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University of Alberta

Spaces Unspoken: Memories of a Working-Class Life

by

Sally Kerry Hayward 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Arts*.

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 2000

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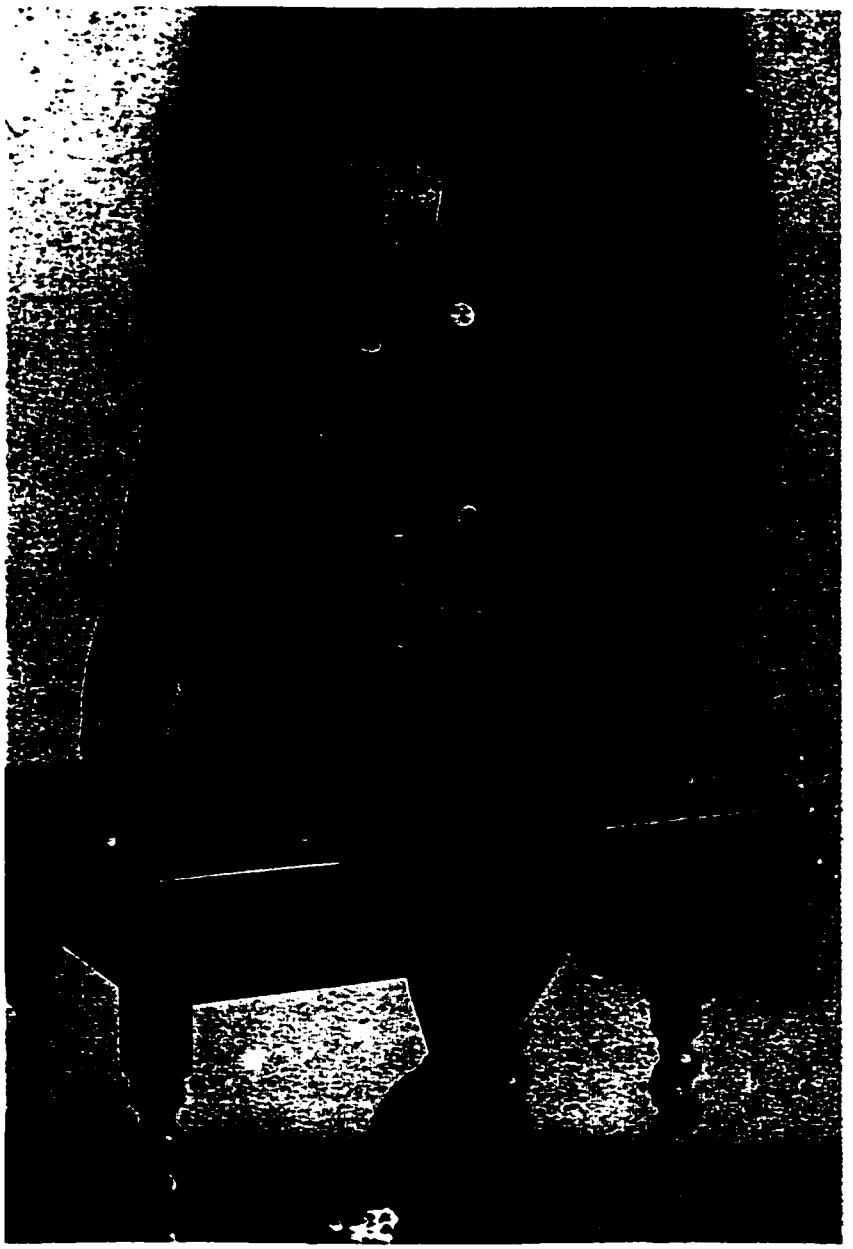
S Hayward

10401-96th Avenue
Morinville
Alberta, Canada
T8R 1C9

Date: Sept 5th 2000.

For there is no light of justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who, going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty.

Plato *Phaedrus* 126



ABSTRACT

This project explores the life of my mother, Mollie Eileen Smart. Born in 1925 in the slums of Northampton, England, she grew up to become a factory worker, a wife, and a mother. As a child I watched her as she sewed, cooked, danced, and stormed around the small rooms of our house. Writing now as an adult, I attempt in this work to understand my mother – her dreams and ambitions, her disappointments and depressions – within the specific historical and sociological context of her working-class life. In knowing her, I hope to better understand myself.

To research her life, I spent the summer of 1999 in England, traveling around her childhood neighborhood, and pouring over her journal, notebooks, photographs, and old documents. In an effort to contextualize her particular working-class experience, I have included a broad range of theoretical perspectives. By including this theory, and by intentionally fragmenting the form of the narrative, it is my hope that the reader will be able to enter into a dialogue, finding a space in which to tell her own story: a story which will add to the necessary elucidation of women's difference.

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Spaces Unspoken: Memories of a Working-Class Life* submitted by Sally Kerry Hayward in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Prof. Kristjana Gunnars

Prof. Daphne Read

Prof. Claudine Potvin

Date: 28th August, 2000.

DEDICATION

For mum, with love

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank to my supervisor, Kristjana Gunnars, for her unfailing support and encouragement throughout this process. Her insightful comments and enthusiasm for this project helped me to bring it to its final form.

Thanks also to Dr. Daphne Read for her support, encouragement, and thoughtful reflection on my work.

Finally, I have to thank my family: my children -- whose patience and understanding allowed me to see this project to completion -- and my mother, without whom there would be no story. The many hours spent with my mother in her small kitchen drinking tea and listening to her reminisce about her life, is remembered fondly. Her enthusiasm for this project, her honesty, and her willingness to share her life with me has been, and will remain, an inspiration.

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Chapter One

1a

How to begin?

Rain.

This is the first thing that comes to mind.

There is something about the rain

that reminds me of an ellipsis on a page. . . .

Three dots that indicate

a longing,

a falling,

into spaces unspoken, unknown.

A falling,

as if from nowhere

on to bodies, on to my body. . . .

The spaces hit me with

their silence.

They make me desire contact . . . the feeling of rain
on my skin. . . .

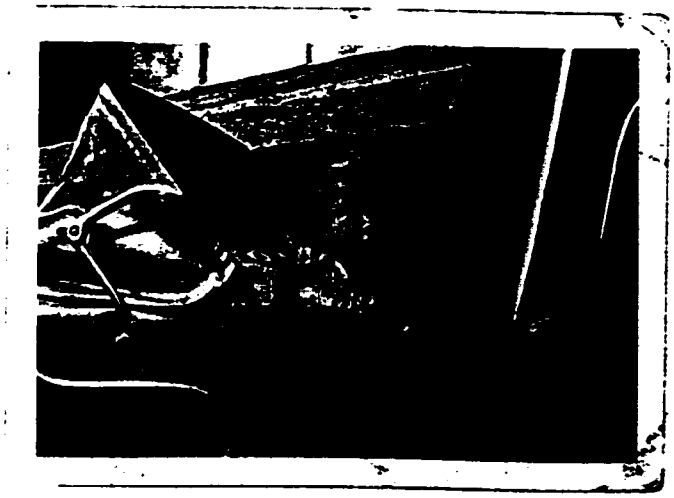
Rain,

dripping

off the walls of my resistance to this life. . . .

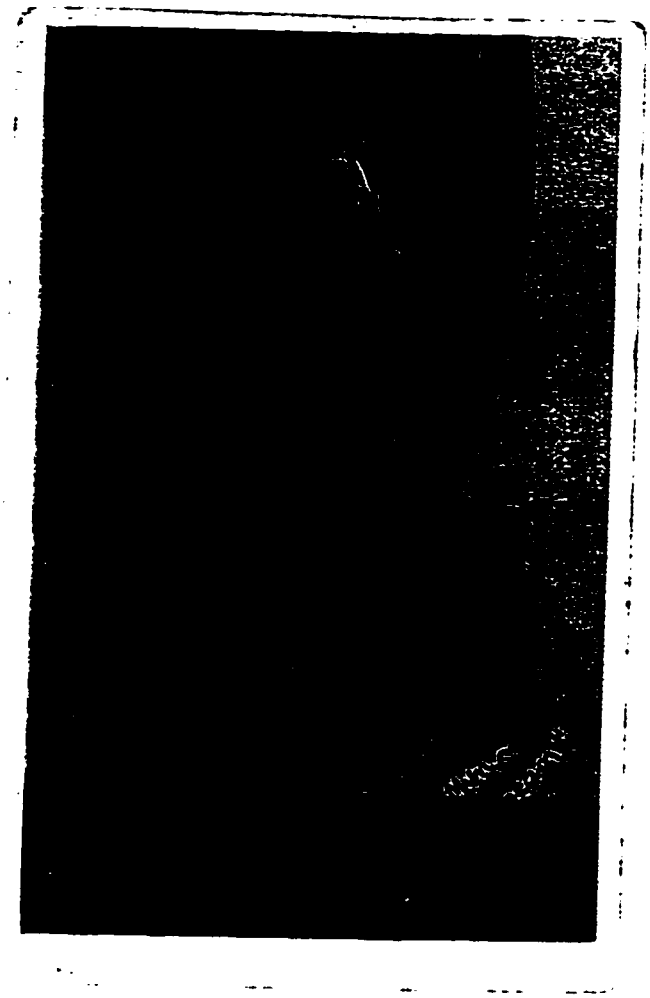
The rain is coming down in sheets, layers. I sit by the window in my house watching it fall: I notice that it is falling so heavily that it is making the delicate spring branches of the almond bush bow low to the ground. A few of the soft pink flowers lie scattered, strewn upon the sodden earth. A good two inches will accumulate today, the man on the weather station tells me. It is cold, almost freezing. A wind is blowing. The rain slashes against the window, pounds the pavement. Today, I want to stay inside where it is warm. I will not leave my comfortable house; I will not step outside the shade of its strong wooden frame. This rain will not last. In Canada the sun comes in equal measures; in England -- the place of my birth, the place where I spent my childhood, my teenage years -- the rain stays.

1c



The rain remains in my memory, a constant gray backdrop to the maze of high, brick buildings, smoke-belching factories, and row-upon-row of terraced council houses. It reminds me of how, as a child, I would sit on the stairs and stare out at the rain. I liked the way it came down in a solid wall and bounced off the pavement. I liked the way people rushed along the sidewalk, pulling their coats over their heads in an attempt to avoid the downpour. It made me feel safe somehow, secure, sitting inside and watching it. Not being a part of it.

The rain also reminds me of my mother, of how she always had her eye on the weather, ready at the first sign of rain to rush out and fetch the washing off the line. It reminds me of how each day she would struggle in the rain, her arms full of plastic shopping bags, up the long streets that wound from the factory to our house. I can remember the way she smelt when she came in the door: musty, damp, cold. It was as if the rain had penetrated her bones, her muscles, her skin, depleting them of life, warmth.



"Photography has something to do with resurrection" [1]

(Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 82)

[1] Additionally, Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, writes: "Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience (people, things, events, whatever we see – albeit differently, often inattentively – with natural vision) and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined – as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control . . ." (156).

Sitting here now in my warm house, sipping hot tea, I am thankful that this onslaught will soon pass. When you live constantly in the shadow of a rain cloud, the promise of a warm shelter, a cup of hot tea is a good inspiring thing. I am thankful for the respite. The rain, however, is relentless; like the earth, it has a way of pulling all things down -- a slow sinking, a falling to a sodden tangle of roots in black ground.

1d

It is these roots -- these working class, one might say, rain-filled roots --which I am, in my writing, struggling to understand. They are not just my roots. They are my mother's and my mother's mother's; they are female, if not feminine; they are the roots of women who did not have, as Richard Hoggart informs us, the "secret of masterful writing and speech . . . at their fingertips" (251). They are the roots of women who have, to some extent, been silenced. They speak but it comes out wrong, they argue but no one listens, they shout but no one hears. In some ways, therefore, this writing is an attempt to find the working-class woman's voice, my voice: a voice that was strangled -- stifled -- in the maze of brick-lined streets that is working-class England. In other, possibly more significant ways, this writing is an attempt to understand not only the working-class woman's way of speaking in the world, but also her way of moving physically through the world. It is an attempt to understand her body. In attempting to know and understand her, I am hoping that I can somehow free her.[2]

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[2] In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, when talking about men's writing, notes that the use of the letter "I," partly because of its grandeur and dominance and partly because of its aridity, obliterates all that falls in its path: "Nothing will grow there" (94); "In the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless mist" (93). With this in mind, I decided to denote my subjectivity in this text by using the small 'i.' My intention was to obliterate nothing. I wanted to make room for others to

But this writing also, of course, constitutes a desire to understand, know, and ultimately free myself. It reflects a personal need to be heard and seen for who and what I am, beyond my faulting, stumbling working-class speech, and beyond the self-loathing that I have for my 'grotesque' working-class body.[3]

---

find their voice alongside mine. I wanted to leave a physical marker of my desire to create, within the pages of this book, not a monologue, but a dialogue.

But I changed my mind. Taking a closer look at Virginia Woolf's work, I had to ask why she, as a woman writer, used the capital "I." When Woolf writes that, "the book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (72), she is, I think, assuming that it is a body that the woman is at least attempting to own. In trying to find, to own, to reclaim, my own voice and my own body in this writing, my use of the capital "I," constitutes an attempt not to obscure my differences, but to claim them (73).

In recording and reclaiming my "infinitely obscure" life (83), it is not my intention to obliterate the lives of others, but to insist upon the continued accumulation and 'documentation' of women's difference. It is not that I think that I can free women; but that I think they can free themselves. It is my hope that this text contains enough suggestive power that a woman might, as she reads about all my "unknown or unrecorded things" (84), begin to authentically claim her own "I." In bringing all my "buried things to light" I hope to make 'her' wonder why, indeed, she has buried her own things, hidden them from the light (86). For myself, I want, above all, to write as a woman (86). I want to find my own voice; I want to know its relationship to my body, to the 'things' in my life. And so, writing here "in the common sitting-room of [my] respectable house" (65), I begin. Again.

[3] Living, as I do, in a culture that values appearance – ideal representations of feminine beauty and social identity – my own identity, triply constructed as female, middle-aged, and working class, presupposes a body that is conceived as grotesque. In as much as it is grotesque, it is also an abject, "loathsome" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 2) body, a "jettisoned object . . . radically excluded" (2), banished, by nature of its abjectness, from the bourgeois cultural norm. As Kristeva puts it, this abjection that I feel (and which I am sure my mother feels) is a "brutish suffering that 'I' puts up with, sublime and devastated, for "I" deposits it to the father's account

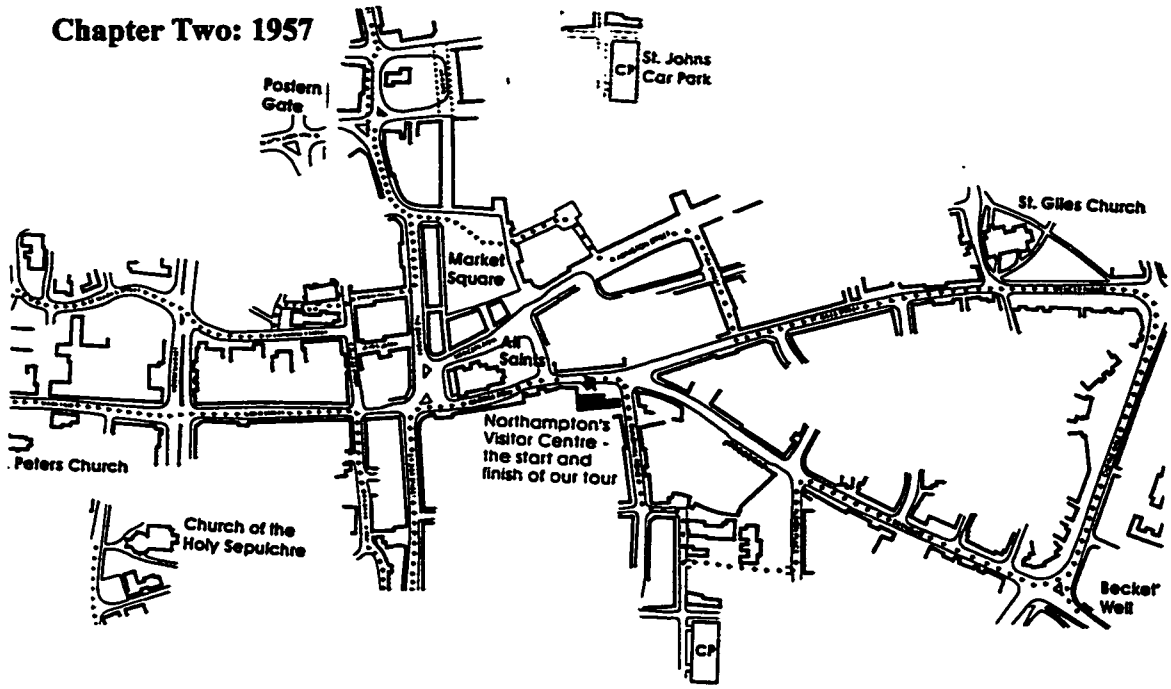
Concomitant with a desire to know my body, my physical presence, there is a desire to know exactly who the "I" is who signifies Sally Hayward, née Smart. According to Jacques Lacan, however, I delude myself when I believe that I can ever know who "I" am. The Saussurian bar, the elision which separates the "I" from the representation, the body of Sally Hayward, signifies not my presence, but my absence, my lack of being (164). My desire to know myself amounts to "no other than a derangement of instinct than that of being caught in the rails eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else – of metonymy" (167). My desire for myself, which is always displaced and deferred, is nothing more than a reaching out, an endless search for an endlessly unsatisfactory object. I live, I exist in a state of restless impermanence.

[verse au père – père-version]: I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other" (2).

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, it was during the Renaissance that the grotesque body became an abject body. Up until this point in time the grotesque body, associated with "copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment" (251), was symbolic of the changing seasons and, as such, it was valued. Associated with death and rebirth, the grotesque body was positively thought of in terms of transformation, "growth and becoming"(24). It was the "ever unfinished, ever creating body" (24): a body which exceeded its own limits, a body which transgressed boundaries and which stood on the threshold of what is known and what is not known. During the Renaissance, however, Bakhtin informs us that the grotesque body became "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classical aesthetics'" (25). Juxtaposed against the classical body, which is conceived as a "ready-made, completed being" (25), calm and stable, finished, "cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25), the grotesque body becomes a degraded, abject body, associated only with those bodies that are excluded from the classical (read, bourgeois) norm.

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, I do not recognize that it is this very abjection that is capable of challenging its master (2), and which offers me a "propitious place for communication . . . the point where the scales are tipped towards pure spirituality" (Kristeva *Powers of Horror* 127): towards a new conception of what it means to be feminine and beautiful. Practicably (although not theoretically), my desire to know myself beyond my 'grotesque' body – what Mary Russo, drawing on Mikhail Bahktin, calls the "open, protruding, extended, secreting body," a body that is potentially transgressive, capable of disturbing the existing social structures and undermining or redeploying conventional representations of women – is presupposed by my desire for the 'classical body': a body which is "monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism" (325). It is this body, this classical body, which possesses power, authority, and recognition in the society in which I live.

Chapter Two: 1957



I was born in Northampton, a large town in the center of England that is renowned for its oak trees, its tanning, shoe factories, and puritan mindset. We lived in a relatively new council housing estate, built to accommodate the post World-War II baby boomers. The year was 1957. In that year, Britain exploded her first H-bomb, Fidel Castro declared war on the dictatorial regime of President Batista, and the Soviets sent a dog into space. In that year my mum and dad were busy trying to make ends meet. Both of them worked in the local shoe factories. Dad was saving up to buy a car; mum was hoping to be able to buy a 'Coney coat': a coat made out of rabbit skins.[4]

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[4] Geoff Dyer, in his analysis of Britain in the 1950's, points out that the welfare state, established by the labor government in the 1940's, relieved much of the poverty and hard-living conditions of the working class, but it also established the basis for a "regeneration of capitalism and its expansion and invasion into hitherto undreamt of areas of peoples' lives" (4). When hunger was no longer an issue, the stage was set for "galloping consumption and the era of organized greed" (Kitchen qtd in Dyer 4). As a child, I watched my parents become part of this new consumer-driven impulse to acquire "things," to revel in the illusion that we too, as working-class people, could have it all. Because we were slightly better off than most people on the street (given that my dad had a staff position at the factory) we could boast that we were one of the first families in our neighborhood to buy – on hire purchase – a black-and-white television, a spin-dryer washing machine, a vacuum cleaner, a phone, a car. In those years, I often caught dad saying that if it wasn't for the Tories (who came to power in 1951 and worked only, as everyone knew, to make life better for the "Toffs"), life would be very good. Very good indeed.

"The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger, Ways of Seeing 8).

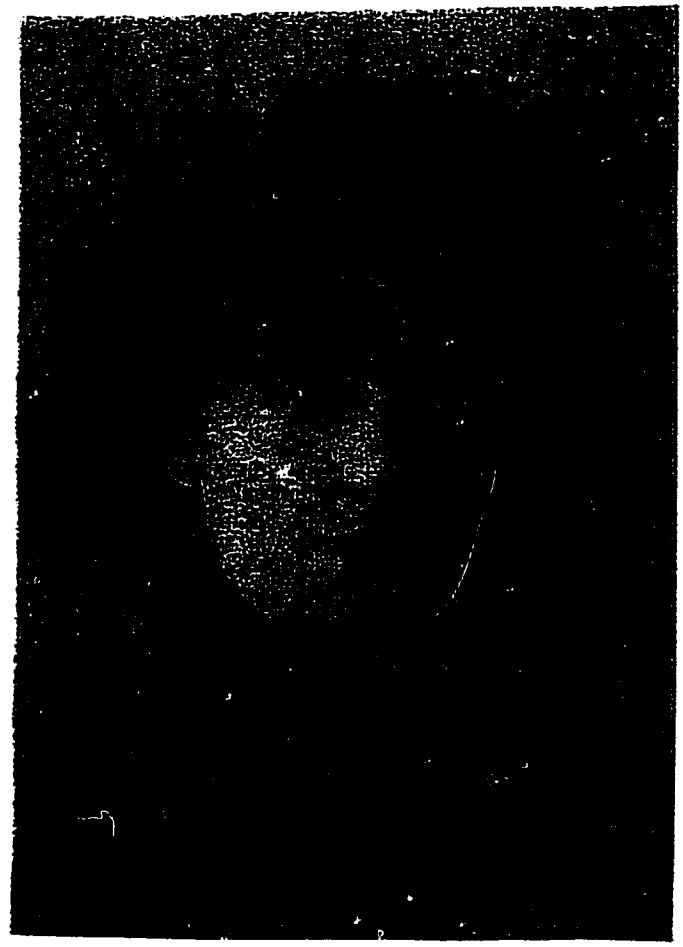
My two older sisters were already as young teenagers, embracing *The New Look.* In an old photograph I can see Pat, who was always more conservative, wearing a dress that had a longer fuller skirt, cut high at the neck, brown in color; Maureen, the eldest and the most adventurous, was wearing a brighter, more flowery version with shoestring straps and a big bow at the back. As she listened to Elvis Presley on the radio singing "Love me Tender" Maureen dreamed of going to Australia. Later, when she was eighteen, she went there on a scheme that got her there for ten pounds. My other sister, Toni, who was only six years older than me, was still busy playing in the streets, going to the Saturday matinee, riding around the streets on her roller skates. After I was born, she had a real live doll to play with. There are black and white photos of Toni and me on our front lawn. In one of them we are sitting on a white baby blanket. She is sitting behind me waiting to catch me if I fall over

"It has become impressive, mysterious, because of its market value" (Berger, Ways of Seeing 23)

backwards. She has dark hair, dark eyes. She looks Chinese. I have hair that is as white as snow, bulging red cheeks and curious eyes. I have been positioned for the photo: I am leaning into the camera, my body has been propped forwards, my chubby legs spread into a V-shape for balance. My mum is probably taking the photo; it is probably her I am leaning towards. Now, looking at the photo, I am struck by my mother's absence. By my desire for her, then as now.

"It is authentic and therefore it is beautiful"

(Berger, <u>Ways of Seeing</u> 21).



If I like the photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents. Lost in the depths of the Winter Garden, my mother's face is vague, faded. In a first impulse, I exclaimed: "There she is! She's really there! At last, there she is!" Now I claim to know – and to be able to say adequately – why, in what she consists. I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation; I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth (and sometimes, naively, I confide this task to a laboratory). I believe that by enlarging the detail "in series" (each shot engendering smaller details than at the preceding stage), I will finally reach my mother's very being. What Marey and Muybridge have done as *operators* I myself want to do as a *spectator*: I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I *retard*, in order to have time to *know* at last. (Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* 99)

Images.

I have an image of my mother. It is not a photograph. It is an image, a romantic image that I have created from what she has told me about her youth and from what I believe I know about her life. In this image she is a teenager, not quite sixteen. She is standing on the street corner under a lamppost on a dark, foggy night. The strange, wavering gaslight creates a gray, silver aura around her. It makes her look mysterious, ghostly almost. She is clutching the lamppost with one hand, leaning out and reaching into thin air with the other. As if in slow motion, she swings around and around. She has the poise, the graceful ease of a dancer. She is laughing, her skin a perfect rosy blush, her eyes big and brown, her hair a mass of soft, auburn waves around her face. She is wearing a pencil skirt, dark in color, a white blouse. Beyond the circle of light, dark shadowy faces crowd around to see her; some stay, some wander off into the night. I wonder if my father's face -- young, handsome, idealistic -- is out there? In my imagination, the first soft notes of *Lilli Marlene* echo through the gray, muted light:[5]

underneath the lamplight- by the barrackgate
Darling I remember the way you used
to used-
Twas there you whispered fondly
That- you loved me, you'd always be
My Lilli of the lamplight-
My own Lilli Marlene.

[5] Mum wrote these words and, looking at them now, I often think that her writing, like her life, looks forced, strained, deformed in some way. Certainly, writing doesn't come easy for her, and yet she is meticulous about what she puts on paper. I notice a certain reverence (the reverence of the poorly-educated?) for the written word as she crouches over the table, her hand carefully forming each letter, word. By her side is her dictionary (a pocket Oxford); she uses it for everything. She wants to get the words right, she says. It is important to her.

I found these words last summer when I was in England. They had been scribbled in a notebook that my mother had given me to read. I took it to her and asked her to sing the song for me. I told her that the words were not enough; I had to hear her sing them. Her voice, soft and wavering, struggled to reach the high notes. She laughed, a little embarrassed, as people are when they reveal their weaknesses. Fiddling with rings that had become too tight around her swollen, arthritic fingers, she reminisced, "I love that song. I always have." I thought it must remind her of the old times, her youth. She told me that when she was a teenager she sang this song as she danced under the light of the gas lamp on deserted street corners. She said she would imagine that there was, under the gray, dim, luminous circle of light, a partner, a Fred Astaire look-alike, and an audience that cheered her on as she spun and leaped to the music of an imaginary band. She and some of the other kids on the street used to perform for each other under these gas lamps. It was their stage. It was here that they used to dream of better, bigger things.[6]

* * *

My mother, now in her seventies, still dreams of bigger and better things. Only now she dreams of winning the lottery. She says that when her number comes up she will get a face-lift, just her eyes and her chin. She wants to travel -- see Egypt -- and she

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[6] According to Walter Benjamin, the advent of technology, and specifically the advent of electricity which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth-century, significantly contributed to what he called 'a crisis in perception.' Juxtaposing the rhythm of the lamplighters to the "brutal shock caused by the spectacle of entire cities suddenly being illuminated by electric light" ("The Flâneur" 51), Benjamin intimates that this 'new perception,' involves a barrage of shocks that the individual must always be on guard against. On the one hand modern man is anxious for all that technology and the modern experience can offer him and, on the other hand, he is anxious that, in one distracted, crisis-filled moment, it might all be swept away. As a young woman, my mum's internal conflict, which involved desiring all that life could offer her, while fearing, at the same time, that she might not be worthy of actually getting it, typified this crisis. Fearing the brutal shock of failure, of *exposure* of her failure, she decided, like so many others, not to try. Like many women, she succumbed to what Benjamin calls the "latest narcotic for those abandoned" (55): she took up shopping, not actually buying, but simply "roaming through the labyrinth of merchandise" (55) dreaming of what she might, one day, possess. Herself?

wants to do a Princess Diana thing -- dance on stage with Wayne Sleep. "I'll show 'em who can dance," she tells me. And I know that if she could she would. She still likes to look good (sexy); she still likes to perform. Even now, in my sister's pub, if she is having a good day, if her emphysema isn't too bad, she will dance well into the night with anyone who will push and pull her about to the beat of the music. Sometimes, if it is very crowded, she will climb up on to the nearest table and dance there, her feet neatly sidestepping the jugs of beer as she does her imitation of an Irish jig. She likes being noticed, she likes the spotlight, and wants to be the star attraction. It is what she lives for. Her longing for life cannot be quenched. It pops up at unexpected times. I feel it too, in a different way. It surprises us: the simple words of a simple song, an image on a dark, gray night.

In Ecrits, Jacques Lacan talks about desire. He says that as much as desire seeks to recover one's origins, it is prevented from doing so by a primary separation or loss. It is this lost part of us which phantasy seeks to reconstruct (322). In imagining my mother in this way, I realize that it is really my desire that creates the fantasy. What is beyond my desire to know, to really see my mother is my desire to know and really see myself. But it is hard to see myself beyond the fictions that I am busily creating for my mother.

The Sound of Music

When I was a child I, too, loved to dance. I would dress up in my mother's clothes; clatter around in her too large shoes, and dream of dancing alongside my mother on the center stage. When I was six, my sister took me to see *The Sound of Music*. Julie Andrews fascinated me. I wanted to be like her, I wanted to speak like her, dance like her, sing like her. I fell in love with her voice: her carefully modulated tones, its strength, its clearness and its dignity. I now think that I fell in love with her upper-class Englishness, something that was completely foreign to me. But I didn't know this as a six year old; I only knew that I idolized Julie Andrews, and I loved the movie so much that my sister bought me the L.P soundtrack. I played it over and over again, singing along until I had convinced myself that I was as good, if not better than my idol.

Suing

On Dec. 14 in Manhattan, singer-actress **Julie Andrews**, 64, filed a malpractice lawsuit against **Drs. Scott M. Kessler** and **Jeffrey D. Libin**, alleging that she was not informed that a 1997 operation to remove noncancerous nodules in her throat carried the risk of permanent hoarseness and "irreversible loss of vocal quality." Neither doctor has commented.[7]

Mum remembers watching me twirling around our tiny front room, bellowing out at the top of my voice, "How do you solve a problem like Maria" or, better yet, "The hills are alight with the sound of music," and she laughed. Sometimes she said she laughed so hard that she had to leave the room. But I was oblivious; I was so confident in

[7] Taken from the January 1st, 2000 issue of *People Magazine*.

my ability to sing just like Julie Andrews that I decided to audition for the school choir. I had no doubts in my mind that I would be one of the chosen few selected by Mrs. Mason, our home room teacher, to sing for the school.

* * *

One-Way Street:

This street is named Mrs. Mason Street, after she who directed my steps one way.

My elementary school was only a five minute walk from my house and, on the morning of the audition, as I walked out of our front door, turned right through a narrow one-way street which led out on to St. David's road where my school was, I remember that I was tense with excitement.

Lengthy meditation, as I feel still the swish of my skirt, the turn of a supple ankle, the euphoria of the anesthetized patient awaiting surgical intervention.[8]

St. David's Road:

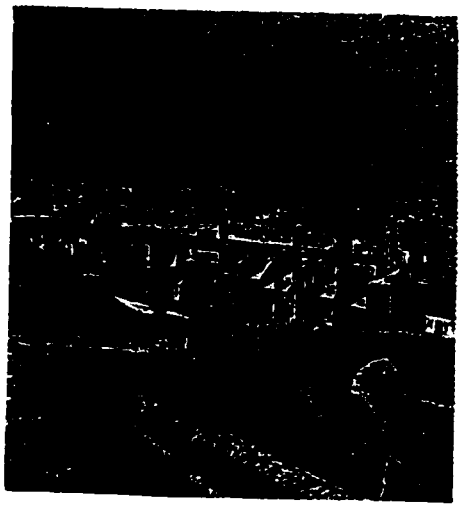
There is not a tree on this street. Just two long lines of redbrick houses facing one another. It is one of the rougher streets in the neighborhood. Broken down cars sit jacked up on the sides of the road and engines, bikes, and garbage litter many of the tiny gardens. As I walked down the street a woman, screaming at her kids to 'bloody well get

[8] This section, *One-Way Street*, was inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin. In particular, "Polyclinic" in *One-Way Street* and his essay, *Naples* resonated with what I wanted to say. I have attempted to replicate Benjamin's portrayal of the cold, emotionally sterile and, in my case, working-class, urban experience. In particular, I want to emphasize the effects of this experience on the young, developing child.

off to school,' leaned out of an upstairs window and hung some washing out to dry. From another house, the Beatles singing "It's been a hard day's night" hurried me on my way.

Interpenetration of inside and outside, and me, walking alone, advertising nothing.

Factory:



The school itself was built sometime in the Victorian era. It had an eight-feet high wall around it and a concrete playground. The teachers were strict. Caning the students was a common practice. I remember being thankful that I was a girl because the boys got caned more than the girls. There was also a nurse at this school, a large, heavy-set woman who routinely checked our teeth for cavities and our hair for nits. She organized the morning bottle of milk that we had to drink whether we wanted it or not. At recess and lunch she also did bathroom duty. On walking in to the bathroom, we had to tell her if we wanted to do a number one or a number two. If it was a number one we got one square of paper, if it was a number two, we got two squares. That was the way things were.

I take out my tool, I make an incision, I cut, I add a word, a clause, a final period. I screen nothing. Benjamin doesn't question whether or not the fall or the bourgeoisie will or will not occur. It is a given (<u>One-Way Street</u> 84).

Clocking-In Station:

On the morning of the audition we played marbles at recess. Recently, we had been playing *London Bridge is Falling Down*: a game where two of us would form a bridge while the rest of the girls circled around, singing the song and skipping through the bridge as they went. On 'my fair lady' we would lower our arms and try to catch them, and the girl who was caught would then become part of the bridge. No one wanted to be the bridge. I think the idea of escaping was just too appealing. This morning, though, I played marbles, and I won. I took it as a sign that I would be chosen to sing in the choir.

"The concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things 'just keep on going' is the catastrophe. . . . Hell is not something that lies ahead of us, but this very life, here and now" (Benjamin N9a,1 64).

