost. But not quite. But it soothes nonetheless? Probably not. I do not tell Mum that for me the Twinkling Star feels relentless. Greedy. Consuming. Haunting. One day in a poetry class, the haunting screaming sobs seeps out of me in the apparent innocence of that nursery rhyme - and it hurt. It broke me in the moment. But it passed. And I do not tell Mum that Kübler-Ross also writes that statistics on loss by sudden tragic death like wee Jim’s highlight that loved ones need “to find a safe place where they can scream if need be (without being stopped or tranquilized); and where they can put into words the ‘unspeakable’” (1983:33). And I think about my poor Nana. And Maw. And Mum too –maybe…? Who were the ‘they’ that Mum says tell the story of the terrible scream? Where was Mum – wee Janette – was she there?

August 2018: ‘X’ Marks the Spot

Mum and Dad pop in to wish me ‘Happy 47th Birthday’ on their way home from church. Settled with cups of tea, Mum hands me my birthday card with too much money inside and emphasises I am to buy something nice for myself rather than fritter it through the housekeeping. I am grateful and tell her I will buy ‘posh’ expensive bath oil. Mum nods approvingly and then she remembers she has another gift for me. Dad is sent out to bring it in from the car. I know by the feel of it that it is a book. As I carefully unpick the sellotaped wrapping, Mum rummages in her handbag…We’ll need this…she says, brandishing a large magnifying glass in the air.

Mum’s extra gift is a large paperback book called ‘Old Bo’ness’ (Young, 2018) which has a compilation of old pictures of the town where we live. Mum takes the book from me before I get a chance to open it and she busily flicks through the pages several times …Yes… here it is! Found it! She peers though the magnifying glass at a blurry black and white photo… Have you got a pen handy? Yes. Mark that spot – see…? Yes. Right there where my nail is… Yes. Right there…got it? Yes. I mark the almost-exact spot.
Mum hands me back the book and puts the magnifying glass in my hand. OK… now look there where you’ve marked… can you see it? My eyes zone in on the enlarged blob of blue my pen made on a block of houses in the background of the photograph. I have never seen these houses before, but I know what Mum will say next. I nod. That’s your Maw and Dey’s house… that one right there, in that block…. do you see it? Yes. Well that’s where I grew up before we flitted up the road. Yes. You know I’ve never seen a picture of that house before and then someone gave me this book and I saw this photograph and …well I recognised it …that’s where I grew up… and it brings it all back… it’s exactly as it was…oh - I remember it all like yesterday… and I thought you’d like to see where I was brought up…? The block of flats is hazy. But I nod. Yes. And look - can you see the playpark up the hill in the background? Yes.

A photograph is a text, an image that is constructed by a particular point of view (Cavarero, 1997). The playpark is the main focus of this photograph. Well… you can see it’s not actually the playpark in that picture because the park hasn’t been built yet. I check the description under the picture. Yes. The photograph predates the ‘building’ of the park in the early 1900s by several years. But you can see it’s the park…? Yes. The network of paths that lead in and out of the park – and still exist today - are clearly visible in the picture. It is the playpark without the various chutes and swings and seesaws that have no doubt come and gone over the years. It is the playpark before fledgling trees and hedges are planted, eventually creating a leafy green wall that protects the beautiful handsome homes the Victorian merchant and manufacturers lived in from the bustling industry and decaying slum houses – that people like Maw lived in – and people like me even decades later are born in.

The flats where Maw and Dey’s wee bedroom and a kitchen home – unlike the well-built houses above – are now long gone – but it stands still – real – alive - immortal in the photograph - and reignited in Mum’s memory. Stanley (1992) says that when it comes to the past, memory withholds the key because we are selective in what we remember and memory lane is narrow, twisting and is discontinuous as it routes us back through the landscape of a past, and to selves that we can never remember but only construct through limited and partial evidence available to us like in photographs. Mum is excited as she speaks to me – oh how she remembers this house in her mind – but now - look she has a real physical photo – a photo in a book – I can tell that Mum is heavily invested in this photo. It is something she needs me to look at – to understand.

It’s not the playpark Mum wants me to focus on… although it is… Can you see that although it’s a good distance up the hill there was a clear view to the park from Maw and Dey’s house… can you see that? Yes. That’s why we were allowed to play there - because your Maw could see us from the house… you can see that…? Yes. Then we both say nothing, staring at the picture, waiting for Mum
to continue – because we both know what is coming next... The Playpark. The distance from Maws' house. That’s where the police inspector stood. And that’s – well – you can see it all clearly now, can’t you - that’s where the policeman stood... when... you know...? What? When he could not bear to hand over pain – to deliver the message that a phone call to the local constabulary confirmed he must tell a family? I just nod to confirm that I am following the story. I know the story. It is the same story – the same old story – forever told – again and again – the details set in stone. It is - I imagine - the self-same story that Mum’s toddler-self will have heard unfold-unfiltered at first – before a version – an order to the story is established - all around her in real-time in the aftermath of the event. It is the story that she learns to recite when she is young because the grown-ups learn and recite it in the aftermath of sudden loss. The story that cements itself in place as ‘The Story’, ‘The Truth’ is a story that is probably less of a ‘definitive facts of the matter’ but one that Law (2004) might assert is too messy, complex and diffuse to be heard-told, described-defined: it cannot be captured. Goodness knows I have tried.

As I continue to stare unfocused with my mind’s naked eye at the tiny little dot my blue pen has marked on the blurry reproduced photograph where Mum points out where X marks the spot... I might go through the motions of saying goodbye to Mum and Dad and thanking them for their birthday gifts, but all the while I am falling back in time to my writing and the long visit it took in the scene of the playpark...

Between 26 December 2015 and June 6th 2017. I wait – in the playpark in the picture - frozen in reflexive liminal time – I wait – paralysed in bodily-thought - waiting in a pre-defined spot - to hear the sound of it echo from down in the house where ‘X marks the spot’ – the sound that emerges in the words I read – the words I reflect on – the words I write reflexively back into – the words I avoid – because once it hits me that it is coming I avoid it – I know it is there – I feel it ripple in my body – I hear it -the terrible howling scream that Nana made when the inspector handed her the awful terrible news. Re-reading-reflecting-writing-scream emerges in the words...

Boxing Day 2015: An Inspector Calls

Force matters. These words appear consistently in my writings-in-progress. ‘Force matters’. I’m not consciously aware of knowing why ‘force’ matters in this inquiry, but when I re-read my writings-in-progress I become aware that I write so many ‘notes to self’ about ‘force’ that its repetition grabs me: I stress its importance; I underline its presence in my research diary; I draw asterisk stars and arrows in the margins to highlight it; I scribble notes to remind myself that ‘force is key’. And – repeatedly - I grasp for words to describe it: I assert that ‘the force of it’ must be ‘gentle’, ‘creaking, - ‘a sort of ‘milky force’. 
I wonder about it now - the crucial importance of a gentle, creaking, milky force, when I reflect and seek to enter a liminal reflexive space on my research project – as I swing back and forward in the playpark on a bleak midwinter evening. I am the only person here in this park. I swing back and fro, hands grabbing tight to the iron chains that suspend the swing, rhythmically cawing through with the strength of my legs and body – back and fro - just like I learned as a child - driving myself upwards higher and higher to seemingly fly into the fog-laden dusk sky. And then I stop - and release my body – close my eyes and lie back almost-horizontal in the air – momentarily losing myself in the momentum as I bask face to face with the stifling weight of the starless longest night sky. And the swing gradually slows down. And I open my eyes. And I sit up straight. And I dangle my feet down to trail against the ground, dragging the swing to a juddering standstill.

It was here – in this playpark on the hill – that the police inspector stood on a warmish midsummer evening as a red sky crept in to tease the possibility of a ‘shepherd’s delight’.

It was here – in this playpark where my feet tiptoe on the ground as I rock myself gently back to and fro – that the Inspector waited and kept watch for the right time to deliver the bad news.

It was here – in this playpark on the hill next to the church – that the Inspector kept watch over Maw’s house, waiting for the men to return because he couldn’t tell the women that wee Jim was dead when they were on their own. But Mum always says, ‘They say it was your Nana that answered the door and they say that she let out a terrible scream. They say that - oh – it was a terrible sound - and they say that your Maw shouted out – oh Jennet, Jennet, hen – what’s wrong – oh Jennet have you hurt yourself…oh Jennet, hen…? And then…’, Mum always pauses before continuing,

‘…they say that your Dey came running to the door and he collapsed to the ground when he saw the policeman standing there’.

It is dark now in the playpark as I stand up months later from the swing and walk to the edge of the park to look down the hill to the space where Maw and Dey’s house stood. I wonder if the Inspector had to say anything to Nana when she answered the door or if his presence told her all she needed to know. It is a sorrowful tale. But it is a family story that I have heard so often that its sorrow is repeatedly diminished for me. When I listen to it, I can imagine my maternal great-grandfather falling to his knees, his head held in his hands as he rocks back and fro repeatedly saying no no no no…. It seems, I think, that the Inspector waited in vain for the men to come home because it is Maw who stands strong to comfort Nana whilst the Dey is bowed down to weep into the floor. Maw is a strong woman.
This family story paints a vividly morbid picture of human beings bearing the weight of their own horror. But I have heard the words so often – they become so familiar to me - they paint an image that I hold and view from a distance - with dispassion.

Standing on the doorstep to Maw and Dey’s home, the Inspector bears death. Gives the black unwanted gift of pain. And I watch him standing there, on the threshold, as he knocks on the door. I see Nana’s horror. And I see Dey fall onto the floor. I see Maw holding Nana up as her entire body attempts to escape the horror. And I see Papa standing stony-faced in the background. I recreate the scene in my mind’s eye – picked up from the bits and pieces Mum tells of the actual moment when death is announced. And it becomes a frozen tableau depicting intangible shock that my researcher-fingers cannot bear. It becomes a moment stalled in space and time that I know only through the words of the story I have been told. A stalled moment that repeats itself - it pivots and suspends, bobbing back and forwards, bound in time. Suspended.

It is only in the process of writing – writing and reading, rewriting and re-reading – when blue ink turns into words on cream-lined paper and grey-black typed letters emerge as sentences on a grey-white screen – when it hits me: it is the sound. As I re-picture the scene again, re-running the story in my head, hearing the family story that is so well-told there are few gaps for the listener to ask questions, I realise that the words conceal the sound in the gaps of words – what leaks through – white inky milky creaky words – words seeking a release - -- what is invisible – concealed: it is the scream…

And moving between positions, becoming reader-writer-listener-researcher almost all at once, I struggle to maintain the distance I need to stop the collapse when I hear it...

**New Year’s Day 2019: First Foot**

The kids and I first-foot their Gran and Granddad. I ask Mum for a slice of Black Bun and a wee tipple of sherry. Mum laughs before she launches in to tell the kids the story of how Maw used to strip the entire house on Hogmanay and only put it all back together just before the bells. Maw saved up all year to make sure there was always plenty of madeira and sultana cake and clootie dumpling and whisky and sherry. Have they read *The Broons* (Low & Watkins, 1936)? The kids yawn ‘no’. Well it was just like *The Broons* when she was growing up. I challenge this: *it wasn't really though Mum, was it…The Broons is just a humorous ironic parody of ordinary lives which never delves under to show the darkness of what really happens.* Mum tuts but agrees. *But, anyway, I say – I suppose like all families you were as good at sweeping things under the carpet then as we still are now – something they were also actually doing in the Broons because they couldn’t be bothered to collect it*
up. Ha Ha! We laugh before Mum tuts and challenges me. Anyway, talking of sweeping things under the carpet. Is this the year you’ll finish that thesis and move on with your life? Yes. So I can look forward to looking through the photos albums with you soon – you said we could do that together when you’d written that thesis… you’ve not got time for me these days.

As we are about to leave Mum remembers she has homemade lentil soup for me and the kids. Waiting in the hall as she ladles it into a Tupperware tub, I look at the photographs displayed in a decorative ‘Memories’ photo frame on the hallway wall. Occupying the prime and largest slot in the middle of the framed display is Mum’s older brother. Aged around three or four, his impossibly bright blue cheeky eyes are piercing as he stares out at me from beyond the grave in his wee boy dungaree shorts in the fashionable hand-coloured black-and-white photograph that Nana and Papa displayed on their radiogram in the 1970s. I don’t recognise anyone in the surrounding photos. Who’s that? I point to an elegant slim poised young woman. That’s your Nana. No? It is! And see that picture there? Yes? I stare as Mum points at another elegant slim poised young woman whose knowing eyes glare out to confront me from behind the perspex frame. And I know before Mum tells me that this woman is ‘Maw’.

Back home, I peel potatoes and put homemade steak pie in the oven for New Year’s dinner before I locate the box with the family photographs and take it to my bedroom and shut the door. I open the box. An overwhelming part of me wants to – needs to - absolutely must - look through the photos right now. I imagine myself peeling the stuck-down blurry greying black-and-white photographs out of their albums and staring into the depths of the bodies captured in those snapshots of time long ago. I am desperate to know more. About what? About my family? The women that came before me? The women that writing led me towards? The women and their silenced unstoried stories? The women and the screaming silenced grieving stifled behind their hardworking downtrodden skivvying eyes? What might these women say if they could speak to me quietly from beyond the frame of their captured snapshotted scenes?

But another part of me wants to keep my promise to sit with Mum and listen to her talk me through the photos. It is Mum’s wish to do this - and it is her rightful place to tell me about the stories behind the camera – to speak for the women that she knew better than I ever could because they brought her up. But I feel so strongly that this would ruin it! Ruin what? I don’t know but I need to look at the photos myself with my own eyes - fresh – new – untouched – I want to look at them without any commentary. I want to make sense or allow questions to emerge from them on my own.
And yet another part of me wants to wait - like I explained to Mum – until my research is written up – finished – tick – complete. To wait until there are no more words to say because I have said it all and it is done – ‘The End’. I have been patient. I do not know why. Trujillo (2004) interviews family members to find out more about his grandmother and he builds a bigger picture of who she was and the life she led and the secrets she kept. She became a rounder character than the role he gave her. But I have not interviewed or asked family members any leading questions. I have sought a principle of letting the research unfurl on its own through writing. And I feel again the tension of the tenacity of my visceral furious attempt to ringfence my research – to somehow preserve the ‘purity’, the seeming ‘wholesomeness’ of the written words – the language – the material that has unconsciously emerged from and through me already. Opening up and looking through these photos would give me access to a different type of evidence. I would no longer be working with just hunches and memories and dreams of thousands of rapid fleeting unconscious previously unthought words. I might find visual proof that confirms or puts into question everything I have come through my research to believe is true over the last six years. And then I wonder, am I like McAllester (2011) who contrives to gather material together to sit down with his ‘memory pores open’ to conjure up his now dead mother but then he does nothing – medical records, diaries and photograph albums – documents of life - remain unopened even though he knows with a click of a few keys he could investigate and find out more. Is it ‘fear’ I wonder of what we will see or uncover? I check myself – am I scared to stare into Maw’s eyes and for her to find me and my research ‘wanting’. Caught in a bind. There is no easy solution. I am over-involved. I am unable to remove myself from the story – my story – our story – the story of the women who come before me – the story that later will be retold as the telling of the old-old story – the story of the long line of strong women I come from – the story of their lives living in our town. I do not want to let the story go.

And at once I feel myself bristle against the shaming flush of insatiable greed that courses through me. It’s not just about letting it go. It’s more than that too. I want this. I want that. I want more. I want it all. I am entitled to it. I want to keep the photos all to myself. After all they will be mine to have one day anyway.

I am disgusted at this overwhelming feeling of possessiveness. I am ashamed at even considering breaking my promise to Mum. I am disappointed at the thought of cheating on my ‘writing’ by casting doubt on the quality or validity of it as evidence. I was brought up to be a good girl. Good girls do not covet or lie or cheat.
And all at once in that moment, a flashback comes to me.

I am in Nana’s bedroom. I put on her only pair of high-heeled shoes. I paint red lipstick on my lips and cheeks. I rake around in Nana’s seashell jewellery-box and pick out Bakelite beads to string round my neck. And then I make my way back to the living room.