The Closing Room:

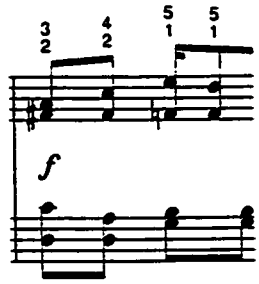
We auditioned in our classroom. In those days the classrooms were different. The floor sloped up at an angle from the front of the room so that when we sat at the wooden desks, our inkpots and blotters in hand, we looked down on the teacher. This never negated her imposing presence. Each morning our teacher, Mrs. Mason, made us recite our times tables six times over. It was written across the top of the blackboard and Mrs. Mason would point to it with her baton as we chanted along. If someone made a mistake she would stop us by slapping her baton down loudly on her desk, and we had to do it one more time. Sometimes we did it eight or nine times. I knew my timetables very well, in

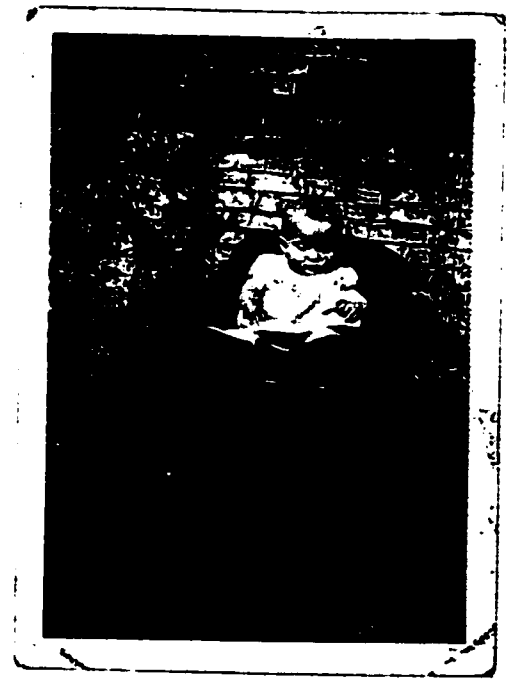
spite of how much I hated math.

I fetishized Mrs. Mason's baton. I thought that if I could only own, or even hold, that baton, I would possess all the things I desired. I would possess myself. I didn't know then that this baton represented the ability of the bourgeoisie to keep me enthralled, reaching for something that was far beyond my working-class reach.

"In studying this period, so close and yet so distant, I see myself as a surgeon operating with a local anesthetic; I work in areas which are numb, dead, and yet the patient is alive and can still talk" (Morand, qtd in Benjamin <u>One-Way Street</u> 50)

The Skiving Machine:





On the day they were to choose the school choir, there must have been about fifty of us all standing cramped behind our desks, singing at the tops of our voices, trying to create an impression. Today, Mrs. Mason didn't stay at the front of the classroom. Today, she walked up and down the aisles, her head cocked to one side, her forehead creased, as she strained to listen to each of our voices. She carried a baton and, every once in a while, she tapped someone on the shoulder with it and ordered them to leave the room. As this teacher got closer to me, I sang louder, and louder. I wanted her to hear me,

to stop everyone and tell all the others what a good singer I was. I wanted her to tell everyone that I was a star. When the baton slammed down on my desk, I didn't get it. I turned around. Surely, she must be looking at the person behind me. But her eyes were boring into my face; her lips were twitching with rage as she pronounced my name. Without any explanation, she grabbed me by the collar and threw me down the stairs and out of the room.

I guess I sang so badly that she thought I was doing it on purpose. That I was trying to destroy her choir. The headmaster thought so too. Despite my protests of innocence, my sobs and my 'I didn't mean to sirs', he slapped me three times across the palm of my hand with his ruler. And then he told the nurse -- a woman who had muscles bigger than his own -- to wash my mouth out with soap. It would teach me humility, he said, not to contradict him when he was talking. The nurse told me that she was doing this -- washing my mouth out with soap -- because my singing was like a bad swear word. It was something I had to get washed out of me.

I HAVE A DISABLED SON. HIS NAME IS JORDAN AND HE IS THIRTEEN YEARS OLD. HE IS IN GRADE SEVEN; HE HAS A LEARNING DISABILITY. VERBALLY HE IS COMPARABLE TO CHILDREN OF HIS OWN AGE, BUT WHEN IT

It worked. I didn't sing again in public for a good long while -- twenty years at least. I mimed at school: in music class, and in the school assembly. And I mimed the day I *got married, standing right there under the nose of the*

In the Psychic Life of Power, Judith Butler informs us that our subjectivity is formed by our subjection to the 'law' (what Foucault calls the

comes to reading he is functioning at a grade one level. This year in school the teacher sat him at the back of the class with another student who was functioning socially and verbally at a much lower level. Jordan likes to talk; he is curious, intelligent, he asks questions. He felt isolated at the back of the class, frustrated that he couldn't talk to the boy that he was forced to sit with. The other students called Jordan stupid. The teacher told Jordan that he was the closest in mental ability to the other student, so he had to stay there. At the back, where the stupids sat.

vicar. In fact, I mimed a good way through my marriage, and through my life in general, only pretending to sing and enjoy myself. But it is hard <u>not</u> to mime, to pretend (that necessitates a certain knowledge of yourself). It is hard to sing when you are told that you can't, or shouldn't. It is difficult, sometimes, to know yourself apart from what other people say and think about you. We forget our dreams in the effort to be what we are not.

'regulatory regime'). Our every desire is determined, curbed, prohibited, foreclosed even, not only by patriarchal structures, but by the specificity of our history. I was formed by the language and culture of my working-class, English heritage. I re-evaluate and regulate my desires in terms of these cultural prohibitions. I berate myself for desiring, but in sacrificing my desires, I can't help but feel a certain sense of loss. I am, as Butler says, "constituted through a certain kind of preemptive loss" (23).

I am destined to remain trapped in the cycle of desire and self-berateement as I endlessly pursue that which I desire but can never find: myself.

Disillusionment:

"They survey, like men, their own femininity" (Berger, Ways of Seeing 63)

Too soon for my mother the imaginary band was replaced by the constant drone of industrial machines, the dancing replaced by the repetitive press, release, press, release of the foot treadle of the machine she used to sew the souls onto other people's dancing shoes. Life, for her, was a narrowing down of possibilities. Her dreams were lived out, not on the stage, but in the small spaces, the small rooms of her life: her mother's small drawing room, my sister's pub, our kitchen.

I remember watching her as a kid. Although tired and worn out much of the time, a piece of good music on a Sunday afternoon was almost guaranteed to send her jigging across our front room, deftly spinning and twirling around the furniture, scooping me up in her arms as she went. She said that music and dancing were the only things that could get her going. She had a natural rhythm. Sometimes, when things were quieter, when the rain drizzled relentlessly down the walls of our house, beat on our windowpanes, my mother taught me how to dance under the glare of a single electric light bulb. At these times, the small table in our already crowded kitchen would be moved back to clear a space for her; the radio would be switched on and shoes would be carelessly tossed to the side. Sometimes I would sit and watch her, listening intently as she jigged around the room showing me the steps and telling me how, in the war days before she met my dad

and had us kids, she jived. She told me how she could fly between a man's legs, at his side, and over his shoulder as swiftly and lightly as a bird. At other times, she would grab me and, pulling me out into the small space of our linoed kitchen floor, swing and twirl me around, enthusiastically pushing and pulling me back and forth to a scratchy rendition of the Glen Miller band or Joe Loss singing "In the Mood." She told me that if it were not for us, her children, she would have made something of her life. She would have been a dancer. It had been her dream.[9]

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[9] Unlike my mother, I refuse to see life as simply a narrowing down of possibilities, an enclosure of potential into a small, frustrated room. It is more, so much more than that. With each closing there is also an opening. I went from dancing to singing to writing. I like to think that I went from the outside in. The desire to make music is still there, only now I try to make my words dance and sing. I try to make them carry the weight of my voice as I struggle, like my mother, to reach the high notes. I try to make them carry the weight of my body -- my skeleton, my muscles, my unwanted fat -- as my pen slides and jiggles, pauses and leaps across the page. I am not always, not often, successful. It is a hard medium in which to work. Every letter, every word, every part of the sentence must do its work, know its steps. It is a difficult, heavy thing.

In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke writes that words are "sheer emptiness, as compared with the substance of the things they name" (5,6). The problem is, then, how to make words carry not just abstract, analyzable meaning, but the substance of things? How do I make these words, these sentences, do more than to symbolize the working-class woman's experience? How do I make this writing embody that experience, become it? How do I make each syllable, each word, each space within and between the words paint not only a picture of the house of my youth, but penetrate inside of it. How do I allow the reader to see and feel the texture of the mortar that binds each individual brick? How do I make the reader see the bodies inside: the father, the mother, the daughter? See them walking around the small rooms, the narrow corridors of the house? How do I take them inside the experience of each individual character, let them see the passiveness of the father as he sits smoking his pipe and watching the telly; the fury of the mother as she slams pots and pans together, rushing around glaring at her husband, expecting him to know, to understand that she is tired? Mad that he refuses to even acknowledge her? The daughter, the small child, caught between the walls of hate and indifference, trying to attract her father's attention by telling him over and over again that she loves him, groping and clinging to the skirt of her mother, attempting in some small way to hold her fixed?

Identity Politics:

My name is Sally Hayward, nee Sally Smart, Sally Kerry Smart. I am female, if not feminine, white (pink?). I am forty-two years old. I was born in Britain, but I have lived in Canada for the past twenty, no nineteen years. I am British and I am Canadian. I am working class and my rise to the middle classes leaves this fact undisputed. I am heterosexual, which I think means that I like men and I hate them. Similar to Virginia Woolf, I think I like women more than I like men. I may be lesbian. My kids think I am straighter than straight. I am twice divorced, but I have only been married once. I am nobody's wife, but I am the mother, a single parent, of four children: three boys and one girl. This fact about my life is true – at least from my perspective.

Only some of my children are not children any more. Kieran, my oldest son, is twenty while Dani is seventeen. They are both over six-feet tall, both of above average intelligence. Jordan is thirteen; he has cerebral palsy. He is disabled and he is not disabled. It all depends which way you look at it. Alia, my daughter from my second relationship, is ten. She likes to sing and dance; she dances all over the house. My mum says that Alia is a drama queen. A numerologist that I once went to see told me that she is destined to be a healer.

Dreams

According to Freud, the unconscious mind, the creator of dreams, is connected to the conscious mind by an inoperative logic. Dreams are, he says, "the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious" (60); in knowing our unconscious minds we can know and understand our real desires, our fears; we can leave insanity behind and claim complete health.

I remember that I first dreamt of Canada not in the English rain, but in the English snow. It doesn't snow much in England. Not like it does in Canada. In England, there are no three-foot high snow banks marking the edge of your driveway. At best there is only a sprinkling, a slow falling that everyone hopes will come around the third week in December so that everyone can say, in true Bing Crosby fashion, that it is a white Christmas. This particular year, however, when I was around six years old, big white flakes piled one on top of each other until our whole garden, the whole street, was covered in smooth hills and crisp, white mounds. The snow hung on trees -- big white blobs that weighed the branches down -- and sat heavily, almost lazily, on rooftops. It hung over the edge of these rooftops making the red-brick walls appear brighter, capped as they were with a head of sparkling white instead of the usual gray.

That year my sister Toni and I rolled snowballs and shaped them into two huge ominous looking snowmen that stood, with their carrot noses and coal eyes, outside our house. I remember thinking that there was something eerie about them. Something that spoke of another world, a world beyond ours, a world we couldn't know. I remember that I got hot ache so bad rolling those snowmen that later, sitting by the coal fire in our front room with my socks off and rubbing my feet with equally frozen hands, I cried and

cried. My sister, who was six years older than me and much tougher, laughed at my pain. She told me that if I was stupid enough to roll snowballs with no gloves on, then I deserved to be in pain. It never occurred to me that I would need to protect myself. Keep my hands warm.

In my dream I am well wrapped, furs adorn my body and my head. On my hands, large leather gloves make my arms look longer than they really are. I am warm; I am not suffering, no ominous snowmen stand barring my entrance or my exit. In my dream I am standing in an open field looking down snow-covered railway tracks towards a small cluster of houses. Home? There is a sense of sadness, a longing, a yearning to go there. But I don't. I step off the tracks and walk off into the bush, trekking slowly and deliberately through the knee-deep snow. A big sandy colored dog -- much like my own only bigger -- bounds by my side. Watching us from some nearby trees a bear prowls. I am not afraid. I am carrying a gun. I keep walking. I tell mum about it when I wake up. I also tell her that when I grow up I am going to live in Canada.

"You're barmy," she says. "What d'yer wanna go there for anyway? It's freezing there, nothing but snow, and mountains and ice and all that stuff."

I tell her I really don't want to go there. I tell her that I just know that I will. Freud would say that a belief that dreams can predict your future is a typical belief of the "lower strata" (61), "the common people" (102). Maybe it is true; I certainly believed that my dream was prophetic. My dream, however, was pleasing in that it spoke to me of escape: escape from the gray streets, the brick walls, and the paths that led to the smoke-belching factories. For as long as I can remember, probably from the time when I came to think of myself as one of the 'lower strata,' 'the common people,' I wanted out, away from those streets. Maybe, as a child, this desire manifested itself in my dreams, in my desire to fantasize and embrace another world, another existence so unlike my own.

Later, mum said it wasn't a country but a man that I needed. She said that a good man who would work would, of course, solve all my problems. My dad agreed. He thought I was getting above myself, too big for my own boots. Neither of them could see that I didn't want to spend my whole life slaving on a factory floor. When I was younger, the snow, the open spaces, the mountains, even the bears, spoke to me of freedom; they spoke to me of release from the chains of my working-class background. Now, looking back, I can see that it was not so much Canada that compelled me, but the idea of being free from the oppressive, narrow, dark, and muddy streets, being free from the winding red-brick walls, free from a people that cannot see beyond this wall or the next one. Canada, with its wide-open fields and possibilities, with its beasts and its snow, was an exciting alternative.

"I always feel . . . that . . . color is a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, color is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses)" Barthes, Camera Lucida 81.

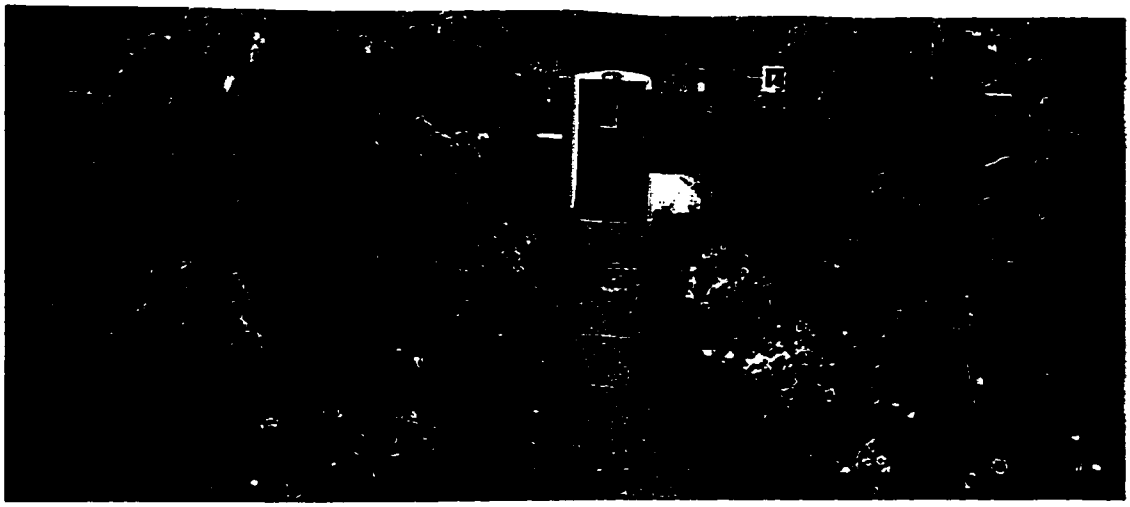
Chapter Three:

England.

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject norobject but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.

Barthes, Camera Lucida 13-14

Last summer, I took my own daughter to England. My boys, Kieran, Dani, and Jordan were spending the summer with their father in Ontario, camping. I went to visit my family, my mum and my three sisters; I went to listen to their stories. I wanted to understand my mum, to feel the forces that had shaped her life, made her what she is: the good and the bad. I wanted to connect, "only connect" as E. M. Forster would say. And I wanted to write about it.



On the plane, I am eager. My notepad is out. This is how eager I am. I take notes about the way I am feeling. I write that I am anxious, excited; I write that Aila, my daughter, is nervous. She is only nine and this is a big trip for her. England isn't her home, she is returning to nothing that she knows or remembers. Canada is her home. I try to comfort her, assure her that she is going to have fun, that she is going to spend time with her grandmother, her cousins, and her aunts. She can't relate because she can't remember most of them. The last time we were in England she was only two years old -- little more than a baby. To take her mind off it, as we circle around in the gray clouds waiting to land, I show her London. It looks like a well-used Lego town from this distance: dirty and gray. The bits don't seem to fit together right. They look like they have been glued too solidly into place at the wrong spot, long lines of bricks that

intrude into spaces where they are not wanted. "There's Big Ben" I tell my daughter, pointing through the drizzling rain, through wall after wall of buildings below us. "There it is. Look the tall one over there." She sees it; she is pleased with herself. I confess to her that I always have Big Ben in mind whenever I read *Hickory Dickory Dock*. I tell her that it makes me laugh to think of such a tiny mouse running up such a big clock, just to get struck on the head and fall back down again. My version of Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the hill time and time again. I wonder if that isn't what I am doing, rolling my boulder up a hill, the top of which I will never be able to reach. I wonder if it is a hill worth climbing, if the story is worth being told. Will it be interesting enough? Will I be able to tell it? "All that a story is," Kristjana Gunnars writes, "is a way of looking at things" (*The Prowler* 90). We start our final descent. Somewhere down there, I tell my daughter, somewhere in that rain, in that maze of streets, grandma is waiting to take us home.

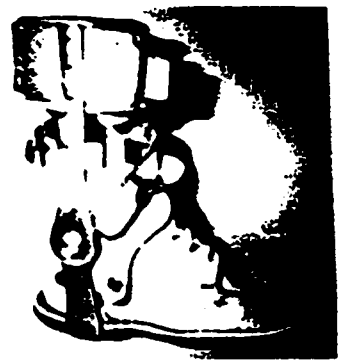
Northampton, England:

The District of Kingsthorpe.

Northampton, the town into which I was born and into which my mother, and my mother's mother were born, sits geographically sixty miles west of London. Up until the seventeenth century it was the favorite meeting place of kings: Henry I came to Northampton to settle his differences with his brother; Richard I planned his expedition against the Saracens safe within the walls of Northampton's castle, and Richard II regularly held parliaments there. After the seventeenth century, however, Northampton fell from favor. Declaring for Parliament -- Cromwell and Puritanism -- rather than for the Royalists and King Charles I, proved to be a fatal mistake.[10] In 1688 when the monarchy was restored, Northampton was punished for its allegiance to Cromwell and

[10] At the Kingsthorpe local library, I pick up a book: *Bygone Northamptonshire*. I read that after Northampton sided with Cromwell in 1642, one man from each household spent his days helping to defend and fortify the town. Additionally, in 1648, when Cromwell's infantry, worn-out and destitute from battle, marched through the town without shoes or stockings on their feet, the people of Northampton dropped everything and produced, in a matter of days, fifteen hundred pairs of soldiers' boots (16). They sent them on to the men, who were, by then, in Leicester.

Northampton's castle and town walls were pulled down. I imagine the men and women of Northampton doing this; I imagine the people taking apart the castle brick by brick, stone by laborious stone. I imagine that, as they did so, they also took apart their identity. I think that it must have affected the poor more than the rich. The rich still had their estates, their private castles. It must have been the poor who felt, most keenly, the loss of the castle, the loss of town walls, the protection and sense of belonging that they afforded. All the people had left was their skill as craftsmen. They had their shoes, they had their quickly disappearing oak trees, and they had the vague memory of a puritan dream: a dream that promoted work, work, and more work as a way of achieving equality in the eyes of God.



Benedict Anderson, in Imagined Communities, posits that, "'already having forgotten' ancient tragedies is a prime contemporary civic duty" (200). This makes sense to me. The people of Northampton were obliged to forget the tearing down of their roots, their local identity, the utter destruction of their homeland, with a conscious, proud remembering of their collective identity as workers. As Thomas Frost, writing in 1969, emphasizes, "It is better to make boots and shoes than to be the shuttle-feathers of tyrannic monarchs and lawless barons" (22). Our working-class identity has become our local narrative: after the tearing down, after the ruthless oppression and suppression of our political and religious beliefs, we remember who we are and we begin steadily and methodically to rebuild. We take pride in our ability as workers. But we forget, in our desire to resist, in our desire to rebuild, in our intent to be a "stronghold of nonconformity" (14), that we are ultimately buying into the desire of the ruling classes to reproduce us as workers. We forget that, ultimately, the only power the worker has is his ability to perform his physical labor: a labor that ultimately serves and conforms to the needs and desires of the master he resists and so emphatically detests.

In the fifties when I was born, my dad had his work -- his skill as a shoemaker -- to take pride in. My mother had little or nothing. She worked all her life, at home and in the shoe factory, but her work was considered unskilled and unimportant. Fortunately, she was beautiful. She had that. Her beauty. All my life I can remember her being inordinately proud of her ability to attract the admiring glances of men.[11] As a child, I would sit on her bed and watch her dressing in front of her full-length closet mirror. Even though she was slim, her figure good, she would struggle, squeeze, and twist her body to fit into a corset. It was not one of those Victorian contraptions; it was modern, made of elastic. It functioned like a pair of pull-on panties, only it went higher, stretching up to cover her ribs, the loose flesh that hung around her waist. When on, it sucked everything in, flattened her stomach and her bottom, so much so that skin and fat spilled out of the top and bottom of it. She didn't care. She would suffer for her beauty. It was worth it. When fully dressed, she would stand and, looking at herself sideways in the mirror, say to me, "Not bad eh Sal? Not bad for an old woman eh?"

"Not bad at all," I would reply. It was expected.

Later, when I was almost forty and she almost seventy, we went swimming

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[11] Yesterday, as I browsed through the newsagents on 82nd Avenue, I noticed that Oprah had brought out a magazine called "O." I buy it, curious about the several articles on 'women who are unable to say no.' In one article, Jane Fonda, in an interview with Oprah, says: "Vanessa [her daughter] has always known my strength – and she has always seen me give it up for a man . . . the inherent message in that is, 'You're supposed to give up everything that matters to be in a relationship" (173). I relate. As women, we are conditioned to position ourselves as objects of desire for men. In doing this, we give ourselves up to them, believing that they will want us, keep us. Desire us. For ever and ever.

together. Standing there in the changing rooms, in front of a big mirror in the locker room, she did it again. "Not bad eh Sal', not bad for an old woman." I agreed. We both had to admit that, at seventy, she had a better figure than I did close to forty. Looking in the mirror again, she sighed, "You know Sal', I had all the men in the street staring at me when I was younger." I nodded; I told her that men still looked, even now. This made her smile, straighten her back a little, twist and turn in front of the mirror like she had in the old days. I was pleased for her.[12]

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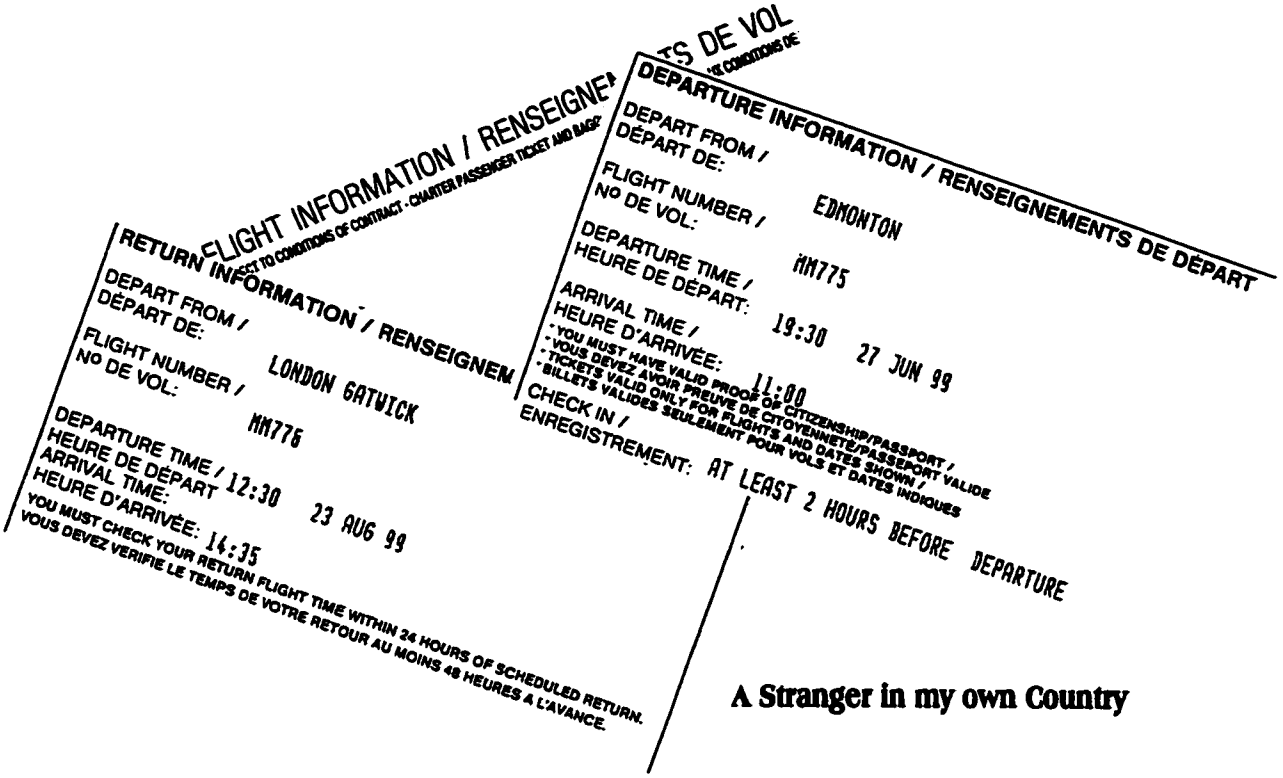
[12] In *The Uses of Literacy*, the classic fifties study of the British working classes, Richard Hoggart documents the definitive working-class girl's path to motherhood. According to Hoggart, the "flighty, careless and inane" (45) girl leads a short-lived 'gay' life of " smoking and 'picture-going'" before accommodating herself to the "real business of life" (46): getting married and having a family. Once married, the girl is then transformed into a woman, a mother, "the pivot of the home," who will "cook, mend, scrub, wash, see to the children, shop and satisfy her husband's desires" (38). Apart from one reference to the "more careless" (46) types of women who run around having fun while their "kids knock around scruffily" (46), Hoggart does not seem to recognize any middle ground, any space for a working-class woman to exist outside of these expectations.

But those spaces are there. My mother exemplifies the inability of the working-class woman (as was often the case), to successfully negotiate those spaces in-between. It is true, mum cooked, and cleaned, and scrubbed for us. It is true, she also worked a forty-hour week sewing soles on to shoes at the local factory. And it is true that she was, ostensibly, a good and faithful wife. I think she always, although sometimes reluctantly, satisfied my father's desires. The few times, at around eleven in the evening, after the ten o'clock news, when she didn't take his hint and follow him up the stairs to the bedroom, he would lay in bed and bang on the floor, on the ceiling above our heads, until she gave in and went to him. In all of these ways, she conformed to Hoggart's expectations for the good, married, working-class woman.

But there was something about my mother that always seemed to be yearning for what we – dad and us kids – could never give her. She wanted *more* out of life. Her husband, her kids, her life, her working-class life, was never enough. This desire manifested itself, I believe, in the only aspect of her life that she felt good about: her looks. As she matured into womanhood, she fulfilled all the standard expectations of who and what a working-class woman should be, but I don't think she ever quite forgot the feeling of power that was associated with her beauty and with being single. She didn't exactly want to remain a teenager, but then again she didn't want to believe in the idiom, "yer' only young once". Contrary to Hoggart's belief, the 'gay' teenage life, "the free period [which] is a kind of butterfly flight" (46) *was* regretted. She clung to the memory, the feeling of this freedom, every moment she could. It was there in the way she would dance in the small spaces of our kitchen, and it was there in the way she straightened her back, stuck out her breasts, and tossed her head whenever, walking me to school, she thought that someone, some man, somewhere was watching her. It left her unhappy and dissatisfied.



A Stranger in my own Country

When we walk out into the central lobby of the airport, mum is there waiting for us. I don't see her at first, but there she is, standing against the railing, a small, erect lady, leaning forward to get our attention. She is dressed smartly -- with class -- a green suit that she had made herself. It hangs well, looks sharp. It accentuates her figure. But she is no longer young. She no longer commands the stares of men. She looks insignificant, ordinary; she is easy to miss. A man pushes in front of her and she disappears back in the crowd. We find each other again, and Aila and I push our trolley, loaded down with suitcases, towards her. As we push, I notice that mum's hair is still barely gray, thick and wavy. She has put on a face for us -- a slash of bright red lipstick, eye shadow, blush -- but she is whiter than before. I think that the emphysema is sucking the breath out of her body, making her skin look white like crinkled-up paper. I hug her over the railing and, as usual, I tell her how good she looks. I don't tell her how her bones feel more frail this time, and I don't tell her that she seems smaller, more fragile, than when I last saw her and hugged her.

She kisses me on the lips. She tries to do the same to Aila, my daughter, but Aila turns her head. Mum is offended, "You think I'm too old and ugly?" she says, her voice hurt, quavering already, and Aila blushes, embarrassed. I explain to mum that Aila is not used to the kissing thing that we do in England. I tell her that I think my daughter is missing out. And I mean it. There is something to be said for this kind of ritual intimacy. But then my own daughter is used to big open spaces, wide gestures. She can't know that living in the row-upon-row of terraced houses in narrow streets, all on top of each other, creates an attention to detail, a desire that is small, neat, contained, sympathetic.[13]

We head for the car. It is not raining, but it is grayer than I ever thought it could be. The grayness permeates everything. This time, I don't feel like I have come home. It makes me uncomfortable. This is my home, the place of my birth, how could I feel out of place here? Have I become too Canadian? I worry about this all the way up the M1. Grandma is in the passenger seat. Aila and I are in the back. My sister's husband, Pete, is driving. His foot is on the floor; he zips in and out of traffic, zooms alongside of lorries. He is anxious to get home. I remind myself that I must drive faster this time. Last time I drove too slow -- Canadian speed -- and an angry construction worker jumped out of his lorry and shouted at me as I waited at the traffic lights. Ripping open my car door and waving his arms -- possibly his fists -- in my direction, he screamed, "You're gonna fuckin' kill someone if you don't get a bleeding move on."

I had stammered my sorries, but they weren't enough.

"Fuckin' Yankees," he yelled as a parting shot, "wanna stay in your own fuckin'

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[13] I am reminded of a quote from one of Rilke's poems: "Strangely, I heard a stranger say, I am with you". The poem itself is lost to me, but I remember that this line was quoted to me by a man who I almost had an affair with. We had both been married, both been unhappy, when we met one summer at a creative-writing course. We connected for a short period of time: the time it takes for two strangers sitting across a crowded room from each other to scrawl one line across a blank page. Strange, that I remember this, but I no longer even remember his name.

country."

"I am," I'd shouted back, "I am in my own country." But it had sounded weak, unconvincing, even to my ears.

But it is true. This is my country. My sister Maureen has the papers to prove it. Our family goes a long way back. She researched it. We were never rich. We were among those who were, in the sixteenth century, reduced to landless laborers. As peasants we at least had the privilege of living securely in a small house and having a small amount of land, enough to keep the odd pig or cow for our own benefit, but with the instigation of open parishes we had nothing but our labor.[14]

[14] In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler outlines Hegel's formulation of the master-slave relationship (3). In this relationship, the slave internalizes his master's consciousness. Having heard his master berate him, he now begins to berate himself. This way of self-identifying insures his own future subordination. Ironically, even as the slave searches for freedom, he imprisons himself with his own thoughts and language. His inferiority is embedded in his consciousness. This sense of inferiority stretches forth over the years, over the generations. I see it in the people I care for; I see it in myself. Our pride in our physical and even mental strength does not make us feel any less inferior. It causes a certain melancholia.

According to Judith Butler, it is "imperative within melancholia that self-beratement be voiced, not merely to oneself, but in the presence of others" (181). It is the presence of others that is significant here. In the act of performing one's melancholia in front of others, it is possible to transform "the social sphere that is abandoned" (180) or lost (when in the melancholic state) into a fantasy which "carries a trace of the other within it" (181). In this way "[m]elancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense 'preserves' its lost objects as psychic effects" (182). Performing this project then, am I "shamelessly voicing my own self-beratement" (181) in order to "find a fresher trace of the lost other" within (182). Am I, as Judith Butler would say, "negatively narcissistic" (182)?

The following day, when all the fuss and awkwardness of our arrival was past, when we had handed out gifts and kisses and hugs, I sit with my Aunt Joan in my sister's pub. The rain is coming down in torrents, slamming against the windowpanes. It makes the room dark, cozy looking, secretive almost. I am not tired. I am eager for this company, these bodies so like my own. Secluded in a booth close to the skittles table, my Aunt Joan -- my mother's sister -- tells me more. She is in her eighties now. What she tells me are the stories. Aila sits on my knee, listening. Mum is talking to my sister, Toni, and feeding her dogs -- an old, crooked Jack Russell and a German Shepherd – pieces of a Cadbury chocolate bar. Aunt Joan tells me that being poor was not a problem for our family. We were workers. We never had to walk from parish to parish to find work. We were always employed, never residents of the workhouse. That was something to be proud of.[15]

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[15] Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy*, insists that working-class attitudes are embodied in the idea of the family. According to Hoggart, working-class people hated "the thought of 'ending up in the work'ouse" because it alienated them from their home life (32). But there was more to it than this. Why did my Aunt Joan, out of all the stories she could have told me about my grandfather, choose to emphasize his relationship to the workhouses? And why, forty or more years after the old Northampton workhouse was turned into a hospital, did mum and Aunt Joan still speak about it with dread in their voices? I think this irrational fear expresses more than a fear of losing one's family (after all, industrialization and colonization had already torn apart working-class families); it expresses a fear of being totally abandoned, a fear of dying alone, unwanted, uncared for. This fear is illustrated in Kathleen Woodward's *Jipping Street* when the narrator says, "life seemed a long-drawn-out agony of uncertainty, rounded off by death and possibly the workhouse, which was worse than death" (8). Friedrich Engels in *The Conditions of The Working*

"The only man who ever stepped foot in the workhouse," my Aunt Joan says, "was your great-grandfather Joseph. And that was by choice."

This man, my great-grandfather Joseph, the father of my mother's mother, was, before he entered a workhouse, a groom for Earl Spenser. He looked after his horses, grooming them, hitching them up to carriages, and riding them out on cold winter days to get the horses fit for fox hunting. One day, though, my great-grandfather walked into the kitchen of the main house when he'd had a few too many to drink, and he was fired.

[16]

"It was this event," my Aunt Joan tells me, "that made him decide to go to Russia."

I am impressed. I, who have a complex about speaking French, even after numerous courses at the university, would quake at the thought of living in France, of

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Class in England, also confirms this fear when he documents "reports of five cases in which persons actually starving, when the guardians refused them outdoor relief, went back to their miserable homes and died of starvation rather than enter these hells (296).

Even though I have had nothing to do with the workhouse, I can feel the horror. It crawls under the skin of these women who I know so well. They saw it, experienced it, felt the insecurities, the fear that dictated that one would rather starve than enter those walls.

[16] "Althorpe House": the country home of the Spencers (of Lady Diana fame). Postcard published by "Photographic Heritage." Photography by Gordon Flanagan (1999).

immersing myself in a strange land, a strange culture, a strange people who do not even speak my language. But my Grandfather didn't quake. He had no social capital: he knew no Russian and he wasn't rich. He couldn't even read and write. But he went anyway. He walked all the way to Cardiff so that he could catch a boat to Russia; and, on the way, he slept in the workhouses.

"He wasn't forced to enter a workhouse," Aunt Joan emphasizes, "he chose to. It had been a place to sleep. He didn't stay in each one of them more than one night."

This is, for my Aunt Joan, an important distinction.

Apart from the fact that we know my great-grandfather paid his way from Cardiff to Russia by working as a fire stoker on one of the boats, no one knows much about his experiences in Russia. Suffice to say he came back to England, married and had my grandma Flo' and four boys, Albert, Richard, George, and Sid.

"He finished his days as a cab driver," Aunt Joan tells me, "operating his own horse and cab. He used to park outside The Black Horse. You know the pub on Wood Hill?"

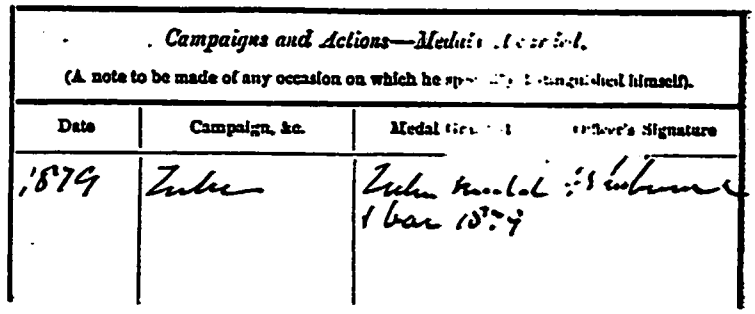
I know the place. As my sister brings us over two more glasses of red wine, a bottle of orange pop for Aila, I think of him sitting there on cold, rainy nights waiting for passengers to come out of the pub. I think of all the movies I have seen with this scene in it. The rich in their splendid gowns walking towards the cab, the men helping the women climb in while the cab driver holds the horses still, politely staring ahead. Invisible but essential.

"I suppose," my Aunt Joan says, interrupting my reverie as she raises her glass of wine towards me, "that you have your great-grandpa Joseph to thank for your love of horses."

"I suppose I do," I reply. It has been a long while since I have ridden horses. In Canada, I don't ride at all. But I do miss it. Every time I go to the local *Bag 'n Feed* store to buy dog food, I smell the leather of the bridles and saddles and I feel the familiar yearning. The ache of an old love, an old passion that I can't quite forget. I refuse to equate my great-grandfather with the cab driver Nicholas Skinner who, in *Black Beauty* (my favorite book as a kid), whipped his horses until he drew blood. This doesn't fit. Not for me, or for him.

You see, this man, my great-grandfather, took up growing lilies in his later years. No man who grows lilies would beat horses, surely. My Aunt Joan still grows the same strain of lilies in her garden. Later, when mum, Aila and I drive Aunt Joan home, being careful, of course, to remember to stay on the right side of the road and being careful, of course, to drive fast, faster than I would ever drive in Canada, she offers to take me out into her back garden and show me them. We climb out of mum's car and go through to her back garden and she points them out to me. The lilies are small, not at all like the big white ones I see around Easter time in the grocery stores in Canada. These lilies are pale yellow. Their heads are a little heavy for the short, thick stems. They hang to the side, rainwater dripping off their big, soft petals as they scrape the soil under my feet.

"Nice," I say, and I mean it.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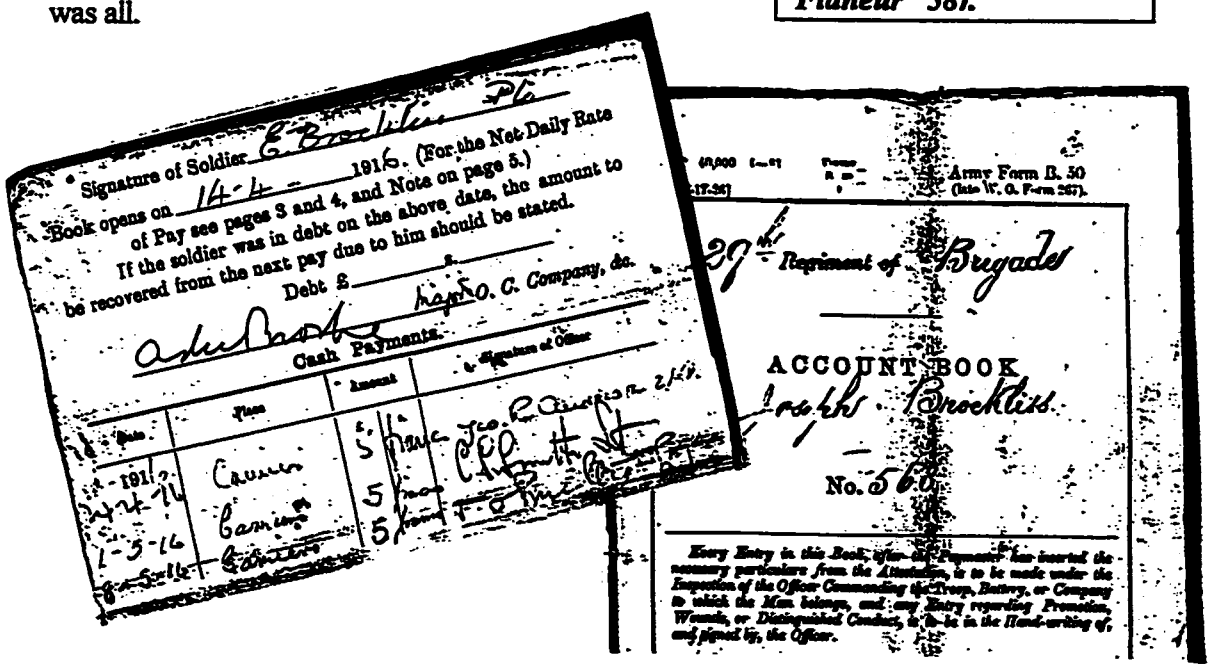
While we are there, Aunt Joan shows me my great-granddad Joseph's war papers. He won a medal in the Boer war. He was wounded. He came back to England a hero. I find that, despite myself, I am beginning to buy into the nineteenth-century tendency to idealize the working-class body. Standing in my Aunt's front room, looking at the papers I begin to visualize my great-grandfather as a strong man, an adventurer. I see him fighting in the war under a hot sun, I see him as a young man, his skin wet with sweat and shining in the hot African sun. I see him fit and strong, walking along dirt roads heading north across strange lands, alone. I think it is admirable that he had no money, no middle-class home to provide for him. He had his body, his labor, and his street smarts, that was all.

> ***"To be sure, insofar as a person, as labor power, is a commodity, there is no need for him to identify himself as such" (Benjamin "The Flâneur" 58).***



Suddenly, as I look out the big double glass doors, which lead onto Aunt Joan's back yard watching Aila who is picking apples to take home, I realize that there are no stories about my great-grandmother, Joseph's wife. I ask Aunt Joan and mum about her. They look perplexed. They tell me that they don't know much about her.

"I've never really thought about it," mum says, "but I guess she must have been there."

"Somewhere . . ." Aunt Joan raises her eyes to the ceiling, looks perplexed.

We sit down and take time out to have a cup of tea. Aunt Joan brings it in on a tray. There is a plate of cream cakes. Aila comes in and takes one, devours it as she watches *The Simpson's* on the telly. Aunt Joan and mum talk, once again, about the workhouse.

"If you went to live in the workhouse," mum says, "even in my time, you were good for nothing. You were rubbish."

"But it wasn't only the rubbish that went there," Aunt Joan interrupts her, "the ones who wouldn't work. It was the kids too, and the old people, and the cripples. They had no choice as I see it."

"But it was awful it was, we used to walk by there didn't we Joan? We'd walk by and hear them crying and wailing at all times of the day and night." Mum shudders and we look at each other. The presence of my own disabled son is hanging in the air.

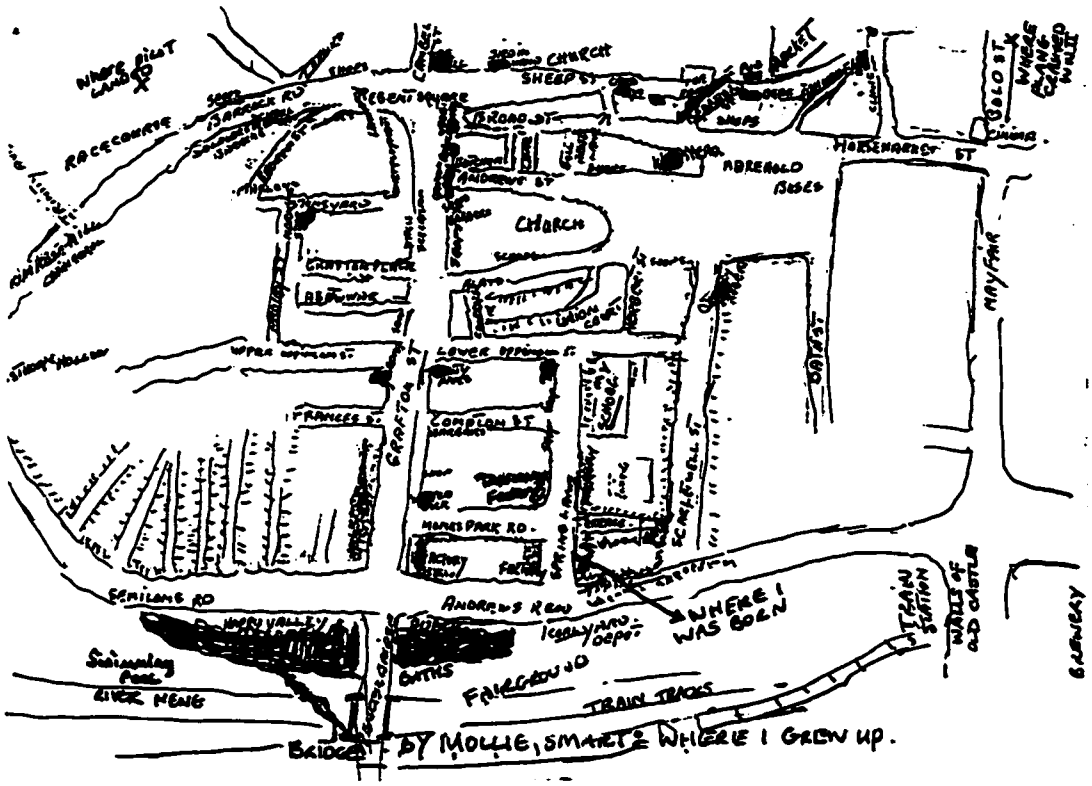
"Everyone was afraid of dying there," she tells me, "everyone."

When I am in England, I sometimes go past the old workhouse. I look up at the brick walls, at the long, narrow windows. It is now a hospital, St. Edmund's hospital,[17] *but I can imagine what it must have been like. I think I can hear the crying of the children, of the disabled children, alone and deformed, shut away in some room somewhere, alone. I wonder if Jordan, my own son, might have lived there in another age, another time. I realize that, in some respects, comparatively speaking, he is lucky. His life isn't so hard, not really.*

[17] The Northampton workhouse was renamed St. Edmund's hospital in 1934, a process that was put into place after the Poor Laws were repealed in 1929. There was a stigma attached to the hospital because of its former use as a workhouse. Mum had my three sisters in this hospital, but she hated the idea and felt for a long while afterwards that having them in this hospital would bring her children bad luck.

Chapter Four: Birthplaces / Deathplaces

The Burroughs.



In a county known for its landed estates, my mother and my Aunt Joan were born and raised in the Burroughs: the slums of Northampton. Mum was born in Spring Lane in 1925, at the time the local government was attempting to fulfill its promise to the surging post World War I community to build homes that were "fit for heroes" (Brown 88). In Dallington, a suburb of Northampton, the government boasted that three-bedroomed homes were being built that had a living room and an indoor bathroom. They had municipal grate-ovens, coppers and hot-water geysers; they had large gardens to supply the working-class families with all their vegetable needs (141). But the homes in

the Burroughs were old, small, and run down. They were, as one government official noted, "hideous hovels" (94). [18]

My mum was born in one of them. Row-upon-row of these houses faced directly on to the street. They were two-up-and-two-down. Downstairs there was a small kitchen and a front room, a fireplace; upstairs there were two small bedrooms and a window facing on to the street. In the back, a small, square garden housed a shed for washing and a closet outhouse. My mum and my Aunt Joan argue about how many flowers were there. My mother says one. My Aunt Joan says two. My mum says there was a flower called "Love Lies a Bleeding" right outside the back door, but my Aunt Joan also remembers a Dog Rose Bush outside the washhouse door. I think that they hang on to these flowers tenaciously. They mean a lot to them. Both my mum and my Aunt remember an incongruous tap that stuck out of the bare earth in the middle of the yard. My mum smiled when she told me about this tap. She said that they considered themselves lucky to have running water. The thought of being able to boil water for a good wash in front of the fire on Sunday evenings and keeping the fleas at bay still brought her pleasure. "It was a luxury," she said, "to get a good wash."

When I was researching first hand accounts of people who had been raised in Northampton, I was surprised to read how one woman recalled with horror the time when the authorities had forced her, and the other children in her part of town, to attend Spring

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[18] Friedrich Engels in his classic study, *The Conditions of The Working Class in England,* describes these hovels:

> The streets are generally unpaved, rough, dirty, filled with vegetable and animal refuse, without sewers or gutters, but supplied with foul, stagnant pools instead. Moreover, ventilation is impeded by the bad, confused method of building of the whole quarter, and since many human beings here live crowded into a small space, the atmosphere that prevails in these working-men's quarters may readily be imagined. Further, the streets serve as drying grounds in fine weather; lines are stretched across from house to house, and hung with wet clothing (39).

Lane school in the Burroughs. She said that in order to get there "we had to walk through narrow slum streets, past open door tenements. I recollect the smell today, one rich with the indescribable odor of poverty" (*Northamptonshire Within Living Memory* 12). She wrote that her parents kicked up such a fuss that they gave the children a special cloakroom so they wouldn't "get the nits from the local children" (12), like my mother.

Seventy odd years later, sitting at the kitchen table with my mother, I am reminded that these Burroughs, with their long, narrow lines of brick houses, the poverty, nits, and real human bodies they contained, were all part of my mother's childhood. They defined my mother's home, but they also defined her. She spent her formative years there. It was in those buildings and streets that she learned who she was. As I am thinking, my mum sits down heavily. It is early; her hair is uncombed, a cigarette is already hanging out of the corner of her mouth. "Err, I'm buggered," she gasps, breathing heavily as she squints an eye, lights her cigarette and takes a long, soothing drag.

I am patient. I wait for her to wake up, to come to her senses.

"So what do you want to know?" she asks.

I ask her to tell me about her birth.

"It was ordinary" she says, "nothing special."

She tells me that even then she hadn't been any trouble. The local midwife helped her mother. They hadn't had to call in the doctor. She said that a neighbor or two had probably bustled around bringing hot water and cloths. She gets up, makes

a cup of tea. I have come all the way from Canada to hear this. I am aware of the relevance of her story and life to mine. I too am affected by those streets and those people with nits that get in the hair and make the skin crawl. As I sit and talk to her, I feel the bare, exposed skin on the back of my legs sticking to the plastic kitchen seat. I am uncomfortable. I lift my legs one at a time and I listen to the suction. Somehow, the feeling of this chair on my legs becomes mixed up with everything I feel about this woman -- this mother -- sitting opposite me now. I am held there by my desire to know, my unwillingness to leave and, strangely, my uncomfortableness.

8 SPRING LANE.

I imagine the scene of her birth. I see the faceless neighbors, with their white caps and pinafores made out of old sacks, drawing the water from the small tap outside, boiling it. I see them walking in and out of the small, dark bedroom with their bowls of water and hot cloths. I imagine them clucking behind the door, sympathizing as they clutch their own waists in anticipation of their own impending ordeals. I see the midwife dipping her cloth into the water, wiping my grandmother's tired face. My grandmother is lying on the bed, knees raised, straining; her face is set in a determined, yet horrified, grimace. She can't believe the pain. The midwife urging, manipulating, taking hold of the small moist head that is the head of my

mother. Wiping away the mucus that blocks her nose, eyes, mouth. I hear the baby, that is my mother, crying. They are smiling; my grandmother is sighing with relief.

They call Earnest, her husband, and he comes. He, too, is relieved that the baby is all right. At the same time he is worried, a little irritated that he now has yet another mouth to feed. He doesn't stay long. Downstairs men are gathering. He is a bookie; he runs the business out of his house. In those days betting was still illegal. Everything has to be done quietly, on the side. Downstairs, the men are collecting their winnings, placing their bets, walking discreetly in and out of the front door.[19] The door slams time and time again. My grandmother, tired and weak, is cleaned up, wrapped in the big, heavy blankets and told to sleep. In her arms a small baby – my mother -- lies. She is not crying. Before my grandmother drifts off to sleep she reminds herself to lie still. She doesn't want to crush this child, this small baby girl, who is lying so quietly in her arms.

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[19] In *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart elucidates the connection between the working-class and gambling:

> Working-class people, as is well known, are fond of a gamble. Is this mainly a reaction from having to 'put up with things', from the realisation that no gradual effort at change is likely to effect much, from the wish for sudden riches, for freedom from a dull job, for something for nothing? In those forms of gambling which require a certain amount of skill there is, too, as some writers have suggested, a pleasure in one of the few available outlets for self-expression. The man who has a 'system' for playing the 'pools' or horses is respected – and the results of his 'system' not always closely scrutinised. He is admired, rather in the way that a good footballer is, because he is 'making a science of it'. And behind all forms of gambling, whether or not they need skill, is the simple thrill of taking a chance, in which the emphasis is less on the worry of whether one will win than on the prior 'fun' – win or lose – of "aving a go' (114).

My mother tells me that her mother didn't lie in bed long. She says that this was how it was in those days. You worked and you had your babies and you worked. Life went on. I am reminded of the Monty Python skit that makes fun of this reality. In this skit a sturdy Yorkshire woman is rolling dough at the kitchen table. She is matronly, overweight, and wears an apron. Suddenly this woman stops, strains for a few seconds, then bends down, scoops up the baby she has just delivered, plops it on the table and carries on rolling her dough. I smile at the thought of it. Mum sits down again, hands me my tea. I notice that the cup is cracked and brown-stained. I don't say anything; I sip my tea, enjoy it.

* * *

Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* locates the birth scene as the "ultimate of abjection" (155). It represents a horrible fantasy, horrible to see because it makes visible the mother's body. Discussing Celine's misogynist texts she writes:

> The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flayed identity. Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual. (155)

I see my grandmother's body, my mother's body, my own, suspended somewhere in this liminal, abject space. We are connected by our ability to give birth; by the way our bodies nurture life. But we are connected also by the horror, the blood, the torn and bloody skin: the realization that death is a part of our being.

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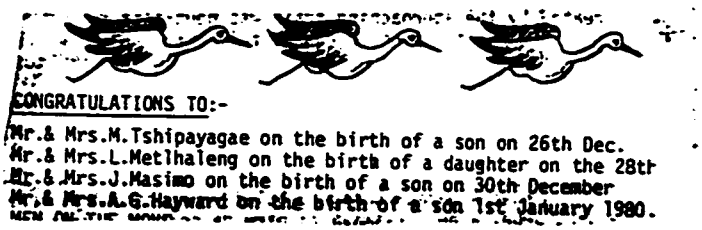

[20]

Nursery Lane:

I have my own birth story of sorts. Sometimes, mum tells the story of how she had tried to get rid of me. I hadn't been planned. She said she already had three children and she certainly didn't want another. In this story, she tells how she took a tablet -- one of two that had been given to her by a local midwife -- that was supposed to terminate her pregnancy, my life, before it began. She tells me that everyone did it then. She tells how, after she had taken the tablet, she had seen blood on her panties. All excited, she had put my sister, Toni, on the back of her bike and pedaled all over Kingsthorpe, never even stopping on Nursery Lane hill, the steepest hill in the district. Of course the punch line is

[20] My first child was born in Selebi Pickwe, Botswana, Africa on the 1st January, 1980. He was the only white baby born on that day. When I went into labor my husband and the doctor were together at a New Year's Eve party. They were both drunk. They arrived almost too late. In their absence, I was helped by a local nurse. She told me that 'us white women make too much fuss about having babies'. Waving a dismissive hand at all the shiny, sterile equipment she said that all this wasn't needed. Not necessary. She told me the best way was not to lie on my back, but to crouch. The women support you, she told me. That's the way it should be. Waiting for the doctor to arrive, I pleaded with her to give me something for the pain. She refused. She said I should enjoy the pain. "Out of the pain comes life," she said. I will never forget it.

that, after all of this, the bleeding stopped. She hadn't been able to get rid of me, no matter how hard she'd tried. She laughs when she says this, and I know I am not supposed to be upset. It wasn't designed to make me feel bad; it was designed to make me feel strong, a survivor. The unspoken assumption was that I should be proud of my ability to survive, to persist. It was in my blood.

Emotionally, of course, I was confused. I grew up copying my mum, laughing about it, joking to people that they wouldn't be able to get rid of me, but deep down inside I felt like I was a bad accident, something that should have been gotten rid of. Intellectually, I can see that this is a woman's story, a working-class woman's story. Like the other stories, it explains what cannot be directly spoken. Specifically, these stories point out my mother's own feelings of abandonment, her ability to persist, to overcome her fears and desperation when learning that her life would be constrained even further by yet another child. Generally, they speak of women's struggle to control their own minds and bodies. These stories contain subtle warnings. Don't get pregnant, they say. Don't burden your life with too many kids. Similar to Maxine Hong Kingston's *No Name Woman*, they illustrate woman's negation in our society; a reality perpetuated, not only by men against women, but by women against their own daughters.

Good Old Scarletwells

One day, Mum, Aila, and I drive in mum's old Ford Fiesta to go and see where mum was born. The car is old, rust is making a hole where my feet sit, the passenger side door won't shut properly and the rear view mirror falls off whenever you

go over a bump. But I am driving and I am, once again, beginning to enjoy it. I feel elated that I no longer have to conform to the strict Canadian speed limits. The engine is still good; the car is nippy. We whiz around corners, nip in and out of slower traffic, and speed up the long stretch of road that runs past "Happy Valley," the park where mum used to play as a child. It is windy and cold, threatening rain. Together, we pull our coats around us to keep warm, and walk up the short hill, the narrow, paved street that is Spring Lane. My mother is keen. She likes sharing this with me; she likes telling me her history.

Spring Lane, where my mother was born, is now in 1999 at the heart of industrial Northampton. There are no houses; there are warehouses and car-spare-part shops. Volvo has its offices in the spot where there used to be a tanning factory and the Super Sausage Cafeteria and Lorry Park now fills the space where the public slipper baths used to be.[21] Mum tells me that she used to be able to get a good, long bath there for thr'pence. She said it was a real treat. Spring Lane school is still there at the top of the hill, but my mum's house and all the other houses are gone. In their place is a school playing field. The thick grass is like a blanket over the past; covering it up, making it nice, acceptable, green. At the edge of the field, facing the road, a neat line of trees has been planted. They are not huge trees, but small and indistinguishable. They sit behind a wire fence, exactly where the long line of terraced houses once stood.

My mum Mollie, her sister Joan, her two brothers Ted and Jim, and her parents Flo' and Earnest, lived in one of these houses. They were cramped. Upstairs, one bedroom housed my mum's parents and the other housed the four kids. The two boys slept in a single bed on one side of the room and the two girls slept in a single bed on the

[21] In exploring his family's roots in Northamptonshire, Jeremy Seabrook notes that those who worked in the boot-and-shoe industry received little job satisfaction: "Few of them were skilled enough to find much delight in the transformation of the unyielding acrid-smelling animal hides into footwear. The smell from the tanneries filled every street, it permeated the hair and clothing and even clung to the flesh of those who worked there" (119).

other side. There was no curtain dividing the two halves of the room. Mum tells me that whenever her parents argued -- which was often -- their dad would move in with the boys and the girls would move in with their mum. At those times, mum tells me that all three of them -- my mum, her sister, and their mum – would crowd into the small double bed. Because she was the youngest, mum always had to sleep in the middle. She tells me that to this day she hates snuggling up to anyone at night. "You know what it's like Sal'," she says, "it's horrible

the feeling of soft, sweaty flesh pressing against your body." I am not sure that I do know, but I don't tell her this. I am too busy imagining it: too busy noticing how, despite the cold, my skin has started to feel hot, uncomfortable. The clouds are gathering, threatening to soak us at any moment.

We walk, and as we walk she points out things. I see in my mind's eye the row of houses. I see my mum's house, the dull, red bricks, the small window with the cat in it that I remember from the curled and tattered black-and-white picture mum showed me. She looks about five in the picture. She is standing on her front steps holding a big ginger tabby. She is smiling into the camera, her hair a mass of uncombed curls around her face. I think of how thin she looked back then, how vulnerable. But she brings me back to reality.

"Right where that tree is" she points across the road, "is where our house was." She tells me that the Mundins lived directly below them. Their dad was in boot and shoe and they only had one boy. Directly above them lived the Smiths. Their dad was also in boot and shoe and they had three girls. These families were not too badly off. "Boot and Shoe," she says, "paid better than most jobs. Now take the Keedle's dad," she shouts against the wind, "he was in leather dressing and that was awful, no money at all."

She remembers how most of the men on the street would be home on Mondays. They called it 'Saint Monday' because it was the unofficial holiday for St. Crispin's men. St. Crispin, the patron saint of shoemakers, was a Roman citizen, martyred for his faith after he left Rome and took up shoemaking with his brother, Crispian (*St. Crispin's Men* 4).

"It was a good excuse to go to the pub," mum says with a note of disgust in her voice, "they lived on credit. It was a vicious circle. On Friday when they got paid they would go to the pub and get drunk. But then on Monday when they had spent all their money for the week, they would pawn all their possessions, their watches, their wife's wedding rings, even their furniture, just to put food on the table. On Friday when they got paid they would get them out again."

I think how strange it would be to only have your possessions around you for two days out of the week. Walter Benjamin writes of how the middle class cultivate a sense of permanence by observing the traces, imprints, of themselves in their possessions ("The Flâneur" 46). No chance of the working class being able to do this.[22]

As if trying to change the subject, she points her finger towards an empty space across the street and shrugs. "That's where the Civil's lived. Two doors down from us."

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[22] It wasn't only the boot-and-shoe workers who did this. Friedrich Engels sees it as a condition that pervaded the entire working-class community. In particular, he observes how men in Manchester, after a weekend of drunken revelry, would "pawn whatever they possess. Furniture, Sunday clothes where such exist, kitchen utensils in masses . . ." (138).

She tells me that the Civil's, like the Tilney's and the Althorpe's, were so poor that they had to sleep on straw mattresses.

"Those kids were always covered in flea bites and large, round ringworm circles." she says, wrinkling up her nose at the memory.

Apparently this wasn't unusual. The kids on that street and the one over, Scarletwell Street -- the most notorious and the poorest street in the Burroughs -- never had enough clothes to wear or enough food in their bellies. Some of them never had shoes. Others, who had suffered from Polio wore leg irons, walked funny. They all had snotty noses. My mum remembers a rhyme they used to sing about the people who lived on Scarletwell Street:

Good old Scarletwells
It stinks like bloody hell
You should see the fleas
As big as bumble bees

She cannot remember the rest. But she does recall the antagonism, the fights between the people who lived on Scarletwell Street and the people who lived on Spring Lane. She remembers the way some of the lads would taunt both the girls and the "poufs." She remembers one boy, "Sammy his name was." Stopping and turning her back to the wind, she crouches over and lights a cigarette. I am quiet, I wait.

"Now there was a pouf who got beat up *all* the time." She shakes her head, tutts, exhales loudly. "Poor bastard," she says. We walk further up the street. I let her talk, ramble, her mind firmly fixed in the past.

"Worst fighter of them all, though," she continues, her voice somewhat lighter, "was Black Charlie. He chased us with a knife many times. And I think he meant it too." She pauses now, looks around, as if looking for the houses that are no longer there.

"People were poor," she says, as if this says it all.[23]

One time when we are visiting my Aunt Joan, my mum tells me that the really poor ones, the ones who didn't even have a home, would walk down the streets singing. People would throw them pennies. They walked from town to town, she says. This was how they made their living. Mum remembers one of the songs. She asks Aunt Joan if she remembers it too. And she does. Between them, they remember the words, laughing as they do. Aunt Joan repeats it to me
slowly so that I can write it down in my notebook. She speaks clearly, slowly, like she is talking to someone who does not quite understand. She wants me to get it right. It is important to her.

Come inside, come inside,
I really thought you had more sense
Working for a living, take my tip
Act bloody silly and become a lunatic
And get your meals quite regular
And two new suits beside
Thirty bob a week and no kids to keep
Come inside you silly bugger, come inside.

Later, when I am back in Canada, mum mails me her version. I don't think she remembers as well as Aunt Joan, but later when I question her on it, she insists that her version is right: [24]

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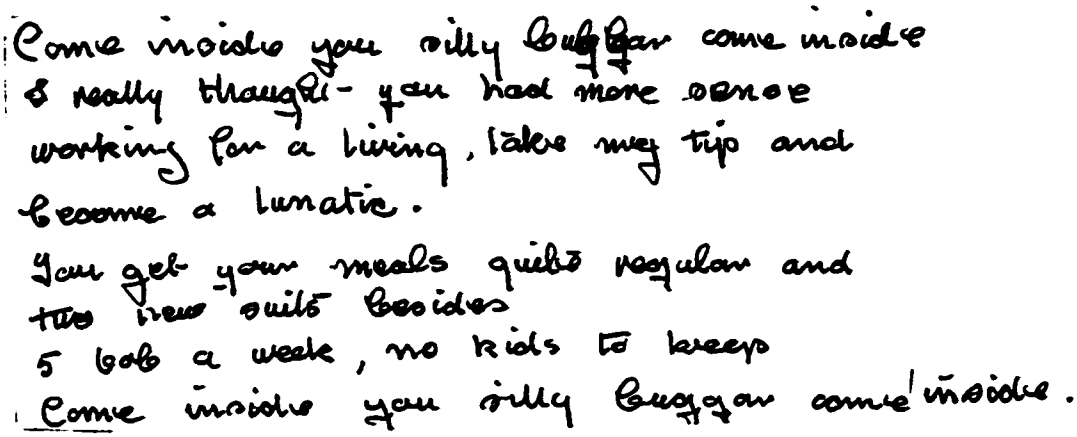
[23] In my opinion, Jeremy Seabrook 'says it all' when he writes: "I cannot imagine anyone wanting to perpetuate proletarian culture. The conditions that created it were a cruel bondage which mutilated and destroyed, and those who would prolong it – even in the name of some prospective and possibly beneficial revolution – would need the ruthlessness and inhumanity of a circus owner who breeds a race of dwarfs from some dishonourable motive of personal gain" (120-121).

[24] Reflecting on the working class need to be 'right', Jeremy Seabrook writes: "In their opinions they were aggressive and dogmatic, possibly because somewhere they sensed the inadequacy of them, their lack of real information, their inability to give intelligible expression to their ideas, and if anyone assailed their views they had frequent and spontaneous recourse to violence" (43). I see this in my mum; in the way she gets hostile, angry if I question anything she says. I remember the time she dragged me half way across



Mum told me that compared to most people back then, they were well off. Her dad had his bookmaking business (in the days before betting was legal in England), and he cleaned railway cars on the side. He was always coming home with things people had left behind in the trains -- mostly umbrellas, the odd camera. She said they had an assortment of umbrellas -- red ones, blue ones, ones with fancy handles. They gave some of them away and sold some of them to the rag and bone man, but they kept the best, most extraordinary, exotic ones, for themselves. I am reminded of E. M. Forster's narrator in *Howard's End* who proclaims, "All men are equal -- all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas" (87). The ultimate irony. [25]

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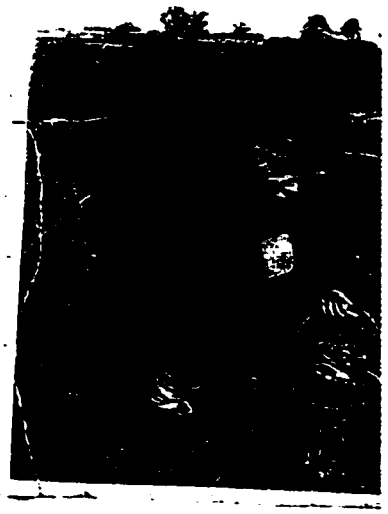
town to prove to me that the word for 'throwing up' was "to reach", not "to retch". She had caused a big stink in the bookstore, elbowing one woman out of the way in her rush to get to the dictionary section. Of course, she had been wrong. She didn't talk to me for days. I also see this need to be 'right' in her writing. She is careful with it; she writes slowly, trying to be accurate; trying, with the help of her dictionary, to get the spelling right. I pick up a book called *You and Your Handwriting* and read. Graphologists would say that the hooks on her letters indicate a tendency to "cling," to persevere, to persist. And yet, I still feel that there is a general insecurity embedded in each letter, in each stiffly formed word (Stafford 34). If I could think of one word to describe her writing, I would say that it "shakes". Like she is clinging on to something too tightly, like at any moment she might fall.

[25] Jeremy Seabrook, in his book, *The Unprivileged*, documents how the working classes, having become used to a life of service and inferiority, suffer feelings of "abasement". Seabrook describes how one of his ancestors, Frank, who "is remembered as having served with the Elwes family, who finally dismissed him for drunkenness" (8), displayed an exaggerated respect for those he had, in the past, served. "Of his days in service he retained, even in the cramped house in Scarletwell Street, Northampton, a predilection for polished silver and the whitest of napery, and he is reported to have laid the scrubbed deal table as for a banquet at every meal, even when – as was frequently the case – there was nothing to eat. He suffered all his life from asthma, and he put an end to it by throwing himself under a train at the age of sixty" (8).

Train Tracks:

Sometimes, I go for a walk. I go along the railway tracks, look at the flat farmer's fields that stretch as far as the eye can see in every direction. My body, being middle-aged and somewhat worn out, is often tired. Its heaviness resists movement, but my mind forces it forward, ever onwards like the big diesel trains that rumble and rattle past me at regular intervals.