*Nana, Nana...look at me!* I teeter in to stand in front of Nana sitting smoking in her usual chair. *Ta-da!* I’m a pretty little girl all dressed up as a woman. Nana looks at me and laughs then picks me up to sit on her knee. Cuddling in, I play with the necklace she wears around her neck. It’s pretty. *I want to play with it.* But Nana says no - it is very precious. And Nana opens up the locket to reveal two tiny black-and-white photos inside. Look. See! That’s your Maw. See? Yes. And that’s your Maw’s maw? Do you see them? I stare at the tiny blurry blobs in the locket. I nod.

Then I jump off her knee.

I have that locket now! I inherited it from Nana. I put the lid back on the box of photos and head to my jewellery drawer. I find Nana’s gold locket. I open it. There are no photos inside.

**Maw: Where Love Resides**

5 June 2017: Red Sky at Night

I am all set. I have packed some snacks, a bottle of water, a notepad, several pens and Nana’s pendant in a rucksack. It is a beautiful Scottish evening. The sky is streaked with vivid shades of orange-strawberry jam reds and the forecast for tomorrow is good. I am grateful for a good weather forecast because tomorrow I will walk down the hill from my wee study at home through the playpark and then further downhill until I reach the foreshore road.

Anticipation heightens our senses, enhancing birthdays, holiday celebrations and vacations; but anticipation also magnifies the possibility or reality of a loss’ (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005). I plan to both mark a formal anniversary date (Schützenberger, 1998) of Wee Jim’s death and also to simply meet Maw – to watch her in her own real-time at the scene of the fatal accident.
Like force, dates come to matter in my research. Schützenberger (1998) asks what might happen if we explore the gaps in what has been said and forgotten, and we consider coincidences in dates and the repetition and reactivation of feeling, the stress of anticipation of an anniversary places upon us? And whilst I know I cannot reconstruct the scene I have written in-and-towards, Cixous says “True writing is always going forward” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:102) and tomorrow I will be moving forward - I have decided: I will watch Maw – tomorrow... I will conjure her up in my mind – as I rewind time in my writing – and I will meet her in her time – and I will meet her eyes – the eyes of my ethical m/other. I will. I need to. I am so determined. I want her to acknowledge that I am acknowledging her. I need her to know that I have heard her silenced scream. Her pain. Her horror. I am here for her. To acknowledge the way she just has to carry on and pick up tattered pieces of lives broken and be there for everyone – unacknowledged in her own space and time- but not now – she can give up the burden... my writing-to-inquire with Cixous towards the “there-not-there” (1991:3) of family secrets has brought me to her – to her scream...MAW!!!! I am in the mouth of her. MAW!!!

Maw’s brokenness emerged in my writing. I will touch Maw. With my eyes. My heart. With all of me...obviously I know that knowing the past is decidedly uncertain so we have to be tentative in the claims we make about the past and those lives lived in it (Stanley, 2002). Benjamin says

memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging (1932/2006:xii).

But the scene I about to watch happened before I was born. I have no memory of it. All I have are the oral stories and the silences within them. But it was documented in a newspaper. And there is no mystery to it. And I know for sure it happened. A child is hit by a car. His Maw cradles his dying body in her arms. Ordinary human beings don’t like mystery because you cannot put a bridle on it (Stewart, 2007). And I write like wild horses towards Maw... I gallop towards her... unbridled....

But I know I cannot really recreate the scene I plan to sit myself in. But my soul stirs with a wanting to make it happen and my embodied writing seeks.... and I go to bed thinking about the poetry class where I broke down – where I felt Maw through my words...

January 2017: Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

It is the first week of a Creative Practices ‘Poetry and Psychotherapy’ class I have enrolled in at University. It is a very small group of people gathered in the room and some of the other students are
in a group I am tutoring this semester. We go around the table and each take turns to say why we are taking this class. Clumsily, when it is my turn, I say: I don’t know… I don’t like poetry so I thought maybe if I did this class I might like poetry…?

This is true. But I am also interested in poetry as a creative analytic practice.

Vonnegut, talking of the poetry of Anne Sexton, says that poets do not just extend language for him, it does a better favour, it domesticates terror and then “examines it and describes it, teaches it some new tricks which will amuse me, and then lets it gallop wild in my forest once more” (1971:vii).

Richardson says

By settling words in new configurations, the relations created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us hear and see the world in a new dimension. Poetry thus suggests a way out of the numbing, disaffective, disembodied schizoid sensibilities characteristic of phallocentristic social science (1997a:168)

Noting that shaping poetry is a conscious careful practice, Gannon says

The textual strategies that shape a poem are not generalisable to other projects, they vary according to each (con)text, but reflexive attention to writing is also part of a poststructural research ethic” (2004:114)

Near the end of the class, we are given a chance to write some ‘poetry’ of our own and to write on the pieces of paper provided…and give responses to the questions asked without really thinking too much about it…

Pick a song memorable from your childhood: I pick ‘Twinkle Twinkle…

Brainstorm-mind-map for five minutes – I mindmap as asked…

Then I write a poem – timed – five minutes – I write:

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

She sits on the outside toilet, a small sweet blonde girl, dirty scraped knees, legs dangling, pointing to the twinkly wee star, shining brightest in the sky and says ‘That’s oor Jim’s star?’
She stands next to the small sweet blonde girl, swollen fat legs holding up her broken body, and cannot see the brightest star of love past eyes flooding tears.

She sits on the toilet on a late Summer’s night, waiting, curiously-enjoying watching the freedom of Maw’s tears, and says again ‘That’s oor Jim’s star? Maw? Is it?’

She is sent to the chip shop, too wee to go alone, and Dey finds her, carrying her home to Maw, slumped in the kitchen, surrounded with tears that cannot be drained.

She remembers the emerald mouse she wants but can’t have because it belongs to Oor Jim. Mum gives it to her when he gets the twinkly wee star. She doesn’t want the mouse now.

I do not think much as I write it because we only have five short minutes… and I know there are too many long sentences of words and it is more prose-like than poetry… but it encapsulates something of where I am… what I am and then we are asked if we are each happy to read our poems aloud. Yes.

It is my turn.

I read aloud – and my words hit me – convulse me – swallow me up inside Maw’s brokenness. I cry. It is not soft or trembling – the words eat inside me, and I cannot speak and the room is silent and I stop ….and I try to police the crying because there are students in this room who I need to face in a different setting next week….and one of them hands me a tissue and I read to the end of the poem – fast…

And the next person reads…

I go home later. Re-read the poem. Re-feel it. Maw’s body. Broken. Weeping. I need to meet her. See her. Make it better. I know that is impossible. But I will try.
A few weeks later I decide that I will go to the foreshore road to write on an anniversary of wee Jim’s death.

I will meet Maw there. I will relieve myself of the relentless weighty endless stream of errant words of unwanted derelict feelings that run amok inside my head. They fill me up until I almost cannot quite breathe. Fugitive words bubble up to rush and try to escape me. And I will force myself to step forward to face the fear that numbs me.

July 2016: The Fatal Accident and my Birth Home come together

We visit Mum and Dad before we head abroad on holiday. The kids tell their grandparents I am taking up all the space in the suitcases with my books. I argue that I need to catch up with my research because I’m too busy working-cooking-cleaning and generally running around after them to get anything done on my thesis. Mum tells the kids they should do more about the house to help Mum. This prompts my eldest to remember that he has helped me… he managed to get the printer working and he’s left the printouts of the old local newspaper articles on my desk. I say thank you.

Mum is curious. What news articles was I interested in from the local newspaper? I pause a moment. I do not want to answer – but I tell the truth. I was interested in how the death of my Uncle – her brother – was reported, so I paid for a British Newspaper subscription to find out. Mum wants to know what was written in the newspaper. Not much… just a small rectangle noting the details of a ‘Fatal Accident’. Nothing you don’t already know. Mum would like to see it – read it – can she? OK. I’ll print you a copy when I get back from holiday. And then my eldest points out it will be on my computer as I emailed him the PDFs to print.

The newspaper article is a document of life like others that litter and structure the fabric of everyday life (Plummer, 2001) whether it is a piece of material in my hand – the original newspaper – the print that my eldest has made – or a PDF in an email. Documents of life are a particular kind of data (Stanley, 2013). I take my laptop out my bag. I find the article. I read it aloud to Mum. She comes to sit beside me so she can see it for herself. She is quiet. Then suddenly she tells me it all makes sense. What does? Mum could never work out why wee Jim had been crossing the road because the Town Service bus should have dropped him off on the roadside closest to Maw’s house and so she assumed he had taken the other Town Service bus but then he would have had to change buses in the town. I already know this because sometimes she will say it when she tells the story. But now she sees it clearly. What? The article states the accident happened at the bus stop next to the billboards. And? Mum is visibly shocked. She thought the accident happened further along the road.
But – she says - YES!  Now it all makes sense.  YES!  There was a shop across from the billboard bus-stop so Maw would have heard the commotion and ran out as has always been related in the family story as it is written in the newspaper report that Mum has never seen before.  And this bus-stop also makes more sense because it is closer to Maw’s house so it would be Jim’s usual stop. But Mum’s visible shock is because the bus-stop at the Billboards stood exactly where the block of flats I was born was located.  Exactly in the same spot. Mum seems to be attaching significance to this previously unknown fact, but I don’t think she knows why it matters.  And I don’t know why it matters either.  But there is something unsettling about it.  I always know where I am born.  The date.  The time.  The place.  The names I am given and why.

I know I was named after Maw – taking her first, birth and married names as my first three names. Given names form one of the foundations of identity with traditional familial names reminding us of those who pass away (Schützenberger,1998). I know these things. I know all the details surrounding my birth. For goodness sake, I know the colour of my decaying placenta! But what I don’t know – and I don’t know it because Mum somehow does not know it – is that I am born in a decaying flat which is less than a hop skip and jump away from the road where her brother is knocked down and killed. And then Mum wonders what I have already wondered and neither of us will ever know the answer to. Wee Jim is ‘crucified’ by a neighbour’s statement. She tells the police the wee boy just ran straight on the road. No regard for safety. Out he ran. Bang. Maw is immediately at the scene of the accident. The newspaper report confirms the family story. Maw drops her message basket when she hears a commotion outside the shop, and she emerges onto the scene of the fatal accident to see her wee blond haired grandson on the road. Had wee Jim seen Maw from the bus? Had he alighted the bus and ran – excited – over to the shop to surprise her – run into her arms. Did Maw think this is what happened too? Did she blame herself. Wish that she had not been there – going into that shop? Surely she must have wondered?

Silence. We sit in it. Mum.  Dad.  The kids and I.  And then we get ready to go home. Home to go to the airport – on holiday.  We kiss goodbyes. I do not tell Mum that I already knew – knew my birth home stood where wee Jim died.  I realised when I read the newspaper cutting.  And I waited. And I went there – on an anniversary date – 6 June 2017. I spent the afternoon there…. Waiting.

6 June 2017: A Sunny Afternoon

One step and then two and then three – then a path – then one step and then two and then three – then a path.  There is an almost skipping rhythm to my movement as I run down the gentle wide sloping steps that lead me down the hill from the playpark to the foreshore road: outwardly, I look carefree; but inside…
Fear paralyses me. Fear frightens me. Fear threatens to overcome me. But I am already almost just endlessly there now anyway. I have taken the first step. And it is not going to go away. There is no way back. I cannot rewind the ticker-tape of words I have written and start again. I cannot return to sit — thinking about my research - on the playpark swing. I cannot stop my research – pretend I do not know where it took me. I cannot ignore the sound it has made. The ghostly scream. And I cannot return to stand where the Inspector stood. And I cannot walk back up the hill to the place I call ‘home’ where the snowglobe sits on my desk. Writing glares at me there. Demands me. Twinkle-blink: Stop. It makes me face my words. Makes me face where they have taken me. And I cannot simply console myself and make it all better – write it all better – make it a better story. Because it is not. And I cannot write myself away from the direction that my writing has taken me. It is too late now. I’ve already seen it all before. And I’ve always known. Like Mackinlay, much of my writing “that has taken place and takes its place here, comes from a moment in time of deep unhappiness; a sadness so cavernous, so close that at times I felt that I would and could not possible continue” (2019:8) and I have felt Cixous knocking on my door….and I want Cixous to catch-me-falling-hold my hand now as I flutter-fly…

I have “voler” with Cixous (1976b:887) and my flitting-fast-wild and free associative writings-in-flux (Law, 2004). I have sought to feel for an unfurling amidst my reading-writing from a body that struggles with the brokenness and paralysis my words have left in their wake. And where do all my scholarly activities take me? Nowhere. It seems there is no escape. I am stuck. Caught in the trap. Back where I belong. I search back to the poem I wrote about ‘Place’ in my Creative Poetry class:

**Stagnant Smoke**

I stand myself there, Thirlestane, Carriden and

or Kinneil. Either or the same

but different places where me and salt

and clay and coal

came into being, lapping together

deep underground amidst

a manually-measured subsea river-passage,
lost in place and time, connecting

past pit men to Valleyfield where security resides.

But it’s all swept up, those hissy-spitty flames and

back-reek smoke, pokered into a dampened shovel of political ash.

And stripping peeling seamed layers of nicotine-yellowing

brown flocked-hessian wallpaper reveal only

fiery fuelled memories standing, still erect, in a wheel

that does not move now above the black diamonded ground

the colliery bands still march their endless parade upon.

…and it is interesting, I think, as I settle myself now to sit at the foreshore road, that in that poem I inadvertently used ‘Thirlestane’ – the name of a castle as well as the name of the road the council house we move into shortly after my birth rather than ‘Haney’s Way’ – the name of the demolished flats and the road sign I now sit at… a birth home I almost disown because I have no memory of it…

Sometimes, I wonder if I entered a Faustian-like relationship with the goddess of writing…did I want the power of infinite flowing words flying from my fingertips… did I harness myself to the powerful flix-flux-flow of writing to escape from the here-and-now of life… did I employ writing as a device to transcend selves with whom I no longer wish to converse…did I think I could escape the mundane? I don’t think so – but maybe…but… everything – Nana would say - comes at a price. Whatever and whenever we practice “read-writing” (Cixous, & Calle-Grüber, 1997:57) – even when we are escaping ourselves - we are always writing from somewhere – and we are always writing from ourselves – about ourselves – and there is, I think - always a consequence. Words can give us control of different worlds – traversing us to places we would not dare to go – but we cannot come back to be who we were before we went there. Poulos (2009) and Pelias (2004) suggest writing can be ‘healing’; but I am not convinced. I am more inclined to agree with Atwood (2002) who believes writing is to do with darkness and a desire or compulsion to enter and illuminate it and bring something of it to light… And there is something very dark in the stagnant smoke of my poem – my words…
Words – I have come to realise in my coming to writing - have the power to overwhelm us: or stop us - we cannot rely on being able to control them or reign them back in once they have thrown us out – like a flitting pebble – somewhere out there - into the sea.

“When you descend into the sea, then you can imagine whatever you wish: head first and you are in a fetal position” (Cixous, 1993:5). Writing, round-and-around in ceaseless open questioning—seemingly playful-searching circles – with failed dead-end attempts to find a way out – writing has led back here. I am sitting back on the spot where my life on earth began. I am sitting on an untended strip of patchy concrete-grassy wasteland next to an unforgiving foreshore road lined with empty-looking warehouses. This is a hostile inhospitable space. The playpark where I waited so patiently sits on the hill above me. And, whilst the industrial buildings block them from my view, I know that claggy mudflats dumped by the river that stole up the wall of my birth home lurk just behind me.

People do not sit here. This is an industrial part of town now. People move swiftly as they go about their business here. Trundling haulage trucks trickle noisily along. Occasional empty buses glide past the unfrequented bus stops. As the early shift gives way to the back shift, streams of weary factory workers drive through, heading to and from menial-monotonous jobs that barely cover their bills and clothe their children.

I am awkward here. People stare at me as they go past. I understand why. My presence here looks strange. I block out their stares why do I care but I want to scream out… I don’t want to be here…I know I look odd…I feel odd…crazy…weird…mad…cornered and closed-in…out of sorts. I am displaced. But I am meant to be here. I know there is a reason – it is a gut feeling – writing would not have encouraged, cajoled and pestered me to come and sit here unless it was ‘here’ that I was meant to sit – think – contemplate – write-research-observe….