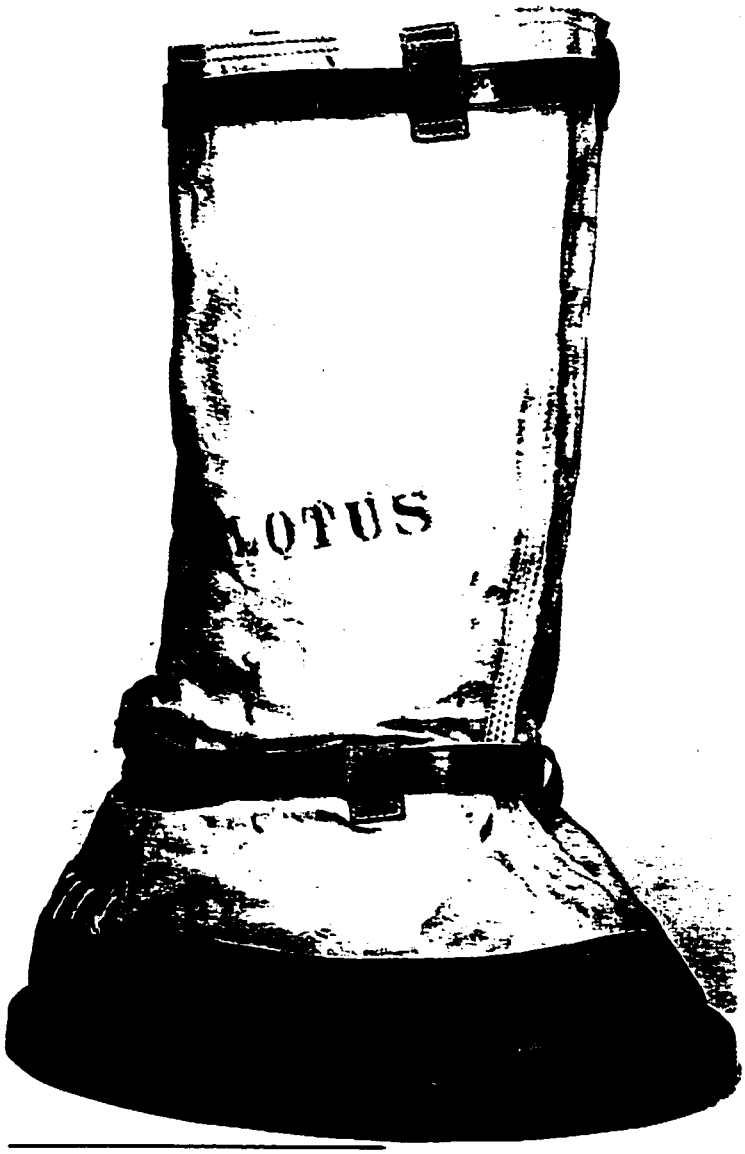
My mother grew up next to the train tracks. As a child she would play on them. Jump across them, daring the whistling steam engine, which flew by her body with inches to spare, to hit her. It was here too, in the swampy ground that stretched from the railway tracks to the river, that she looked for frogspawn. She collected it and took it home so that she could watch the little eggs turn into black blobs with tails and legs, and later into big green frogs. It was also here, because of her attachment to this place, that the local kids christened her "Mollie Blob" after a local wild flower -- a large yellow buttercup that blossomed every spring and died every autumn.



It was also in this field, by the railway tracks, that she was raped. She had been three years old at the time. Her mother had found her bleeding on the grass. My mum didn't remember much about it. She remembers being carried on her mother's hip to three strange houses -- the houses of each of the boys -- and she remembers her mother standing in their small, dark front rooms screaming at their mothers. She

remembers her mother spreading her plump little legs as she showed the blood to the boys' mothers. My mother doesn't remember the boys much. She doesn't remember the act at all. She thought the boys were nice to her; they gave her some sweets. The police were never called. After the shouting was over it was never spoken of again.

I grew up only a short walk from the train tracks, only the trains no longer ran by steam; they were electric. As children, we used to put our heads to the metal track and watch the whirring of the overhead wires to gauge if a train was on its way. We knew that they came so fast that if you saw a train and you were on the tracks, you would be dead. It was as simple as that. No one could move or jump that fast. As kids we would dare each other to run across them. Always, as I ran, my legs hopping over the shiny tracks, my eyes set rigidly on the far bank; I would feel my heart beating all the way up to my mouth. I would

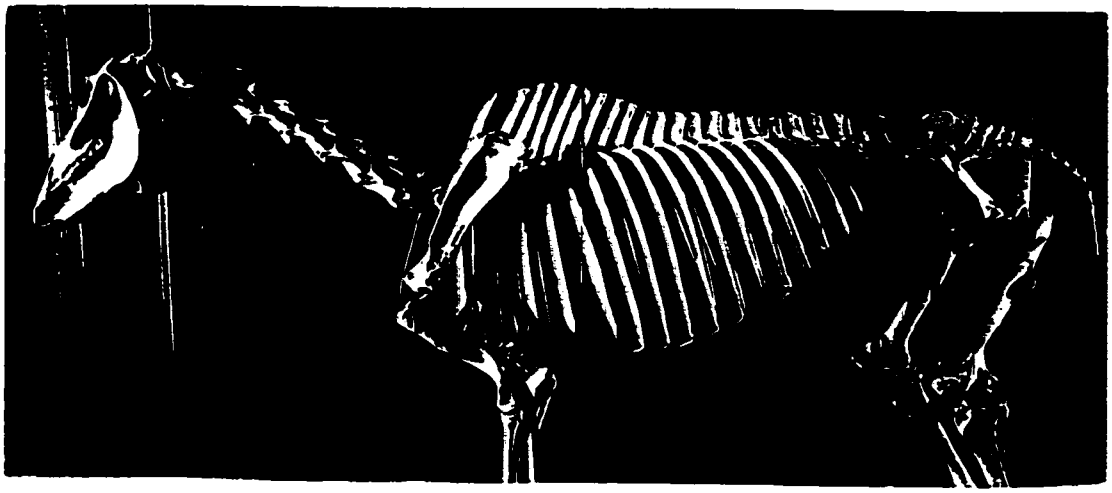


[26]

[26] Postcard, purchased for 28p, from the *Northampton Museum and Art Gallery* in the summer of 1999.

wonder if, at any moment, I would feel the whoosh of air, the solid thud of the impact that would instantly obliterate me.

At that time, I rode at the local horse riding stables. They kept horses in the field next to the railway. One evening the horses got out of the field and wandered on to the track. The next morning we found them -- the body parts of twelve horses -- scattered over the tracks and the surrounding fields. Strangely, I don't remember seeing any bone. In my memory, it has disintegrated, disappeared. There must have been bone, but all I remember is chunks of flesh and blood. Everything, it seemed, was splattered with a dull, diluted red. The only solid body part I remember finding was a hoof; it had been neatly cut off just below the fetlock. I remember thinking at the time that it would make



Eclipse, named after the eclipse which occurred the year of his birth, was one of the greatest racehorses in the history of racing. He was never beaten in his racing career – 1769-1770, and was a most successful stallion.

27

a good paperweight. I collected paperweights. It wasn't until later -- much later -- when I read about how in the concentration camps, Jewish people's feet had been used to make paperweights, that I felt sick: sick at my own ability to distance myself so far from life.

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[27] Postcard published by E.T.W. Dennis & Sons Ltd., Scarborough. *It strikes me that, today, even the bones, the remains of dead things, are commodified.*

Life itself had become a commodity -- a neat tool to hold down paper in a strong wind.[28] Strangely, I also found a horse's head collar; it lay intact, neatly buckled together, in amongst the lumps of flesh. I left it there. I thought I could smell, on its blood-stained blue nylon, the horror and fear that those horses must have felt when they had, seconds before their death, seen the train barreling towards them. But this kind of imagining is sick in itself. I wonder what gap there is in our natures that we need to imagine the worst when the worst is right there in front of us.

* * *

Reflections:

I

Train, 1. Bring (person, child, animal) to desired state or standard of efficiency etc. by instruction & practice, . . . **2.** Teach & accustom (person, animal, *to* do, *to* action), . . . **3.** Bring (horse, athlete, one*self*), come, to physical efficiency by exercise & diet, . . . **4.** Point, aim, (gun etc. upon object etc.). **5.** (arch.). Entice, lure, (*away, from* post etc.). **6.** (now rare). Draw along (esp. heavy thing). **7.** (colloq.). Go by ~, perform (journey) thus, . . . **8.** ~ *off*, (of shot) go off obliquely. . . . **9.** n. Thing drawn along behind or forming hinder part, esp. elongated part of woman's skirt trailing on ground or of official robe, long or conspicuous tail of bird. **10.** Body of followers, retinue, . . . **11.** Succession or series of persons or things, as *long ~ of sightseers, of camels* . . . **12.** Series of railway carriages drawn by same engine(s), . . . (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1376).

II

I still fear that the impact of a certain collision will rip me apart and crumble my bones.

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[28] According to Walter Benjamin, the commodity, as fetish, stands at the center of capitalist society ("The Flâneur" 49). People, as consumers, surrender to its intoxication. As customers, alienated from themselves and others, "abandoned in the crowd", they surge toward it, their intent to consume, to fill a hollow emptiness that is gnawing at their insides (55). It *is* the modern condition.

III

As a woman who is quite unable to shake off her identification with the working classes, as a woman who still, to some extent, fears the authority, the power, that the ruling classes have over her, the train and the train tracks symbolize the gap between 'them' and me: the "I" who is doing the identifying and the one, the 'he,' 'she,' or 'it,' who is being identified. Lacan uses the same image in *Ecrits* to symbolize the gap between the signifier and the signified (167). For him, the rails are a dangerous place. Desiring the impossible, one might become deranged, become absent to oneself, there. I think, for the working classes, existing, as they do, on the bottom half of the equation, on the half that is being identified, one might even say, commodified, there is a strong possibility that one might even die there.

IV

Now, in my forties, these bodies, these trains, get confused in my mind. When I went to see *Life is Beautiful* at the Princess Theatre, the scene that most stuck out in my mind was the one where the train pulls into the concentration camp. Its passengers are confused, disoriented. Guido rushes along the side of the train, leaps through its center in an attempt to see his wife. All around him are men with guns, starving prisoners. He is pretending to his son that it's a big game, but the son knows the truth. He walks away from the train and on into the concentration camp, and he knows that there is something awful about this place. For me, there is something awful about that train, the way it sits there, the way I am unable to distinguish its big metal body from the soldiers or from the fragile human bodies that depart from it.

V

As I walk along this track in Canada, I know that I am safe. The trains here don't run too often, they are not so swift. And yet, these trains take a long time to pass, their heaviness shakes the windows, the foundations of my house. A long time after they have left, I still feel the distant rumble, the assault of the sharp whistle on my senses. Their big heavy bodies and their noise allow no reflection. All speech, all thought even, is consumed in that roar, in the thundering of the wheels on the tracks. If one is to survive, one forgets about speech, one reacts. The children act it out in their games: they leap in front of the train and they laugh, telling each other how clever they are at evading death.

The Buddleia Bush:

Mum remembers the boxing matches when she was a child. "It was a way of life," she tells me one day when we are sitting in her back garden. It is warm. Her garden is wedge shaped and, in the far corner, in the corner where I used to sit and make mud pies, eat worms, a large Buddleia bush is in flower. Its purple flowers attract butterflies. Aila, using a cheap net that I bought her at the local "It's a Gift" store, is trying to catch them, put them in a jar. She has the jars lined up on the grass in front of her. One jar is already filled with slugs. Slime coats the sides of the jar as they attempt, unsuccessfully, to escape. I watch them moving slowly across the glass, as mum speaks.

"The big boxing matches, the matches the men had, were held in a big, old tin shed that backed on to our house. We used to climb up on to the outhouse roof at the bottom of the garden and take turns looking through a hole in the tin so we could see the fight."

I imagine the kids fighting about who will get to watch first. I think of how, in Canada, my own kids argue over the T.V. and their Nintendo games. A 'me first, no me, but you went first last time' kind of conversation.

"All I can remember is the blood," mum continues, "it fascinated me. Seeing it on the faces of the men and all that."

As we sit, I swat at the midges, smear their little black bodies all over my legs. Mum seems oblivious to them. They must like me because I am fresh flesh, I think. A foreigner in my own country. Mum tells me that they used to set up boxing matches for the kids in the back garden. She says they would rope off a section and the kids would challenge each other.

"They really used to go at it," she laughs.

"Did you fight?" I ask this because I have a memory of my mother sitting on top

of my dad on our living room floor. She is furious. She is clawing at his face, hitting him on his chest. But she is also triumphant, enjoying the power of a punch, the feeling of him cowering beneath her flaying hands.

"Lord, no! Only the boys."

She is shocked at the very idea.

"The girls helped our mam make and serve the ginger-beer."

I think of these events as places where the boys and girls were socialized into their roles. Socially-constructed moments when the working-class girl learnt to be the good working-class girl. The perfect one . . . if possible.

I am reminded of my childhood, of ways in which my own femininity was constructed. I remember, in particular, my favorite T.V. show, *Bill and Ben, The Flower Pot Men* (in my defense, there weren't many kids' shows back then). In this show, Bill and Ben were two handsome flowers, their roots firmly planted in their pots, their petals in full bloom. They knew all there was to know about making it in the world. They knew how to grow and succeed and how to nourish themselves so that they would grow into beautiful, strong flowers. They were, of course, male. Their job on the show, as I remember it, was to educate 'little weeeeed': the whiny female. The one who never got anything right. The one with whom I was supposed to identify: the skinny, irritating, stupid pest who slumped and wilted in the corner. The one whose mission in life was to please, appease.[29]

"Men made their living boxing in those days," mum interrupts my thoughts. "There wasn't any social security back then you know. If people didn't work, if they didn't make money, even if it was only through betting on the fights, they didn't eat."

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[29] The sad part of this story is that I married a Bill, or was it a Ben, a flower-pot man anyway, and for ten long years I played the part of little weed, pitifully dancing around his pot, waiting to blossom. Even sadder is the fact that I still tend to do this, act this way, around men that I like. It is instinctive, I don't believe a word of my own act.

I know from my research that there were no jobs to be had in this inter-war period. The depression affected them all. In Northampton the influx of cheap German leather footwear meant lay offs, which meant that men were out of work with no way of supporting their families. Life was precarious. Tomorrow these people knew that they too could be sleeping on straw, picking the nits out of each other's hair. My mother's family knew this well.

Happy Valley:

My granddad Earnest's betting business meant that the family was always living under the threat of exposure. At times, when things were good, my granddad paid the cops thirty bob a week to leave him alone, but at other times, when the takings were sparse, the whole family lived in fear of having everything taken away from them in one loud, invasive sweep. Mum said that she always knew when they were being raided because the police would leave their pushbikes outside. Also her mum would stand at the door and keep the kids away. "She would give us a penny and tell us to go back down *Happy Valley* for a swim.[30] We didn't mind".

Once, though, she remembers coming back after a raid and finding the place a real mess. Her mum was crying. She told her that the police came and took everything -- even her hankies. Mum's dad was nowhere to be seen. Another time, returning after a

[30] Happy Valley was a local park or commons area that ran along St. Andrew's road, just below where mum lived. Part of the river had been sectioned off and redirected into a square swimming pool area. Mum said it cost her a penny to get in and, as part of the deal, the kids were given a free biscuit to eat while they were there.

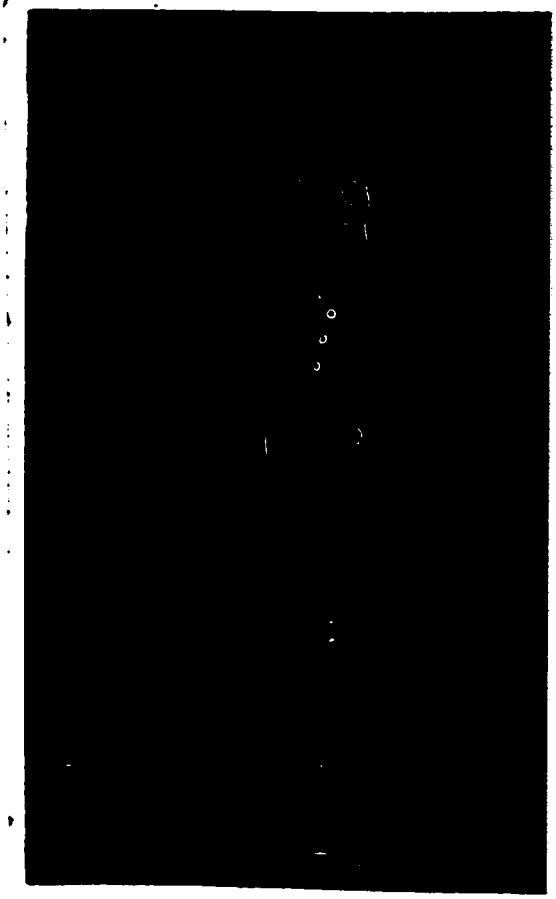
raid, mum found a bunch of thr'penny bits all over the front room floor. She said she felt like she'd found a gold mine. She gathered them up quickly, put them in her pockets and rushed out the door into the street. She felt like a Queen that day; she bought all the kids on the streets ice creams. The Wall's boy, who sold the ice creams from his bike, couldn't believe it. She laughed when she told me this. The memory of this abundance feels good. Even now.

Richard Hoggart, who wrote *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957, the year I was born, states:

> There are many thrifty working-class people today, as there have always been. But in general the immediate and present nature of working-class life puts a premium on the taking of pleasures now, discourages planning for some future goal, or in the light of some ideal. "Life is no bed of roses," they assume; but "tomorrow will take care of itself": on the side the working classes have been cheerful existentialists for ages. Even of those who spend a more than usual amount of time worrying about how things are going to 'pan out', it is true to say that their life is one of the immediate present to a degree not often found among other classes. (110)

I resent such generalizations. Hoggart fails to mention that the lives of working-class people, now as then, often *don't* pan out. Often the working classes die before their time, alone and lonely, uncared for in one of the millions of unheated redbrick council houses. Often all their pleasures, all their winnings – which may have admittedly, by their standards, at times been considerable – are reduced to an immediate present which involves, far from an existential joy, a miserable, lonely existence. It may involve, as it did for my grandfather, dwindling your last days away, an untreated prostate gland giving you pain, forcing you to lie in your own urine, lamenting the days of your youth, waiting for death to take you away. It may involve, as it did for my grandmother, a life plagued with lung problems, heart problems. An early death.

Chapter Five: Types



Grandma (i):

As I sit here now, in Canada, papers spread out across the surface of my kitchen table, I think of my Grandma. I have a photo of her and now I turn it over and over in my hand. She was an ordinary looking woman. My mum only has one old black-and-white photograph of her. In it she is sitting on a chair, staring into the camera. Posed. It doesn't say very much. She looks rather drab, dark coat, gray dress, black hair, pale skin. She has nice eyes though and she is smiling into, or maybe even beyond, the camera. It is a small smile, a mere upward turn at the corners of her mouth, but it warms me to her. I think her body looks tired. Probably it was, probably she has held this pose for a long while. Probably her neck is stiff and her back is aching, tired of being held rigid and erect for the photographer. I think that she looks like a martyr or a fallen angel who, having once been pure, unsullied, now has to suffer for her crimes. But what crimes could she have, I wonder, other than being born?

"The remarkable thing about these pictures, however, is their emptiness. . . . They are not lonely, but they (are)empty in the manner of a flat which has not yet found a new occupant" (Benjamin "Short History of Photography" 21)

Criminals:

Helene Cixous, in *Three Steps on The Ladder of Writing*, talks about our ordinary, psychological, invisible crimes. In an attempt to explain this, Cixous elaborates on the scene of the crime where one of Kafka's dogs is being buried:

> Man wants to bury the dog exactly where he himself would like to be buried, he, Man if he were dead. We/he must bury. We constantly believe we must repress, forget, bury. Yet this isn't true. The desire to bury hides a much more twisted desire: Man wants *to be seen burying* wants to be discovered in the middle of hiding. . . . Man only half-buries the dog. In fact, he exhibits the burial in such a way it seems like a disinterment. He must unbury the burying, which is equivalent to bringing what has been repressed back to the surface of consciousness. . . . Man has to do this because he felt compelled to abandon the dog that is alive. This is a crime. Yet this crime is unfortunately invisible (44).

Our crime, then, is that we unconsciously, without even knowing it, abandon the living. We are abandoned and we abandon ourselves. I suspect that this is what has happened to my grandmother. It is there in the smile, something sad that is not able to be expressed. The picture cannot tell us the

As I sit here in my warm house in Morinville, Alberta, Canada, I read. It seems as much as I can do. Two sleepless nights and an essay due at University have left me feeling drained. All the left side of my shoulder and neck hurt. I am beginning to get a migraine. My brain feels tired, fuzzy. My left eye throbs. But it is not the writing itself that has left me feeling this way. It is not even, not even, not completely, the lack of sleep. It is the constant feeling that I need to perform, compete, strive for more, clambering for ever upwards, not downwards. Reading Cixous was refreshing. She confirmed my feeling that it is not up and out that we need to go; it is down, down with all the creatures

actual scene of the crime, but it is there nevertheless.

Helene Cixous connects writing with death. The scene of the crime, the place where we abandon ourselves, is the place where we die, half-buried in the earth, deformed, stiff limbs sticking out of the ground. But, because this death is a *necessary* death, this scene, if we can re-imagine it, offers us hope. Writing this scene allows us to face our "interior enemies . . . our fear . . . our weakness" (6), our truth.

that dwell beneath the ground, down where the worms crawl on our skin, down where the soil gets in our pores, our noses, our ears, our mouths. It is here, Cixous argues, beneath the ground, that we find the scene of our crimes: the crimes that shame us, haunt us. I need, as Helene Cixous urges, to find "the scene of my crime in order to come to terms with [myself]" (45). I have to find my version of the truth. But it is not up here, it is under the ground, underground, somewhere deep in my subconscious, hidden from view. Cixous assures me that "Paradise is down below" (6), and I believe her. The paradox is that in descending, I will ascend. If only I can muster the time, the energy, to do it. If only I can resist the urge to half-bury, as my grandmother did, the real me in the earth somewhere.

Freaks:

In a similar way to which Freud talks about the primal scene, Cixous posits that we all have a crime scene, a "primitive picture . . . one that frightens us" (9). I think about this. Immediately, I know what mine is. I am four or five at the time and I am sitting alone in the back seat of my father's car. The musty smell of used cars assaults me. I think it is an old Ford, fifties style, curved top, running boards. My mother and father are in the front. They are smoking, and I sit and watch as wisps of gray smoke swirl up through the air and head in my direction. My father is driving. His foot is pushed to the floorboards and he is leaning forward into the long stretch of highway, intent on getting me to the hospital as fast as he can. Mum is in the passenger seat. She is doing all the talking. She isn't talking to me and yet I know she is talking about me. She keeps throwing furtive, worried glances over her shoulder in my direction. The hospital is two hours away. I have a large Strawberry Nevus on the left side of my face. I have had it since birth. The swelling makes my head look large and distorted, pulling my left eye up and the left corner of my mouth down. It is bright red, pink in places, patchy. It is this that is worrying them.

"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (Berger, <u>Ways of Seeing</u> 7).

My parents are trying to decide if they should let the doctors burn it out. They did that in those days. My father showed me one he had on his right side, over the top of his ribs. All that is left is a large round circle, wrinkled and shrunk from the burning, the size of an old English penny. The trouble is that mine is on my face. Either way they think I will be deformed for life. I internalize this. I think that everything I am is ugly and deformed. They have told me so, haven't they? I have no voice, no choice in the matter. I am paralyzed with fear. I can feel it running through my body like the anesthetic I will get before they cut and burn off the side of my face.

Writing, Cixous says, is learning not to be afraid (10). In writing, I can see the truth. Writing allows me to go down, to descend deeper into the earth. It insists that I feel the weight of the soil on my body, the ants crawling all over me, the worms sliding inside as they consume me right there where I sit at my computer. Metaphorically, the scene in the car presents me with two choices: I can sit there for ever frozen in the back seat of that car and hope that someone will notice me, like me, value me, despite my deformity, or I can get up and walk away, leave the car. In writing, I leave the car. The scene of the crime is excavated by my writing, filed away as evidence in a file marked 'do not open'. Not ever again.

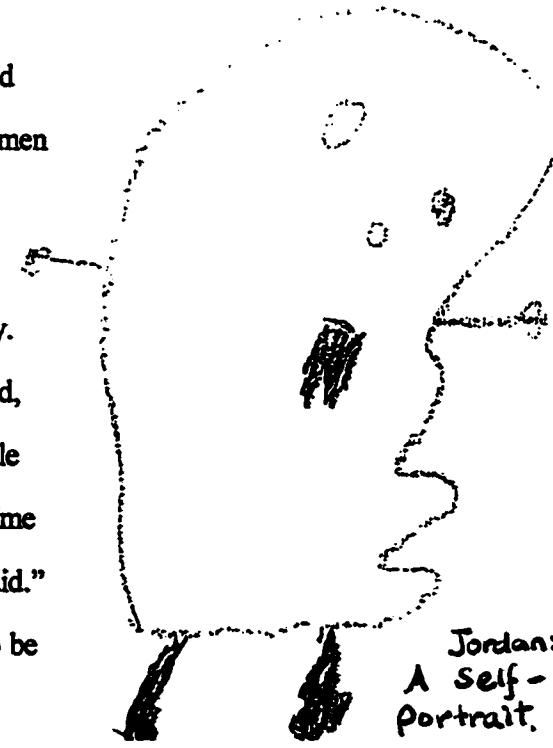
As an adult now, sitting here reading Cixous's writing about the scene of the crime, i realize that this whole scene can be read symbolically. The car is, at once, a place of refuge and a place of fear. In it i can look out through the glass at the world and know that for now i am safe. But it is also the scene of my parents' impotency. The image of their helplessness has remained frozen in this picture in my mind all these years. The fact that they didn't burn out my nevus, that it went away on its own eventually, is irrelevant. i am the disfigured one sitting in the back seat, afraid of what even my own parents are contemplating. i watch this scene now as an adult: scene one in the theatre of my life. The curtains have opened and i, in all my raw terrified familiarity have been revealed.

And how, I wonder, did my grandma perceive herself? She couldn't write. She had no time to sit and reflect about subconscious, psychological states. She would have said I was stupid for doing so. I can almost hear her laughing as I am writing this.

Remembering my grandma, mum said she had a smile for everyone. The other women on the street liked her.

"She had lots of friends," mum said, "everyone liked her, and she liked everybody. She even spent time with Frankie Jelly's child, Rose. And she was disabled; you know a little simple in the head. Not many people spent time with her let me tell you. But your grandma did."

I am pleased that this is something to be proud of.[31]



[31] I do not know this child, Rose. I do not know what her disability was, or why she was disabled. But when I am reading Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body*, I am struck by her argument that social conditions construct disability by "creating or failing to prevent sickness and injury" (36). She states that, besides war and medical practices,

> [m]any other social factors can damage people's bodies in ways that are disabling in their environments, including (to mention just a few) tolerance of high-risk working conditions,

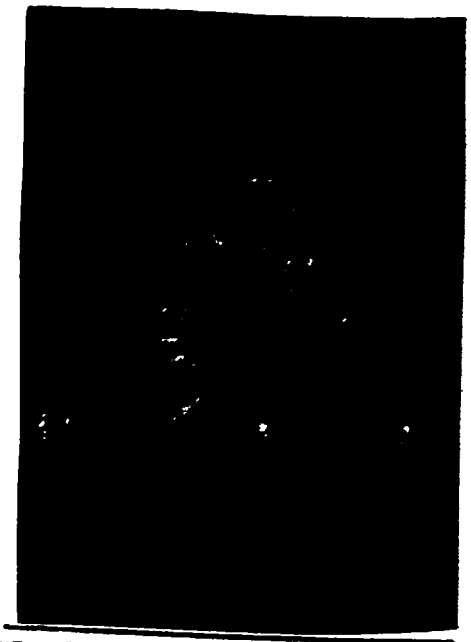
> "Although [the working class] were all convinced that they had been 'put there' for a purpose (a purpose which they never ventured to define and which it often wasn't 'given to us' to understand in our ignorance), their lives were in fact so uncertain and insecure in every way that many of them sought refuge in the spurious reassurances of fortune-tellers and the stars" (Seabrook 35)

Mum told me that the other women on the street came to Grandma for comfort. She told them their fortunes: gave them a cup of tea and then read their futures from the black swirl of tea leaves left behind. She told mum that it soothed their minds and made them happy if she could see money, men, or fame in the bottom of their cups. She didn't tell them about the bad things. To my mum – her daughter – she laughed about her skill and said that these women would believe anything you told them. That was how desperate they were.

> abuse and neglect of children, low public safety standards, the degradation of the environment by contamination of air, water, and food, and the overwork, stress, and daily grinding deprivations of poverty. The social factors that can damage people's bodies almost always affect some groups in a society more than others because of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and advantages of class background, wealth, and education (37).

I think of my own child, Jordan. He was born in Sudbury, Ontario, on November 1st, 1986. The day after Halloween. He was three months early. He is disabled. Constantly, I am compelled to run through the possible causes, even now. There was the fact that at the time we lived in an old, bat-infested farmhouse in the country, and there was the PVC spill that contaminated our well water, and there was the "new" RH shot that I had been given a week before Jordan was born, and there was the fact that, only a couple of months before I got pregnant with Jordan, I had carried a child for six months inside of me that had died at three months. The doctors hadn't picked it up; they failed to warn me that after they had taken the baby from me that I shouldn't get pregnant again for at least a year. And then there was the fact that I had spent the whole of the evening before at the front door giving out Halloween candy to local kids. I told Allen when I got home that I felt sick from all the bending down and he had been annoyed with me. We had argued. I said he didn't care, and he went to sleep. I remember lying there, he on his side of the bed, me on mine, feeling suffocated, thinking that I was trapped, destined to spend the rest of my life in this emotional vacuum. I remember wishing that I wasn't pregnant so that I could escape from this relationship where there seemed to be no feeling, no caring, no connection at all. And there was, of course, the fact that the hospital was understaffed and failed, when he needed them most, to be there. Crucial, those ten minutes when the nurse had been too busy. And there was, of course, all of the above.

When mum was a teenager, my grandmother used her skill to exercise a form of control over my mother. At times she would look in my mother's teacup and tell her that she would have good luck today if she worked hard at school; at other times she was more specific. "I see a dark boy," she would say, "and the letter T." Then she would ask mum if she knew a boy whose first name began with the letter T, knowing full well that mum had been seen holding hands with a certain Tommy in the street. "Danger," she'd say, "keep away from this boy. He's bad news." Mum said they used to laugh. It was a joke. But, at the same time, she was always in awe of this woman who professed to know her innermost secrets.



"In photography . . . there remains something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art" (Benjamin, "Short History of Photography" 7).

The Demented:

One day, as we are sitting around mum's kitchen table, my Aunt Joan comes to visit. My Aunt Joan comes often to visit us while I am there in the summer. My mum's house is smaller than Aunt Joan's, much smaller. Mum doesn't own her house, whereas Aunt Joan does. Aunt Joan never takes off her coat when she comes in. She never stays long. It bothers mum, who thinks that Aunt Joan has always been reluctant to have anything to do with her. She thinks it is because Aunt Joan is jealous of her.

"She's jealous because I was always the better looking one," mum tells me before Aunt Joan arrives. "But I don't understand it," she

continues. "She's always had more than me. She's owned shops, houses, even a hotel. And look at me, nothing."

But when Aunt Joan comes this time they don't talk about what they have or don't have. They talk about their friend who is in a nursing home with Alzheimer's.

"It's disgraceful," Aunt Joan says, "they don't let her out of her chair. Her legs have got so weak that she can't even go to the bathroom. They have her in diapers too."

Mum tells me how last week they caught one of the male patients feeling up one old dear.

"He had his hand between her legs and everything," Aunt Joan says, a disgusted look on her face. "And when we told the nurses, what do you think they did?" She looks at me. Waits.

"Nothing," she continues when she gets no response. "Nothing."

"Why don't you report them?"

"That won't help."

"They cover it up when they know they are going to be inspected." Silence.

I feel like there is a message for me in this. I think that they are telling me that this could be them, next month, next year. On some level they want me to know what it is like so that I can fight for them when they can no longer do it for themselves. "Don't leave me in that dark, awful place," they are saying. If this ever happens to me, don't leave me there. Fight for me.

This time when Aunt Joan visits, she also tells me about my grandma and grandpa, about their relationship together. She tells me that they had constant fights. He would be angry if she took off to the pub with her sisters and their husbands on her own, and she would be angry if she had reason to suspect that he was interested in other women.

"Mum and me used to go to the pictures once a week," she says, "but she stopped because she thought he was fooling around on her."

"She wanted to keep an eye on him," mum winks.

I learn that, in their own strange way, they cared for each other. Mum remembers that when she was sick he took her cups of tea in bed, and when he threw the beautifully decorated wooden Chinese shoes (given in exchange for a betting debt) on the fire, she forgave him.

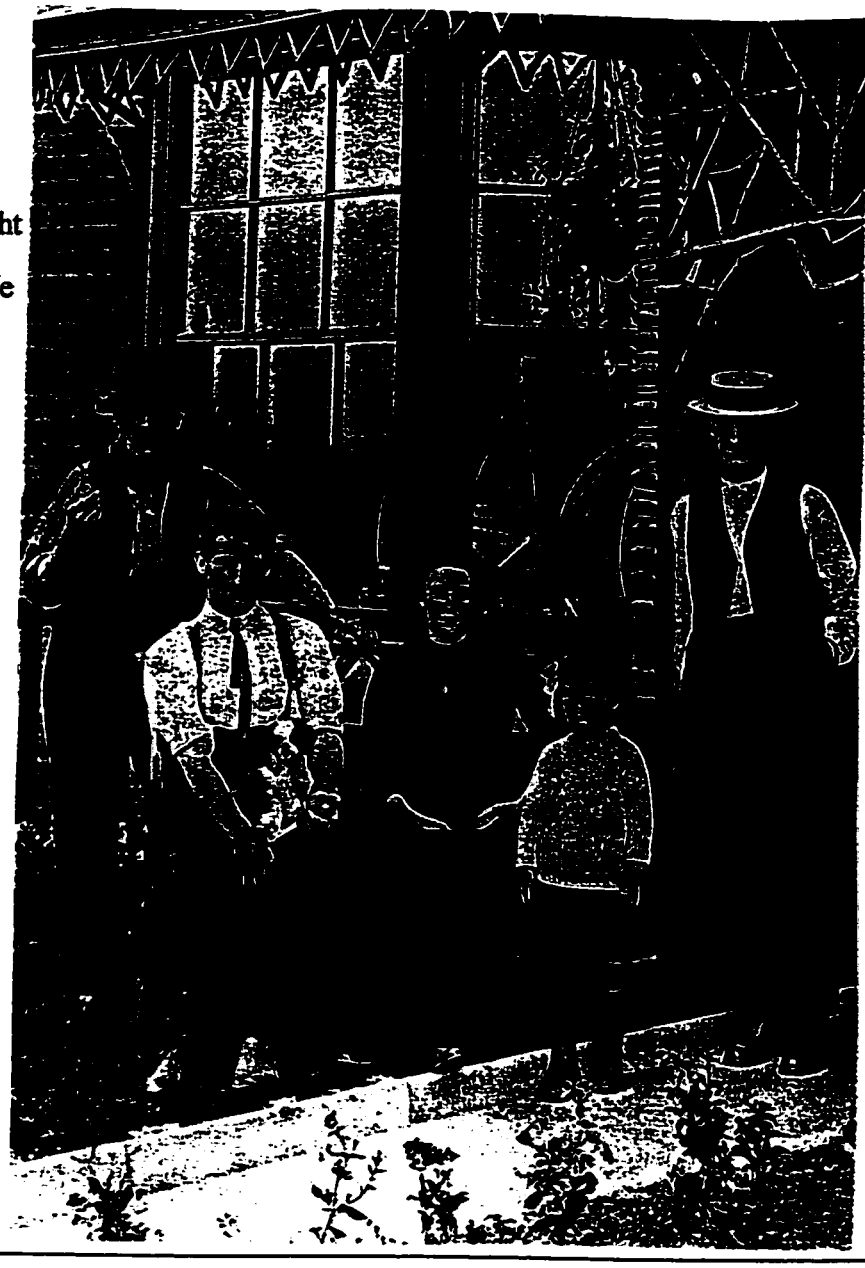
I don't have a photograph of my grandma and grandpa together. I have the one of her where she looks like a jaded angel with her dark hair and eyes that stare off into the distance, and I have one of him. I try and put them together and imagine them standing next to each other, sharing the same house together, raising their kids together, dancing, holding hands, talking. I think he must have fallen in love with her looks, her fine hair, her air of reserve. Her innocence. And I think she must have fallen in love with his dark, cool, confident sensuality. In the photograph that I have of him, he is smiling. He is leaning against the doorpost. All around him willow has been woven into intricate, twisting patterns. On his head there is a hat, it throws a shadow over his eyes. He is smiling into the camera, out past the family that is not his own. Friends, mum tells me. He looks, I think, street smart, like an adventurer. A gambler, some might say.[32] I know

[32] In "Some Motifs on Baudelaire," Benjamin compares the gambler to the factory worker:

[T]he work of the unskilled . . . to be sure, lacks any touch of adventure, of the mirage that lures the gambler. But it certainly does not lack the futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something

the attraction that my grandma must have felt for him. I have, as they say in Canada, been there, done that. Don't want to do it again. Not ever.

GRANDAD:



My granddad fought in World War 1. He was the machine gunner. Six men manned it and he was in charge. He told Aunt Joan he could hear the gas popping in the swollen bellies of the dead men as they lay in the bottom of the trench. He said he got so used to seeing them that

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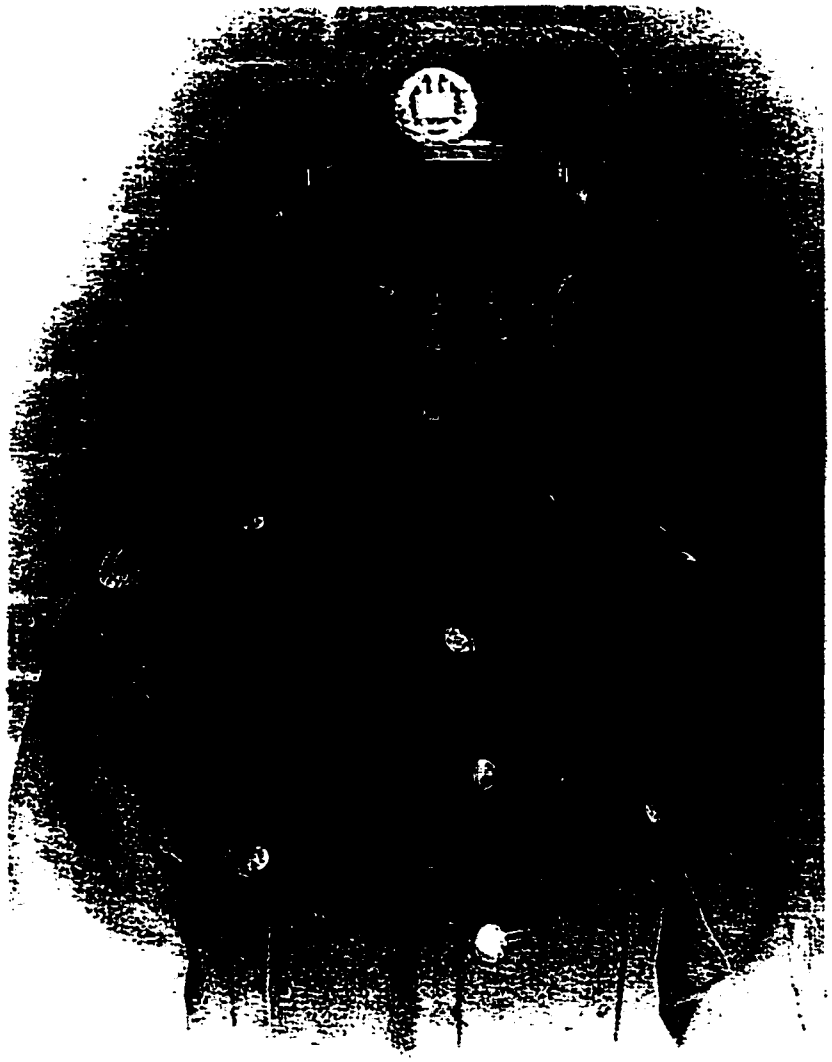
which is inherent in the activity of a wage slave in a factory. Gambling even contains the workman's gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. The jot in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance. The manipulation of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is equally devoid of substance (177).

he could walk over them without even thinking about it. But he knew he didn't want to end up like them, so he learnt how to dodge the shells. My Aunt Joan smiles when she tells me this. She is proud of him. She says that he was a "sharp bugger." He told her that from where he sat with his gun in the trenches he could see the lights from the shells as they were fired and, quickly, he learnt to figure out where they would fall. He could see which way to dodge or jump so he wouldn't get hit. "He *was* wounded though," Aunt Joan says, her voice full of pride. "He had a big scar on his arm and his leg to prove it." They were bringing him back to England on a stretcher when armistice was declared.



"I'll give it to you!"

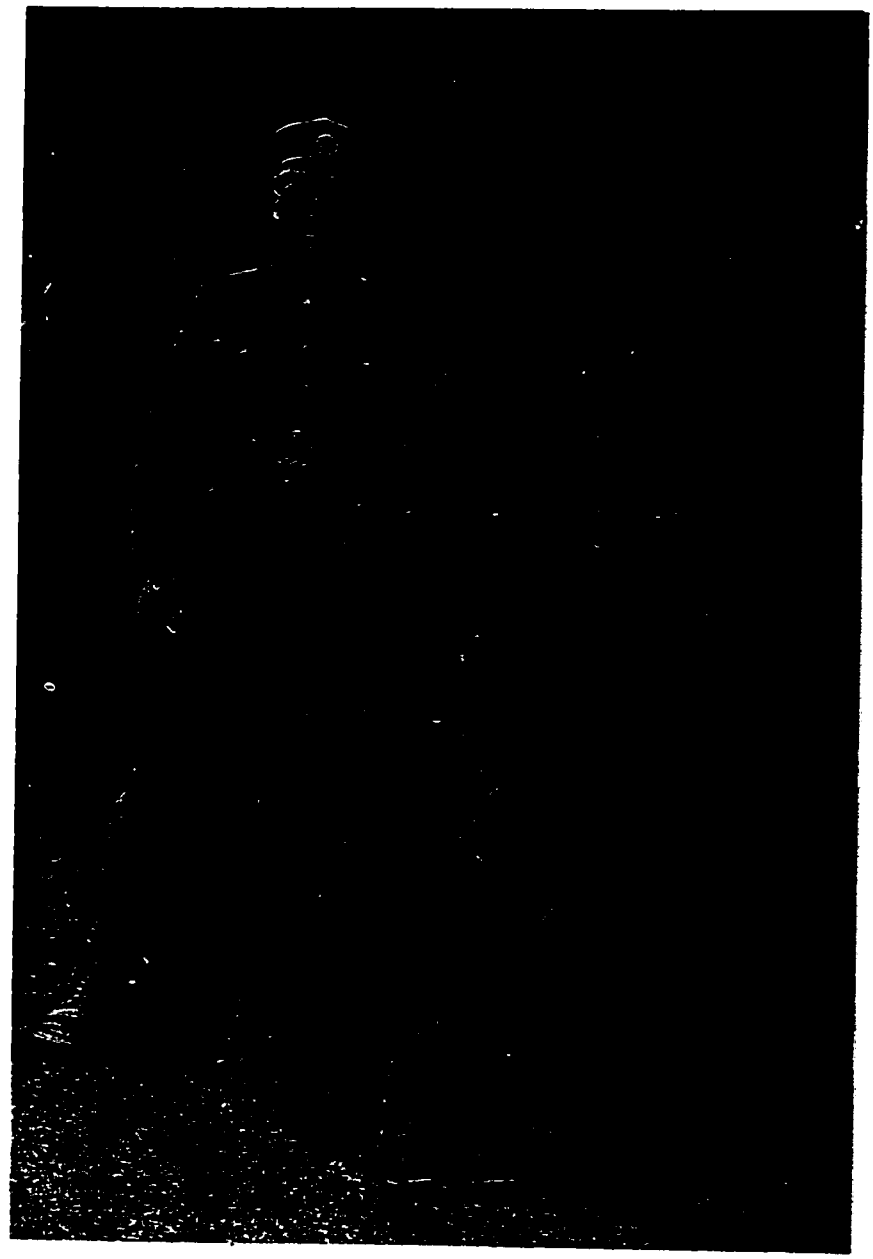
Mum said he was luckier than her mother's brothers. Three of them, Ted, Dick, and Bill died in the war. One of them was a forerunner, it had been his job to run out and cut the barbed wire so the men could advance. He was hit by a shell as he was cutting the wire, left hanging there like a strung up chicken. Mum is proud that her dad never had shell

shock. "You should have seen some of them," she said, "walking around the streets shaking like they didn't know who or where they were."[33]

I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith. I think of his cry, "I'll give it you!" as he escapes the good doctor by jumping out the window (*Mrs. Dalloway* 195). I wonder what held my grandfather together during that terrible war. I wonder what prevented him from "giving it to them" (195), his life, I mean. Was it his refusal to think about human nature? Was it his lack of sensitivity -- his working-class attitude? Or was it simply his desire to live: a desire that was stronger than his horror? Regardless, Granddad was a survivor. Grandma must have seen that in him too. I think she must have liked his spunk. Maybe she thought that there was something exhilaratingly sexy about a man who wanted to live so much that he would kill for it.

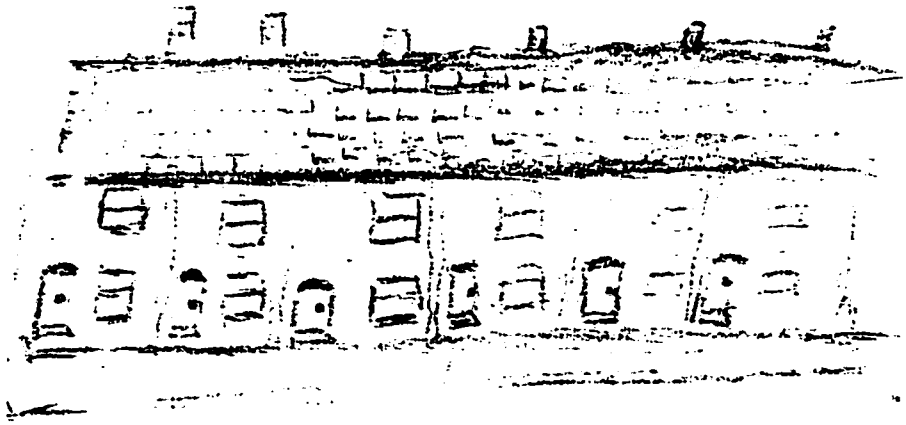
[33] I remember that when Aunt Joan and mum are telling me all of this we are on our way down town, sitting upstairs on a double-decker bus. Aila wanted to ride on a bus and Aunt Joan wanted to buy lottery tickets. On the way, Aila stands at the front of the bus and holds on to the bar. She is enjoying being thrown from side to side as the bus leans precariously around corners. Some other kids have joined her there. They are asking her if she is American. I can hear them from where I am sitting, but Aila is having trouble understanding them. It's the accent; she thinks that they are speaking a whole other language. My family, my people, are foreigners to her. I try to see beyond the front of the bus to the world of trenches, to the world of scorched, blown earth, explosions, smoke, noise. I try to imagine it as it was, as my grandfather saw it. I see bodies blown ten feet into the air, I see limbs, not words, strewn across the ground. I try to reverse this, to imagine the men whole. But I can't. My daughter turns and lets go of the railing for a second to wave. She falls to the side, collapses on the seat at the front of the bus. Her head appears over the top of the seat. She is laughing. I wave back, smile, shake my head. Put all the sick imaginings out of my mind.

"What are the dangers of the forest and the prairie compared with the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization? Whether a man grabs his victims on a boulevard or stabs his quarry in unknown woods – does he not remain both here and there the most perfect of all beasts of prey?" (Baudelaire qtd in Benjamin "The Flaneur" 39).



Grandma (ii):

My grandmother liked children. On cold, dark winter afternoons, whenever Earnest – her rather dour and serious husband – was out of the house, she would call in all the kids in the neighborhood, give them a biscuit and put her favorite Spanish music on the phonograph. Here, in her small front room, she would teach the kids how to dance. Mum remembers this well. She remembers how they would all stomp their feet and wave their arms as they spun around the room and out into the small kitchen. She remembers how they would circle around the kitchen table, being careful not to disturb my grandfather's betting papers, swinging their hips, clicking their heels, and letting out great whoops of unadulterated glee. Sometimes, mum said that when all the dancing was over, her mum would give them a treat, a change from the usual bread and dripping: bread dipped in Nestles condensed milk. Mum said it was delicious, something to kill for. The children liked this, they liked her, my grandmother. I like to hear this. I never knew her because she died before I was born. She had only been forty-seven. Not much older than I am now. And me feeling like I haven't really lived.



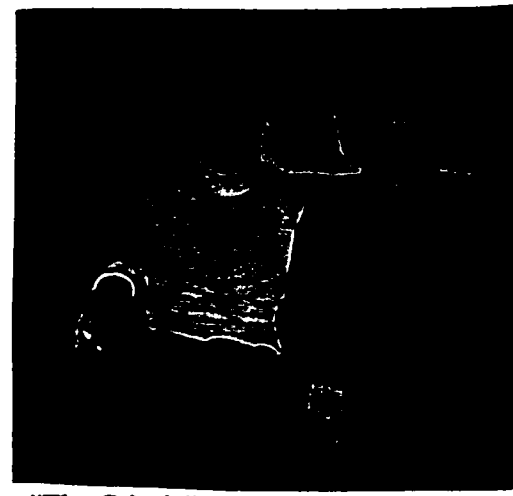
The Egyptian:

As mum is telling me this we are standing in the street staring across at the empty space where her home used to be: staring across at the space where her mother – my grandmother – led a long line of children in a wild Spanish dance. I feel restless, the wind seems to grab at my coat, reach for my skin. I sense that the dirty, skinny children are around me – ghosts from the past – singing, dancing, urging me to join them. In the distance, my Grandmother beckons me forward. My mum feels it too, I can tell. Suddenly, she breaks the spell; she purses her lips, whistles a tune and, jumping down on to the road from the sidewalk, dances out across the road. Her feet tap, her fingers click and her hips jiggle and wiggle to the sound of the imaginary music. She has not forgotten what it felt like to dance in my grandmother's kitchen. "Come on" she shouts, a snake-like arm beckoning me forward.

I follow, somewhat awkwardly. I am not as good a dancer as mum; I wonder what people will think seeing this forty-year-old woman and this seventy-year-old woman dancing in the middle of the street. I encourage my daughter to join us; she is shy at first and then she steps out too, her body moving in a completely different dance: an Egyptian catwalk. We laugh. Lorries trundle by at the end of the street, pull in and out of the *Super Sausage Cafeteria* and we don't care. I wonder if somewhere in the space where the house once stood, my grandmother's ghost is smiling, laughing at our strange antics as she, too, wiggles her hips and clicks her fingers to the sound of the music.

As I sit here now, in Canada, papers spread out across the surface of my kitchen table, I wonder what happened to my ability to dance – to hear and respond to music. When I was a child I used to hear music – a musical ringing in my ears. It wasn't exactly music you could dance to though; it was more of a kind of music to meditate by. At first I would only hear it when I went for a walk over the fields. But then I began to hear it in other places – in the kitchen, in our front room, alone in bed at night. It scared me, but it also fascinated me. Eventually, it fascinated me so much that I really got scared; I thought I was going crazy. So I blocked it out; refused to hear it. And it went. For a long time I wondered if I was autistic. Now, I wonder if that is what I have been doing all my life – simply blocking out the music.

Grandma (iii):



My grandmother loved music. Whenever her Sisters came to visit with their husbands (women were not allowed in the pubs on their own without a male escort at the time) she would leave my grandfather counting his money and calculating his winnings, and go up to "The Crispin" at the top of Spring Lane or to "The Welcome" on Grafton Street for a drink, for a song, and if she was really in good form, for a dance on rickety tabletops.

> "My Old Man" spoke to them, not only of poverty, but also of humor.
>
> We had to move away
> 'Cos the rent we couldn't pay,
> The moving van came round just after dark;
> There was me and my old man
> Shoving things inside the van,
> Which we'd often done before, let me remark
>
> My old man said, "Follow the van,
> And don't dilly-dally on the way"
> Off went the cart with the home packed in it,
> I walked behind with my old cock linnet.
> But I dillied and dallied, dallied and dillied,
> Lost the van and don't know where to roam.
> I stopped on the way to have the old half-quartern,
> And I can't find my way home.
>
> (Vicinus 265)

Mum told me that the pubs were different in those days. There was always a piano playing and there was always a singsong. At night, lying in bed, mum said she could hear the singing from the local pub. It was their lullaby. Not only her mum's voice, but the voice of the whole adult community would lull her, her sister and her two brothers to sleep with tunes that sang both of the happiness and the tragedy of growing up in working-class England.[34]

[34] For me, "My Old Man" illustrates, as Richard Hoggart informs us, "the working-class people laughing at themselves, at their own oddities and their troubles" (187). It speaks of a kind of "Carnival laughter" (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 126). It is down to earth, ambivalent, a reaction to crises: a

By the time my mum was ten, my grandmother was sick and getting sicker. Repeated attacks of pneumonia and heart trouble meant that she was confined more and more to the house. Over the years she had worked either at cleaning jobs or in the closing room of the shoe factory, skiving or stitching together the leather that would make the upper part of the shoe. But eventually she had to give up work altogether. Granddad even got a woman to do her washing for her. Aunt Joan said it probably eased his conscience. She thinks that this was around the time that he started seeing other women, when she, his wife, was too sick to care anymore. Aunt Joan remembers her death well. She passed away in hospital. There was a woman, Aunt Joan remembers, opposite her who was also dying. She had meningitis. Aunt Joan told me that in those days they put the beds of those that were dying at the end of the ward, near the exit door. It was a practical decision. They didn't bother anyone this way, and it was easy from that place to bundle them off to the morgue. On her deathbed, my grandma had asked Aunt Joan, her eldest daughter, to take care of everybody. She told her not to rely on their father. "You won't get anything out of the old man," she'd said. My Aunt Joan was twenty-three at the time; my mum was only fifteen.

What do you do, I think, when your mum dies before you are even grown up? How do you deal with this?

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crises . . . in the life of the world and of man" (127). The working class have a way of taking all that they hold sacred (their home and their attachment to it) and ridiculing it. They have a way of laughing at themselves. As Bahktin posits, this laughter allows them to ridicule their own lives and, in so doing, to hold up a mirror – "a crooked mirror" – to the class system, to the sacred rituals, texts, and laws of society (127). Essentially, though, this self-ridicule is a tool for survival; in not taking themselves too seriously, the working classes are able to laugh, to find pleasure in the oddities, the small things in life that, in their own way, make life bearable.

Sitting opposite mum now in her small kitchen, she tells me that Grandma died of pneumonia. "It was no surprise. Everyone had seen it coming, she'd been sick on and off for years." A pause. "But she was only forty-seven."

"How did you deal with that?" I ask her. "It must have been awful. You were so young yourself."

"I went to work," she replied. That was all there was to it.

I watch mum struggling to breathe. Her breath is coming in shallow, short gasps. I wonder if one's death reflects the essence of one's life. I know that at the end she will slowly suffocate; I know that her death is getting closer every day. She will, in the end, drown in her own phlegm. It will be slow and painful, she will probably claw for air, for a space in which she can fill her lungs, breathe easily. I think that her death will reflect the way she has lived her life.

Chapter Six: Education?

Mum, I feel, has, in one way or another, been suffocated all her life. In part, she has done this to herself, but, in part, it has been done to her. From the beginning it was made clear to her by her parents, by the school system, and by the general culture around her, that she wasn't expected to aspire to anything but becoming a wife, a mother, a cleaning woman, or a factory worker.

School:

I faced similar expectations. When I was growing up in England, the working classes were pushed into the factories. It began when we were young, at home (wha' d'yer want schooling fer?) and at school. At eleven we all sat an exam called the eleven-plus. The kids who passed this exam went to the *Grammar* schools and, later, maybe on to university, but the kids who failed went to the *Secondary Modern* schools and were

streamed into the factories.[35] The eleven-plus was supposed to make things fair, give the working classes a chance to move up in the world.

For some it worked. It worked for my ex-husband. His father was determined that even if *he* couldn't get out of the working-class ranks, his children would. He made Allen study every day of the week, and most of Saturday and Sunday. And he would quiz him. Constantly. But it didn't work for me, or for any of my friends.

I didn't study for the exam because passing it was not what I wanted. Unlike Allen's parents, my parents thought it was a waste of time. What was the point of getting an education if I was just going to get married and have children anyway? Mum worried that if I did pass, she wouldn't be able to afford the school uniforms, the expensive sports equipment. I worried that, if I passed, I wouldn't fit in (after all, the grammar school was the place where the 'toffs' went). Looking back, I think it is the only test that I was pleased to fail. Mum was pleased for me. My sister, Toni, told me that it was good that I wouldn't be mixing with the snobs at the grammar school. She said I would like her school much better. It was more fun, she said. I would get to play more than I would get to work. There were smiles all round.

[35] Dad passed his eleven-plus exam, but he refused to go to the grammar school. Mum told me that he preferred to stay with his own kind. This was not unusual. I feel sad that a fierce – if somewhat misplaced – loyalty prevented him from escaping a monotonous life, clocking-in and clocking-out at *Chamberlains*, one of the local boot and shoe factories where he worked.

"We give death to a child when we give it a doll – it's the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane" (Barnes, Djuna 142)

Once in the secondary-modern stream, though, I was disappointed. The school – which was an all-girls school – was rough. Fighting, drinking, and smoking were the norm. Occasionally, a teacher was hit. Sometimes a gang from another school would come and have a big fight with a gang from our school. Once, during one of these fights, a girl in my class – a gang leader – was beat up so bad that she had to spend over two months in hospital. They had kicked or stomped on the back of her neck and damaged one of the vertebrae in her spine. This girl didn't come back to our school, so I didn't see or hear anything about her for years. Strangely, when I was pregnant with my first child I ran into her at a maternity clinic. She was the same age as me – twenty-one -- but she already had two kids and was pregnant with her third. She walked with a limp. No longer confident and self-assured, she mumbled when she spoke. Looked at the ground. I think of her as the only completely broken person I have ever known.

The teachers also did their own fair share of breaking. In a different way. They certainly didn't make school fun and, most of the time, they didn't even make it interesting. In class, I would typically retreat into a daydream, tuning out the teachers while staring out the window and longing for the end of the day when I could go and ride the ponies at the local riding stable. I wasn't the only one. The teachers didn't seem to care. I think they assumed that we didn't have the intelligence to do anything interesting or worthwhile with our lives anyway. They had laughed when my oldest sister, Maureen, said she wanted to be a secretary. They told her she was getting "too big for her boots." Above her station. They gave her a list of all the local factories in the area and told her to choose one.

Mum tells a similar story: a story with a slightly different twist. As a kid, she thought she was lucky to be in the regular school. She says she could have been unlucky enough to go the *Thomas Becket School*. She tells me that the really poor kids -- like her friends Cath' and Dolly -- went there.

At *The Thomas Becket* they learned to work in the big houses. If they were lucky they would get to be a ladies maid, if they were unlucky they would be stuck cleaning for the rest of their lives. [36]

"Going into the factories wasn't so bad," she says. "Besides, I never thought there was a better alternative." She hesitates here, thinking, remembering. "In fact, when they came to recruit

I love to rise in a summer morn,
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away:
Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day,
In sighing and dismay.

Ah! then at times I drooping sit,
And spend many an anxious hour.
Nor in my book can I take delight,
Nor sit in learning's bower,
Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing?
How can a child when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring?

[36] Excerpt from "The Schoolboy," by William Blake (1794).

me for work in the factories, I think I was even grateful." She tells me that at school she always felt ignored: insignificant. When she was chosen to work in the factories (even though she was only tying the knots at the end of the stitching on the men's army boots) she felt important, like she was helping her country, or something.

I believe most of the kids in my school also felt small: insignificant. I did. Some of the teachers at this school seemed to take pleasure not in teaching us, or in encouraging us to learn and grow, but in humiliating us. I think because I was quiet, and because I was a daydreamer, I was an easy target. Many times, I remember Mrs. Kannedy, my math teacher, making me stand up in front of the class on a chair so that she could tell the other pupils how stupid I was. I was the example not to be followed.

Mr. Berber, my geography teacher, gave this an added twist by shouting at me until I burst into tears. Once, I ran out of his class and was rewarded by being sent to the headmistresses' office. The headmistress – a 'Cruella De Vil' figure if ever I saw one – gave me ten slaps with the ruler on each of my palms and ten slaps on the tender skin on the inside of each of my elbows for good measure. I think she was upset that I didn't cry, but I would have taken the physical punishment over the humiliation any day. My parents didn't complain. They had no say in it; in those days, the teachers were the sole, never to be questioned, authority. Eventually, I joined in with the other kids rebelling by flicking ink from our fountain pens at Mrs. Kannedy's back or feeding Mr. Berber biscuits that we had made, and dropped on the floor, in our home-economics class.

But not all the teachers were bad. There was our drama teacher and another geography teacher who really seemed to believe that our school motto 'Nil Impossible Est' applied to us. And there was Mrs. McCleavy.

She taught me English. One day she pulled me to the side and told me that my writing showed potential. She encouraged me. It was because of her that I wrote and passed my English O' level a year earlier than the rest of the kids. And I believe it was because of her that years later in Canada, when my husband and I divorced and I decided to go to university, I chose to study English.

At that time I was writing voraciously. Mostly, I wrote bad imitations of the *Famous Five* mystery stories, but I also wrote bad horror stories. In one of them I wrote about a girl who was trapped:

Pacing the room, she thought and thought and then she lay on her bed and she realised this was no joke, Mrs. Williams meant to kill her. All day she had no food and heard nothing from Mrs Williams. Felicity realised she must escape, the window she thought but it was a long drop, but worth a try. squeezing out of the window she stood perched on the edge and then from out in the yard Mrs. Williams shouted up to her " Don't jump my dear, you can't escape".

It was only then, sitting in my first university class, that I realized my English education wasn't that bad. Despite going to a second rate school, I found that I had a good enough basic knowledge to grasp the material (even in those subjects that required math). In English, I was pleased to discover that my essays came back marked with an 'A', instead of the expected 'C'. I have found, however, that my working-class English background does affect me in other ways.

In Canada, my university friends tell me that it is an advantage to be English, especially if one is studying English Literature. I don't tell them, when I listen to them talking about how, as children, they read Zola or Marx, that before I came to university, the only classic I had read was *Jane Eyre*. I don't tell them that every time I speak, open my mouth, I have to fight back an impulse of uncertainty and insecurity. My impulse is to be subservient, to defer, to acknowledge that, as a working-class woman, I have no place in university, in this (oh, no, I should be in a factory) intellectual discussion.[37]

Richard Hoggart talks about the alienating and difficult experience of attempting to rise out of the working classes by acquiring a university education: "He is often not at ease about his own physical appearance which speaks too clearly of his birth; he feels uncertain or angry inside when he realizes that that, and a hundred habits of speech and manners, can 'give him away' daily . . . . He would like to be a citizen of that well-polished, prosperous, cool, book-lined and magazine-discussing world of the successful intelligent middle-class which he glimpses through doorways or feels awkward among on short visits, aware of his grubby finger nails" (246).

[37] In *A Writer's Diary*, Virginia Woolf gives a middle-class view of her *To The Lighthouse* character, Charles Tansley: ". . . a self-taught working-man, and we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, raw, striking, and ultimately nauseating" (47).

Jeremy Seabrook, in a similar way to Hoggart, also talks about the "self-effacement" which characterizes the working-class:

> The feelings of abasement, which they were taught was the virtue of humility, has left a legacy of social unease, and a complete inability to deal with those of a different social background. The precise modulations of a schoolteacher's voice, the self-assured inflexions of a doctor or minister can still send the hand fluttering nervously to the stray lock of hair, and cause the color to rise in old men, as they detect, even in the kindest words, traces of the voice born to be obeyed. (8)

It is not easy. It is difficult to 'own yourself'—your thoughts, your ideas, your body – when, in certain social conditions, the desire to defer subconsciously arises.

* * *

When I am walking in England, I often stop on a hill at the base of an old, gnarled thorn tree. From this place, nestled between its sharp, jutting roots, I sit and stare at the gray-slate rooftops of the long rows of houses where I was born. Strangely, as I sit, I feel a connection to the tree. It should never have grown, perched, as it is, on this ridge of sandy, otherwise barren ground. In order to keep its precarious balance the trunk of this tree has become knotted, twisted and misshapen: deformed. But it is strong. As I sit there underneath the tree, I look up and see that it stretches, winds, twists into a rough, but beautiful umbrella above my head. I think to myself that everything in this tree, from its roots sticking out of the ground to its gnarled branches reaching out and up toward the sky, wants to grow. This is the nature of the tree. It must grow, regardless.

Church:

> *In so far as they think of Christianity, they think of it as a system of ethics; their concern is with morals, not metaphysics. . . . They will say, without sense of contradiction, that science has taken the place of religion, but that we ought all to try to 'live according to Christ's teaching. (Hoggart 97)*

One of the strongest memories I have as a child is of watching my mother sitting in her chair in our small front room, a weak electric light above her head, reading the Bible. Although she has never managed to read it straight through from the beginning to the end (she says she always gets bogged down somewhere around *1 Chronicles*), she has read certain parts of it over and over again. She says she thinks it is good because it teaches you good common sense: how to lead a clean life and how to be a good person. Everybody, she says, should read the 'Ten Commandments'. But her favorite part is *Genesis*. When I am speaking to her on the phone she points me to the part where it mentions the angels and the giants:

> 6 Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, [2] that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they *were* beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. . . . [4] There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore *children* to them. Those *were* the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown. (*The New King James Version* 5)

She says she finds it fascinating to think that there is some truth in the nursery rhymes and folk tales. "That's proof that there really were giants," she says assertively. I think that the idea of there being a magical world, beyond her world of endless winding brick streets and factories, appeals to her. Most of all she likes the idea that the angels (the sons of God) found the women on earth so fair that they came down out of the heavens and coupled with them. She says it makes her feel better about being a woman –

connected in some strange way to God.

Although mum has never gone to church (she went to Sunday School, and sent me to Sunday school), mum believes in God. She says that she believes that he is a good God who can save you if your heart is right. For years, she has studied on and off with the Jehovah's Witnesses. I remember this. I remember, as a child, seeing copies of "The Watchtower" lying around our house. Once a week, a Mrs. Watkins, a tall, thin, mannish-looking woman, would come to our house to study with mum. Together, they would sit at our kitchen table and read passages from the Bible out loud. Mrs. Watkins would go first and then mum. Using another book, Mrs. Watkins would interpret the meaning for mum. When mum is in Canada, the Jehovah's Witnesses come to my house. She studies with them; reads out loud at my kitchen table. But she is not fully converted, even after all this time.

Mum says she likes the idea that you should believe without questioning, but she can never quite bring herself to stop wanting to question. It upsets her that they won't discuss anything with her, that they always answer her questions by pointing her to a passage in one of their books. "I don't see why we can't question what is in *their* books," she says. "After all, they didn't write the Bible did they?" She thinks they should show a bit more humility. "Going door to door is all very good," she complains, "but I'd like to

see them get down on their hands and knees a bit more often. Show a bit of humility." We laugh at this. Somehow it seems funny to imagine them on their knees. She is dismissive of them now, on the phone, but, still, I know that the next time they knock on her door she will invite them in, study with them. Deep down, she wants to be like them; she *wants* to have the comfort, the peace of being able to believe unquestioningly, but she can't. Because of this, and because of other reasons, she believes that God will, on her judgment day, "spit her out of his mouth."

Once, mum tells me, God came to her. It was after she had been bargaining with him, pleading with him to fix something in her life. She had promised Him that if he fixed this one thing for her, she would give up smoking. She says she saw a light and felt a sense of peace. She says that God helped, He fixed the thing that had been troubling her. But she never gave up smoking. On the phone she explains this to me. "See," she says, her voice breaking, "it's bad. I failed. I made a promise which I didn't keep, and now I will go to hell." I tell her not to be so silly; I tell her that no God would be that harsh over a few cigarettes. But she is insistent. "You don't break a contract with God," she says. "If you do, mark my words, he'll spit you out of his mouth. That's what he's done to me, spit me out." For her, there is no doubting it.

* * *

You, with your long blank udders
And your calms,
Your spotted linen and your
Slack'ning arms.
With satiated fingers dragging
At your palms.

Your knees set far apart like
Heavy spheres;
With discs upon your eyes like
Husks of tears;
And great ghastly loops of gold
Snared in your ears.

Your dying hair hand-beaten
'Round your head.
Lips, long lengthened by wise words
Unsaid.
And in your living all grimaces
Of the dead.

One sees you sitting in the sun
Asleep;
With the sweeter gifts you had
And didn't keep,
One grieves that the altars of
Your vice lie deep.

You, the twilight powder of
A fire-wet dawn;
You, the massive mother of
Illicit spawn;
While the others shrink in virtue
You have borne.

We'll see you staring in the sun
A few more years,
With discs upon your eyes like
Husks of tears;
And great ghastly loops of gold
Snared in your ears.

(Barnes *Repulsive Women* 26-29)

CHAPTER SIX.: ECLIPSED

Pearl's a Singer:

It is the middle of the summer. Hot. Aila and I have been home over a month. We are sitting in mum's small back garden, having a cup of tea, reading the papers and swatting at the flies. Aila is catching butterflies. All summer there has been talk of death. It is in the papers, on the telly, on the lips of people we meet. There is a certain hysteria in the air. Mum says it's nonsense, fear-mongering so we will buy the newspapers. "Don't believe everything you read," she warns, her finger wagging authoritatively in my direction.[38]

But an astrologist friend that I know in Canada doesn't discount this talk of death so easily. She tells me when she phones that it is because the planets, Mars, Saturn, and Uranus, are forming a triangle. When the eclipse occurs in August, at the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day, the sun and the moon will combine forces to make a Cosmic Cross. I don't know what this means. My friend sighs. "It's making everyone go a little crazy," she whispers in hushed tones. "It's the magnetic forces."

My brother-in-law, Pete, has another theory. He leans on his bar and tells his slightly intoxicated customers that it's the 'Pre-millennium blues.' "It's because everyone thinks they're gonna to die in the New Year anyway," he says dismissively, swigging back his beer. "It's on their minds aint it?" Death.