An accumulation of reasons bubble-away. Writing-dialoguing with Cixous lifts some of them to the surface. I skim - I dig in: this is where I was born; this is where my Uncle was killed in his childhood – although we did not find this out until later – and so – my first whimpering screams at birth – my little sheepy-meh whimpers and our Maw’s inward tearing scream – come together in this place. Our voices mingle. Mingle-Mangle. Bleak though my surroundings might be, this is where ‘I come from’. Gannon (Gannon and Davies, 2017) questions what happens between ‘self’ and ‘other’ in writing when the other is the self in a different time and place and intentions of writing are intensity itself: I wonder about this as I find myself sitting in the stagnant remains of my past.
Nana said blood was thicker than water. In dialogue with Cixous, Clément says “we must go through the audience of writers, psychiatrists and judges to reconstitute the mythical stage women on which women played their ambiguous role” (Cixous & Clément, 1986:5). In writing to inquire my intention was to language confictions, allow pause for hesitations and to negotiate enough space to allow multiple truths to boil and bubble up, mix and merge, settle and then congeal – just enough – to allow a visible – but disposable skin to be seen and written, whilst always acknowledging that once skinned, a different substance lurks beneath – the liquid is still there. Mining-writing, giving myself to writing as Cixous suggests, “being a position to do this work of digging, of unburying” (1993:6), digging up primitive roots (Bachelard, 1948/2011, 1958/1994), and following Kuhn’s (2002) assertion not to abandon our roots, I sit stuck in my roots now. And with my birth home demolished, I dream this home into being as I try to remember my baby body born here – “the house of memory, the house of our birth is built over the crypt of the oneiric house. In the crypt is the root, attachment, depth, the plunging dreams” (Bachelard, 1948/2011:71): and I stretch myself out – unfurl my researching body as I think back to the impossibly distant past and the women and children who stood here before me – decades ago – women and children who laboured hard – trading their limited wares - to produce the tonnes and tonnes of salt that made those industry landowners buried in ostentatious graves in the cemetery now, but who once lived in the big Victorian houses above the playpark – extremely wealthy.

Mum tells me from almost as soon as I am born that ‘I am special’ because I was born in ‘the pans’. Other people were having their babies in hospital but I am lucky because I was born and bred at home – here in ‘the pans’ – I may belong here – because I come from here – this is my corner of the world (Bachelard, 1958/1994) – this is the scene my coming to writing – my writings in progress – always led me towards but I do not feel like I belong here….. You’re one of the last – you know, Mum will proudly say, her obvious decision - that’s just what we did – the women in our family - to give birth to me at home, in a time when almost all the women had started going to the hospital- secures my place as one of the last true Grangers… Over the years, I laugh this off. But it sticks. And sitting here now – mired in my roots in amongst the concrete-grass – I wonder if there is anything still here of where I came from – who I am - or have I shed enough skin to rid myself of the damp and dirt of this place where salt was mined and children operated see-saw wand-pumps that drew water from the river behind me and women tended the fires that burned every day except – because the Kirk Session decreed it so – the Sabbath. The river water - notoriously unclean – had to be mixed with local slaughter-house blood when it was placed into the shallow-oblong iron salt-pan to be boiled. Women – nicknamed ‘The Bloody Witches’ got streaked with blood when they leaned over the boiling bubbling salt-pan ‘cauldrons’ to skim off the jam-like scum of impurities that rose to the surface with their long-handled wooden rakes. But that was centuries ago. Nobody produces salt here now. Because it is no longer economical. And nobody burns ‘witches’ in the town now. Because ‘witches’ don’t exist. But I am a Cixousian witch or a sorceress right now as I sit with my pen, returning “from the heath where witches have been kept alive” (Cixous, 1976b:877) waiting to conjure up a scene back in time
where I was born and the billboards that are now gone once stood...the shop where Maw dropped her message basket is long gone too. But the road in front of me – the foreshore road - where the fatal accident took place is still here. And the bus stop is still here too.

I look at the bus stop next to the billboards where wee Jim alighted the Town Service bus.

I hear the neighbour who crucified wee Jim whisper in my ear... oh aye ... ‘It was the wee boy’s fault......the bus driver could never have stopped in time... aye... it was his own fault’.

Yes, I think. Maybe. But surely wee Jim paid the price for his inattention that sunny early June afternoon when the bus strikes him down and he is left lying on the road.

And as I rewind time, I think about who Maw is...

Maw is a nag. Davies and Dormer (1997), writing about the ruptures of silence note how girls and women are said to speak: natter or prattle – nag bitch – blether – and ....scream...

Maw has to get married... hush-hush!

Maw never had much – she never travelled outside the town...Maw lived “a narrow life” (Forster,1995:33)...

Maw was just there – everywhere – as needed – as she nagged and moaned and fed and loved and cared....

...but Maw was no angel – human-real-stretched-woman-fleshy-imperfect-grieving-loving-perhaps

loathing the shards of her life -

she tells wee Janette how wicked she is with her wee sharp features –

she tells wee Janette the foundry fires that she delights in sitting at with Dey, drinking from the billy cans, are like the burning fires of a hell that bad wee girls need to fear and...

oh but Maw I know always loved the wee boys best...and

... I check my watch: it is 3:20pm – the bus will be coming soon... and I see Maw back in 6 June 1949 ... and I know that I do not want to see the woman walking towards the shop where she buys her messages. My own words have already brought me here - back in time – I can see her walking along the road at the bottom of the hill. She is tidy and dowdy. She is wearing a flowery wraparound pinny. She has pinned her greying hair in a bun. My own words have already drawn my eye towards this scene. She is carrying the shopping basket - that I already know she will drop soon - under the crook of her arm. My own damn words – a fast, rapid stream-of-unconscious seemingly innocent
directionless deceptive words - have led me right back here. And it is not over yet. She is blurry and fuzzy under the mid-afternoon summer-sun haze as she walks along the road...

She is an ordinary non-descript working-class woman of her time. She is around the same age as me - but she looks older. She is – unlike me - make-up free. She has cold-water-and-soap-cleaned her plump face this morning…*She had beautiful skin your Maw – soft and smooth – no wrinkles… not like your Nana…people spoke about your Maw’s skin… ‘aye…’ they always said, ‘oor Nettie has got braw skin’.* And, although I am sat too far away to see the nails on the calloused raw-blistened hand that will pull the ration book out from her basket, I know that – despite routinely performing the dirty task of cleaning and setting the fire this morning - this woman’s fingernails will be pristine clean because it is a Monday - wash day – dolly tub soak and scrub and wringle-wrangle through the mangle - *oh your Maw took a right pride in her washing… boiling, scrubbing, wringing… and her washing line!*…*oh your Maw was notorious for pegging out a braw line*…

And I know that I do not want to see this tidy-dowdy woman in her flowery pinny standing patiently in line to order the stuff she needs for tonight’s tea… a tea that will never come be cooked or eaten once the commotion occurs…?

A half-ounce of dripping and a wee drop of sugar…

Does she still have enough allowance left for a wee bit of mince…?

She kept a ‘good meat-house’ your Maw did. Folk maybe looked down on her because she was kept downtrodden because… well…but she fair knew how to cook and she kept us all well-fed…Your Dey used to say that his brothers’ wives might have their houses all fancy but oor Nettie could cook…

And does she hear anything now from inside the shop when the fatal accident happens? Is there a screech of brakes as the bus slams to a too-late stop?

And I know that I do not want to see this woman turn around to see what caused the commotion outside the shop. *Oh… what’s happened?*

And I know that I do not want to go close-up to see this woman drop her shopping basket – in her real-time - 67 years ago exactly to this day – where I sit safe-and-sound – thinking-writing-imagining-remembering - from a distance – a safe distance – cushioned in a privileged time and space…
And I know – because a few rectangular inches of words from the local newspaper that I source through the British Newspaper archives tells me so – that she will drop her message basket soon and she will run out to the scene of the dreadful horror and …

And this is where the words that have been rushing to escape me have always been leading me back in time towards. And I know why I cannot… I cannot watch… I cannot meet her eye – I try – but she is too busy with wee Jim on the road and…

It’s all just white space…………
interminable white noise…………
A blank.
I cannot look. I wanted Maw’s eyes to find mine. I wanted her to search for me like my research has pulled me to search for her…
I have failed.
Maw is a disappointment.

And I have sat outside the demolished foundations of my life and I have watched a vanishment happen and witnessed a little piece of the very small world I am yet to be born into unravel…

6 February 2019: The Locket

It is nineteen years ago today since Nana died. Me and Mum reminisce. We remember the date. Mum laughs when I tell her I almost looked through the family albums without her. That would have been OK! And then I ask Mum about the locket. I wonder what happened to the photos inside. I wonder if it is the wrong necklace because when I try really hard to remember that day when I played dress-up I’m almost certain that the locket was heart-shaped and the gold locket I have of Nana’s is oval. I worry that my memory is wrong. Mum says nothing. Lockets create depth – but tattoos are the antithesis of the locket and the tattoo creates not depth but additional surface. It is publicly symbolic; calling on communal symbols and communal values, it is easily read and easily exposed. The locket is always threatened by loss, for its magic is dependent upon possession. But the tattoo is indelible, and in the sense that all ownership proper implies potential separation and loss, it cannot be ‘owned’. It represents incorporation just as other carnival grotesque images do (Stewart, 1996:127).
Maw is written on my body. I have not lost her. She is on me. Written on me. Through me.

Before leaving ‘Our Town’ I take a moment to breathe. To feel for the women in the story that I leave in the trail of my words. St Pierre (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) says although the older women from her home town do not appear in her texts, they taught her ethics and are in every word she writes. And I note, that as much of the section above has been edited during a period of lockdown in the UK, sections of the thesis relating to the storying have been read aloud (mostly over the telephone) with my Mum – not so much for permission or revision but so she could hear some of the storying heard back to her not exactly as she gifted it to me as a child, but re-worked and reinterpreted. The family stories within the fabric of my quilt are narratives are contextual, situated and subjective, and note that memories and differing versions of selves emerge over time, which Doucet (2008) says may alter stories we can tell and the knowledges we create.

The ethics around storytelling and asking permission from family members are not without issue (Tolich, 2010; Richardson, 2007). Ethical considerations cannot be separated from our epistemological and methodological stances (Skeggs, 1997; St Pierre 2006). Ethics under deconstruction cannot be reduced to a set of rules (Lather, 2007; Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) and Lather suggests researchers face the responsibility of always being unprepared at the outset to be ethical and to face the undecidable and accept the limits of knowing (Lather, 2007; 2016). St Pierre says

Qualitative Researchers are haunted by ethical issues for it is difficult for them to escape their work and to get free of those other lives, and they often live uneasily with dilemmas that will not go away (1997a:405).

Richardson says there are no easy answers, only messy conflicts, and “we have to make a situated, ethical decision about what to say and whether to say it” (quoted in Ellis, 2004:174). St Pierre (1997a) says there is ethics in representing anyone - even ourselves - and there is little that drives us that is truly innocent, as she notes that whilst rituals like consent forms offer some security in traditional research, there is no hiding place for the poststructural researcher.

Jackson and Mazzei (2008) challenge Ellis’ (2001) narrative assumptions and interpretation of how she represents her mother in her research despite Ellis’ (2007) assertion that she recognises writing of
the deceased is ethically complicated. Jackson and Mazzei (2008) wonder what might have happened in Ellis’ text had she decentered her authority as a researcher.

St Pierre says it is the older women in her family and community who teach her how to be a woman and it is their practices of the self that filter down to become her own subjectivity (St Pierre, 1997b). And this resonates with me as I note that in thinking-brooding-grappling with ethics in my research I engage with it as a discomforting and limitless process of ongoing negotiated, relational and practical deliberation.
CHAPTER 4: Post-mortem - Discussion

I continue to struggle with ‘playfulness’ both in the academy and in real life as I deal with where writing took me as I seek closure without snapping closed the unbearable pain of the scream my research uncovered. Boundaries between life and death are kept in play, as are the concept of beginnings and endings to the research process. Concepts around grief are kept under erasure as this project rails against the idea of pathologising the women and offering easy answers to name or soften the pain of open wounds as I do not believe this is the work of writing. Instead, the patches of writing keep ‘unbearable pain’ alive enough to be spoken about, acknowledging that it has been heard as I continue to piece in patches of literature around ‘grief’.

Anniversary dates continue to be used to not only mimic perhaps the relentless nature of the project, but also the relentless nature of being unable to name and shame unbearable pain – to let go of it – to call it to task – put it away. This tension works at keeping ‘wanting’ and ‘longing’ which is splashed everywhere in the patches of this quilt alive as a form of the desiring that Cixousian jouissance calls us to in writing woman. This is done to bring into play that in writing this longing and wanting – an excessive writing – behind the scenes the material I have is about women who want because they live in lack – without – with longing.

I dialogue with Mum around ethics. Core to a poststructural approach is the doubt that any discourse has a privileged place or any method of theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) and I show my struggles around power and authority as I recognise that wherever truth is claimed so is power and how, who and what I am writing is loaded with issues (Richardson & Lockridge, 2002). Especially because in the writing, not only is it longing-lack and wanting – there is deep entrenched shame. And it is the ‘shame’ and ‘shaming’ of the women that comes to the fore.

Mackinlay screams “Got ethics” (2019:241), evoking Cixous’ Angst (1985), as “angst arrives and does its riddling” (Mackinlay, 2019:241), and, as she asks again “Got ethics” (2019:241), she notes “and the angst-ing kept riddling away” (2019:241). This beautifully describes the dread, apprehension, anguish – an angst – that an engagement with Cixous’ command to write brings “because when a woman writes in nonrepression she passes on her others, her abundance of non-ego/s” (1981:53). And, I feel Mackinlay’s fear when she says “I fear that I will never be able to write a-way to the ethical relationships Cixous calls for” (2019:243).
Talking of the demand of poetic writing, Calle-Grüber says to Cixous, “Much has been said about ethics, about the relation to the text: one could put your work under the sign of poethics” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:79). Responding to this, like Lather (2007), Cixous turns to the “undecidable”, noting that she likes the ‘undecidable “because it is the other’s chance” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:83). Cixous then goes on to say “My foreignness is all-powerful in me. When ‘I speak’ it is always at least ‘we’, the language and I in it, with it, and it in me who speak” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:84).

Cixous says

a feminine text can’t be predicted, isn’t predictable, isn’t knowable and is therefore very disturbing. It can’t be anticipated, and I believe femininity is written outside anticipation: it really is the text of the unforeseeable” (1981:53)

Throughout this research, I have written-read-researched with Cixous into the unpredictable and unforeseeable. And I found myself writing into and towards family secrets. It has been a writing that has called me to bring forward stories of women in my past – real, fleshy, women – the women I come from – my kin. And I am always already overwhelmed at the responsibility this has brought. And like Mackinlany, I have, and still, will possibly always, continue, to feel the angst – the “angst-ing” (2019:241).

Mackinlay says “the ethical drive that sits behind the wheel” (2019:244) of her research is a Cixousian gesture which is a writing which leaves space for the other which lets “the other be as other” (2019:244). Sellers says “a feminine mode of research also has implications for the way a text is approached” (1988:7), and Cixous suggests “We must save the approach that opens and leaves space for the other” (1991, 62).

In my research, I have kept in mind Cixous’ words when she says “the origin of the material in writing can only be myself. I is not I, of course, because it is I with the others, coming from the other’s place, giving me the other’s eyes” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:87). And I have sought the eyes of the family women whose stores I write. And I have tried to imagine not just a loving maternal gaze but also a questioning, a ‘holding me to account’ gaze. In this research, I have been able to speak with Mum. I have been able to give her a copy of my final thesis to read. I have been able to think of Nana in my mind’s eye reading my words. And I know other family members will possibly read it too as published words, if they are so inclined. But, it is Maw’s eyes, whose eyes never met with mine on earth, in life – it is Maw’s dead eyes that I have tried to re-open and I have been aware of her eyes boring into my soul, as I have written-researched: it is Maw whose ‘approval’ I have continually sought
in the end. In my mind’s eye, I have thought of Maw as my ethical m/other, as I have written towards her, searched her eyes.

This section moves towards a conclusion where shame can be unpacked from the silent scream and named and shamed – to bring justice to the woman – particularly Maw and to bring some closure to ‘the curse’ because it was not ‘real’. It was believed because it was passed down by a patriarchal system which sought to shame the women into owning shame that it bore on to them – shame that was not ‘real’ but was painfully real to them in the moment of their time.