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[38] For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.

Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, 1798-1805.*

Sitting here now in my mum's back garden, I turn the pages of *The Daily Mail* and read that we are all supposed to die tomorrow. Nostradamus has predicted it. On July 4th, 1999 Nostradamus's prediction will be fulfilled: "A monster will appear in broad daylight."

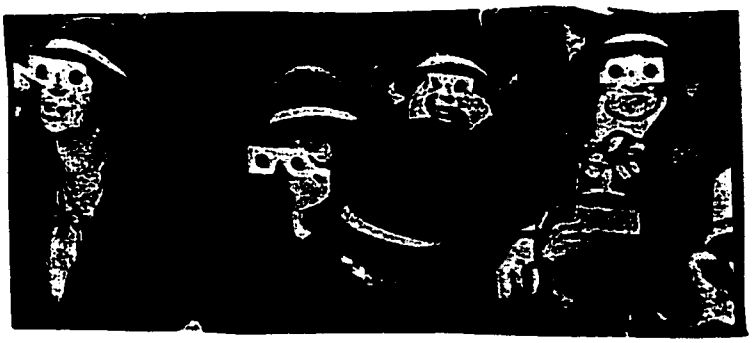
Mum says it wouldn't matter to her. "I couldn't care less" she says, "I've about had it anyway. It's you lot I feel sorry for." As she speaks she draws heavily on an *Embassy*, puffing the smoke out in a quick dismissive thrust from the corners of her mouth.

But we didn't die. Nostradamus was wrong. No monster appeared in broad daylight, no Godzilla stomped across the English countryside, no Saddam Hussein sent his bombs to destroy us. Our time came and went. On the evening of the day we were supposed to die, I went with my sister and six other people from her pub to watch Elkie Brooks in concert at the *Birmingham Botanical Gardens*. She sang *Pearl's a Singer* and my sister stood up and sang along with her. My sister's voice yearned into the cool evening air as she raised a glass of red wine to the Gods and, over the head of her husband, to the man she had fallen in love with.

The *London Philharmonic* were there too. They played *Land of Hope and Glory* over and over again. The irony of it being America's Independence Day made me smile. It was as if the music of England could, if it was played long enough, and loud enough, beat away our good American neighbors: the ones who had introduced us to McDonalds, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Soiling Shakespeare's birthplace. Making us fat. The crowd stood up, they stood up on the grass, on their seats, on the walls of the flower gardens and waved their arms, their scarves, their little Union Jack flags. I stood up with them. For the first time in my life I felt incredibly patriotic, connected to these people as I was, by blood and by birth.

Strange, a whole concert full of people loving their odd connections to each other: their connection to this small Jewish woman with her big voice, and their connection to this land: this land, this green earth that is England, "England's green and pleasant land" (Blake, "Jerusalem"). Stranger yet, a whole nation waiting for an ancient prophesy to be fulfilled: a whole nation waiting to die.

The next morning, a bright Monday, the local papers announce that they were wrong; they mixed the dates up. They failed to take into account, when analyzing Nostradamus's messages, the switch from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. We are now all due to die on August 11th, the date when England is supposed to see a total eclipse. One man is convinced of this. He has even arranged to have his electricity and his gas cut off for the big day. Not that it would matter. The papers tell us that this eclipse will be a once in a lifetime experience.



39

My grandmother must have seen the last total eclipse in England. It happened in June, 1927. My mum must have been two years old then. I have seen pictures of women looking at that eclipse. They are all dressed alike; they all even look alike. They all have

[39] This photograph was taken from *The Daily Mail*, August 11th, 1999. It shows "the British masses" watching the eclipse at Giggleswick in 1927 (41).

overcoats on, they all have hats, they are all looking up at the sun, paper glasses or pieces of colored glass in hand. I think of them as women who are eager to see the moon that traditional female symbol -- throw its celestial shadow over the earth. I think of them as feminists. I cannot help myself. I wonder if my grandmother was with them, in spirit if not in body, as they stood looking up at the divine demise of the patriarchal day.

Mirrors:

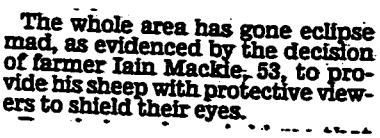
[40]

August 8th, 1999: three days to the eclipse:

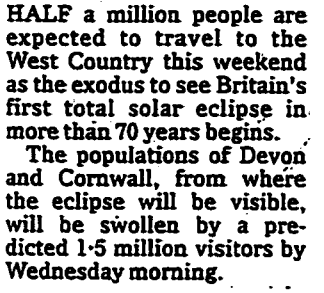
In three days, I am told, there will be a profound change. In three days, the moon will blot out the sun for almost two minutes. During this time, the local newspaper informs me, huge rays of gas will burst from the sun's chromo sphere and rays of colored light will stream across the corona. I anticipate a moment when the world will be plunged into momentary darkness, a moment of awe when man is made aware of his own fragility, of the small part he plays in the scheme of things. At this time, birds may drop from the sky, hens may roost, and cattle may lie down. I may, if I attempt to look at the emerging diamond ring high in the sky, be blinded for a lifetime. I read that people are

[40] Photograph taken from *The Daily Mail*, August 12th, 1999 (3).

buying sunglasses for their pets. I wait and, as I wait, it seems as if the countryside itself is marking time, waiting, silent in its expectation.



The whole area has gone eclipse mad, as evidenced by the decision of farmer Iain Mackie, 53, to provide his sheep with protective viewers to shield their eyes.



HALF a million people are expected to travel to the West Country this weekend as the exodus to see Britain's first total solar eclipse in more than 70 years begins.

The populations of Devon and Cornwall, from where the eclipse will be visible, will be swollen by a predicted 1·5 million visitors by Wednesday morning.

August 9th, 1999, two days to eclipse (or E-Day as my daughter calls it):

The eclipse and the millennium, with all the predictions of disaster and destruction, make me think of Friedrich Nietzsche, expounding and questioning the implications of his theory that "God is dead":

> What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? . . . Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder: Is not night and more night coming on all the while? (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* qtd in Kaufmann 126)

Nietzsche's passage makes me think of the working-class woman's experience. Chained, plunging continually, feeling the breath of empty space. Cold. As Kathleen Woodward informs us, it is the working-class woman who perceives her life as a burden; it is the working-class woman who, aware that her life is "innocent of distinction" (Woodward 3), cries to a God she has trouble believing in, "why, then, was I ever born?" (7). I wonder if my grandmother ever thought this; I wonder if she ever wished, in her life, for death. I think my mum has. But she has never done anything about it. Like

Kathleen, in *Jipping Street*, my mother knew her only real option was to "shut [her] mouth and go on" (151).

Of course, our generation had it easier. We had indoor toilets, washing machines, and we went to school (which my grandmother never did). But underneath all that, I believe little changed: still, it was assumed that we, too, would "shut up and go on". It is, and remains to be, the working-class woman's experience.

August 10th, 1999: one day to E-Day!

I am sick today. Last night we went to my sister's pub to celebrate mum's seventy-fourth birthday. My sister put on a seafood night, charged us sixteen pounds a head. Before supper, before the lobsters were put into the pan of boiling water, they were paraded around the bar by the chef: by the man my sister loves. He slapped one of them down on the table in front of us. It was huge. Red. Its antenna's probed the air and its hard-shelled body twisted and contorted as it tried to make its escape across the shiny surface of the table. Never taking our eyes off it, we picked up our drinks quickly and moved our chairs back. The chef laughed. He had got the reaction he wanted. Mum was the first to recover.

"Ahh, look at it," she sympathized. "Poor thing."

"It's cruel," my sister Maureen bristled, "I wonder if it knows what is going to happen to it? I wonder if it knows it is going to be boiled alive? This must be like torture for it."

"It looks frightened."

Scooping it up off the table, the chef laughed even louder.

"Tasteless," my sister Pat whispered in my ear, her hand over her mouth. "What a

horrible man."

I had to agree.

But the evening went well. We pried the lobsters out of their shells. Ate them. We sang Happy Birthday to mum and washed it all down with champagne and, I think, three bottles of wine. It felt good to be all together as a family again: mum, me, and my three sisters. But today I am so sick I can hardly get up. Everything is an effort. Aila and I are looking after a farm for some friends for a few days while they are away on holiday. They have six horses. One of them is a Clydesdale. Beatrice is her name. She is huge. Today when I am cleaning out her stable, I throw up. I can't help it. She watches me with curious eyes for a few seconds and then returns to eating her hay. Indifferent.

THE TIMES

"Both the eclipse and the millennium are associated traditionally with change," he said. "There is a sense of utopian change, a new age of Aquarius, but also an apocalyptic view. Most people haven't thought it through. They just want to be there."

ED PRYNN, arch druid of Cornwall; suffers from no such confusion. "The eclipse is one of the biggest mystical events of all. The darkness symbolises evil and death, and the light represents rebirth and goodness," he said.

Prynn, whose adherents have been recruited as unofficial guardians of Cornwall's stone monuments, gave an exclusive preview of the "eclipse dance" he has created. The lyrics include: "Wiggle your hips and think of the eclipse. Shuffle your feet and think of the heat."

"That is a reference to the stallion which shuffles its feet before covering the mare," he said. "We will also be performing a fertility dance using home-made heads of a stallion and a mare."

August 11th, 1999, E-Day:

This morning I am reading Hélène Cixous's, *Coming To Writing*. In it she urges women to listen to their bodies:

> As soon as you let yourself be led beyond codes, your body filled with fear and with joy, the words diverge, you are no longer enclosed in the maps of social constructions, you no longer walk between walls, meanings flow, the world of railway explodes, the air circulates, desires shatter images, passions are no longer chained to genealogies, life is no longer nailed down to generational time, love is no longer shunted off on the course decided upon by the administration of public alliances. And you are returned to your innocences, your possibilities, the abundance of your intensities. Now, listen to what your body hadn't dared let surface. (49-50)

I like the idea of opening up to all my possibilities, my abundance of intensities. I like the idea of letting my 'grotesque' working-class body explode. Transmute. Metamorphose into something beautiful. A butterfly? Diverging words? I like the idea that my course in life will not be determined by genealogies, generational time. I like the idea of not having to be the 'proper' working-class woman. The one who my mother was: the good wife; the good mother; the good sewer; the good cook.

This morning I don't cook at all. Aila grabs some cereal and follows news of the eclipse on the telly, while I feed the horses. This morning, I don't let them out into the field. I am told that the eclipse might make them crazy.

French superstition still vies with French logic. Paco Rabanne, the fashion designer, has closed all his shops and gone on holiday after predicting that Mir, the Russian space station, will destroy Paris on eclipse day.

Eleven o'clock in the morning, and my daughter and I rush out into the yard, our solar viewers raised to protect our eyes from the splash of glaring whiteness high in the sky. Amazing that a mere sliver of the sun could light up the sky with such intensity, brilliance. Looking up, we observe the moon's path as it consumes the sun, covering its brightness. The man on the telly tells us that in Northampton, ninety-five percent of the sun will be covered by the moon. We won't experience the moment of totality. We won't experience complete darkness. There will be a shadow. An eerie dusk-like darkness. A strange silence. It will be cold. We watch and we wait.

HUNDREDS of Dracula fans are expected to gather today at one of the real count's former castles at Polenari in the hills of Moldavia. Nicolae Paduraru, the organiser of the event, said: 'We're pretty sure the count will be up and about during the time of the eclipse, and we want to see if he comes home.'

The world doesn't end. There is a gradual shrinking, a darkening, as though a long shadow has been thrown over the world. There is a strange silence. A moment where it feels as though the earth and everything in it is suspended

some people took it all in their stride. "Well, that was good," a middle-aged woman said. "Now, how about a nice cup of tea?"

in space,
connected to life by only
a thin magnetic string. A thought, a strange,
incomprehensive idea.
And then,

gradually, there is a slow brightening. A forgetting? A heralding in of a new day.

My
astrologist friend says
that this eclipse begins a new
age: the Age of Aquarius. The horses
didn't go crazy, they didn't even
lie down. They just kept
eating their
hay like

Astronomers are a hardened bunch, but the return of the sun moved many close to tears.

"I feel like crying," one woman said. "That was very emotional."

nothing was happening.

I tell Aila that we should keep our protective glasses as a souvenir. I smile, try to act big, strong for my daughter, but for some reason I am feeling vulnerable, fragile, small in the scheme of things.[41]

I catch myself thinking that maybe my sister should embrace her affair, grab what happiness she can, while she can. Maybe it is better, as Nietzsche would say, to "live dangerously"(127). If my sister suddenly had to leave it all -- if she had to leave this life -- behind, surely she would cry for herself: for her unrealized ambitions, for her opportunities missed, for a life lived, as her husband would say, in second gear.

response: if it's meaninglessness that awaits us, let us so live as to make it an unjust fate."

[41] In 'the scheme of things,' all of the newspaper clips in this section were taken from either *The Times* or *The Daily Mail* (August 8th – 12th, 1999).

Chapter Eight: Fictions?

IMAGINE a woman.

> Better yet, I'll help you imagine a woman. A woman is 'belle, grosse, féminine, effrontée, charmante, maigrichonne. Pas pire, brillante la petite.' A woman is a blank page upon which these adjectives can be inscribed. Adjective, never noun. Nommée, jamais nom. Object, never subject. 'Other', or 'they', never 'I' or 'we'. Silent, voiceless, a mute muse. A blank space waiting to be filled by my words. Woman is absence. Woman does not exist.
> (Nemeth 57)

Abandoned:

My mum, I think, never got out of first. She was never liberated. Never even aspired to being a feminist. And yet, as a teenager, I listened constantly to her lament what she would have done with her life if she'd had a family, parents, who had paid attention to her, cared, if she'd had a different husband – one who was supportive, encouraging, if she hadn't had us kids holding her back. Stifling her. They were her fictions.

When I read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*, I was struck by the comparison with my own life. To begin with I was envious of the way that her mother's stories had molded her life. Her family's stories were not

necessarily good, nurturing stories, but they did create for her a sense of history, a sense of belonging, a sense of a shared culture and community. I don't feel I ever had that. My dad was an only child and my mum was not close to her brothers and sisters. All of my grandparents were dead by the time I was three years old. I didn't grow up hearing stories about the people, the women in my family. My mother was always too busy; too tired it seemed, to talk much at all. My father was too distant.

This, I suppose, is my own fiction. It is different to my mother's, but it is the same. It allows me to feel abandoned, underprivileged. Absent from the dominant, dare I say (considering that my own father, far from wielding male power, was a passive, relatively impotent figure) patriarchal, narrative.

> It is this dichotomy of presence and absence that is so problematic for women. If we have always been the blank space between the lines, if we have always lived in the margins, we have been absent from text. Our absence as subjects – even in our own writing, as, for example, in the Victorian novel – has made it possible for others to re-present us as object and as adjective, has made it impossible for us to speak for ourselves, to discover our own voices. Representation itself is thus problematic, particularly for women who write and who want to inscribe themselves as subjects 'sans tuer autour', (France Theoret) or without killing everything around them in order to better offer it up, describe it, to their readers. (Nemeth 83)

On using the subjective "I," Joan Didion, writes:

Of course I stole the title for this talk, from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: *Why I Write.* There you have *three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:*

I

I

I

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.* It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions – with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating – but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space. (14)

In doing this writing, then, am I attempting to understand my mother, my father, their background, in relation to myself? Or am I simply killing them off, offering them up for my reader's inspection and dissection in an attempt to present myself as a clearly-known Subject? Strangely, I find myself, in this writing, desiring a certain absence. I am tempted, in my writing, to use the small letter "i". Is this because I do not want to do an injustice to others, or is it because I want to remain small, insignificant? Have I simply grown used to functioning in the margins, invisible, absent, even to myself? Am I more comfortable remaining hidden between the lines, existing only as a subtext to the real story, because I am too ashamed, too shy, too unsure of myself, to speak myself?

Or do I desire a certain absence because I believe that

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

meaning is found not inside the pages of a didactic text, but inside a text that allows meaning to become relational. Meaning, I perceive, is discovered as much within the spaces, the distances, the claustrophobia, and frustration of what is *not* said, as much as it is discovered in what *is* said. We become known and know each other through a community of possibilities, differences. In this way, there is no violence done. Or am I deluded? Am I, as my mother always tells me, merely being "wishy-washy", "airy-fairy"? Of no particular substance at all. Is this my fiction, or hers?

What a sight!

Carolyn Steedman, in *Landscape For a Good Woman*, emphasizes the need for the working classes to begin to tell their own stories:

The fixed townscapes of Northampton and Leeds that Hoggart and Seabrook have described show endless streets of houses, where mothers who don't go out to work order the domestic day, where men are masters, and children, when they grow older, express gratitude for the harsh discipline meted out to them. The first task

is to particularize this profoundly a-historical landscape (and so this book details a mother who was a working-class woman and a single parent, and a father who wasn't a patriarch). And once the landscape is detailed and historicized in this way, the urgent need becomes to find a way of theorizing the result of such difference and particularity, not in order to find a description that can be universally applied (the point is not to say that all working-class childhoods are the same, nor that experience of them produces unique psychic structures) but so that the people in exile, the inhabitants of the long streets, may start to use the autobiographical 'I', and tell the stories of their life. (16)

* * *

And, as an inhabitant of one of those long streets, I know that there *were* stories, real stories, of course there were. There was the story about how mum got run over by a truck, about how she lay there on the road and watched it drive right over the top of her, missing her. And there was the story of how, one night, she went to bed with her candle and tried to read her book under the covers.

Mum has told me this story many times. One day, as a kind of bedtime story, she tells it to Aila:

"There I was reading my book," she says, "when suddenly the candle sets light to the bedcovers and w-h-o-o-s-h, there I was up in flames." She raises her hands, wiggles her fingers, and makes a sizzling noise for emphasis. It works: Aila looks horrified.

"What did you do? What did you do?" Aila jumps up and down excitedly on her bed.

"What was there to do? I screamed so loud I guess that I woke everyone up. My brother, Jim rolled me up in a blanket, I think."

"Did you get all burnt up Grandma?"

"My arm, that was all. I still have the scar. Do you want to see it?"

Aila nods enthusiastically, and mum rolls up the sleeves of her sweater. Here, just below her shoulder, the skin looks more leathery than normal. Here, the skin twists around, makes intricate patterns, small ridges that feel rubbery to the touch. Man-made. Aila and I touch it with our fingers, feel the rigid lines, the deformed skin.

"See how lucky you are to have a mum who cares about you?"

Aila looks up at me, and smiles. I don't get Grandma's logic, but then I often don't. I smile, take the compliment anyway.

"My mum and dad didn't care much, I can tell you. Oh sure, I had a doctor come and take care of my arm every day, but they didn't really care. They didn't pay me much attention at all. They never did. No one bothered with me much."

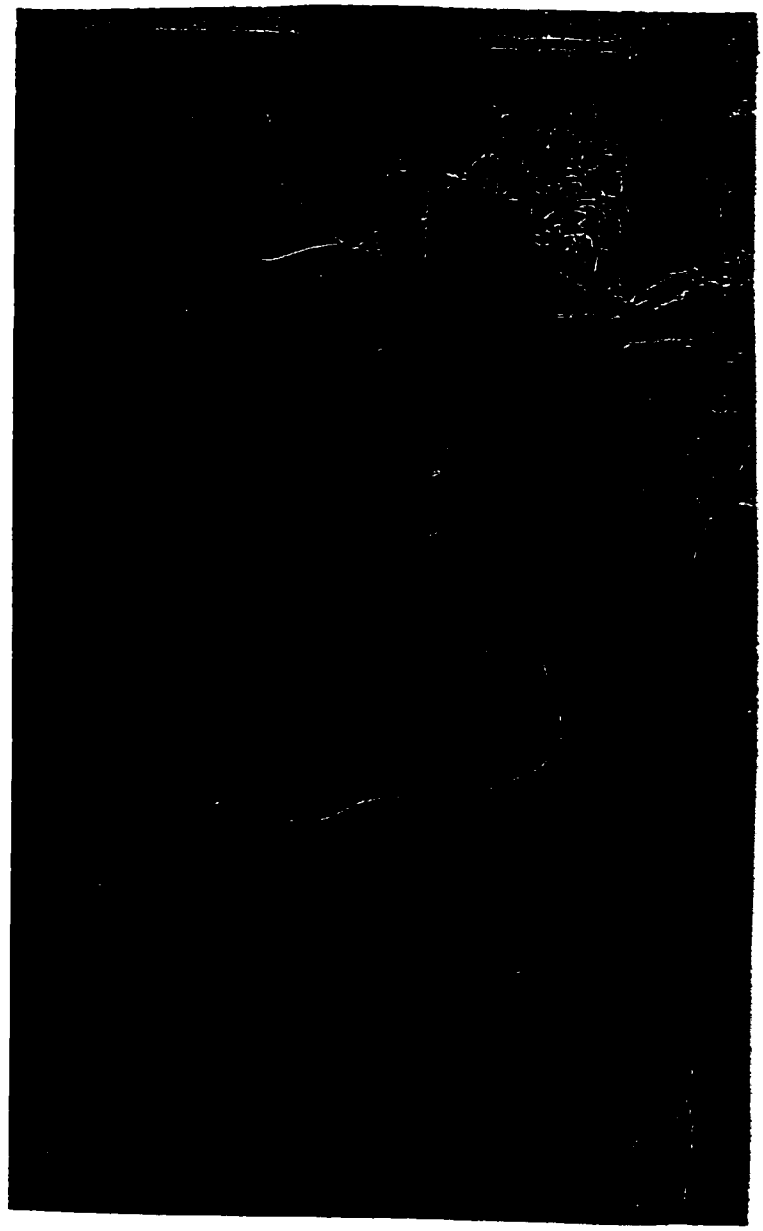
It is a common theme. I am angry. Why does she always have to speak like this? Like a victim. Aila is staring at her, not quite comprehending this new line of thought. I have been subject to these sudden switches, to the over-arching theme, all my life.

"Time to go to sleep," I tell Aila. Time to put all this behind us, I think. Time to move on, for Christ's sake.

* * *

Strategies of writing and reading are forms of cultural resistance. Not only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out (and show that it can be done) . . . they also challenge theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address.

Teresa de Lauretis



Magpie:

Surge, Power,
uplifting of beating
heart
in
flurried wings.
Black against white,
against blue.
And for . . .
what?
And so . . .
I could
have a chance
to spy
this
miracle
unearthed?

Speaking of the effects of the 'newer mass art' (magazines, books) on the working classes, Hoggart writes:

> This regular, increasing and almost entirely unvaried diet of sensation without commitment is surely likely to help render its consumers less capable of responding openly and responsibly to life, is likely to induce an underlying sense of purposelessness in existence . . . Souls which may have had little opportunity to open up will be kept hard-gripped, turned in upon themselves, looking out 'with odd dark eyes like windows' upon the world which is largely a phantasmagoria of passing shadows. (202)

When I am in Canada I invite a friend from university to stay with me. He needs a place to stay for a few days before he heads out west. One time when we are talking he asks me what kind of books the English working-classes read. I'm not sure I know the answer.

I remember that when I was young there was a traveling library that used to come around once a week. I think it was part of a literacy program: their attempt to educate the masses. I used to go to the section marked CHILDREN. I read all of the *Jill's Pony* books. Mum went to the CRIME and ROMANCE sections. Thinking of this, I pick up Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*. He tells me that mum may have read "writing that is in large measure dead, full of trite simile, weak imitation of tough American talk and flatly photographic description" (219). She may have read:

> Lefty went up to Molony and carefully showed him the knife; then let him see it placed against his stomach. Then Lefty pressed gently but firmly like a butcher going into steak. He was still grinning straight into Molony's eyes when Molony let out one rattling scream and sagged. Lefty sniggered then, pulled out the knife and wiped it very carefully. "Now for the dame," he said.[42]

[42] This extract is taken from Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. He does not cite the source, other than saying it is a scene "typical of the crucial scenes in many of these [working class, crime-fiction] novels" (217- 218).

I phone her. She tells me she has always loved Agatha Christie. But she also, as a young woman, loved D. H. Lawrence. I am surprised and impressed. My mother reading literature. I pick up *Women in Love* and open it randomly to page ninety-eight. I imagine her reading the same words as I am reading now:

> A terrible voluptuous thrill ran down her arms – she was going to know her voluptuous consummation. Her arms quivered and were strong, immeasurably and irresistibly strong. What delight, what delight in strength, what delirium of pleasure! She was going to have her consummation of voluptuous ecstasy at last. It was coming.

I smile, but I have to admit that I enjoy Lawrence. He is so incredibly sensuous, so over the top.

"Everyone read him," mum tells me on the phone. "He was big. I think it was all the sex really. The court cases and all that. I guess his books were sort of our version of *Playboy*." She says she liked *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the best. She liked the way the woman rode through the town naked on her horse.

"I always wanted to do that," she says.

For years now, attending the University of Alberta, my reading has been assigned. I read what is good for me. I read literature. I read Shakespeare, Milton, The Brontes, Dickens, Joyce, but I also read Cobbe, Jacobs, Barnes, Kincaid. I read theory more than I read literature.[43] I read Freud, Lacan, Irigaray,

[43] I agree with John Berger: "the true function of the critic is not that of an impresario but that of a poet and thinker combined" (Berger qtd in Dyer 32). I also like his idea that criticism should be "the shadow

Cixous, Kristeva. I read Bahktin, Foucault, Said, Benjamin, Davis, Goffman, and Wendell. I attempt, through my reading, to glimpse the reality behind the phantasmagoria of a consumer-driven society. I attempt to discover, through all my reading, through all my thinking, not how culture informs society, but how the two interact. Lately, I have become interested in autobiographical disability narratives -- Mairs, Brown, Reeves – and I am attempting to discover, through my reading, how normalcy is constructed. How the disabled body is figured within that construction and how it, in turn, challenges the dominant culture.

* * *

In labeling the disabled, are we not also advertising their difference, their inferiority, their deviance, their inability to fill the prototype of attractiveness and usefulness dictated by a consumer-capitalist society? Are we not saying, then, that this image and, by extension, this person may, like an old, defective toy, be discarded? Thrown out with the garbage when it is no longer of any use.

In General

What alter cloth, what rag of worth
Unpriced?
What turn of card, what trick of game
Undiced?
And you we valued still a little
More than Christ.

(Barnes, *Repulsive Women* 17)

* * *

Ultimately, though, all my reading and all my writing indicate only an attempt to find myself.

---

preceding the body" (32). It appeals to my idealistic sense that the work the critic performs in theory should be put to some practical use in the real world of actual experience.

Ladybugs:

My story is about a child. A small child. She is scooping ladybugs, small tender bodies, from the crumbling crevices in her garden wall and she is singing the ladybug song: "ladybug, ladybug, fly away home / your house is on fire, your children are gone . . ." She perches one of them on the end of her finger and blows. It flies away. Behind her, a pudgy teenager bikes by, intent on delivering the morning papers to people barely awake, and one door down, leaning against the small triangular-topped wall that surrounds her house, an overweight matronly figure waits patiently for people to emerge from their houses. She wants to talk to someone. Communicate. The child ignores her. She scoops out another ladybug from its hiding place, watches it as it flies away, up and over the wall, disappearing into the cool morning air. She wants to get up and, like the ladybug, fly away. But she cannot move. The cold concrete below her, the towering, redbrick buildings above and to the side of her, hold her fixed. This is home. This is where she belongs.

* * *

A Trip To The Fair:

There was, I remember, the story mum told about her inability to make decisions. Mum re-tells me this story one day when Aunt Joan is over visiting:

-- I think I was around seven or eight at the time.

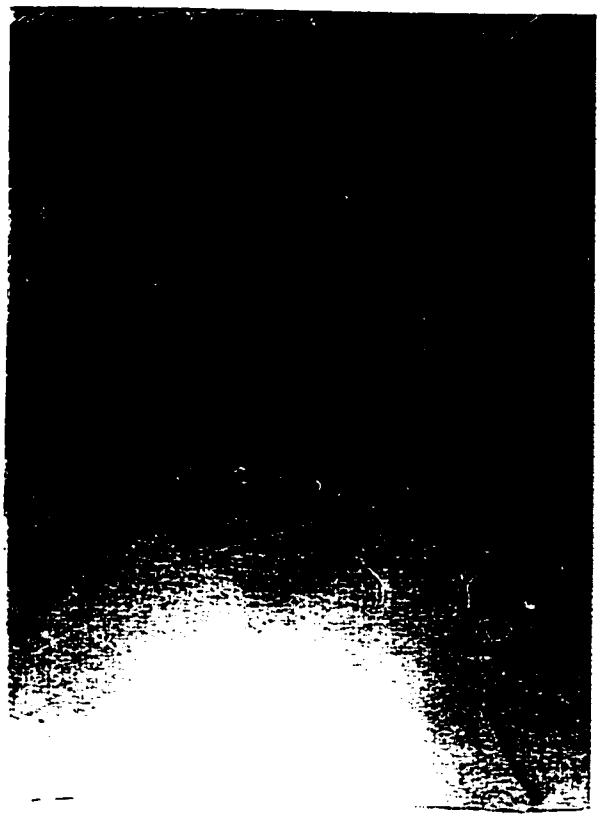
-- Somewhere around that. Sid, mum's brother, your great uncle, was just back from Canada.

-- He went there when he was fifteen. Jumped on a boat and went.

-- Emigrated. They were dying to get them there in those days. He worked on a farm. Somewhere in the prairies, I think. He ended up looking after a house for a woman when her husband died, but in the end she died too and the house was sold (A pause). Of course, then he was out of work wasn't he?

-- Was that when he came back to England?

-- Nah! (a snort in my direction), he came back because he had to. Got deported for stealing. But it was a shame. When he did come back, he got sick.



-- He had trouble with his bowels. (Aunt Joan shuffles in her seat, looks uncomfortable, leans towards me.)

-- It was his back passage. You know, he had one of the first operations that they used freezing on. Lot of good it did him though (a glance at my mother). It was after that operation that he came to visit us.

-- I wish he hadn't. He did look good though. No one could have known.

-- He'd been depressed though,

hadn't he? I remember him telling our mam that.

-- How would I remember Joan? I was so young then. I was only a kid.

-- Well get on with the story Moll, we don't have all day (Mum glares at Aunt Joan, looks irritated).

-- Alright, alright (she turns to me). He offered to take me out you see. He told our mam that he wanted to take me because I was the prettiest one. Of course, I didn't think so, but I was thrilled. He gave me a choice. He said 'choose the fair or the pictures.' He said, 'pick one.' And so I did. I picked the fair. There was one on in St. James's end – a big one. I had been dying to go to it.

-- He didn't give the rest of us that choice though, did he?

-- Well it wasn't my fault was it? She's jealous, you see. Jealous that he picked me and not her. He said he wanted to take the prettiest one, and that was me. Anyway Joan, you make it sound like I deliberately left you out. It wasn't me, you know. It was him. I couldn't argue. I was only a kid at the time. I just went along with it. Besides, I was pleased to get some attention for once. And you have to admit that I didn't get much of that (Aunt Joan bristles in her seat, but she is silent, and mum straightens her back, continues). Well, he took me there alright and we had a grand old time. I wore my favorite hat, a bright pink Tammy. I remember that. And I held his hand all the way to the grounds, and all the way back again. He had bought me some sivvings and . . .

-- They are the bits that fall off sweets. You know, in the jar like? (I nod)

-- They were so good.

-- It just goes to prove that you never know what is going to happen do you? He took her home you see, and went off and did away with himself. Put his head in the oven.

(Mum gets up at this point and makes us a cup of tea. She comes back with it on a tray. I notice that her hands are shaking.)

-- The awful thing was that our mam was really upset. She blamed me. She told me it was my fault. She said I killed him because I picked the fair. She said he killed himself because I had made him spend all his money.

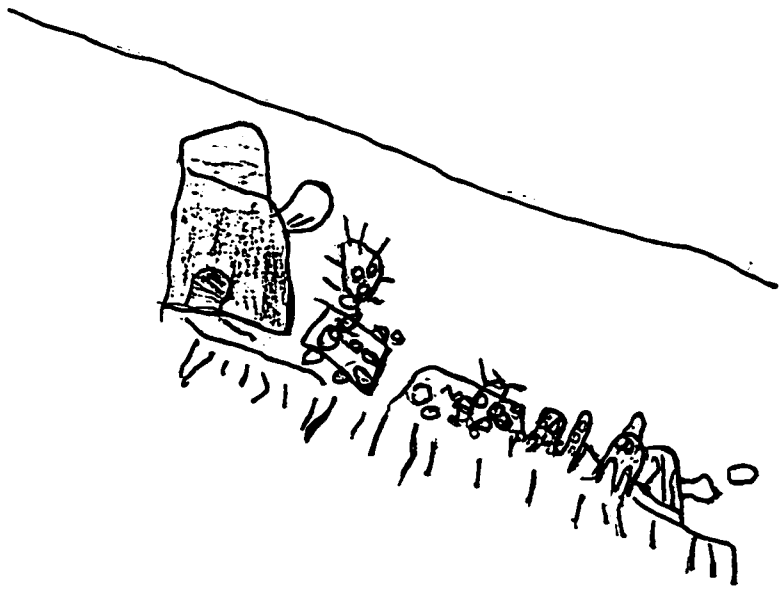
-- That's horrible.

-- I've never been able to make a decision since then.

-- Not if she can help it, she don't (Aunt Joan laughs loudly, but nervously).

-- I wouldn't even go up and see Joan with you kids when Alf refused to drive. Your dad told me that you kids would catch pneumonia in the rain. I couldn't stand the thought of it actually happening, so I didn't go. I stayed home.

-- Phuut (Aunt Joan snorts, having to have, as mum would say, the last word).



This incident reminds me of the film, *Sophie's Choice*. In this film, Sophie, who is standing in the middle of a train station, has to choose which of her children she will give to the German soldiers. He quotes her a line from the Bible, "suffer all the children to come unto me." He is smiling as he says it. In effect, she has to choose which one of her children will live or die. She picks the boy. She watches him walk away to his death. When the war is over, she has to live with her guilt. It destroys her.

* * *

When I am living in the Yukon, a native woman and I sit around and drink coffee together. She tells me how, when the white people first came to her village, they told the parents that they had to choose which one of their children would be sent away to school. They tell the parents that this is a gift. They tell them that this child will become civilized. "Pick one," they command. 'L' tells me that her parents picked her. At this point, in the telling, 'L' is upset. "Why me?" she asks as she looks down at her swollen, arthritic hands, "I could never understand that. I was only eight years old. Why me?"

She remembers that they herded the kids into a big straw-covered cart pulled by two horses and set off for Whitehorse. It was the middle of winter and it took them three days to get there. Imagine, she says, thirty odd kids, crying for their moms and only the straw to keep them warm. She said that when they arrived they were treated like animals. "They took the hose to us." She sighs, remembering. "They said we had fleas." She didn't see her parents for over five years. When she did see them she couldn't speak their language.[44]

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[44] *David Perkins, in his introduction to the works of William Blake, states that Blake "believed human sacrifice to be the basis of social organization" (37).*

Surtout ne pas s'arrêter ne / pas s'accrocher / le charme jeté
L' écriture rompue / ni fiction ni théorie / coïncidence /
Patatonique / maintenue a son point de surimpression / laisser faire

Above all not to stop not / to hold on
to / the spell cast the written word
breaks free / neither fiction nor theory
/ coincidence / patatonic / maintained
at its point of superimposition / let go.