August 2017: Sowing the Seeds of an Ending

I am becoming weary of my research. Weary of how it is making me feeling dirty and exposed. Weary of being scared that I will be ‘found out’ to ‘not be good enough’ – to be found ‘wanting’. I could not write Maw when I searched for her at the foreshore road: I could not find her in my words but I know she is there somewhere – in my words – in the gaping holes of me - but I am weary of searching for her…

And I want to be like ‘normal’ people. Somehow-somewhere I have come to feel-be-become somewhat ‘different’ – apart – from the world in which I was born and grew up in: perhaps I have always felt it and disowned it. Certainly, my youngest will laugh because I ‘talk differently’ in my hometown than I do at work.

I am just generally weary of having been born into a world of ‘wanting’: a wanting that Steedman (1986) says many women, like her mother, know well, and these ‘wanting’ women have faces of unfulfilled desire and have been driven mad in that way.

Nana was scared of ‘going mad’. Mum wanted ‘to do better’ than the women before her. I wonder what Maw wanted…did she have secret desires…did she want more? I cannot know: she just seems to have worked hard and picked up the house and picked broken people…probably including herself - up off floors that were kept so clean ‘you could eat your dinner of them’. And in my own particular trajectory of a bid of wanting? Well, there is a wanting not just to be more – but to know more – about why/what/how/everything… and to think differently – see differently - and to view the world from different – strange, unfamiliar – lenses and angles. To break out the small world of home and domesticity and nothingness…but sometimes it’s all just too tiring – I am exhausted. And the shit-is-hitting the fan at home – and I just want to be normal again – to both just be the old me’ and have the
life I used to have. I want to actually know something simple-normal – in a way that I can definitely predict – to trust -to be certain of something – just one certain thing – something that I am in control of – that I have a hand in – something I can make happen… maybe I can tame the wild domestic of my front garden…?

Yes! I want to be like my neighbours. They wash their cars every Sunday. They plant spring and summer bedding plants. They sow bulbs in Autumn and they bloom in Spring. In my world, blinds on windows are tilted closed in rooms because we do not use them or we forget to open them in the morning. To the outside world, it looks like we do not care. **But I do care** – old habits die hard – I **care very much.** And I want to look like I am in control. No – erase that – I want to be in control – and I want it to look like I care – because I do… appearances must matter to me even though I know they should not. Why care what the neighbours and passers-by think? But people in this town know me – where I come from – they know the women I come from – perhaps some of them have been privy to their secrets more than me! … This comes to my mind at a parents’ evening for my eldest when I realise that I know – from listening in to Mum and Nana talking about ‘women’s stuff’ **oh aye…so-and-so wouldn’t be standing here now if that hot bath and the gin had worked – oh no – aye but look just what a blessing they’ve been…apple of their mother’s eye…God works in mysterious ways…** and in the moment I think: I’m sure these are stories that won’t be passed down within the families themselves but they are still alive and around in what remains of a small-town mining community. Communities keep secrets too (Zerubavel, 2006)

And as I think about the outside world, I think about people who know where I come from and how they might talk about me when they walk past my house… **aye she might have a big house but she’s not kept it up… what a state the garden is in….!** I flush. I know that inside my home – behind the mess of the garden – over the public-private threshold - I do cook and clean and keep the house tidy – but I can’t keep on top of it all. **And I am ashamed by the state of the outside of my house.** Recycling bins overflowing. Trees overgrow. Weeds have spread. Mulched leaves carpet the paths. It’s all too much. The shit keeps hitting the fan – again and again and it’s all I can do to keep the inside of the house clean too with two untidy teenagers – tidy – warm-cosy – cared for – and my writing to inquire – my trying to bring together a thesis – well that’s impossible because the writing is like I have thrust hundreds of thousands of words like seeds and they have either withered or grown – like wildflowers-and I am trying to pick them – to make them flow into some kind of beauty - to make something of the women whose flavour of the lives I tell good and perfect and whole even if I am finding brokenness and shards of a scream and their lives were hard….and well – if I can’t do that then I just want my own shit together – my own life in order and I want it NOW! I want to be the kind of person who has taken time to plant bulbs in pots at my front door so I can watch them – perhaps somewhat smugly – peek
through, grow and blossom – and I want my neighbours to see it too. Yes. Maybe it is all for appearances. Fake. But I know that I want it all…

NOW!

See…I’ve worked myself into another frenzy with my wanting. But I know I cannot speed up the process of nature with a click of my finger and the demand for my wish to be granted. I cannot plant bulbs today and expect them to bloom tomorrow. I know this because my Sunday School teachers told me that the Bible tells me so. “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Ecclesiastes, 3:1). So I go back to thinking about my research and leave the garden to just be as it is …and then I remember my old cat…

August 2009: You’ve got to be cruel to be kind

I am being cruel now. Enough is enough. The vet tells me this over the phone. I tell the kids. I put the cat in his basket. He goes in meekly. My youngest stays home. My oldest accompanies my husband and I to the vet. We are talked through the process. …He’ll not know a thing – it’s for the best - you’re doing the right thing – the only thing. I know it is not the only thing. We could walk out and take Leo home. But I nod and agree. Because it is the right thing. I am being cruel. It’s instantaneous. He will feel no pain.

But I am holding a purring bundle of soft peach and white fur in my arms. I think he knows what is about to happen. I say nothing. Instead, we kiss and pet final goodbyes. Ready? No. But my husband nods. There really is no choice. I nod. Yes. And we crouch down so my eldest and I can cradle Leo between us. The needle goes in and the purring stops. My eldest stands back up - separate for a moment - and I stand back up to hold and rock the full weight of peaceful death.

My eyes need to cry. But I concentrate on holding them back. My head sinks onto the body of my now dead cat. And I dry my dampening cheeks against his still-warm fur. His body – thinned and lightweight in life - feels so much heavier now in death.

The vet remains respectfully silent before reassuring that we did the right thing – the only thing. Yes. I nod again to the vet. It was for the best. It was the right thing to do. Pointless platitudes. But it’s too late to go back in time. Together –three of us - my eldest, my husband and I - cuddle and pet the cat for the final time. Yes. He does look like he is now in peaceful sleep. No more pain. And the vet, who has undoubtedly seen it many times before, watches respectfully on for another few minute, before moving business along. There are other people and their pets out in the waiting room.
We hand Leo to the vet. He passes him to the veterinary nurse. Everything will be taken care of. The vet – shaking his head… tells us he could arrange for us to have the ashes – there is a leaflet detailing the cost but.. And, nodding furiously, I interrupt him…YES! Of course we must have the ashes! The vet turns to my husband – searching for a voice of reason – as he points out that the process involves closing-down and cleaning the incinerator and – well –he cannot guarantee – with the cat being an old boy – very thin – lightweight — that there will be many ashes to be collected… it might be for the best just to leave it…? I remember all of this years later when Ian Brady dies and no-one wants to handle the infamous body of the 1960s ‘Moors murderer’ who resisted leading police to some of his victims bodies. Like his accomplice before him, he lies in wait for months before a court forces a crematorium to burn his body… and the crematorium are careful to announce they close for a period afterward to allow for a full deep-clean and sterilising so the next dead bodies will not be contaminated with the remains of a convicted child-killer (Perraudin, 2017)…

…and I remember how Nana always said that she was ‘lucky’ because she knew what happened to wee Jim – where his body was laid…Yes. Nana did not have to go through “ambiguous loss” where the need for sociological or psychological closure is unattainable (Boss, 1999)…

and I remember how Mum and Nana would shake their heads in horror at ‘missing children’ headlines on TV… and how Nana would say how lucky she was that she was not the mother of one of those poor Moors Murderer victims…imagine that man tape-recorded it all… imagine having to listen to your child crying for you in a courtroom – shouting for their Mum – oh…. and I remember all this when the newspapers re-run old footage after Brady’s death and one of the mothers of the children whose body is never recovered and cannot be laid to rest and how she fears she will die without peace: despite her desperate pleas to Hindley or Brady to tell her the truth so she can give her wee boy a burial but she knows that they will take those secrets with them to their graves (Nugent, 2012).

I remember the fear in Mum-Nana’s – silent eyes – And I think about the lightness of my old cat’s ashes – feather-light-not worthy of being collected and given back to me… there is no lightness in death I want to shout at the vet! None. Cixous (1982) says “Lightness always weighs down… lightness is already a weight… there is no word light enough not to weight down the lightness of lightness” (quoted in Kamuf, 1995:70). But instead, I just demand: I will pay to have the incinerator closed. I want to have the remains of my cat back. Please! I cannot just let him go. Leave him here. I simply cannot. But my husband and the vet shake their heads in agreement together. And my eldest agrees. They win. So I nod in agreement with the rationale of the decision. Of course it is the
right thing to do. Then I shake my head as the veterinary nurse offers me the cat’s carrier as we are shuffled out into the busy waiting room. No. It’s OK. Keep it. Get rid of it. Give it to someone who needs a pet carrier. I don’t need it now. I will never have another cat ever again.

My youngest screams and runs to her room when we come home empty handed. No pet carrier. No cat. I cannot deal with it. Mum looks after and consoles her. Then later, the four of us – me – my husband, my youngest and I – we lie in bed and try not to cry – we amuse ourselves with memories. I pick up chippy for tea. Next day we buy Goodbye Mog (2002) and read it together in a bid to make some sense of death. And then a few days later we pick a big pot and buy some daffodil bulbs at the garden centre and we set it up in the garden and hold a ‘service’ as we plant them in Leo’s memory. Look! There is nothing here just now – but wait until the spring -it’s like magic – the daffodils will come to bloom! I fake enthusiasm.

A few weeks will pass before the kids begin their petition for a kitten. I know I will be persuaded. But it is too soon. Whilst I might know Leo has gone – is dead – and he no longer occupies his usual spot under the lilac bush – or stalks the kitchen window meowling to come in before immediately coming in to meowl at the door to get back outside again - I know that I still hear him cry most days – that bloody cat – I will think as his familiar meows nag at me - and then I will check myself - I realise there is no longer a family cat to meow so I must be hearing things.

September 2017: A Storm is Brewing

It is a sunny Sunday September afternoon and the desperation to appear normal – which, when I think about it, might just convert to meaning to appear ‘respectable’ – has finally thrust me into action. The shit might be continuing to hit the fan in my personal life. The wildness of where my research takes me might have me out in the ravages – but I will myself to take control. I don a pair of gardening gloves and lop branches off way-overgrown trees. Gathering them up into bundles, I stuff them in my car and drive to-and-fro the local tip. And then I wash out the bins. And then I ask my eldest to help bring the cobwebby pots out from the back of the shed – because I am afraid of the mice and creepie-crawlies. And when he retreats – scratching – to shower - I sweep up and plant the bulbs I bought from the supermarket – snowdrops, tulips and daffodils and - I deliberately save the best for last - I pull out the smallest pot – and I plant the tiny bluebell bulbs I ordered online. I hum In and out the dusty bluebells as I push them in and level the soil. And then I go in, scratching – and head to the shower. I continue to hum In and out the dusty bluebells as the hot cleansing water hits my skin. And I smile inwardly at the thought of looking forward to watching my bulbs grow – just like my old cat Leo’s daffodils come up in their shaded spot under the evergreen-laden pergola in the back garden every
year and I do nothing to make it happen! I look forward to seeing the fruits of my labour in a few months' time.

January 2018: Reaping the Harvest

Shit-fan-shit-fan-shit everywhere. To escape chaos, I semi-move out of the family home into a rented space of my own – a place for some peace. It is disruptive. Displacing. Terrible. I take my thousands of books with me. I have to run several trips in the car to move them all. On one of my trips, I notice the buds poking through one of my pots of bulbs, so I pick it up and place it at the front door of the rental to make it feel more homely.

It is only when I fill the car with the remaining books and I see my wee study at home empty – bookless-soulless – that the enormity of the pile of shit that my life has become hits me. And I howl primal-wild on the final trip in the car. The sound horrifies me. It is my closest ever encounter with madness. Terrified by myself, I make myself stop - reign myself in - and ease my way back from the edge to convulsive fitful hollow sobs.

February 2018: The Truth will out

As my doctoral research enters its very final ‘closing’ phases, I visit Mum specifically to sit down and speak with her about my thesis. Mum left school aged fifteen to work in the draper’s shop after a high-school education that taught her how to cook, clean and keep a house. Mum has not read books about research methodologies, ethical considerations, power dynamics or reflexivity. Mum has not had cause to consider how poststructuralism differs from postmodernism or what makes writing to inquire and autoethnography slightly different (Richardson, 2000) or to think of labelling herself as ‘feminist’ (never mind what ‘wave’ she would categorise herself as belonging to if she did!). And Mum is ‘old school’ regarding matters of ‘truth’. I don’t think she would agree with writing towards it or placing it in the curves of inverted commas. No. Mum believes we should always tell the truth regardless of circumstance - *Tell the truth and shame the devil*; we will always be found out if we lie - *Liars need good memories*; and of course there is the ultimate - *of course there is an indisputable truth – that’s the ‘gospel truth’ and God is watching us to make sure we tell it*.

Mum can be set in her ways, openly vocal about her strong fixed moral beliefs about what is right and what is wrong and what should and should not be done or spoken about. But Mum is worldly-wise. And, whilst she might never have believed any children of hers would go to university – *because that’s not what people expect from folk like us* – and indeed my brother and I are still the only children of
Mum and Dad’s generation of extended family offspring to go to university and be educated, ‘out of our origins’ (Wright, 2014)...but I think Mum benefits and learns from the education my brother and I have had too. Over the years I have noticed how she takes on board the book-learned wisdom that trickles from her children into family conversations - offering different ways of looking at and making sense of the world, Mum’s eyes gradually widen and open up I never thought about it like that. Times have changed. Yes – I can see it differently now. Mum is more willing to listen and learn than the school education system expected from wee girls like her where not much was expected. Intuitive. Astute. Indeed, I am inclined to think that even as a little girl wee Janette was more astute than the education system might have expected from wee girls like her in a book-learned way because when I look back at the stories wee Janette tells – I would disagree with Steedman’s assertion that in childhood only the surroundings show and they do not possess a social analysis of what is happening to them or around them, “so the landscape and the pictures it presents have to remain a background, taking on meaning later in different circumstances” (1986:12). No. As Hochschild (2003) says, children catch glimpses - hear-learn – are socialised into the world – from hushed conversations not meant for their ears. I think Mum knew more than we might think as a child as she was socialised through the hushed whispers as she picks up – the sacrifice – the losing- the giving – the plight of women – the not lamenting but being strong and carrying on – of wanting and trying to get...more but that might be a sin...better to be content. Yes - Wee Janette–Mum – was-is astute. She reads between the lines and catches ‘concepts’ fast. So I know that not only will she be open to what I am about to speak with her about, but she will understand the import of our conversation. Mum understands something of what I mean when I say that I have followed Polkey (1999) and focused on how narratives are created and I recognise that personal narratives tell multiple truths of lives from different perspectives rather than a singular objective ‘Truth’...because, I think that our lives are they are lived are contextual and textural...and I know there is power in me using the ‘I’ of our family stories and this can be a way of assuming power that I do not have (Loughran, 2018)... And I know Mum will question and challenge me. And I’m not sure how much she will like what I have to say or how uncomfortable it might make her or me feel... Mum carefully listens to my every word and searches behind my eyes as I explain that my research challenges notions of ‘truth’ as it chips in to well-established and oft told family stories. Occasionally she nods or asks a question as I talk her through the twists and turns, nooks and crannies and supposed dead-ends that I’ve visited as I found myself coming to writing about ordinary working-class women with unremarkable lives like me and her and Nana and Maw. Ordinary – Women – Feminine – Poor. Strong women. Broken women. Words Mum knows well. I talk about
strong – about what it means – the softness-vulnerability-pain-hurt-and more – behind that strength – the core of the women – and the absolute disgrace that these women were othered and shamed and… how these are our women but so many other everyday working-class women too. And I tell Mum that I know Siegel (1999) critiques Cixous’ white ink claiming it snags on the body of the mother. But my embodied writing led me back to my great-grandmother Maw – an echo of a scream from the past… and it’s wrong that lives of women like Maw were lived out ‘in the borderlands’ (Steedman, 1986) – the shadows – dirty – murky – dingy – not to be spoken of – with pains not to be recognised. It is – I declare – unjust – and I go on and on….

Then I pause. There is silence. But Wee Jim…you will be writing about wee Jim? Mum sounds like she wants it to be about wee Jim. Yes. Sort of. I’m not writing about wee Jim – although stories of his birth and life and death might be included because they are central to my ‘writing-story’ – they are part of where it began. But they are shorter stories that build to the bigger story. I have told fragments – full of facts – but like Forster (1995) says, they are full of hearsay too: and beneath this stuff of hearsay ordinary family history is the story of thousands that can be told to disrupt established narratives. And I am not writing our stories and leaving them as ‘the stories’ as they were told and heard over the years: I am rewriting - renarrating - recreating our stories and incorporating them into a writing-story that reinterprets it in the light of my research as I write reflexively back in towards where writing has pulled me. I try to explain it to Mum: it’s like reading and writing pulled me towards a black hole and then as I tried to get away it kept drawing me in. And even though I didn’t want to be where writing took me, I heard something. Something harrowing. Engulfing. Calamitous. An inner commotion… a screaming. Does that make any sense? Yes. And I am writing about what I hear - the silenced story between the gaps – the story behind the scenes – the story that Maw and Nana could not say – the silent words and sounds and feelings that maybe Mum – maybe you heard, saw and sensed over the years but could not articulate because you learned very young to repeat the surface set in stone story – because that is the story that has always openly (and I emphasise this) - with good reason - has needed to be told. And Mum nods. A quiet yes.

We sit in silence again for a while and then I ask Mum again if what I’ve said makes any sense? Yes. Because that is what I am writing about in my thesis. The story of wee Jim’s death is at the heart of it, and at one point I thought that it might be ‘the story’ – but it’s not what the writing took me back to hear. Mum, I’m telling the story about the women who loved him and grieved him. I’m telling the story of the ongoing aftermath. I’m telling the story of a silenced scream. It is a different story – it is an untold story. It is a story that we have both inherited – and lived through - but never spoken aloud. It is a story about five generations of women who have lived in one town and been affected by the events of one particular day but also every day because they had to live their lives with socio-historic-cultural

Mum knows I am not asking permission to tell the story. I know it is not Mum’s permission to give. Just like the house Mum and Dad never thought they would own - because people like us don’t buy houses – so too do the family stories have shared ownership: but the value of family stories cannot so easily be equally split because they have years of investment behind them: they are what makes each family unique. But I wonder what Mum thinks-feels about what I’ve said? I think you are writing about women and pain that cannot be borne. A pain that is too big a burden to carry but it cannot be laid down and put to rest either. I nod. I thought I might be writing about ‘inherited trauma’ (Prager, 2015) but I don’t say anything - because I think Mum might be right.

And I go home. And I think about my ‘injustice’. St Pierre (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) thinks that writing as a method of inquiry carries us across thresholds towards the promise of what Derrida calls ‘the democracy to come’ which can only be positive for anyone concerned with social justice. Cixous (Cixous & Urban, 2017:214) says democracy “exists in our language, it exists in our desires but she agrees with Derrida that it is yet to come. Derrida (quoted in Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) points out this democracy will never appear in its full presence - we must provide hospitality though and prepare ourselves for its arrival. I think about Cixous and ‘arrivance’ (Mackinlay, 2019). I think about ethics. Alterity. Truth. Transcendental justice. I think about all the comings-goings-writings in and towards in my thesis – here-there I seek it – answers… how I seek to bring alive the women in my past – how I avoid the terrible curse that cannot be spoken – the harrowing scream that cannot be heard.

The ghostly elephants of the past sat in the room today with me and Mum – acknowledged. But, for what? Why could my writing not just let it all be – not wake up the past. I circle again around the critiques around writing about the dead (Tolich, 2010). And I remind myself of Derrida’s words if I am getting ready to speak at any length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us or outside us, it is in the name of justice (1994:xviii).

Yes. That is the direction of the truth I write towards.
Anniversaries

6 June 2018: The Writing Retreat

Another year. Another anniversary of wee Jim’s death…

I am hosting a writing retreat for our school’s research centre. I tell my fellow-writer-researchers I will be writing back – again – to an important date in my research… and then I stare at a blank screen…

I remember Mum’s storying of the day with Nana and the terrible scream…. I wondered who are the ‘they’ who witness the moment when the inspector calls?

Mum is never in the scene of the family story when Nana screams. I remember Mum tells me she runs from a scream in a work situation – someone lets out a sharp scream and Mum exits the building. She is embarrassed. It was uncontrollable she says when she tells me how she was so embarrassed and she doesn’t understand it. Why would I do that why did I run away. I wonder. And later again, when she tells me the story on the anniversary of Jim’s death – when she tells me again – about the inspector and the waiting in the playpark and Maw running to the door to hold up Nana – in the tableau that I write – frozen – for a long time in research-writing time – but frozen even longer in the ‘real’ spacetime of ordinary life in the flix-flux of being lived – I wonder – out aloud – I wonder – I say to Mum - I wonder where you were when Maw and Nana waited – like the Inspector – for the men to come home…to bring – hopefully ‘good news’ – that wee Jim will be ok? Because it is Dey and Papa – the men - who go in the ambulance that takes hours to come from the next town… your Dey held wee Jim, Mum says… he could feel him ‘go’…but he was still alive when they left the hospital… but…: and like a ‘shimmering boundary” it hangs there. Full stop. Except Dey’s regret: oh how he wishes wee Jim had gone then in the ambulance – in his arms – with his family… And your dey took that regret to his grave…!

But I think – surely everyone must have known that wee boy wasn’t coming home from the hospital when he left that house. Everyone – including Mum – wee Janette – she must have known in the whispers and the way the women carried on cleaning – tidying – hoping – banking up the fire… – and I hear myself wonder aloud again…. - where was Mum was that day? And instantly she responds. Oh I was there. And she breathes - in shock. I was there! She wonders how she could not know this before – why did she never wonder where she – she was heard. I heard the scream. Yes she did….

And then I remember my own scream…

Cixous says
it is the feeling of secret we become acquainted with when we dream, that is what makes us both enjoy and at the same time fear dreaming. When you are possessed by a dream, when you are the inhabitant of a dream, you are driven by this, by a kind of heart beating: and the dream says something that is never said, that will never be said by anyone else and which you know; you possess the unknown secret (1993:85)

I scream-hear the secret in the middle of the night. Bolt. Upright. I am screaming. I wake up the house. I do not need notebooks to capture the scream... it escapes. But I hear myself make it and my kids hear it... wonder in the morning about it... you screamed so loud Mum... it woke me up...why were you screaming. It was nothing, I say: just a bad dream.

I turn to notes now. In his phenomenological study of the scream, Schwenger (2014) argues a scream is not communication. A scream is emitted as either a reaction to a scene of horror or anticipating a horror of own’s own (Schwenger, 2014). I think of Maw at the foreshore road. And me – who could not meet her eyes. The scream is a projection of our self out of the body Schwenger, 2014). I think of Nana and Mum and the terrible scream. Sometimes we might not even know we are screaming (Schwenger, 2014). I think of the dream that I do not know that sat me bold upright. The scream is not an acoustic cloning of our selves, it redoubles horror as it exists at degree zero (Schwenger, 2014). I think of the sinking- the lack of buoyancy – the terrible horror of the days after wee Jim dies.

6 June 2019 – Walking-Talking-Thinking with my research
Another year – another anniversary... St Pierre (2015) says that when we weed or garden or go for a walk, we are taking part in ordinary practices that might not be scientized like the interview or observation but are still research practices....

So, stuck and in despair, I leave my endlessly untidy house - and I go for a walk around the town. The town where I am back living. Where the women lived. Still live and breathe in my research. I visit the playpark – the foreshore road – and then I head to the cemetery. Thinking-researching-writing-in my head as I go...

And I remember Richardson’s (1999a) assertion that whilst life is not a narrative, people make sense of their lives and the lives of others through narrative constructions and the work of researcher is to balance and sift experience because it is not about telling ‘what comes next’ but about placing ‘next’ in a meaningful context.

And then I remember Cixous who writes
My mother held me. I hold my children. I have been a baby-child and a mother. There is continuity between my childhood, my parent's childhood, my children's childhood – and the world of writing – of being a narrator (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:202).

And then I remember Nicolson (2017) who, claiming that the one relationship all women have in common is that they are 'daughters', sifts fact from fiction to writes a memoir of seven generations of women in her family. She creates a moving and powerful retelling, but the women she writes about come from privilege and already had a history of writing down and telling their stories. They already had a voice and expectation of an audience...

And then I remember Steedman (1986) and Skeggs (1997) and Walkerdine and Lucey (1989). And Light's (2014) tale of common people that seeks an audience because poverty homogenises, whereas family history humanises.

And I remember Mum when I am in the depths of a despair where I do not think I can step past the domestic doorstep of pain to adventure – play – go to an academic conference – Mum, I just can't….and Mum says – yes, you can - damn well use the privilege you have. Put it to good use. And I hear Maw say. Just pick up your pen and write. Your pain is nothing compared to mine.

Stories are never transparent all at once and narrative understanding takes time (Plummer, 2013)...

And I remember the Red Paragraph in the lining of my patchwork quilt…'My maternal grandmother dies three months before I am born…': And I am reminded that whilst my birth story routinely relates the fact that my maternal great-grandmother knits a layette for me before she dies, it is only through writing that I actually come to realise there was only a three-month gap between her death and my birth and wonder about how the women grieved for her. No-one deliberately kept this a secret from me, but like a slow-moving veil or curtain sometimes our stories can only be revealed gradually (Plummer, 2001).

Sometimes we are not ready to hear what is always already there. To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time (Portelli, 1991). And today, as I walk I find myself standing again at my maternal great-grandmother’s grave as a writer-researcher-great-granddaughter, mentally clutching my birth certificate, comparing the documentary evidence of the
handwritten Registrar’s signature confirming my date of birth with the memorial mason’s carved inscription on her well-weathered headstone commemorating the date of her death – a touchstone - and I can wonder why no family member has ever acknowledged the shortness of the gap - and I can wonder why it has taken me so long to recognise it myself – but I do not think I can ever pinpoint any definite answers….

“The grave is a metaphysical site. It is situated in space and in time, yet it destabilises this matrix, warping the linearity of time and the spatiality of space’ (Ruin, 2018:112). And Ruin (2018) goes on to talk about the actual archaeological digging up of the dead from graves and ‘bringing back’ the dead and he suggests that as inheritors we must find a way to respond to the obligations of the dead: and I think about the justice I seek as I try to voice Maw’s scream and to write the curse that seems to thread its way through the generation of women. But I am endlessly disappointed that Maw’s eyes and mine did not meet. I feel loss…grief… longing – still for that meeting.

I have no memory of Maw… except in the stories I am told. Schwab asks

How does one write from within an absence of memory, from within a loss that is less remembered as a story or an image or a thought than as a mood, an existential void, or a sense of annihilation? Writing is performed in the shadow of a lost object. Writing is the shadow of an absent voice. Writing assembles an ungrounded body’s fragmented speech (2010:60)

No-one has talked about how Mum and Nana felt when Maw died. Maw’s death and the women’s grief is never part of my well-told birth story. Maw brought Mum up. Nana spent most of her day with Maw too – only going home to her husband at bedtime.

No-one seems to have considered that it might not have been my birth that caused my older brother to ‘act up’ when we laugh at the family stories reminding him of his ‘naughty behaviour’… but perhaps he felt the loss of his beloved Maw who adored him, because as family stories make clear, Maw adored all the wee baby boys born into the family.

And no-one has ever told me if Maw fought to live each day – in the way that Black (2018) suggests humans sometimes do… ‘just one more day’- to see me arrive into the world…

When Mum’s tells her pregnancy story about the time when she is expecting me… oh she is filled with joy. She blooms throughout the pregnancy. The doctor calls her impossibly short maternity mini-dress a mini-tent. Her swollen baby bump is ‘neat’ and when it doesn’t measure the correlate number
of inches-to-weeks the doctor tells her to go home and put the chip pan on and feed the bump – which is why, I am told, I have always liked chips… and so it goes on and on. It is a story filled with happy light-hearted expectancy. No-one talks about the death and the funeral that happened in this mix. And I wonder now about the practicalities of it all. And I realise that I will have been quite a big presence in Mum’s womb – kicking, squirming, perhaps even hiccupping - when my great-grandmother dies. Did Mum cry at the funeral? How did Nana cope with her Mum’s death? Nana now had to accept the loss of both her parents. Adult friends have talked about how hard this has been. A final loss. I wonder now if losses can ever be final. But my friend said being parentless was unexplainable-unexpected-terrible. I wonder now if Mum and Nana talked about the coincidence of one life ending and another beginning as is often anecdotally done? Was I seen as ‘a blessing’ – a welcome distraction? Did Mum cradle her growing bump – the life inside her that would become me - when she stands in the cemetery at Maw’s burial? Did I squirm and kick? I do not know. I suspect Mum might not even remember… but these are questions that involve skimming below the surface of the thick skin that can settle on top of the formula stories that families find easier to digest. Some family stories are told with ease and repeated frequently (Pincus and Dare, 1976) but as Gordon (2008) says others are unspoken and haunt our lives unless we follow the ghosts, facing forward and back -not to memorialise or slay, but to settle.

September 2020: Searching for an Ending...

I say – EUREKA! – I have found the ending to my research… so many times… I search for it in lirécrire (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:57) as books seem to appear for me just like they do for Speedy (2015) and Law (2004) and everything I read seems to be relevant to my research…

Lirécrire – ‘writereading’

Summer 2018: Memoirs of death

I find myself reading Beard’s autobiographical account The Day that went Missing: A Family’s Story (2017) in one long sitting in a beautiful cottage garden at the reflexivity chapter writing retreat. Beard’s brother is drown on a family holiday in the summer of 1978. Beard (2017) and his remaining brothers do not attend the funeral. And – quickly – over time – somehow it becomes ‘a day that goes missing’ as it is erased – not talked about – presumably too horrible to bear – and also because there is a pervasive attitude of ‘just getting on with it’. It is, I think as I read Beard (2017), like Tomalin who writes that we are always "moving between the trivial and the tragic and even in our worst moments where we want to give all our attention to grief the house has to be cleaned and the bills paid" (2017:4).

But one day, Beard (2017) finds himself unable to go on without searching for the missing day – questioning it – wanting to know the details. There are similarities with what happens with wee Jim in
terms of keeping pain hidden. But I am also struck with his certainty that everything he has written in his profession as a writer has already been pointing him towards this erased day: his unconscious mind has him veering towards it before he knows he is writing about it. It is already in everything he has written. Like Richardson, in *Lone Twin* (2019). Yes, I think this is what writing does.

And I read *The Passenger was Death: The Drama and Trauma of Losing a Child* (Daher, 2003). And I watch Daher take the phone call that delivers the dreaded news. I see him negotiate those ‘shimmering boundaries’ Stanley (2002) talks of as he writes ‘Life after life. Life before death. How is forgetting related to oblivion?’ (Daher, 2003: 60). And when he talks of all the rituals – sharing loss on the anniversary, spreading ashes, planting trees – I find myself wondering about the day of wee Jim’s funeral. What did the women who were not allowed to attend do? Wee Janette – a woman-in-the-making - would certainly have been with them. Sitting. Listening. Absorbing it all in. The fear – the oblivion – the need to forget but also the need to never-ever forget or let go.

And when I read *Half a Life* (Strauss, 2011), I see another side to our family story. Strauss is the driver of a car that kills a young female cyclist. We read how he goes to the cinema that day. No doubt in shock. We read how it was an accident. It is investigated and he was found not to be at blame. Wee Jim is knocked down and killed. But someone was driving that bus. How did it affect his family?