Mc Murray 30

Visiting:

Visiting man. In Ostend. Thinking of long, slow month. Drinking. Laughing. Dancing in Germany at October fest. Kissing and finding out that he. Fired. Devastating. But not hopeless. Deciding to hitchhike around Europe. Belgium, Holland, Germany, France. Ditching suitcases. Leaving. France was the best. But disappointing. Paris not what expected. Lost. Sleeping in bathroom. On cold floor. Never knew floors so hard. Looking for Monmatre and being accosted by small man who wants to show us good time. Women and men. Women and women. Oh la la. Big bucks, we didn't have. Leaving Paris. Having been offered ride to St. Tropez by journalist man met in sleazy bar. Nearly empty. Drinking freshly squeezed lemons. Etienne. His name. Very tall and dark. Wavy hair. Smile. I going weak at knees. Driving through French Alps. I thinking he beautiful. He teaching us. How to drink Espresso, Absinthe. How to smoke French cigarettes that smelt like shit. But cool. Living in St. Tropez without Etienne. On the beach. Eating French bread and tomatoes. Big ones. Drinking cheap French wine. A dollar a bottle. Penniless and fighting. Deciding to catch ride. To England. Saying goodbye on busy road. And him returning to wife. Revitalized.[45]

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[45] This section was inspired by Gail Scott's *My Paris*. She, herself, was inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin.

Let go of all structure. Embrace, Fragmentation.

In language. In body. If only for a while. A short while.

I Am Not One Of The[46]

I am not one of the physically challenged –

I'm a sock in the eye with a gnarled fist
I'm a French kiss with cleft tongue
I'm orthopedic shoes sewn on a last of your fears

I am not one of the differently abled –
I'm an epitaph for a million imperfect babies left untreated
I'm an ikon carved from bones in a mass grave in Tiergarten, Germany—
I'm withered legs hidden with a blanket

I am not one of the able disabled –
I'm a black panther with green eyes and scars like a picket fence
I'm pink lace panties teasing a stub of milk white thigh
I'm the Evil Eye

I'm the first cell divided
I'm mud that talks
I'm Eve I'm Kali
I'm the Mountain That Never Moves
I've been forever I'll be here forever
I'm the Gimp
I'm the Cripple
I'm the Crazy Lady

I'm The Woman With Juice

Cheryl Marie Wade (1987)

[46] Poem printed in The Disability Studies Reader. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. In a footnote, Wade states that the poem is dedicated "to all my disabled sisters, to the activists in the streets and on the stages, to the millions of Sharon Kowalskis without a Karen Thompson, to all my sisters and brothers in the pits, closets, and institutions of enlightened societies everywhere" (408).

It is painful to watch Jordan walk. His whole body is stiff, tense. It is a penguin's walk, an injured penguin's walk. He is unsteady. He shakes. His arms, bent at the elbows, stick out in front of him like two broken wings. His legs spread wide apart, do not bend at the knees. He makes small, shuffling steps. The weight of his body is centered not over the soles of his feet, but over the inside edge. It has deformed them. Big, bony protrusions twist his feet outwards and his big toes bend back over the other ones. Crossed. Red. I take those feet in my hands. Massage them, soothe the straining tendons, the sore spots with olive oil, emu oil, tea-tree oil. I want him to know that he is loved. Every part of him.

[47]

It is spring in Canada. The snow has gone, the trees are budding, the birds are singing. I walk to the coffee shop in Morinville and, as I walk, I can smell the earth coming alive. I breathe deeply. Inhale, exhale, inhale. A neighbor drives by me in her car and waves at me. I wave back, make a mental note to remember that I have promised to take the kids – hers and mine – swimming this weekend. I arrive at the coffee shop, drink my latte, take out my notebook and write: *I have aspirations of becoming a writer, a university teacher, a researcher.* I put a star by this sentence. It is important to me.

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[47] "Balmoral boot with sunburst motif, c 1920. Made by Dorr & Jackson, Kettering, Northamptonshire." Published for *The Northampton Museums and Art Gallery*.

[48]

Women's fictions raise theoretical issues: women's theorizing appears as/in fiction. Women's writing disturbs our usual understanding of the terms fiction and theory which assign value to discourses. Detached from their ordinary contexts, established meanings become suspect. By inciting the reader to rethink her/his presence within that "social reality" women writers effect a disturbance in those constructions that work at keeping us all in our "proper" places. (Godard 4)

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[48] The writer who is me looks at the page. Print. Black-on-white. She thinks she needs a picture or a document. Picking one up she centers it, moves it around. It is a picture of her mother and her kids – Aila and Jordan – and their cat and dogs. The writer is taking the picture. Her eye is to the lens. She thinks that the streets look wide here in Morinville, in Canada. She is used to narrowness, to bricks not wood. Satisfied with the picture, she attaches the sticky tape, presses it into place. A stray hair from her head falls on to the picture. It is brown. She blows it off and watches as it curls in the air, falls like a question mark on to her kitchen table.

A country house, by the sea, painted white. Surrounded by wild roses and butterfly bushes. I would like to live there. I fantasize sitting inside this house at a desk, writing. As I write, the smell of yellow roses wafts in through the window, and I sit for a while and listen to the roar of the sea. I can feel all around me the strength of the ages, the strength born out of old wood and stone. Resilience. It inspires me. This house reminds me of something half-remembered. Something about myself that I have forgotten. I think that if I can only walk through that gate, walk along that path to the front door, walk through those cool, spacious rooms that I do not know by sight, but feel in every bone in my body, I will begin not to live in this place, but to inhabit it. It is 'I' who is embedded in the stone walls, the overflowing vegetation, the straight and narrow path. As Barthes notes in Camera Lucida, inhabiting this place will involve a "double movement" (40): a certain voyaging out, and a coming home, a return to all that I know is me. And then there will be peace.

Chapter Nine: Spaces

Holes:

49

After her mum died, mum stayed home for a while. She was fifteen. The war had been on for a year. Northampton didn't see much action. There was nothing much to bomb there, so life went on pretty much as normal. Uncle Jim was still living at home, working at cleaning the rubble up downtown. He was hoping that in a few months, when he turned eighteen, he would be able to join the Marines. Uncle Ted had already joined up, but he was de-mobbed for being a 'nuisance'. Mum told me he fought too much. He also (with the Krey twins) stole some kitchen supplies, food and the like. For this he was doing time somewhere up in Scotland. Three months for bad behavior. Mum's older sister, Joan was working in Coventry in the 'munitions factories. Coventry got bombed a lot -- they had three major raids that went a long way towards leveling the town -- but the people flocked there to work because the money was good.

When mum was sixteen she had an argument with her dad and left home. He owed her some money and one day she went to his tin where he kept his betting winnings and took it. She bought herself some new shoes with it, but when he found out he went

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[49] Wheelwright Julie. "Women Gain Their Wings." *History Magazine*. June, 2000. Vol. 1: 2. 20-21. What strikes me about my relationship to this picture is my desire to romanticize it; to make it seem more noble than it actually was.

crazy. He tried to strangle her. She went to Coventry to live with Aunt Joan and got a job working at a factory riveting airplanes. At this time, Aunt Joan had left the 'munitions factory and was working in a massive factory on Banner Lane. She was on a production line making cylinders and cranks for Hercules engines. She earned sixteen pounds a week, a fortune in those days she told me.

Aunt Joan and Mum remember the bombs there. Every night they listened to them falling through the air, exploding. They said you knew when one had landed because the chandeliers would jingle. It was something to watch for. Aunt Joan remembers how a friend narrowly escaped being blown up. He had been guarding an unexploded bomb when a friend offered to relieve him. He took him up on it. He went off for a few moments, got himself a cup of tea and came back, only to find that the bomb had exploded while he had been away. There was no bomb and no friend left. Just a big hole where he had been.

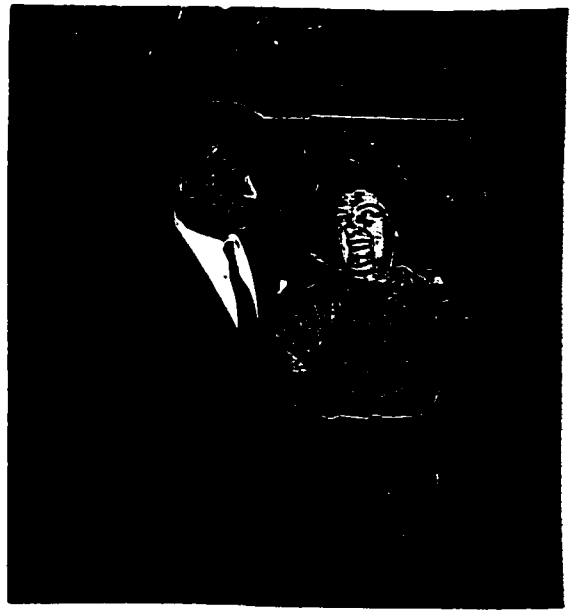
RUNWAYS:

Northampton never saw bombing like that. The most exciting thing was when a plane came down in the center of the town at the top of Gold Street.

When we are downtown my Aunt Joan points out the deep grooves in the sides of the buildings. "That is where the plane scraped," she says, "just before it

blew up." She tells me it was like Guy Fawkes' night that night. Fireworks, in the form of exploding bullets, were going off all night. . . . I also heard the tale about the German pilot who landed in the middle of the Racecourse. Aunt Joan said you could see the outline of his body in the ground where he landed.

"Poor man." she says.



Dance Halls:

Mum returned to Northampton just before Christmas. She was seventeen. That was when she met my dad. She met him at *The Embassy*, a dance hall. It was a small place on the second floor above *Burton's*, the men's outfitters. There was a small band, she said, which played Glen Miller and Joe Loss with enthusiasm, if not the best skill. The place was packed, mum said. She had been doing the jitterbug with some of the Yanks -- because they were the only ones who could do it well -- when she had seen him. He was standing in the doorway, tall, dark and handsome in his sailor's suit and sailor's cap, cocked saucily to one side. He had come in late with some friends after he had done his round at the pubs and he caught mum's eye immediately. He noticed her too; he asked her to dance. She accepted. They did the quickstep. Mum laughs now, when she tells me this. She says he was confident, a ladies man, a good talker. He spun her around on the

floor and she attempted to follow him, stepping on his feet as she went. She says she felt foolish.

She tells me now that he invented his own steps. The truth, she says, came out later when, in their forties, they had taken ballroom dancing lessons. Laughing now, as she tells me this, she imitates the pompous voice of their dancing instructor, "Are you inventing those steps Mr. Smart?" I laugh too, but I also know that she got her own back. She never let him, or any of us, forget that it was dad who was the terrible dancer, not her. On their first meeting, though, she didn't say anything to him about his dancing. She stumbled around the dance floor after him and, at the end of the night, she let him walk her home, kiss her on her doorstep.

Stairway to the Stars:

When I am home in the summer we go around the pubs, the ones that my mom and dad frequented during the war. One night mum and I go to one called *The Shipman's* with my sister Toni and two of her girlfriends, Rose and Susan. It is in *The Drapery*, the old bus depot, in the center of town. It is an old pub, small and dark. People are crowded around the bar. I order a beer, but the others drink wine. We take a seat against the wall at the back. Mum looks around, turns up her nose, at what I'm not sure.

"You should have seen this place in the war," she leans over and tells me, "It was so packed you couldn't move."

In the war, the place was full of yanks, mum says. They were sent to Northampton whenever they were on leave because it was considered a safe place.

"The Yanks were very popular with the girls," mum remembers. "The yanks weren't rationed you see. They always had lots of cigarettes. *And* they had an *unlimited* supply of sweets and silk stockings." Unconsciously running her hand up her leg, she continues, "We would crave after real silk stockings. It saved having to draw a line up the back of our legs."

We are all curious about this. She stands up, shows us the back of one of her legs, and pretends to draw a line up it. "Instant stockings," she laughs.

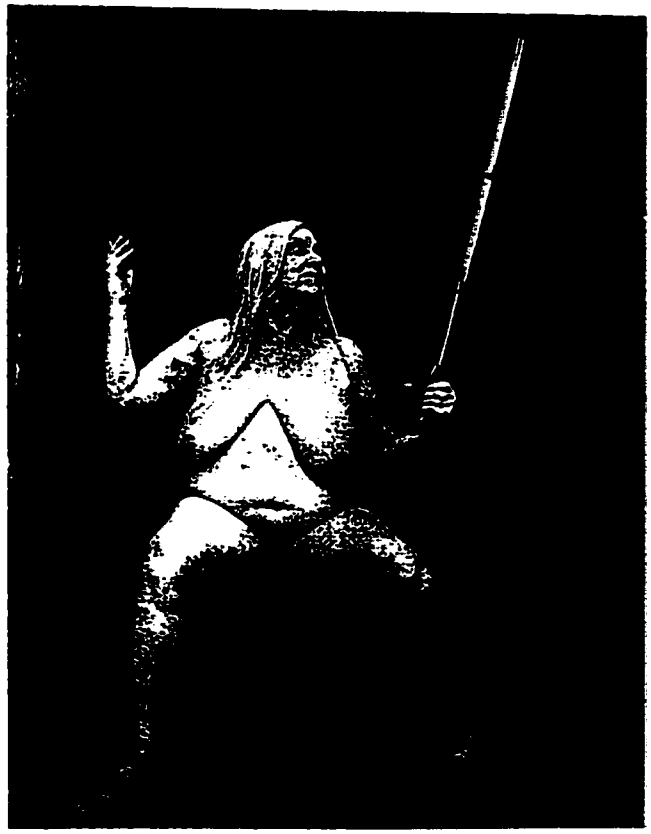
"I bet those legs could dance in your time?" Rose asks. Mum laughs and jiggles them under the table, rocking her body back and forth, and waving her arms about in a mock Charleston. Susan slaps Rose on the leg. "Don't tease," she says. Rose and Susan are an item. They live together. My sister says they are the happiest couple she knows. Even though Toni, mum, and myself are self-declared heterosexuals, there is a feeling of camaraderie here. Like we are all women in this together. Like we all have a vested interest in sharing each other's memories, each other's perceptions. I like this.

Rose is loud and brash. She is in her fifties, a small, rosy- cheeked woman, who looks like a smaller version of the Michelin man. She is also a lot of fun. She starts to whistle an old Glen Miller song, *Stairway to The Stars*, and mum joins in. Together they sing:

> Let's build a stairway to the stars
> A lovely stairway to the stars
> It would be heaven to climb to heaven with you.

They laugh, leaning over towards each other in their seats, mum ending with a cough that has her bent double, wheezing and red in the face.

"The war was great," she smiles when she recovers, still wiping away her cough-induced tears, "there was this feeling of camaraderie, a feeling that we had to make the best of everything. You know, pull together, celebrate while we could, all that kind of thing." She tells us that the pubs were fun. At night, when they closed the black-out curtains, everyone would pile in. "We had a right time, singing and dancing," she says. She tells us that they served beer in pickling jars because there was a shortage on glasses. But often, she says, they would even run out of beer. "The sign would go up," she laughs, "then we'd all leave and make our way down the street to another pub. One that did have beer. You know The Queen's, The Rodney, The Bear." She says that when the Klaxons -- the sirens -- went off, everyone would run, beer in hand, for the shelters. "Some of them would sit in there and play cards all night."



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[50] Photo by Jacqueline Hayden; rpt. in Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory." *Writing on The Body*. Eds. Katie Conboy et al., New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 318-336.

Chapter Ten: Bodies

Wombs:

It seems as though we often talk about the Yanks. Mum told me a couple of her best friends married them and went to live in the States. One of them still lives there. She is happily married, and she has three children. She came back to England several years ago and mum met her. She said it was like they had never been apart. They had chatted until the early hours of the morning. Another of mum's friends had gone to live in Canada with the soldier who had got her pregnant. Only when she got there she found out that he already had a wife. He supported mum's friend though, helped her raise their child, and kept her as his mistress for over forty years. When he died she came back to live in Northampton. She came back to her old roots, to her childhood home, to her first friends. She is happy, comfortable.

But there were other stories that did not have such happy endings. Mum told me about her friend, Karen. This girl had got herself pregnant as a teenager by one of the Yanks. He went back to war, or to the States, and she was left alone. Getting pregnant out of wedlock was a serious thing then. It was a disgrace. It just wasn't done. This girl, who didn't dare tell her family, decided to get the baby aborted. She found out about a certain Mrs. Eels, a back-street abortionist, and she went to see her.

Mum wasn't sure how this woman did it. She wasn't sure if she put some kind of metal stick up inside her or if she inserted a thing called Slippery Elm up into her womb. She'd heard of both ways. On the street it was said that either way would result in

aborting the unwanted baby. It makes me feel sick, uncomfortable. I want to tell her I don't want to hear this. I don't know what Slippery Elm is, I don't know what it would do, I don't want to know what it would do, but I say nothing. I keep quiet. She tells me that her friend died. She doesn't mention the baby.

Is that semen on your dress?[51]

I think back to my own teenage years. To the boys I knew. When I was a teenager in the seventies, there were no Yanks to jitterbug us across the floor or charm us with silk stockings and sweets. There were Skinheads and Greasers. The Skinheads wore white socks, black leather Loafers, and long, black, woolen, Crombie coats. They cut their hair short, but not too short. They prided themselves on looking smart. Next to the Greasers they looked positively wholesome. The Greasers were the motor-bikers, they were scruffy and greasy looking. They had long hair, wore knuckle-dusters, and carried bike chains. The Skinheads listened to Motown and the Greasers listened to heavy metal. Certain pubs in the town belonged to the Skinheads; certain pubs belonged to the

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[51] Virginia Woolf, in her autobiographical writing, *Moments of Being*, recounts a scene in the house she shared with her sister Vanessa at 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury:

> " It was a spring evening. Vanessa and I were sitting in the drawing room. . . . Suddenly the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr. Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress
>
> "Semen?" he said.
>
> Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good" (196).

Greasers. You knew them by the music that was being played. If Judas Priest was blaring out of the doors it was Greaser territory; if Marvin Gay or Diana Ross and The Supremes were playing it was a Skinhead pub. At this time I don't think that the Skinheads were affiliated with the Nazi movement. At least none of the ones we knew were. Most of them liked football. But the Skinheads and the Greasers had regular fights. We were never involved, but occasionally we would sneak up and, from the safety of a cold, dank doorway, watch them. The boys we fancied were the ones who fought well. They were also the ones who were loudest in the pubs, the ones who thought they owned the place, and all the girls in there.

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at a cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.
Berger, *Ways of Seeing* 46

When I was sixteen I fell in love with one of them. I had already left home by then. Like my mum, I left home at fifteen. I went to work with horses in Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire. It was a two-hour drive away. I met him one evening when my girlfriends and I had decided to go to a dance in town. His name was Ian. He was a skinhead of sorts. Only he wasn't a fighter. He wouldn't have been one of the ones I would have fancied, if I could have helped it. But I couldn't. Again, like my mum and dad, we met in a dance hall. Only there was no big band. There was disco music and a big disco ball that threw little round flashing lights over all the walls. It was instant love.

The class

speaks

with the words we utter

and we proletarians

push the pen.

The soul-machine

wears out,

begins to splutter.

They tell us:

"your place

now

is on the shelf."

There's ever less love,

less bold innovation,

time

strikes my forehead a running blow.

There comes

the most terrifying depreciation,

the depreciation of heart and soul . . .[52]

Chemical attraction, I suppose. I swore at the time though that everything stopped, came to a standstill, as we stood there across the room looking at each other. He wasn't the first person I'd had sex with. But he was the first person I'd been in love with that I'd had sex with. It was a messy affair. We did it on his mother's sofa when his mum and dad were down the pub having a drink. We were both self-conscious, shy. He ejaculated prematurely and left a lump of milky-gray liquid on his mother's cushion. He got upset because he couldn't wash off the stain. It was unpleasant. We didn't stay together. How could we? We were only sixteen, and we wanted different

[52] Mayakovsky, Vladimir. "Talking With The Taxman About Poetry." Trans. Peter Tempest. Perf. Billy Bragg. *Talking With The Taxman About Poetry*. London, 1986.

things. He wanted me to marry him, raise his kids, live the life my mother had lived, and I, at that time, wanted to be a steeplechase jockey. Incompatible. I moved to another job in Herefordshire, five or six hours away, to work with steeplechasers. We said we'd write. He did, and I didn't.

But my mum and dad did all their courting by letter. She said that he wrote her every day. She said that she thought they were love letters from a brave and dashing man. She didn't keep any of them. When I ask her what they talked about, she can't remember.

"Did you discuss the war?" I ask.

"Oh no," she replies, "we didn't talk about things like that."

Mostly, she tells me, they talked about how much they missed each other. They made plans to be together.

"It was like that in those days," she tells me, "you did things quick because you didn't know if they'd still be there in six months, two months time." She looked dreamy eyed for a moment. "The war intensified everything," she said.

If a copy of this Form is required,
Form S. 1243 is to be used.

S.—459 (Revised—August, 1939).

CERTIFICATE of the Service of

SURNAME. (In Block Letters)	CHRISTIAN NAME OR NAMES.
SMART	Hired Albert

in the Royal Navy.

Cut along here.

NOTE.—The corner of this Certificate is to be cut off where indicated if the man is discharged with a "Bad" character or with disgrace, or if specially directed by the Admiralty. If the corner is cut off, the fact is to be noted in the Ledger.

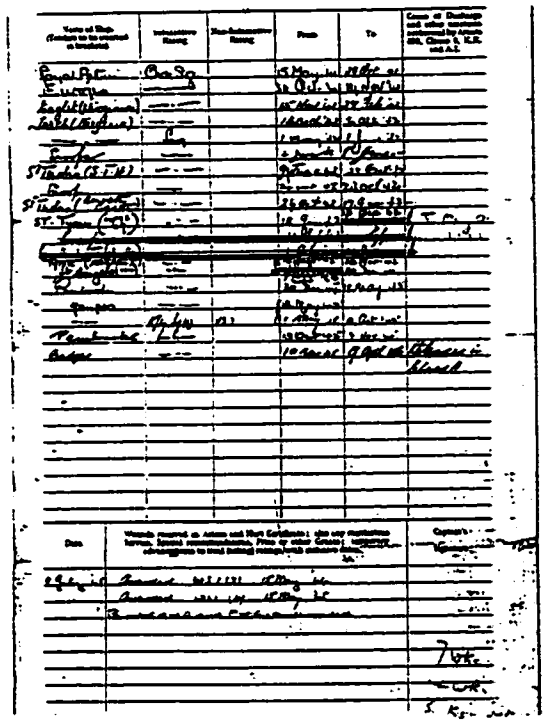
In The Skin of a Sailor:

I once thought of joining the Legion. I heard it would be a good support for people such as myself: a new immigrant alienated from home and family. In order to join, however, I needed to present the Legion with my dad's war-time Certificate of Service in the Royal Navy, and his discharge papers. These papers, now browned and brittled by time and stale air, were evidence of my father's desire to belong to the country of his birth: evidence of his idealism. In my hands, they were evidence of my abdication from the country of my birth, as well as my desire to belong to a country where my hold, at best, was tentative: where I knew few people, and where even fewer people knew me. It was eighteen years since I left England, seventeen years since my father died.

Description of Person	Stature		Chest, In.	Colour of			Marks, Wounds, and Scars
	Feet	In.		Hair	Eyes	Complexion	
On Entry as a Boy							
On advancement to man's rating, or on entry under 28 years.....	5	10½	35½	Dark Brown	Brown	Fresh	Scar R iliac crest
On re-engagement or re-entry for C.S. or for Non-C.S. after attaining 28 years.....							

When I got my father's wartime papers in the mail, I read the details over and over again. I found myself looking through old photographs, staying up late at night reconciling myself to the man who spoke to me between the lines of his wartime papers and the man I knew as my father. I still thought about joining the legion. I still thought about finding

a sense of community: a people joined by the common bond of past glory, a people joined by acts of courage and valor, cowardice and cruelty, adventure and, of course, banality. But now I also thought about my father.



From what I heard, my father's experiences in the war were of the banal kind. He sailed month after month without seeing another ship, let alone any action. He was a signalman, so I presume this meant that he had very little to do, but I could be wrong. How can I presume to know his experiences, his moments of courage and cowardice? I do know that in his six years of service he worked on many ships, stood on many decks, and saw many seas. Listed in his service record are the names of the ships he served on: The Royal Arthur, The Europa, The Eaglec, The Torch, The Saint Angelo, The Pembroke, and The Badger. So many iron hulls washed by so much water. The Captains' names are also in those documents, embedded in the bureaucracy: indecipherable scrawls that spoke, all too clearly, of their flourishing authority and their Kurtz-like desire to conquer new lands. My father was no captain, no Kurtz, but he did achieve the distinction of going from Ordinary Signalman to Signalman -- with honors. These were the facts. The rest is a mystery; I can only make suppositions.

* * *

There is a black-and-white movie that I loved to watch as a child. Mum tells me it was called *The Cruel Sea*. It was action-packed. Heroic. Suspenseful. Over the phone, mum tells me that Stanley Baker played the leading role. "He was a big name in those days," she says. I can't say I know who he is. She tells me that he was a very handsome man, a good actor. In a scene in this movie a German submarine is juxtaposed against the silent hulks of two British ships floating silently, massively, on the sea above it. The ships, which are carrying food from the United States to England, pick up the submarine on their radar. Panic. Men dressed in black sailor's uniforms sound the alarm, call for the ship to begin her evasive zigzagging pattern. One sailor raises his eyes to look at the steel-blue sky.

Suddenly, one of the ships is torpedoed. Explosions, noise, screams, as the ship lurches, shakes, slowly sinks. Men are in the water, floundering. Shouting for help. The other ship moves in, the men think it is going to help them. They shout louder. "Here, here!" But the ship doesn't help them. Its orders are to bomb the submarine. It drops depth charges above where the submarine lies. They fall on to the men in the water. Deep down in the ocean the submarine explodes. A great whoosh of seawater rises into the air. The men disappear. When all is quiet and still again, bodies and parts of bodies float on the cool, blue water.

* * *

I am thankful that my father's experiences in the war were of the banal kind. I am relieved when my mother tells me my father saw little or no action. I am grateful that he came back in one piece, that he never participated in, or was witness to, any of the atrocities or any of the senseless killings that comes with war. When I think of dad, I do not imagine him engaged in battle, heroically struggling up the slopes of some distant,

shelled-shocked beach. I imagine him instead standing alone on an island, a quiet rock resting in the middle of the ocean. I see him on deck, his profile poised above the little black Morse code machine, or silhouetted in the dark against a tropical sky. I can only guess how he felt as his youthful, uniformed body strutted across strange shores and new lands. And I can only dream of him smiling as he lay in his bunk thinking of home.

A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence.
(Berger, Ways of Seeing 45)

Chapter Eleven: Marriage

"Yes," said Hermione slowly – "I think you need a man – soldierly, strong-willed -- " Hermione held out her hand and clenched it with rhapsodic intensity. "You should have a man like the old heroes – you need to stand behind him as he goes into battle, you need a man like the old heroes – you need to stand behind him as he goes into battle, you need a man physically strong, and virile in his will, not a sensitive man --"
(Lawrence 287)

Al' and Pat:

Mum and dad were married in the town-hall registry office three months after they first met. It had been raining. Mum remembers this because her gray-wool skirt suit got so wet that all the way through the ceremony and all the way through the small tea that dad's parents put on for them, she felt damp, wet, uncomfortable. My dad wore his naval uniform. Black sailor's cap, white square shoulders. They signed the registry: Alfred Albert Smart and Mollie Eileen Brockliss. Up until now, and for years after, they called each other by their assumed names: Al and Pat. I asked mum why they did this and she said simply that they liked their other names better.

There are no photographs of the wedding. None were taken. There were only four other people, beside themselves, present: dad's parents, mum's sister Joan, and her brother Jim. As mum is telling me this she is making supper, pouring oil into the pan, lighting the gas stove. Striking a match she says, "I didn't have anyone to give me away.

My dad refused to go to the wedding." She tells me that when dad had gone to her father for permission to marry her, he had been told that he was viewing mum through rose-colored glasses.

"Rotten pig," mum says as she drops some cut up potato wedges into the hot oil. They splash, sizzle, and she stands back for a moment.

I am incredulous. "Why would he say such a horrible thing?" I ask. "Did you fall out with him?"

"No, no," she replies, "It wasn't like that. It was just the way he was. He was a miserable bugger that's all." [53]

Those who are not judged beautiful are *not beautiful.* Those who are, are given the prize. The prize is to be owned by a judge – that is to say to be available to him. (Berger, *Ways of Seeing* 52)

She pushes a plate already full with fries towards me. I wait. A piece of cod soon joins them.

Aila complains, "I don't like fish."

"Well that's because you haven't had English fish," my mother says abruptly. We sit down and eat. Such plain fare.

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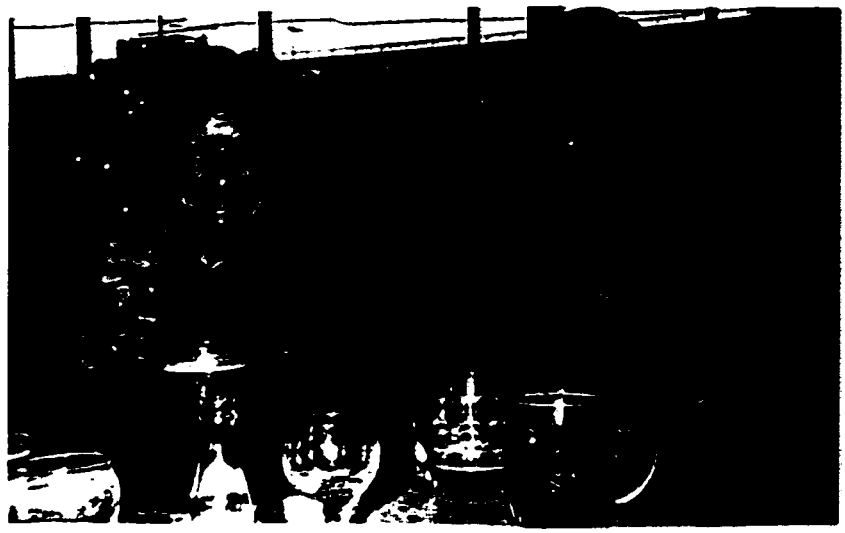
[53] *Although fathers are not as salient as mothers in daily interaction, mothers and children often idealize them and give them ideological primacy, precisely because of their absence and seeming inaccessibility, and because of the organization and ideology of male dominance in the larger society (Chodrow 181).*



Conventional wisdom has it, and much of our everyday observation confirms, that women are the romantic ones in our society, the ones for whom love, marriage, and relationships matter. However, several studies point out that men love and fall in love romantically, women sensibly and rationally (Chodorow 197).

Al' and Sal':

It is strange how many parallels there are between my mother's life and my own. I too got married quickly. I met my husband in Zambia. I was there visiting my sister, Toni and her husband, Pete. They were working there. The first time I met Allen, my husband to be, was at the Rugby club. He was so shy that as I approached him he somehow managed to eject a whole package of cigarettes onto the floor. As he attempted to pick them up, cigarettes still slipping out of his hands, we were introduced. I liked the fact that he was shy. I thought that this meant that he would be nicer than most of the men I had met. Illogical.

We started dating. Three months later I flew home to prepare for the wedding. Three months after that we were married. Not without hitches. Just before our marriage, Allen phoned and told me he had accepted a job in Botswana. I hadn't wanted to go

because at the time I was an amateur point-to-point rider and I had been offered a chance to turn professional. Mum argued that it was the woman's job to follow her man. "It doesn't work the other way around," she told me, "men don't follow women; it's the women who follow the men." My dad had been no help either. He told me that I had made my bed, and now I had better lie on it. So this is what I did. I lied on it. I gave up my career, I bought several historical romances, and, suitably subdued, told my husband that I would follow him to the ends of the earth, or to Botswana anyway.

CRISIS OVER I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH BOTSWANA OK
ALL MY LOVE SALLY

In The Care Of The Self, Michel Foucault considers the possibility that marriage may be a "handicap for the pursuit of philosophy" (152) -- for "the care of one's own soul, the mastery of one's passion, the search for peace of mind" (156).

* * *

Botswana was very much like Zambia. More sweltering heat, more low bush, more beautiful Kopjes rising out of the flat sun-scorched earth. More Zebras, Wildebeest, elegant Giraffes, snakes. Not a horse in sight. I stayed home, learnt how to drink coffee with other bored housewives, how to cook, sew, keep my man happy in bed, and to wait patiently for him to return from work, from a drink with the guys, from a couple of rounds of golf.

* * *

The following excerpt is taken from Robin Morgan's "Know Your Enemy: A Sampling of Sexist Quotes":

A woman's place is in the home / Housewives are such dull people / Women's talk is all chatter / Intelligent women are emasculating / If you're so smart why aren't you married / Can you type? / If you want to make decisions in this family, go out and earn a paycheck yourself / Working women are unfeminine / A smart woman never shows her brains / It is a woman's duty to make herself attractive / All women think about are clothes / Women are always playing hard to get / No man likes an easy woman / Women should be struck regularly, like gongs / Women like to be raped / Women are always crying about something / Women don't understand the value of a dollar / Women executives are castrating bitches / Don't worry your pretty little head about it / Dumb broad / It is glorious to be the mother of all mankind / A woman's work is never done / All you do is cook and clean and sit around all day / Women are only interested in trapping some man / A woman who can't hold a man isn't much of a woman / Women hate to be with other women / Women are always chattering with each other / Some of my best friends are women . . . (Morgan 43).

Mol' and Alf:

In the early years of my parents' marriage, when dad was fighting in the Second World War, sailing the seas and risking his life in enemy waters, mum stayed at home in the small back room of his parent's house, waiting patiently for his return. She got pregnant, raised my two oldest sisters in that single back room under the watchful glare of her mother-in-law. Every day mum counted the hours until my father returned, obsessively saving her ration books so that, on his return, he could have two eggs instead of one, a slab of butter on his toast. All the while listening patiently to his mother's criticism as she was instructed in the do's and don'ts of domestic life. She learnt well.

> *That the home is woman's proper kingdom; that all that pertains to its order, comfort, and grace falls under her natural charge and can by no means be transferred to a man; that a woman's life without such a domestic side must always be looked on as incomplete, or at best exceptional: all this is very true. On the other hand, that, in the lower ranks, the cooking of dinners and mending of clothes; and in the wealthier class, amateur music and drawing, the art of ordering dinner, and the still sublimer art of receiving company, form the be-all and end-all of woman, is, assuredly, stupidly false.*
>
> *Cobbe, "Final Cause of Woman" 10*

She also learnt appropriate behavior. One day, in her small bare rooms, before she was pregnant, before she was even eighteen, mum had put *Chattanooga-Choo-Choo* on the gramophone. Keeping the sound low she sang along, danced across the room. Dad was home then on leave and, as usual, he had been sitting in the front room with his mum. But on hearing the music they had walked to the bedroom, opened the door and stood in the doorway, side by side, frowning. They had seen her dancing, singing. Mum stopped, switched off the gramophone. Her mother in law had shook her head, tutted, sighed.