There was no fatal accident inquiry for wee Jim. Sometimes Mum will remember that a policeman tells the family that a neighbour ‘crucifies their wee boy’. Presumably the neighbour tells the truth of what she saw. Wee Jim ran straight out without looking. The driver could not stop. The driver was blameless. But the power of our family story lies in the repeated insistence on the particular word – ‘crucified’ – it is never questioned as being emotive but surely it carries huge connotations of ‘sacrifice’. Sacrifice works at different levels. For example, Morgan (2011) says women see ‘sacrifice’ as in doing without for one’s children. But sacrifice works at the level of a biblical sacrifice too - in the asking for forgiveness of sin or of giving an offering….And as a child, I always wondered why no-one was angry with God as he had ‘chosen’ wee Jim and then ‘taken’ his wee puppy too…surely wee Jim wanted to stay with his family: I would not have wanted to be taken to live with God as a twinkling star! And sometimes, I think that anger is displaced in the story and lands with the neighbour – who stopped any form of justice from being carried out at the time. Someone needed to bear some of the blame…but although it remains unspoken until close to her death, Nana had fingers of ‘blame’ pointed at her in the time. Was Nana ‘a bad mother’ because she sent her wee boy off on a journey too far from home. Or perhaps Maw also felt something of an unspoken blame… did she – and others - wonder if wee Jim had seen her and rushed across the road to surprise her.
But it was simply an accident. But like Strauss (2011) says. There are ongoing consequences. I can see the consequences in my family from wee Jim’s death. But I start to wonder about the bus driver. Surely the shock of hitting a wee boy and then him dying is bound to have impacted his life and therefore his family. Or did he strive to forget it? Pretend it did not happen?

And then I re-read Bittersweet (2011) and read of how McAllester, at the first anniversary of his mother’s death, he never thought that such an arbitrary mark of time could have much power and how he wishes his grief didn’t conform to a pattern that he has been told is similar to what others go through. And he notes how brutal and physical it is in its strength. And in my head, I find myself searching back for Maw – Nana – and wee Janette too: how did they feel on the first anniversary of wee Jim’s death: did they feel this physical brutal pain? I certainly did not see it in the sentimental newspaper cuttings documented in the ‘In Memoriam’ electronic snippings in the local newspaper – but it must have been there...

And in the midst of reading-writing and researching-living, time goes on and the seasons change….and life moves forward and I find myself having passed through Autumn and Winter and I am approaching another Summer...

Spring - Summer 2019: More memoirs of death

And I know that I will finish this thesis now. The research is done. I have enough to say. I just need to vanquish it. Overcome writing. Stop writing. Stop reading. Master it. No – not master writing. I need to lay wee Jim to rest. But I cannot – not before I read Once More We saw Stars: A Memoir (Greene, 2019). And I read it fast. And then again, slowly. And I imagine if I had finished my thesis before I had the opportunity to read this book. Greene’s daughter is killed after a brick from a building falls onto her head. It is a tragic accident. But I ponder his writing. He talks of ‘terminal stillness’. He talks of watching his wife discussing minutiae of their toddler daughter’s funeral after the fatal accident and how - catching himself glancing at her, he wonders Does anyone else hear her screaming silently through this? Yes. I think. Yes. People can be screaming inside. Behind wild savagely calm eyes. I am certain Maw was screaming-howling because I heard it. And I can hear his wife scream too through his text…. Did people hear Maw scream as she carried on? Did anyone care? And when Greene talks of waiting in the hospital walking empty hallways for news and says ‘this first night is the beginning of my re-education – earth is now an alien planet, and I am a visitor treading in its surface (Greene, 2019:21), I think about that first night after the inspector calls and delivers the news about wee Jim and the alien world my foremothers stood in. Greene (2019) quite rightly notes that one is
not meant to surrender the body of one’s child (Green, 2019). And I wonder how hard it must have been for Maw – Nana – when wee Jim’s coffin is taken from their house. To a funeral they did not attend. I remember Mum sometimes remembers that my paternal great-grandmother brings a freshly cut rose from her garden every morning and places it in wee Jim’s coffin when his body rests at Maw and Dey’s before the funeral. Pelias poetically writes “Roses die when put in blood” (2016:84). This makes me cry.

And then I read *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (Riley, 2019). Riley’s adult son dies. Like wee Jim, his is a sudden death. “Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole inductive faculty by which you’d previously lived has faltered” (Riley, 2019: 33). And we see Riley write with a poetic desperate intensity through the months after his death, where time does not flow, where she says instead “You are time. You are saturated with it” (2019:66). And she writes of a longing that drives her to find writing – something that will “carry the reassurance that this cessation of your time if well known and fully recorded” (2019:67). Where, she wonders, does such literature exist? And I think it rarely exists - if at all - except in those books like hers and the other memoirs I have read - where people find themselves, somehow – able to write – about loss and grief – that particular grief that turns these people into mourners, as both Riley (2019) and Greene (2019) note that unlike widow or widower or orphan – has no specific name: there is no word for a grieving parent despite it being a particular club that people only have access to when the very worst thing that could happen comes to pass. It’s like death. It is unnameable because we lack words for it. And as I read Riley (2019), I note her use of the word ‘vanishment’. It is a word I have used in my own wording of the world of my childhood as I think about wee Jim and the moment on the foreshore road… because growing up with the ghost of wee Jim, I have always know that time can hover – pause – stop – just as it moves – because of a ‘vanishment’… and now I read Riley (2019) as she captures this poetically after the death of her adult son – it is a heartbreak – but I understand the word - I knew it – I always already knew that chronology and the length of moments in time are very different from clock time – life can stand still – frozen suspended – chipped in words in gravestone.

And I continue to sit with Riley as I read *The Order of Time* (Rovelli, 2018). Rovelli (2018) seems to confirm that - yes time does stop – it does not flow. And I sit with my adult children as they try to help me understand ‘physics’. No Mum – my eldest points out – *Rovelli is writing about really complex concepts – and I don’t think you really understand time – or space. I argue. And I think about Cixous and her concept of an ‘entredeux’ and me flying in to meet Mum – wee Janette – in the cemetery – and I think about the still lives I write with Nana – where I swing with click-clicking momentum in the park - and I think about Maw – when I rewound time to meet her in the scene of the terrible crime when wee Jim is knocked down – and… I remember Cixous talking of violent situations where we are thrown into strangerness.
when an event arrives which evicts us from ourselves we do not know how to ‘live’. But we must. Thus we are launched into a space-time whose co-ordinates are all different from those we have always been accustomed to (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:9).

And I feel I know something of touching the moment when time stops in my writing. When life evicts my foremothers from themselves.

Rovelli (2018) says that trying to understand and study time is like holding a snowflake in your hand because it melts and vanishes under examination, I think that the little snowflakes in my snowglobe that fall on the patchwork elephant have spoken to me about time and how it stopped. How Maw held time tight in her scream. But I hear its reverberation flood through me as I read Rovelli say

> We are time. We are this space, this clearing opened by the traces of memory inside the connections between our neurons. We are memory. We are nostalgia. We are longing for a future that will not come (2018:xi).

And I think again about Maw’s desires – perhaps for a different future? A future where she could go into a room somewhere and scream some of her pain away? To stop having to pick up the pieces of caring for others? And Nana? Did Nana want to scream without being cast as ‘mad’ or soothed with lullabied ‘there-theres’?

And then I read Lone Twin where Richardson (2019) writes about a secret that has been kept from her. A secret she has perhaps always somehow known but it is only fully revealed in her life writing as different things come together and ‘fit together’ differently. And I return again to the question of evidence and proof – and my irrational desire always to find something that will prove what my writing to inquire with Cixous and feminine writing has shown me because it is known in my body – the body that was once in Mum -who was once in Nana - who was once in Maw. But for me, like Richardson (2019) I have little actual proof – evidence – of the screams – the unspoken curse – the fear and the sense there is an ongoing pain in Maw that needs to be written about. But sometimes I think – it is the things we cannot prove – the solitary things that we hide from ourselves and others that hurt us most. It is perhaps, too that the drive to know – a ‘cool-headed knowing’ (Riley, 2019) of actual forensic dispassionate information is easier to manage than the hot potato disarraying chaos of some of our ordinary lived feelings that we cannot language.
Winter 2019: Mother Homer

And I find myself sitting under a winter blue sky in a basement coffee shop at the university reading *Mother Homer* (2018). It is painful to read Cixous write through the loss of her mother. All I can think is… I write towards the pain of ‘the curse’ – the fear of losing the child – an out of order – unnatural – not bearable – thing to happen that I know I could not bear. As Lieberman (1979) notes the death of a child is a death that goes against the grain of nature thus intensifying the accompanying grieving: it is one of the most stressful events any family might face. But when I write about my birth and Maw not being there and nobody really talking about the grieving that must have been happening… well, I am already writing towards the pain of the loss of mother. And I avert my eyes from that thought.

And then I find myself in the year 2020…

Documents of life

February - March 2020: The Keys, the Photographs and a Book

It looks like there might be a pandemic on the way. I don’t know what this means. But I shop. Fill up Mum and Dad’s cupboards. Warn them they will probably have to stay in. And the keys – Dad asks if I have the keys to their building. As their named carer, I have guaranteed 24-hour access. Yes Dad – ‘somewhere safe’ at home – I’ll have a look for them…but I won’t need them – I have the key fob for the main door – it’s on my keyring. Might lock the front door hen if what you’re saying might happen happens. Keep us under lock and key. I laugh. *Probably won’t come to that Dad*…

A few weeks later Mum phones. I should be in Leuven eating-drinking-relaxing - celebrating my friend’s birthday - but instead I am outside my youngest’s school waiting to collect her before schools close – not just for the summer – but with a foreboding sense of indefinitely - because of what she has taken to calling with derision ‘the covid’. Mum says I need to find my keys. Why? They are locking the front door to the building. The warden has told Mum they will be getting a letter to say the door will be locked and has warned her to warn me. I need keys.

I drive home from Edinburgh trying to coax my youngest to tell me all about what was her very final last day ever at school. There were so many high hopes for what would have been the real final day of school in June: so many events planned – rites of passage… they might not happen now. Uncertainty. Sharp. Harsh. It sort of hits me - but I ignore it.

An hour later, I meet Mum at the back gate of her building. She has come out the fire escape. I put the photographs we were going to look through together ‘when I finish my thesis’ and a copy of *Clever*
Girls (Goode, 2019) – a book she has nagged at me for months to give her but I say she has to wait for because I planned to give her as her Mother’s Day gift – on the ground at the entrance to the gate. Mum picks them up and lays down the keys to her building. I collect the keys. We try to laugh and smile. We do not hug or touch – I am scared that even the air around me could pass something on. I think about how the nurses warned me about Nana’s infection being passed on from me to the baby as they warned me about handwashing and wearing plastic aprons and washing all my clothes as soon as I got home… And then my youngest and I waved and blew kisses as Mum headed back to the fire-escape that Dad is waiting to open for her. Then I drive home with my youngest – in silence – fear of the unknown ahead lurks. And fear of facing death.

April 2020: Scraps of papers

My oldest Uncle dies. Funerals are restricted numbers to immediate household due to Covid. I feel sad on the Saturday morning of his funeral. Mum says he lived to a ripe old age – almost 100 – but we both say …still it’s a shame. I wonder about ‘the damage’ this will do to future generations – the lack of a ‘saying goodbye’ to those we love – who loved us. And then Mum reminds me that in some of the things she gave me before in a clear plastic folder there is a love letter he wrote to his wife – Dad’s sister - during the war.

I remember the folder. It is safe in my desk drawer upstairs. Unopened. I have put a label on it noting they will be, like the key to Mum and Dad’s building, what Plummer would refer to as a ‘document of life’ (2001, 2013). I planned to look at the contents of this folder once my thesis was submitted but…I decide to look through them now: I want to read my oldest Uncle’s love letter. And I want to see what else is in here – I want to look at these bits of fragments of life that were not written by my hand. I know it breaks my own rules for the thesis – but surely – I reason – when I read books – I am doing the same…

THE LOVE LETTER

I find the love letter. Dad’s oldest sister (another mother to him) was sent this letter by her soon-to-be husband when he is at war. It is written in paper so old now – so fragile it disintegrates in my fingers – and although the words are so faded I know I am holding true strong love – old love – handwritten heartfelt domestic love – as I squint my eyes to read it - and I smile – my bones warmed - at its beauty – and innocence. Yes. I think. I do know love. Love is a gift. It is not just man - woman – maternal - child though, I think. There is something very domestic routine mundane in the tattered love in this letter I hold…
THE SUNDAY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT’S LETTER

And then there is a letter from the Sunday School Superintendent. I read it. It strikes me that much of the content of family well-told stories possibly begin in the contents of this letter. It is plain and beautifully both matter of fact and to the point as well as seemingly-desperately-inspirationally trying to find words to console. It says Jim was a particularly bright boy. Just like the Fatal Accident newspaper insert. It confirms the Sunday School was cancelled and Jim had said he would go off to pick some bluebells in the woods for his mother instead. It says that whilst all at church are so deeply saddened by Jim’s death, they are drawing some comfort in their thought that Jim had been able to wander and enjoy the lavish beauty of God’s spectacular world on his final day on earth.

There is more – lots more in the letter – and I cry when I read the letter – several times. I cry at the thought of all the Sunday School children who take part in a service the week after he dies lining up to sing wee Jim’s favourite hymn, Onward Christian Soldiers (n.d.) I cry at the image the Sunday School superintendent plants of wee Jim marching up to Heaven – and lining up in front of God - a good little soldier. And then I rage. Sentimental. Soft. The words hold hideous beauty. I think of how Macfarlane (2017) says ‘bluebells’ have become a word – as well as a world of nature - lost to children’s dictionaries, having been replaced with technological words like ‘blog-vlog-wiki’. And I remember Beard’s (2017) anger when he comes across all the letters of condolence that were written to his parents after his brother dies. Soothing. Slush. It reminds me of Riley (2019) who does not want people to say that they cannot imagine what she is going through when her son dies – no – she wants them to imagine it. And it reminds me of all those ‘there-theres’ – the consoling words of the community around Mum and Nana and Maw – and it reminds me yet again of how I could not look at Maw – into her eyes – when she sees wee Jim lying on the road when I sought to rewind time.

And I am taken back to what I come to think of as an ‘an orchestrated moment’ - when I plant the snowdrops and the bluebells in pots in the garden and I am mentally willing them to grow… not just for the neighbours but so I can see new growth peek through the earth. Nature will flourish. And I can touch them. Smell them. And pick some of the bluebells. And then I will take two wee bunches of bluebells along to the cemetery and place them on Nana and Maw’s graves. A wee gift. And I can finish my thesis and have it all done. No more sadness or grief or ghosts. Tick. I have acknowledged them – they can be gone…

But the winter of 2017-18 was hard and frozen and just as winter should have given way to spring a storm sweeps across the country. The snowdrop that peeks through early is hardy despite its look of humble fragility. But the snow that drives against the side of my house batters against the earth the bluebell bulbs sit under. And when they do come in – they have grown at a slant. They remind me of
the Emily Dickinson poem *There is a certain Slant of Light* (1861/2016:258). And I remember thinking about God and Church, the meaning of Nature, life and loneliness and death…. And I think of writing beginning in the school of death and me and wee Janette in the cemetery and…

**TITLE DEEDS**
And then there are the title deeds. Mum and Dad have been canny. They knew the old cemetery was filling up so they bought their plot. And Mum knows that I once – in a weak and silly moment – say that one of the first things that hits me when my husband and I separate is that I have no-one to be buried with now…. and worse still I have nowhere to be buried – I’d assumed I’d die first and my husband would sort it all out for me. Oh what a strong independent woman I am/was! And now I will be alone. Mum must have heard my deep pain. And has found a way to solve it. They will be cremated. There is space for them in Maw and Dey’s plot. And I can break new ground! I might be alone but I have a place to go.

*No Mum – don’t talk about you or Dad dying. Don’t. Stop!*

But here are the deeds to Plot 276. My final resting place-in-waiting. The absurdity of me holding this paperwork makes me laugh properly out loud.

**THE OPTICIAN’S APPOINTMENT**
And then there is a letter addressed to Nana and Papa which is an optician’s appointment dated January 1950. It has a date and time detailing when wee Jim should be taken for an eye test. Wee Jim dies in June 1949. Records must not have been kept up-to-date. I wonder why this single piece of paper has been kept over the years. Did Nana weep when she received it and had no son to take? Was there anger at the administrative mistake? I feel the empty space…I feel for myself as I hold these documents… I am in a long neverending stalled moment…

*Spring-Winter 2020-2021: Lockdowns*

*Spring 2020*
As people die in UK care homes, I worry-and-care for my parents. With schools and universities closed, I worry and care for my children. And I am forced to face some facts about my life: it is not as carefree as I might have once thought…stuck – at home trying to work on my thesis but with other work and cooking-cleaning-shopping-breadmaking-baking… trying to fill the gap where the normality of our daily working lives has gone… I feel the strain.
Sometimes I don’t do a lot of my caring with love: rather it is with a sense of ‘why am I responsible for all this…?’ Rich (1986) once asserted most of the labour in the world is done by women… but that was decades ago… how can so little have changed, for me anyway…

But I think about Mum and Nana and especially Maw as I care - cook – clean – wash-up. I escape into my head to meet with her. Seton (2007) shuts her eyes and goes back as though place were a time machine and she is with her mother – in the kitchen of her childhood. I go back to Maw whose kitchen I never stood in – but I imagine. Seton says kitchens are not to be confused with food, rather they are about the process of making a meal and that “the kitchen slips noiselessly into the dreams of our children before they are conscious of it” (2000:57). I imagine Maw - in her bedroom and a kitchen home - making the best of ‘the little she has’ as she ‘makes ends meet’. And I imagine her cleaning out the coal fire and resetting and lighting it. And I realise Maw is exactly my age now when she saw wee Jim on the road. I feel young still although I mentally always paint Maw as old in my imagination. And I try to re-picture her – like the goddess Hestia of home and hearth, not personified in human form, but as an eternal flame burning on a round hearth (Bolen, 2014).

Gran’s Treat: Easing Lockdown

My youngest and I set out early on our walk to collect Mum. My youngest says this will be ‘a treat’ for Gran who has not been outside since mid-February. As UK covid lockdown is being slowly eased, family members are encouraging Mum and Dad to stay home a wee bit longer because Dad is shielding. But Mum is desperate to go for a walk. Just a wee walk around the cemetery. Mum petitions me on the phone – quietly - please… I know how much it will mean to her. She needs air. Against my better judgement, I agree.

Mum is waiting at the gate next to the bins at the side entrance to her building. She waves excitedly and walks quickly towards us. My youngest instructs her…’STOP! Two metres distance Gran! Put on your mask!

Mum wears patent low-heeled court shoes and carries a patent handbag and a Tesco carrier bag. I tut at her shoes and bag – trainers would be more sensible surely – you’re walking to the cemetery not going to a garden party! - and then I beep the car key Mum gave me back in March for Dad’s car. I instruct Mum: You don’t need a bag – put your bags in the boot. What are you thinking about! Bloody hell. We should be hugging. Touching – making contact – but then that would be against the law in the moment we are in. Mum dutifully shuffles stuff around and emerges from the boot with just
the Tesco bag—with all the essential things she needs for the graves. I’m not sure what ‘stuff’ she needs. And I tut again and shake my head.

We walk the less than ten minutes distance to the cemetery. Mum breathes in proper air for the first time in months as she tries to stride in front us to prove her fitness. She is unsteady and I urge her …go canny Mum – it’s not a race – the last thing we need is you in the hospital breaking one of your bones again! The mood lightens as we walk and my youngest and I laugh as we follow Mum into the cemetery through the south gate.

Today marks 71 years since Mum’s older brother died. We visit his grave first. Wee Jim originally had a stone bible with his –age and date of death inscribed. It is propped up against the new gaudy shiny black gravestone Papa picked when Nana died. Garish with its shiny black surface and bold gold writing, it offends Mum and I who would have preferred something more tasteful...

Mum starts to tell her stories… she wonders if my youngest wants to put a sweetie in the shell for wee Jim but my youngest rolls her eyes and Mum can’t find the sweeties in her bag… and she is annoyed with herself – how can she have forgotten them – and I move us on…because just a hop-skip and jump across the path from Mum's big brother’s grave lies her grandparents - Maw and Dey.

So we walk over and visit them too. Mum says Maw died younger that she is now – your Maw was only 73 when she died… My youngest points out the gravestone says Maw was 71. Mum tells us that although the gravestone says that one of her Uncles – Maw’s second son – is buried here, he was cremated and his wife kept his ashes in an urn… your Nana wanted to mark his life so she paid to have his name written on the stone…and he died young… he was only 64. My youngest points out the gravestone says he was 61. Mum is annoyed with herself and worries that we will question everything she says. I tell her to relax. Even I can’t even remember what age I’m going to be on my birthday this year. Mum says I will be 50. NO! She is wrong. I will only be 49. We laugh. But all the while I am looking at Maw’s gravestone and recollecting something I already know but keep forgetting: Maw was 49 years old – the age that I will be on my next birthday – the year that her grandson is knocked down. And I stare at the grave – noting the epitaph that reads ‘At Rest’ and I think – No… Maw might be dead and buried – but she has been anything but at rest for the past 49 years.

We move on. Mum orients herself – trying to remember the paths she used to walk as a child with her Dey - round and round and round we go – with no obvious rhyme or reason of a direction –so Mum
can locate and point out all the other family graves. And I joke – well you can tell this is our town and we belong here - it’s like One Hundred Years of Solitude, a magical-realist multi-generational tale of one family and the town they found... Marquez (1970) writes that a person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground.

And as Mum leads us to Dey’s sisters’ graves, despite the 2 metres distance we keep and the no touch rule – I smell ‘Mum’. Smell is a potent wizard (Synnot, 1993). Yes, it is, I think as I walk in the trace of Mum’s smell. Chanel No 5. Or probably more likely some cheaper dupe. Every year since I earn money I buy Mum the scent she loves for birthdays and Christmas. Perfume. Eau de toilette. Deodorant. Hair mist. Talcum Powder. Soap. Hundreds of pounds of luxury bagged and ribboned scents that Mum hoards 'for good' even though I buy it for her to use...

And – we stand – in turn now – Mum, my youngest and I - between two young women who die much younger than I am now. Mum shakes her head. So sad! Both women had children. Both women’s husbands die shortly after them. I wonder who brought their children up? Mum does not know.

Mum leads us to her paternal great-grandparents’ grave. Mum’s paternal great-grandad was killed in the pit aged 40 – it says so on a small-weathered gravestone that we can barely read that sit propped on the side of a tree next to a newer stone which – I think - somewhat bizarrely notes it was ‘Erected by the Family’. Mum remembers there is a story...

It is a proud story...

The family all put money together for the grave because the original grave was paid for by his fellow workers in the pit.

Mum cannot find her maternal great-parents’ grave although we walk round and round the area she thinks it is in. Mum says her maternal great-grandfather was killed young in the pit too. Two great-grandfathers claimed by the mine! I note this can’t have been unusual as so many gravestones evidence many young men killed in the various mines throughout the town. And young men killed in the war. Mum nods. It’s so sad!... people’s sons taken before their time... and there are so many babies too – so many young children... I’ve never noticed this before today.... I nod but I do not say to Mum – that I have walked around this cemetery over the last few years as I run – walk – exercise – think – write in my head as I research...I do not say to Mum....
Iron gates might guard each of the three separate entry points to this main cemetery. It is not the only cemetery in the town. There are a number of small redundant cemeteries scattered around where the town’s oldest dead lie - their tilting gravestone inscriptions worn-bare and weather-beaten amidst untended overgrown grass and trees in no longer visited grounds. There is a brand-new purpose-built cemetery too, where the town’s newest, most recent dead – those who have not been lucky enough to secure a plot in the leafy triple iron-gated cemetery – are buried. The new cemetery, with its regimented rows of shiny gravestones, is starkly harsh. Its single-entry point stands – ungated and unguarded – on a main transport route, leaving its buried residents exposed – with no respite from the vibrating roars of an endless stream of HGV trucks destined for the factories downtown.

When I go for a walk around the boundaries of this town where I live – the town where I was born - I like to visit the older and the newer cemeteries as I go, taking time to wander around and read the inscriptions – writing in my head – as I note the empty space where a dearly beloved wife or husband or son or daughter or mother or father is left hanging - waiting their turn for their time and death to join their loved one. I like to look at the fresh and impossibly-coloured faux flower arrangements in stone vases and the array of angel and teddy bear ornaments, and the bottles of beer and white picket fences or LED stakes that people use to mark the dead’s territory in the ground. Cemeteries reveal how much the dead are still alive in our midst…

My youngest nods dutifully as Gran walks us round. And I behave solemn. I know this is not turning out to be a fun outing for my youngest. She thinks Gran is making up stories. She is in lockdown and missing her friends. She instigated today’s outing. She thought it might be fun because she wanted to see her Gran. But I don’t think she’s enjoying the stories. I tell Mum we can come back to look for her maternal great-grandparents another day…

But Mum is on a roll, so we walk back with her to stand at my great-great grandparents grave as we get ready to leave. *Do you know…Maw’s wee boy – her firstborn - wee John - is buried in there between your great-great grandad and great-great-grandmother. I think about Maw’s wee boy being laid to rest with his grandfather. There is no mention of him on either gravestone. *No - but he’s definitely in the ground there… there was probably no money to add his name. Questioned, Mum cannot remember how long wee John lived - a few days or weeks or months….she thinks it was a few months. And then Mum launches into the story of ‘Aunt Winnie and the Curse’… directing it to my youngest as she is a new audience….yes when wee John died, your Maw’s sister came round and pointed at his crib and said… ‘aye, mind – may every bairn that you lay in there go the same way!’*
And your Dey said ‘there will be no more bairns going in that crib…’ And he took it outside and broke it up!

My youngest’s eyes are wide – shocked – this is definitely not fun. It sounds dark. Threatening. Not true. I try to take Mum’s mind back on to ‘the facts’. I wonder why – since the gravestone was clearly updated to add in my paternal great-grandmother, that Maw’s firstborn – wee John was not added if he is buried here…? I wonder already if the answer is already held in those stories that can now be told but were – what Plummer (2013) would call – unacceptable.: Maw’s wee boy was conceived out of wedlock. Why – my youngest asks - would that matter…? Because – I say – back then is not today. I wonder if wee John was ‘not wanted’, but I do not voice this aloud… but I know Mum knows what I am thinking.

And then we visit Maw and Dey again. And then Nana and wee Jim again. At least wee Jim has a gravestone with his name on it when he died. Oh yes… but there was still no money… folk in the community paid the funeral costs and the purvey…they say folk lined the streets between the church and the cemetery. My youngest squirms again. She is going to be a successful rich lawyer…. money will never be an issue for her…she’s not bothered about people from the past. And then we walk Mum back home. She waves as she heads back through the heavy iron gate next to the bins so she can avoid the corridors by slipping in through the back door fire exit she has texted Dad to open for her. We watch as Mum sanitises her hands after she closes the gate. We wave. My youngest says - that’s Gran going back into prison. And we laugh - searching for some humour.

On the way home, my youngest and I head back into the cemetery. We wander around the big graves. The ones where the people ‘with money’ – people ‘with standing’ in the community – are memorialised. We stand a moment at a big central grave at the entrance. My youngest points out it is not like the little plot Gran gave you! We both laugh properly out loud. Then we read the inscriptions at one of the large grave…. the goodness of the man – his greatness – his benevolence. And I note that the words on gravestones do not tell all of any story. Statues are being pulled down around Britain as protestors rewrite history of the past as we realise so much wealth was made in the slave trade. The past has happened – but it does not lie settled. Times change and we can look back at things very differently – and sometimes with horror.

Later that night I revisit the graves on my own. To hear the stillness. Feel the beat of Mum’s words earlier. Hear our reactions to ‘gran’s treat’ again. And I feel sad for wee John: there is nothing to
mark that he lived on this earth. And I notice for the first time yet again that Maw’s gravestone says ‘At Rest’ on the bottom mantel. And I think yet again: No. Maw is still not at rest.

July 2020: Dear Wee John

Dad is no longer shielding. Mum and Dad visit the cemetery together. Mum found my maternal great-great grandmother’s grave. She tries to direct me to it over the phone. OK – so I’m looking for a Janet… Oh no – Mum interrupts. No – it’s Margaret. How can she be called Margaret… I thought we were all called Janet! No. Your Dey refused to name your Nana after your Maw’s mother like he was supposed to and in those days it was the man’s place to register the birth and when he came back he had named your Nana after your Maw instead. Really you should have been called Margaret – after Nana – and it would have been me who was Janet after your Maw. Why did he not register the proper name? I don’t know. Was there a falling out – is that why Aunt Winnie cast the curse!!!? Mum sort of laughs – what curse! - but does not quite laugh properly – as she says that she does not know…

But over the next week, Mum remembers snippets and she tells me about them as we make the long regular daily phone calls that keep us in touch when we are not actually allowed to touch – hug – meet each other too close-in-person during the coming out of lockdown where we are still in that almost liminal space of trying to get back to normal whilst still being careful.

There are fragments of falling outs. Disinheritances. Fragments of stories that fell through the cracks emerge from wee ears that listened in.

And then one day Mum tells me she met my Uncle – her younger brother – just by chance – outside the cemetery. He likes to visit the cemetery too – to visit Maw and Dey and Nana and Papa and wee Jim. Mum tells him about showing me and my youngest where the other wee one who died – Maw’s wee boy - is buried. And he says – who is wee John? He’d never known about him.

I tell my youngest. And she is quick to jump to the conclusion – wee John never existed. Gran has made it up. It’s all in her mind.

Perhaps.
But then I remember being pregnant with my eldest. Feeling his quickening. Praying for a healthy baby. A live baby. A baby I could hold and cuddle in my arms. And I remember thinking that I’d never realised how hard it must have been for Maw to lose her firstborn until I was pregnant and could not bear to think of it. I grow up knowing wee John existed. But – apparently my brother does not – like my Uncle he does not know wee John ever lived. They grew up on the other side of the kitchen door of my childhood.

So, one Saturday afternoon in July – on a day so sunny and beautiful – far too nice to be stuck indoors in Scotland, I sit at my computer screen and I search electronic archives – birth/marriage/death certificates – census forms…. And I find wee John’s birth certificate. He did exist. And I find that Maw did indeed have a sister called ‘Winnie’….and the other women in the stories of Mum’s childhood exist – even if it is their ‘proper’ names rather than pet known names that appear on the official certificates…and I search out Maw and Dey’s marriage certificate.

I phone and tell Mum about wee John. She feels vindicated. She knew wee John lived. Yes. I tell her he was named ‘John Rose’ and he died aged 2 weeks. I give her the cause of death. I stare at the Registrar’s old-fashioned handwriting on the electronic certificates as I read them aloud to Mum. And Mum says – just 2 weeks – wee soul - but still – he was a wee human life that came into earth – people didn’t even know he existed – and oh how he would have mattered to your Maw and Dey – their wee boy…

Then Mum asks the date of Maw and Dey’s wedding. I tell her. It is not long before Maw gave birth to wee John. Mum is surprised…Oh I did not know that your Maw and Dey got married just so close to wee John’s birth. I mean I knew they had to get married. But oh Maw would have ‘shown’. Folk would have known! Mum goes quiet thinking. I imagine her at the other end of the phone and I feel the shame she feels for Maw’s ‘predicament’ through the phone line. Yes. I think. Maw would have been shamed and ashamed.

I do not tell Mum there was more until days later…. But I went further back through the ‘long line of strong women’ I come from in electronic archives. And yes – several generations back – we do all come from this town. Pithead Women. Babies born out of wedlock or married ‘just in time’. ‘Illegitimate’ – which as Goode (2019) states is a common secret – is handwritten on birth certificates. Born in shame. Babies destined to die. Because there is a pattern. Perhaps writing was right. There was something of the concept of a transgenerational transmission after all.
December 2020: I am becoming my mother

The sun shines. But it is bitter cold outside. My youngest and I walk to Lidl. We slip-and-slide in patches of the black ice. But when we reach the bottom of the hill near the river there is haar – or is it fog? Neither of us know if there is a difference. But you get used to a frosty winter haze living near a river. And it is freezing cold. We buy some last-minute Christmas food bits for Mum and we pick three cheap bunches of the most beautifully-tiny budded roses. They are perfect. I decide colours with my youngest. Pink for Maw. Cream for wee John. Yellow for Nana and wee Jim. Then we carry our shopping back up the hill.

And as my youngest goes indoors to warm up - I stay outside in the freezing cold and I grab some gardening gloves and I attack the garden with fervour. Holly. Fern. Eucalyptus. I lop huge branches off all the overgrown trees around my garden. And I stuff them in washing baskets and stick them in the boot of my car.

My youngest comes with me. It is still not yet 9am. But when we arrive at the cemetery, a car with an elderly gentlemen is already leaving. He waves in acknowledgement as I pull over to let his car past the gate. Busy here this morning I say to my youngest. That poor old soul was probably visiting his wife. My youngest thinks this is sad.

There is no main route around the cemetery and I’ve only ever walked around it so I just park up somewhere in the centre and we carry the baskets to the graves. My youngest steals my gloves as her hands are cold and she couldn’t find her own and she stands back and watches as I go to each grave and arrange the branches into centrepieces in front of them before opening the spray of roses and place them in strategic positions on top. The cold and dew and frost will keep the roses alive I tell her. She encourages me. This is unusual. She tells me it looks good. Wild. Better than the tidy bought holly wreathes at the other graves. Yes! I agree. I am unnaturally pleased with myself.

We pop home to collect the shopping we have for Mum and Dad and drive it along. Mum meets us at the fire escape. I sanitise my phone and drop it on the ground and let Mum see a picture of the graves. She is moved. Declares it ‘beautiful’. I – who have no talent and just stuff flowers in vases – have done a wonderful job. I am pleased.

Then Mum says, ‘Mind those roses won’t last though – not in this cold’. I disagree: yes, they will – the cold will keep them alive. Mum shakes her head indicating I am wrong.
Then Mum asks how my thesis is going? I tell her. And she tells me off again, ‘do you know what your problem is? You say you are writing a patchwork quilt…?’ I nod… ‘well… you think of a patchwork quilt as something beautiful and perfect like one of those fancy things people buy… well a proper patchwork quilt was just made from bits and pieces and scraps you had lying around – functional – warm – not something decorative…. Anyway, away you go home and just finish writing your thesis and then get yourself organised for Christmas!’ My youngest smirks. Then Mum tells me off again – ‘and you’re not wearing enough. You’re going to catch your death of cold… where are your gloves? Oh your hands are all scratched and raw’. My youngest smirks again. She’s wearing them. I tell Mum I got scratched with the holly and rose stems. Mum says ‘You must have more than one pair of gloves! Get yourself home and get a water bottle to heat you up’.

On the drive home I think of the roses laid at the graves Mum says will die. I remember Mum tells me that she has no recollection of being allowed in to see wee Jim dressed in his lilac suit looking like a pure wee angel ‘with not a mark on him’ which is how the story is told of wee Jim in his coffin in Maw’s home. But when Mum asks Nana just a few years before she died why she wasn’t taken in like the steady stream of visitors – family who still years later will talk about the white-blonde haired beauty of the wee boy who looked just like he was sleeping – Nana told her of course she was allowed in to see her dead brother. Of course, she must have been I think – wee Jim’s coffin was taken home to Maw and Dey’s tiny house – the house marked ‘X’ in the photo in the book Mum gave me for Christmas – it was just a room and a kitchen.

New Year’s Day 2021: Everything’s coming up roses

It is bitter cold. The UK is the grip of another wave of Covid. I decide to go for a walk to the cemetery. I slip and slide on the black ice, but the skies are blue and I am wrapped up warm so I sit on a bench at the top of the cemetery and watch people come and go as they pay New Year’s Day respects to their dead loved ones.

I am delighted to see that the roses are still somewhat alive! I am smug. Mum was wrong. I take a picture of them on my phone before I go home.

Back home, I sit in my study. I don’t write. But I put on Nana’s sheepskin mitts. I never wear these gloves outside the house for fear of losing them. They are my Nana’s hands in mine. I snuggle my fingers in the mitts. Pinder (2007) says the subtle messages of who ‘I am’ come to clothe us like a
second skin when we wear the tales that have been woven for us like well-fitting gloves: ‘I am respectable’; ‘I know how to behave myself’; ‘I am a good girl…’ ‘I am to blame.’ And I think about how in laying the annual ‘wreaths’ at the grave, I have taken on the role of being Mum. It is a cliche. I am a cliche. But then I think about the momentum in family stories. Where we can contribute and change. And it doesn’t have to just be about a coherent generative narrative propelling us towards growth and prosperity (Green, 2013). Stories contain temporality and the active process by which they are told and retold over time make them fluid evolving constructions (Ballard & Ballard, 2011; Plummer, 2013). Once a story is told it ceases to be simply just a story, instead it is a piece of history, an interpretative device (Steedman, 1986), and by exploring the ‘pastness’ of our personal lives (Tonkin, 1992) we can open up the stories we tell in our families to explain how we come to where we are in order to challenge established cultural narratives (Steedman, 1986). That the past is open to change raises questions about how we can evaluate and adjudicate between interpretations of the stories we hear and tell about past lives (Stanley, 2013): and it leaves me wondering if the solid sense of who ‘I am’ or ‘we are’ as a family has always been an ongoing subject of change just waiting to be noticed. Perhaps the fluid nature of stories allows us to embrace the opportunity for the stories we hear or tell about our ancestors to be challenged and for the routine dialogical space of family storytelling to be opened up to allow excavation work to take place, allowing space for previously omitted details to form hesitant uncannily familiar retellings that offer us a different – perhaps more realistic way for us to understand and make sense of our past in a way that honours more of the ‘truth’ of the lives of those who came before us.

We are always making sense of our lives in stories in one form or another (Clough, 2002). There is never one and only story: stories fragment, multiply and disperse, weaving and interconnecting with each other creating a vast intertextual panorama in which we dwell (Plummer, 2013). Whilst the idea of a true story in a naive sense has been widely deconstructed (Morrow, 2013), Plummer (2001) argues that stories about past lives may not be able to reach a simple real truth because they are told from different points of view, but stories have their own truth at the time of their tellings. Narrative writes us and narrative writes family, and each family has its own unique story, one that is irreplaceable and cannot be replicated (Ballard & Ballard, 2011) but sometimes the stories we are told belong to a different time and place where they were the only possible story that could be spoken in that moment and - as they are passed through the generations – seemingly dormant - they lie waiting for a different time and place where they can be challenged.

Perhaps here and now is the time and place in the textural written space of this quilt.
A Conclusion: 18th June 2021

It would be Nana’s 99th birthday if she were still alive. My youngest and I walk to the cemetery and stand amongst the early morning dew to wish Nana ‘A Happy Birthday’. Another year and she would have got a telegram from the Queen!

The birds are raucous. Pigeons are calling out thieving magpies and smaller birds are dive-bombing to evict them out of the Magic Faraway Tree. I yell – shoo – shoo - at the magpies and the crows that lurk-in-waiting. My youngest shushes me. Why – there’s no-one here to hear – it’s dawn!! The dead are here. Don’t disturb them. What! Why not? Are they going to come and tell me off! She tuts and wanders off.

And I recall the morning out running back in January when my youngest – sprinting way ahead of me – asks me when I get home if I saw the dead bird on the main road. She says it was terrible… a crow was hit by a car just ahead of her and she saw it happen and saw other birds started crowding round it and they were making a terrible noise. It upsets her. She says it was distressing. I think about the irony of the grieving crows that morning with the thieving magpies and crows this morning. Nature is raw and unpredictable as well as beautiful. And I imagine the birds circling in – around – the dead crow that morning. A member of their flock dead. Pincus and Dare note that “searching is the principal behaviour pattern evoked by loss. Children and animals search for the absent object” (1976:116). And as I stand at Nana’s grave, I think how there is something so primal – animal – impossible to language - in the words I can type – about where my writing-researching has taken me. And I think about how in my writing I have perhaps always already simply been searching...

I stare out towards the south and imagine the river down below. It will be like shimmering glass on such a beautiful still day such as today. It reminds me of those ‘shimmering boundaries’ between life – death – and all the sharded bits and pieces of life in-between...

I think about the fragility and abundance of that rainbow I tried to catch when I wrote the abstract for my first international conference paper– with so much hope under its arc…. of where writing has taken me in between…

And I think about the hopelessness escaping from Nana in her scream. Then I turn to touch the wet grass Nana lies under with my fingertips…
I remember falling into the scene here with wee Janette. And I recall now how Mum got upset at Papa’s funeral when his coffin was lowered into the ground on top of Nana’s broken body. *Oh he’s on top of your Nana now…holding her down… locking her in.* But I like to think that if Papa had ‘gone first’ then he would have been between wee Jim and Nana. And although Nana does not want to die in the end and the minister’s words might have felt empty, I like to picture Nana being happy to hug wee Jim again beyond the grave.

Mum often tells a story of how wee Jim apparently after a ‘to-do’ between Nana and Papa had said he would look after Nana when he grew up to be a big boy. *And oh how wee Jim loved his Nana and Maw so!* I imagine Maw and Nana telling this story back-and-fro to each other. I imagine Mum listening to it. I re-hear myself listen to it as a little girl. I feel the import of it hit my adult researcher body. I think of all the loss that still sits loaded in those ‘anniversary dates’ where Mum will say ‘your uncle Jim would have been however many years old today if he had lived’. I feel the void of all those many years that do not get to be lived and can only be imagined by those who loved him.

Richardson says

> the personal interactions of our childhood, reified though convenient social and cultural categories, shape our adult perspective on the world. The sense we try to make of the world as children haunts us, haunts us as adults (2005:490)

Yes. I think it does. But thinking with Cixous and being encouraged by her to explode the structured binary world of my childhood and to “play musical chairs with hierarchies” (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:10) has allowed me to see them for what they are and to reach beyond the language of my childhood into an uncertain unknown. Papa might have seemed a ‘strong man’ back then: Papa the patriarch – a strong voice that could silence the ridiculous – the feminine – the supposedly weak. But with the ‘good mother’s milk’ of Cixousian white ink (Cixous, 1976b:881) and a piece of Richardson’s crystallisation (Richardson & St Pierre, 2018) in my pocket as I have sought to sit in the reflexive liminal spaces writing called me towards, I have illuminated something of the resilience and hurt and unbearable pain that sat in the darkness of the silenced voices of the long line of strong women I come from…women who I think mourned ‘against the law’ as they kept wee Jim’s story alive in silenced mouths full of love.
My youngest shouts over to me. I’m taking too long. She is going to run home. I nod back. And as I turn to leave Nana’s grave – I whisper to Nana – oh how she would have loved living to meet my youngest and hold her in the curve of her arms. And how I wish Nana had more time to hold my eldest – who she thought was wee Jim’s namesake in her arms.

Then I wander over to Maw and Dey’s grave and I say aloud quietly to Maw that I hope she is at rest. I think she might be. I apologise to Maw for using deed poll to remove my middle names that were gifted from her just before I got married… I didn’t think of her as having been a ‘real’ person back then: she was just a person in a family story. And although I cannot prove that I can hear her answer me: I think she forgives me. And I tell Maw that even if I struggled to meet her eyes on the foreshore road because the unbearable pain was too much for me, she was not a disappointment: I failed to pick up the shards of what could not be voiced. Forster says secrets, suppression and silence were part of the fabric of life for women who had illegitimate children but because she cannot know exactly why this secrecy was so vital, she says she is robbed “of the kind of understanding I want to have” (1995:108). Wee John might not have been ‘illegitimate’, but I have felt something of the shame Maw must have felt as she waited to be wed and I think I have some understanding of how it was an integral part of the irrational curse my research has written-into-and-towards- with Cixous into the “there-not-there” (1991:3) of family secrets.

And as I wander down to visit wee John’s unnamed grave, I realise that I cannot ever really know what Maw thinks from beyond the grave, and I can only always claim the truth of what I write as being in the direction of truth, but I am almost certain Maw would be happy that wee John has been acknowledged in some way too – just like wee Jim. Not in the writing of this thesis, but through Mum’s intentions…

And as I stand at wee John’s grave, I remember Mum phones me on a sunny March afternoon earlier this year to tell me that she needed to know – for certain – that this is where wee John was buried. What if she got the story all wrong? This worried her. So she asked the cemetery groundsmen to check the records. And they did... and yes! Wee John is buried here. And another family child. A wee girl. Mum does not remember any stories about her. Neither of the children’s names are on the gravestone but Mum wants to add a plaque to acknowledge they lie here. I debate this with Mum: there are a bunch of artificial flowers left at the grave that look to have been placed there recently, so someone else (we do not know who) comes here to pay their respects. I tell Mum I’m not sure about the ethics of it all… especially since I feel it has been my research that has made her want to do this,
and I wonder if Mum might be better to put a wee plaque at Maw and Dey’s grave to acknowledge wee John…? Mum agrees, but not before saying to me that whilst she might not know who else is paying respects at the grave, I cannot tell her that she does not have a claim to be there or to tend that grave … to acknowledge her paternal grandparents – to acknowledge wee John… do you know, Mum says…your Maw never talked about wee John, but your Nana did. I think of how Nana never spoke of wee Jim but Mum kept him alive for me to hear about. There is a parallel. And standing at wee John’s grave where there is no name for him or the other wee girl who lies there, I remember Richardson who writes of her deep grief around the loss of the spoken word as she talks of wandering amongst scattered plain gravestones with no names carved on them, but none was needed

for family knew who was buried there… oral tradition passed on the history. I, who have spent a lifetime writing, mourn for the passing of oral tradition. No-one knows the names of the dead, the stories. I am crying (1997a:170).

I feel myself cry too this morning. I walk home alone. I climb the loft – and bring the blanket Nana knitted for my eldest down – touch it – search for Maw – feel through the red paragraph of my research – through the void of screaming words – to feel her touch – to touch sensual knowing in my fingertips… and the patchwork quilt is tattered-frayed-dirty but complete…. although my writing to inquire in dialogue with Cixous feels like it always only beginning.

Epilogue

5 June 2020: Red sky at night – shepherds delight

It is a spur of the moment decision… I am out on an evening walk. The sky is red. Shepherd’s delight. I know what I’ll do – I’ll set an alarm to wake early tomorrow to see the sunrise. I lay out my snowglobe as well as the wedding bible Mum and I carried on our wedding days.

6 June 2021: Dear Maw

Cixous says

when I write, in the writingness (écritvance) itself, in the material, in the course of writing, I am already in the process of shaking all this up… writing with an incessant drive for re-establishing the truth, justice (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:11).

Pelias says of writing If Truth be Told (2016) that it was simultaneously joyous and distressing. Richardson (Richardson & Lockridge, 2002) says writing about lives in writing-stories can be a sacrament as the flow of writing helps us experience connectedness to others, and we tell new stories that exceed entrenched cultural stories and confront ethical issues that are humbling and demanding.
I am sitting in the playpark above the foreshore road waiting for the certainty of the sun to rise at 4:32am. I am alone. The town is still. I rewind time. Back in 1949 Maw would probably have been awake making sure Dey had his ‘piece’ before going to the pit. The town would have been busy with miners going to their work.

I put my hand on the family bible…

Maw… Maw – I am calling your name… I am reaching out to touch you through time. Maw there are so many times when I write at my desk in the wee study up the hill, and I touch this bible lightly and I will myself to write towards the truth of you – for justice for you – my maternal great-grandmother who I never met – and who you never got to hold in your arms.

Maw it is what is left unspoken by you that overcomes and has haunted me in my research as I have written with Cixous into the “there-not-there” (1991:3) of family secrets. I think political ideals and psychic experience, as well as cultural expectations have been imprinted on my body as well as my mind… but so has the love you had to give me – the love left in the trace of the woollen layette.

And my research has been joyous and distressing and it has felt like a sacrament and it has brought me to a deeper connection with you – and the other strong women in the line – who fought hard lives so my privileged researcher fingers can type this to you today.

Calle-Grüber asks Cixous when she speaks of writing truth – justice – “the justice-justness’ of writing – is this the ‘cardiac truth’ that beats in her texts” (1997:16). And Cixous responds saying writing is wounding but she lives the scar – the story…

the wound is a strange thing: either I die, or a kind of work takes place, mysterious, that will reassemble the edges of the wound….it leaves a trace even if it hurts us. It is here that I sense things taking place (Cixous & Calle-Grüber, 1997:16)

The sun rises. The sky is red. A warning.

And I think of all the mothers left without their children in the world. And I rewind time as I stare out to the river in the distance… back to 6 June 1944 on D-Day… all those brave people who did not come back…. they were somebody’s child…somebody’s loss.
Then I pick up my snowglobe – the wee patchwork elephant… and I put it in the curve of my hand –

Maw... writing has shaken me…. writing has taken place at the site of the wound.

I leave the snowglobe in the playpark. I pick up the bible. And walk back up the hill to my home…
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