"That's enough of that," she'd glared at my mum before turning and leaving the room, my father in tow. After lying on the bed, her head buried in the pillow, her sobs muffled and strained, mum had simply got up, went into the kitchen, and began to prepare the supper: a rabbit her father-in-law had trapped the day before.

Under particular social circumstances, people may come to understand that whilst they do not possess *anything*, they possess themselves, and may possibly be able to exchange themselves for something else. Under such circumstances, there exists the specificity of a woman's situation, and the understanding of herself as an object of exchange that may arise when she has some choice over reproduction, and can use herself and her children as a traffic with the future. In its turn, the understanding that young children living in these circumstances may come to gain about themselves, as items of expenditure, investments, and as objects of exchange, needs to be taken into account as well. (Steedman 68-69)

Mum:

As a small child, I was especially fascinated by my mother – by the way she moved swiftly, almost angrily, through the small rooms and corridors of our house. It was as if by rushing and bustling she could avoid contact with the grim reality of the moment – her designated role as an English working-class wife and mother. Propelled always into the future, she could avoid my eyes – eyes which desired contact – and my hands: hands which pushed their own small shape inside her larger ones, only to find that they were cradled in empty space.

I know now that she was just too busy – too busy and too tired. She told me once that she feared that if she stopped she might collapse and, now, I believe her. Never one to shirk her duty, it was mum who rose early on frost-filled winter mornings to light the coal fire so at least one room in our house would be warm. It was my mother who sewed us clothes (the erratic clack-clack of her sewing machine singing songs of martyrdom), and it was my mother who, on Sundays, before she got herself a spin-dryer washing machine and covered our kitchen floor with piles of clothes (one for starching, one for colors, one for whites), washed all the clothes in a big boiler at the bottom of the garden, carrying water from the house. And it was also my mother who made sure we ate a good solid diet of tripe, rabbit (before mixemetosis), eels (a delicacy to be enjoyed whenever my father went fishing), intestines, and fish and chips.

We had beef on Sunday. I hated beef. Worse still, I hated the self-sacrificing lecture that always accompanied it. I liked eels. My dad would keep them swimming around in a big bowl in our fridge until they were ready to be eaten. He liked them fresh.

Their impending death never disturbed my sense of morality. The image of my mother, however, impassively holding down one of the slithery, writhing eels as she methodically sawed off its head with a kitchen knife, still sends shivers down my spine. One time, seeing me cringing, she told me that I was too soft. One day, she said, I would be doing this, cutting the heads off eels, for my own family. It was a duty she said that fell to all women who had children and a husband of their own.

Throughout my childhood, my mother's duty also involved contributing to the family income. She worked in the local factory.[54] Unlike my father, however, she was not primarily defined by her work outside the home. Like most working-class women, she was known not for her ability to sew the soles on to shoes but, rather, for her ability to keep a decent house, to keep her daughters decent and able, like her, to cook a good meal. I felt it was like a chain around her neck – this insistence upon decency, upon homeliness. And yet, it was how she defined herself.

[54] Once, when I had been around eleven years old, mum had taken my hand and led me down the well-worn path to the shoe factory where she worked. She told me that one day I too would work for my children in these factories. When we arrived at the factory she disappeared through steel gray doors into the noisy, chaotic interior, leaving me outside. I had refused, even then, to enter. She had been angry with me. She did not know to what extent I had watched her; she did not know to what extent her constant tiredness, her legs, swollen and webbed with dark purple varicose veins – the result of standing eight hours a day on the factory floor – had bred in me an aversion to factories, bordering on horror.

Friedrich Engels in his classic nineteenth-century study of *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, documents how factory work engenders "a multitude of cripples" (166). Quoting *The Power Report*, Engels emphasizes how "the effect of long continued labour upon the physique is apparent not alone in actual deformity, but also, and much more generally, in stunted growth, relaxation of the muscles, and delicacy of whole frame"(166).

What, I wonder, do these women speak of when they go home at the end of a day spent on the factory floor, at the end of a day-trip to London? What are their secret wishes and desires? What do they dream of when they are alone? Can we, by looking at the photograph, hear their unspoken whispers, their unspoken desires? Are they the desires of all women? All working-class women? And why do I think that my mother, sitting on the end, stands apart, looks somehow like she doesn't fit in, belong? And why, I wonder, did she write on the back of this photograph, "Me, 8 on right." As if we wouldn't know.

* * *

By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred.* Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. This . . . is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die. (Barthes, Camera Lucida 96)

DAD:

When mum tells me that my father, as a young man, pushed her out of his life, I am not surprised. I believe my father came to like distance. I remember him mostly as a morose and silent man, a tired man who, having had one too many children, had retreated into the space of his own mind where, in the middle of all the commotion and noise that four children make, he could be alone.

My sisters tell a different story. They remember dad playing with them, talking to them, protecting them. I only remember a couple of incidents like this: there was the time dad got a new car, there was the walk on the beach, and there was the teasing.

I must have been around five or six when dad, with one elbow sticking nonchalantly out the window, drove his new black, 'Al Capone' car down our street. I was very proud because we were one of the first families on our street to get a car (even the milkman still delivered his milk with a horse and cart) and I brought all my friends to see it. I have a memory of us all standing on the running boards and hanging on to the windows, as dad drove this car slowly through the long narrow streets, honking his horn. We were laughing. We were on parade. I remember that dad loved that car. At night he covered it with a big plastic car cover (over the years this cover became decorated with pieces of yellow tape which dad had used to mend the rips. It mortified my sister Maureen who, as a teenager, felt it was a "real show up.") to protect it, and on Sunday mornings, he would rise early, take the cover off, and spend all day polishing it until it

shone a fierce patent black. The color reminded me of the shoes I wanted, and couldn't have.

And then there was the time when dad took me for a walk along the beach. We had just arrived at Heachem for our yearly summer vacation, and I wanted to go and look at the sea. It was a windy day and mum didn't want me to go on my own. I think mum forced dad to go with me. I remember walking with him along the beach. I remember noticing how the wind was whipping his already graying hair back from his face, and how it was making his clothes look like they were stuck to his bones, making him look fragile somehow. I was throwing sticks for our big yellow dog, Jina, making her run backwards and forwards along the beach. The waves were high, huge. They looked like big open mouths coming towards me.

When I was small I had a friend who was swept out to sea. He lived up the road from me, the policeman's son. Funny, I still think of this boy. Even though I can't remember his face or his name, I think of him whenever I am close to the sea. I think mostly how he must have felt seeing the land disappear in the distance, feeling the waves lapping greedily at his neck. But this is a cheap emotion. Suffice to say, his memory makes me aware of the immense power of the sea. It makes me feel scared just to think of it.

I kept away from them. Throwing the stick one last time before we turned back to the caravan park, I watched with horror as it arced through the air and landed in the sea. In a moment Jina had leapt in after it and was swallowed up by the wave, her legs kicking, her nose pointing skywards as she fought to stay above the water. Dad acted quickly, reaching in with one strong arm, he pulled her out. It is a strange memory. My dad against the sea, some other Ulysses that I suspected, but didn't know. Or is that what I want to believe?

And then there is the memory I have about the teasing. When I was really small, maybe three or four, my mum, my dad, and my sisters used to tease me.

"Nobody loves me," dad pretended to cry.

"No, I don't love him." mum asserted, abruptly turning her back on him. "Do you love him Toni?"

"No, I don't love him," my sister replied.

"Nobody loves me," Dad wailed again.

"I do! I do!" I jumped up and down, running to him and throwing my arms around his legs. Staring meanly at my mum and my sisters, I would vehemently declare, "I love my daddy. I do. I do."

I would like to say that, at this point, dad swooped me up in his arms and hugged me. I would like to say that he laughed, kissed me on the cheek. But he didn't. Typically, there was much laughing. Typically, he would turn to my mother and say, 'Thank goodness somebody loves me,' a note of triumph in his voice. Then he would pat me on the head, tell me to calm down, and send me on my way.

I don't know when this game stopped. I don't know when I stopped telling him that I loved him, or when he stopped patting me on the head. But it did stop. Looking back, I can see that the joke wasn't such a joke. By the time I was born, mum had already begun to reject dad, emotionally, verbally, sexually: any way she could. There was some truth in his play-acting for love. Only it wasn't my love he wanted.

"The violence we perpetrate and have done to us, the recriminations, reconciliations, the ecstasies and the agonies of a love affair, are based on the socially conditioned illusion that two actual persons are in relationship" (Laing 62-63)

Too late, I believe my father realized what he had lost in not fully loving my mother in those early years.

I have a black-and-white

photograph of my mother and father. The paper is old, brown, fraying at the edges. It is bent on one corner so that a worn white line reaches up across the top of my father's head making him look injured and incomplete. Mum tells me it was taken a few years before I was born. She doesn't remember the occasion. Dad, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and a narrow tie, is standing close to my mother. One arm is draped around her shoulder. My mother is staring into the camera stiff and tense, a little awkward. But my father looks relaxed. His face, half turned to hers, is smiling. It is like at the last moment he looked away from the camera, remembered what, for him, was most important about the picture. My mother. I think it is sad that, by the time this picture was taken, she didn't feel the same way about him.

Happiness?

> *"To the question, what moves desire? Locke thinks only one answer is possible: 'happiness and that alone'" (Encyclopedia Britannica: Great Ideas 477).*

As I remember it, my mother was rarely happy with my father. As a child, I grew up listening to her constant complaints. He was too indecisive, too lazy, too selfish, too useless. After all, wasn't she the one who always did the cleaning, the gardening, the decorating? Wasn't she the one who always took care of us kids, worried when we were out to late, worried when we weren't dressed right? Wasn't she the one who cared? When dad did take some initiative and built himself a garage (I must admit that he mainly did this because mum complained that the patched yellow car cover was an eye sore), she complained that the walls weren't straight, that the door hadn't been fitted right. The trouble was that mum never gave up wanting the brave and dashing soldier who had courted her by letter during the war. She wanted my dad to conquer new lands, to go

boldly forward leading her by the hand. She wanted her own house, holidays in the Bahamas, lots of money in the bank. She didn't want this man who was content to just get by, whose ideal holiday was a fishing trip, and who shrugged when she suggested buying a house saying contemptuously, "There's no bloody way I'm putting my money into bricks and mortar." She was disappointed. She wanted the man she thought he was, not the man he was. I don't think she ever forgave him for letting her down like that.

* * *

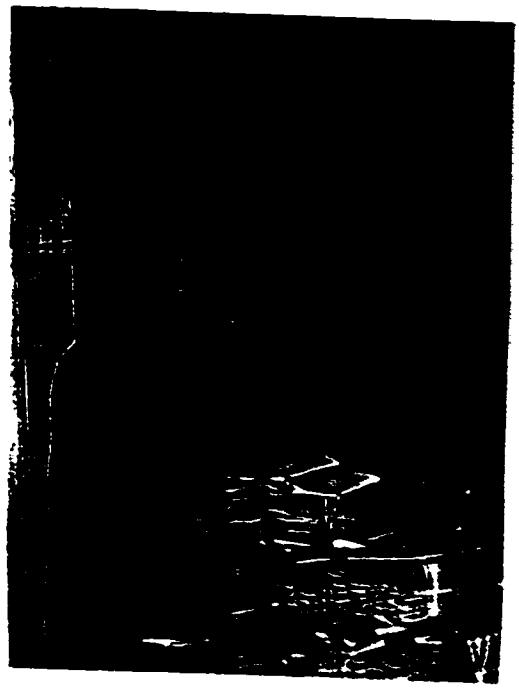
[E]ven when we marry with an earthier vision of what a good marriage should be, the married state – and the person with whom we are sharing it – must fail to meet some, sometimes all, of our expectations: That we will always be there for each other. That we will always be faithful and loyal to each other. That we will accept each other's imperfections. That we will never consciously hurt each other. That although we expect to disagree on many minor matters, we surely will be in agreement on major matters. That we will be open and honest with each other. That we will always go to bat for each other. That our marriage will be our sanctuary, our refuge, our 'haven in a heartless world.' (Viorst 210)

* * *

In later years my mother, having spent years trying to effect a change in my father by trying to make him feel guilty about what he did or didn't do, had a tremendous amount of guilt about the way she treated dad. Repeatedly, she told me that she believed that it was her rejection of him that had caused his cancer and, ultimately, his death. She believes she will go to hell for it.

* * *

"The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love – is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety" (Fromm 19)



In *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study,* Gerhart Piers suggests that, although apparently two separate emotions, guilt and shame are intricately connected in their function as "highly important mechanisms to insure socialization of the individual" (53).

Shame, which involves a failure to meet a goal presented by the ego ideal – "the sum of the positive identifications with parental images" (26) – is, in Freudian terms, related to sexuality via the exposure of the nude body and the genitals (18). Quoting Hegel, however, Piers also relates shame to the belief that one is not worthy of receiving a complete and perfect love (28, 42). Consequently, Piers states that, "[b]ehind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of contempt which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation" (29).

Guilt, according to Piers, differs from shame in that is associated with the transgression of an ideal set by the superego (based on the internalization of the 'Law of the Father' and the "punishing, restrictive aspects of the parental images" (16)). This transgression causes a "painful internal tension" (18) which results in the transgressor internalizing feelings of either complete annihilation or impending mutilation (castration anxiety) (16).

Elaborating on the relationship between guilt and shame, Piers informs us that, although separate, these emotions act as a refuge from each other in a series of anxiety

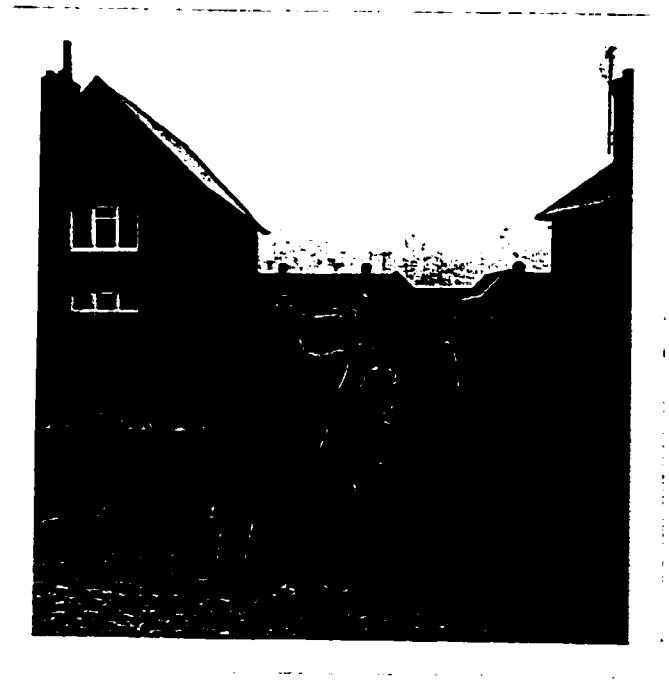
driven "vicious cycles" (34). The individual oscillates between feelings of guilt (a desire to stop transgressing, and *submit* to the 'Laws of the Father') and shame (feelings of unworthiness, prompted by one's inability to *identify* and comply with the Law). A failure to successfully negotiate these internal tensions (i.e., a failure to conform socially) causes the individual to feel an overriding sense of guilt and abject shame. These feelings materialize not only in the mind, but as Freud points out, in fear of exposure of the physical body. [55]

I believe that my mother's guilt and her resulting belief that she will go to hell for the way she treated dad stems, at least in part, from an internalization of these cyclical feelings of guilt and shame. To begin with, she feels angry that, from her perspective, she has never received the perfect love from either her parents ("They never bothered with me"), from men in general (and here I am thinking of her early rape), or her husband ("He never cared for me; he never remembered my birthday or bought me any presents"). But it is difficult for her to openly express her anger for, having internalized notions of the ideal self-sacrificing woman, she feels guilty about her anger and ashamed that she cannot give her acceptance, her love, and her body unconditionally to her husband. This causes her additional anger. The particular institutions (the church, for example) within society do not have to discipline her: she

[55] It strikes me that this explanation of the interdependency of shame and guilt is relevant to the working-class woman, the working-class woman's body, and to my mother, in particular. If we posit that the socialization of the individual aspires first and foremost to meet the dominant, middle-class ideal, we can see that the working-class woman's identity, figured as doubly inferior (not only working class, but a working-class woman), would be particularly suspect to these feelings of guilt and shame. Her working class failure to meet either the ideal of the intellectual, cultured middle-class being, or the ideal of the classical, sleek body associated with bourgeois individualism would position her as inferior. Desiring conformity, but unable through accident of birth and social position to comply, puts her, as my grandfather would say, in a no-win position.

disciplines herself. Paradoxically, it is not her refusal to take responsibility, but her over-developed sense of self-responsibility (a Puritan ethic) that causes her to feel that God, who possesses the all-seeing, all-knowing eye, will inflict a punishment on her for her failure to be the good wife, the good mother, the good woman.

Interpellated (as Althusser would say), or "called" (Piers 47) into this essentially impotent, abject, shameful, guilt-producing and guilt-ridden space, she oscillates between righteous indignation (which usually involves 'passing the buck'), and humiliating shame. According to Piers, she will remain ineffectual, repressed, mutilated to some degree, abandoned (45). Similar to one of Djuna Barnes' *Repulsive Women*, she will "live aghast" (21), unable to reach her potential as a human being (Piers 45).



Someday beneath some hard
Capricious star –
Spreading its light a little
Over far,
We'll know you for the woman
That you are.

For though one took you, hurled you
Out of space,
With your legs half strangled,
In your lace,
You'd lip the world to madness
On your face.

We'd see your body in the grass
With cool pale eyes.
We'd strain to touch those lang'rous
Length of thighs;
And hear your short sharp modern
Babylonic cries.

It wouldn't go. We'd feel you
Coil in fear
Leaning across the fertile
Fields to leer
As you urged some bitter secret
Through the ear.

We see your arms grow humid
In the heat;
We see your damp chemise lie
Pulsing in the beat
Of the over-hearts left oozing
At your feet.

See you sagging down with bulging
Hair to sip,
The dappled damp from some vague
Under lip.
Your soft saliva, loosed
With orgy, drip.

Once we'd not have called this
Woman you --
When leaning above your mother's
Spleen you drew
Your mouth across her breast as
Trick musicians do.

Plunging grandly out to fall
Upon your face.
Naked-female-baby
In grimace.
With your belly bulging stately
Into space.

Barnes *Repulsive Women* 12-15

From my perspective, I think that, for my mother there had only ever been her abandonment and her attempt, one way or another, to deal with it. For my father, I think there had only ever been the sea, the sea and the endless horizon: the long slow days, and the star filled nights. The occasional ordinary heroic moments that nobody acknowledged, or even noticed. But I would like to believe that somewhere in my mother's abandonment there was a feeling of being loved. Likewise, in my father's absence I would like to feel that there was a presence. Like my mother, I want to think that as a young man enthusiastic about life, he must have, as he stood on the prow of the ship staring out at a wide expanse of sea, his signaling manual in his hands, thought of the distance -- the inescapable distance -- between himself and those he loved. I want to believe that at some point during our shared car rides, and our shared walks on the beach that, like me, he longed for connection.

Men do not become what by nature they are meant to be, but what society makes them. . . . generous feelings . . . are, as it were, shrunk up, seared, violently wrenched, and amputated to fit us for our intercourse with the world, something in the manner that beggars maim and mutilate their children to make them fit for their future situation in life. (Colby, qtd in Laing 55-56)

Absence:

Thus, a daughter looks to Her father for a sense of separateness and for the same confirmation of her specialness that her brother receives from her mother. She (and the woman she becomes) is willing to deny her father's limitations (and those of her lover or husband) as long as she feels loved. She is more able to do this because his distance means that she does not really know him. The relationship, then, because of the father's distance and importance to her, occurs largely as fantasy and idealization, and lacks the grounded reality which a boy's relation to his mother has (Chodorow 195).

An increasingly father-absent, mother-involved family produces in men a personality that both corresponds to masculinity and male dominance as these are currently constituted in the sex-gender system, and fits appropriately with participation in capitalist relations of production. Men continue to enforce the sexual division of spheres as a defense against the powerlessness in the labor market. Male denial of dependence and attachment to women helps to guarantee both masculinity and performance in the world of work (190).

For girls, then, there is no ... exclusive attachment to their fathers. Moreover, a father's behavior and family role, and a girl's relationship to him, are crucial to the development of heterosexual orientation in her. But fathers are comparatively unavailable physically and emotionally [193].

Bitter:

> *"[T]he development of industrial capitalism has affected family structure and personality. This is phrased in critical theory in terms of the decline of paternal authority and the father's role in the home." (Chodorow 37)*

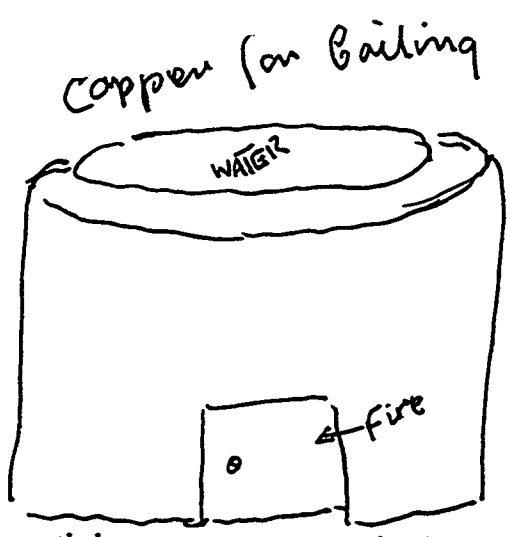
It is a gray day. I have just ran outside to help mum get the washing off the line. It is already beginning to rain: big, round drops that fall on upturned faces.

"I guess I was bitter," she tells me as she throws the pegs into the basket. "All those times when he came back on leave and left me alone with the kids while he went out with his mum to the club caught up with me."

I think of how she must have felt. It couldn't have been easy.

Mum continues, "And even when we moved out of his mum and dad's house and got a place of our own, there was the weekends when he went off fishing with those friends of his. He left me here on my own with the two kids in diapers. Of course, I coped, but it was all too much. We had no washing machines or anything in those days you know? We used to do all our washing at the bottom of the garden. We had a big boiler, used to sit right over there by the washing post. We'd light old pieces of shoe leather underneath it to warm up the water. It was tough in those days. Awful." She is agitated as she tells me this. She is folding the washing and I can see her hands become tense, white with the effort of gripping on to the sheet as she shakes it out. I think I have a memory of mum doing our laundry outside, but it is vague. I seem to remember her and Aunt May standing at the bottom of the garden around a big, black boiler. I tell mum about this.

"You make us sound like we were witches stirring our potions," she laughs.
I laugh too, because that is exactly what I was thinking. But it was like there were three witches because I was there with them too. The sorcerer's apprentice, listening to them



complain about their husbands. No magic there.

Suddenly, as she often does, mum changes the subject. It seems to be the way her mind works. Flitting through the past, she stops briefly to rest upon some disgruntled moment, some upsetting issue. "You know Sal'," she says, turning to me and handing me one end of the sheet to help her fold it, "he never bought me anything you know. In all those years married and not one birthday or Christmas present did I have from him." Recounting the time when Dad came home on leave and pulled out a bottle of expensive French perfume, she tells me how she had been ecstatic. "I was thinking he had bought it for me," she says, "but he hadn't. He gave it to his mother." Mum unpegs another sheet, shakes it out. I take one end and between us we make a rectangle, a square, and an even smaller square.

"That was typical," she sneers. "He was a mummy's boy." She pauses and I wonder if she is trying to think how to explain this to me: dad's need to please and appease his mother.[56]

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[56] Nancy Chodorow's exploration of Greek mother-son relationships helps to elucidate my father's relationship with his mother:

> Greek marriages . . . were characterized by a weak marital bond, and the society was ridden with sex antagonism and masculine fear and devaluation of mature women. Wives were isolated in their marital homes with children. In reaction, mothers reproduced in their own sons the same masculine fears and behaviors that their husbands and the men in their society had. They produced in these sons a precarious and vulnerable masculinity and sense of differentiation by alternating sexual praise and seductive behavior with hostile deflation, ridicule, and intrusive definitions of their sons' intrapsychic situation. . . . this treatment kept sons dependent on their mothers for a sense of self-sufficiency and self-esteem (105).

I read this passage to mum over the phone. "Does it fit?" I ask.

But her mind is on other things. She purses her lips, sighs. "Let me tell you, I was disappointed in him. He certainly wasn't the man I thought he was. He was no noble, brave soldier. He wasn't brave about anything.

I'm telling you Sally, he was a scared man.[57] A scared and selfish man."

I nod my head, look noncommittal. I have heard the story of how dad could have gone far if he hadn't been too scared to drive to other towns; I have heard the story of

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"Sort of, " she tells me. "His mum was very controlling. She even used to open his mail. Once, when he'd applied for a job on the other side of town we found out that she'd tore up a letter offering him the job. She didn't want him to move, you see. She wanted him all to herself. That's why they'd go to the pub and leave me at home. But I don't know about the seductive bit. I don't think it was like that."

I ask her if she thinks that dad's self-esteem was dictated to him by his mother. "You know," I explain, "did she alternate praise and ridicule, that sort of thing, so that he became dependent upon her opinion of him?"

"Oh, his mother thought he was too good for anyone around here. She was always praising him up to everyone. He was always trying to make out that he was better than he was too, but I think that, deep down, Alf was afraid that he couldn't live up to it. Maybe he was afraid of failing, of letting his mum down. I don't know."

[57] I think that when my father was young he was selfish for two reasons: as an only child he had been spoilt, and as a young man he thought it was the 'manly' way to be. He hung out with the other men and expected that my mother would be busy and happy with her babies, her diapers, and her housework. In truth, though, my father, by birth a working-class man, by force of conscription a war-hero (they all were at the time), did not fulfill the normal, stereotypical definition of manhood. He was not aggressive, physically controlling, strong, independent, venturesome, competitive, hard, or athletic. Mum said these other men friends used to tease him, make fun of him. She said he didn't fit in.

I think mum is right when she says dad was scared. I think he was scared because he was different. I believe my father tried, at least in his early years, to be someone he wasn't. As I have said, my dad was not the stereotypical working-class man, defined by his ability to do physical labor, by his ability to fight his way out of anything. My father was quiet, he was an artist of sorts: he designed shoes, he grew chrysanthemums – spending hours in the garden cloning new flowers of all different colors and sizes -- and he craved quiet times when he could sit with his fishing rod and stare out across the river. As a young man, I think he tried to be the type of man he was expected to be, but as he grew older I think he stopped this. I don't think, however, that he ever really valued, or even discovered, who he really was. I believe that his retreat into his armchair and into a space of his own, distancing himself from his family and the world, was not indicative of him finding himself, but indicative of his attempt to make a safe retreat. It deflected his anxiety and gave him some measure of safety in that it allowed him to hide.

In *The Courage To Be*, Paul Tillich explicates the relationship between fear and anxiety: "Fear and anxiety are distinguished but not separated. They are immanent within each other: The sting of fear is anxiety, and anxiety strives toward fear" (37). And later, "It is the anxiety of not being able to preserve one's own being which underlies every fear and is the frightening element in it" (38). The ultimate threat, then, is " the threat of nothingness" (38), the awareness that "non-being is a part of one's own being" (35). I think that dad was only aware that he had two options: conforming to society's, other men's, his mother's, my mother's, idea of what being a man was, or accepting that he was 'nothing' (in their eyes, and, ultimately, in his own). In the end, he chose the latter course of action. In his own eyes, he became nothing.

how we would have immigrated to America if dad would have had the guts to get up and go. I really don't want to have to listen to mum berating dad. Again. I don't want to be an accomplice. But I am, tied there in the rain by her need to fold the sheets neatly, carefully.

* * *

In an attempt to understand contemporary concepts of the 'ideal man,' Carol Tavris conducted a study, part of which involved asking men how they relate to their own 'masculinity':

> We asked male readers when they feel most masculine. It turned out to be a tough question. One young man, struggling with definitions, said, "Masculinity is an illusive quality. Sometimes I mistake showing off for it." Other men feel that masculinity *is* the show: spending money on women, saying something witty or important to impress others, playing the role of teacher, accomplishing a task others said was impossible. Some said they feel masculine only in public, when the concern about behaving "like a man," and not behaving "like a homosexual," takes over. "I usually don't become aware of my masculinity," wrote one man, "except perhaps in the art of drinking lots of liquor. I feel that because I don't drink as much as the other guys, that there might be some doubt if I am a 'real' man." For such men, masculinity is a matter to be established against other males. But for others, masculinity emerges in relations with women. About one-fourth of the men felt most masculine in sexual contexts, wooing a potential partner or making love. For example, one married man wrote about meeting a woman who was very attractive to him and desirable to other men, and who expressed an interest in having sex with him. Nothing happened, "but this made me feel really masculine, and led to the realization that I could be attractive to women in a truly masculine sense – giving me a confidence I have had ever since." . . .
>
> Another group of men (23 percent) felt most masculine when they were involved in work, defeating an opponent, achieving a major goal, or in competition. For these men, masculinity was earned, a struggle to overcome barriers and to prove something to oneself or others. "I became certain of my masculinity," wrote one, "by becoming an accomplished football player after repeatedly being told by both coaches and friends that I was too small." "Learning to box (prize fight) as a youngster and winning a lot of medals helped me *feel* masculine," an older man said, "but making hard decisions in life . . . made me *convinced* of my masculinity." (Tavris 53)

Chapter Twelve: Relations

Father (i):

There are aspects of my father's life that I would like to know more about. Given my father's penchant for distance, I often wonder how my father, who was already dead by the time my son Jordan was born, would have reacted to Jordan's disability. Jordan's lack of balance demands physical contact. Constantly we are catching him, pulling him up from where he has fallen on the ground, assisting him by holding him as he moves around furniture, climbs in the car. Constantly, he is asking for a hug, a warm embrace. His way of saying thank you.

Once, sitting over a cup of tea in our kitchen in the house in Ontario, my mum told me that dad had a *thing* about cripples.

"He wouldn't go near them if he could help it," she told me, "it was like he thought he would catch whatever they had."

But as a young pattern cutter (read: shoe designer) there was also the fact that he made shoes for disabled people. I find myself wondering if his fear of disabled people

occurred as a result of, or prior to his days spent handling their feet. I like to think that he had this fear before he came to know the people themselves. I like to think that he overcame his fear, or that he chose to help disabled people despite his fear. But this is not clear. I can't know for sure, and mum says she doesn't have a clue. I like to think that, had dad been alive, he would have made shoes for Jordan. Dad had sensitive hands, long finely chiseled fingers. I imagine them now, holding on to Jordan's feet. I imagine him feeling the bumps, the lines of his unnaturally twisted, deformed bones. I imagine him running his fingers over the swollen, red skin, wanting with his touch, with his skill, to take away his grandson's pain. But this is only what I want to believe. I don't know if it would have had any bearing on reality.

Dad didn't keep making shoes for the disabled. Eventually, the politics and the daily grind of factory life wore him down. He gave up any dreams he might have had of being the "best darn pattern cutter in the whole of the Midlands" and took a job designing heels. Cementing sections of leather together, he experimented in making thin heels, thick heels, high and low heels for ladies' shoes.

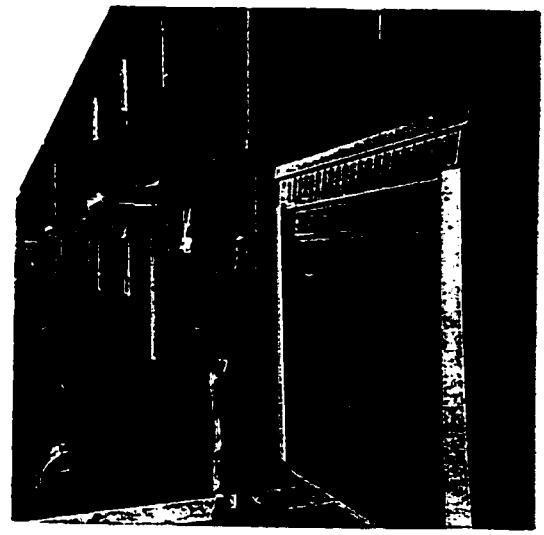
Mum tells me she has a pair of his shoes. I follow her up the flight of narrow stairs leading to the bedrooms.

"He designed and made them for me with his own hands," she tells me, turning them so that I can see them clearly. They are small delicate-looking sandals. They have a

wedged heel and over the top of the shoe, leather straps, red and brown, criss-cross at carefully measured angles. In these straps, I can see the shape of my mother's foot in the way they have been stretched slightly out of shape. Here, I could say, is her bunion, here is the place where her big toe hangs over the edge. Here, where the sole of the shoe has been flattened, is where she put all her weight as she reached up to kiss my father's face. "Thank you," I would like to imagine her saying, a small seductive smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

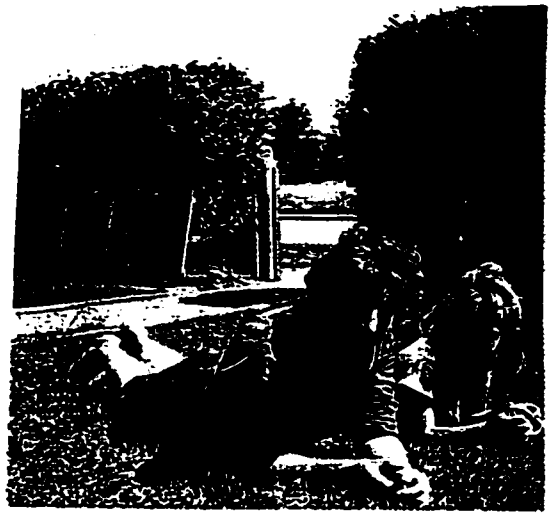
"No unskilled job," I say. I want them to be extraordinary, I want to look at the shoe, the heel, and see a thing of beauty. But they are ordinary: ordinary heels on ordinary shoes. The type you would find in any store, in any bargain basement sale. Nothing special at all. "They have lasted well," mum says, "Twenty odd years, your dad made them strong."

I have to agree.



Mother:

"I was to end up ten, indeed twenty years later, believing that my identification was entirely with her, that whilst hating her, I was her; and there was no escape" (Steedman 55).

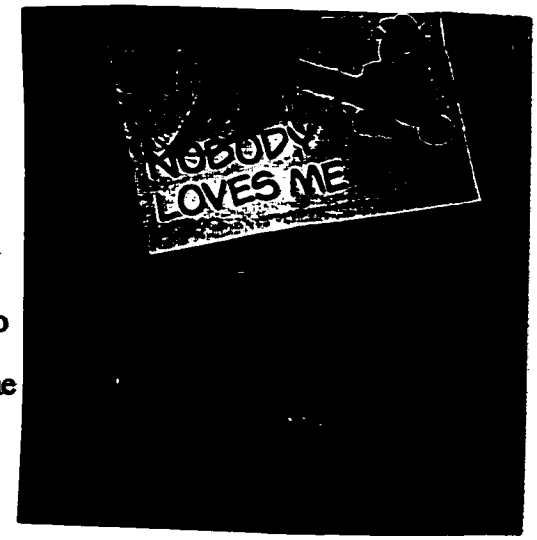


There are also parts of my mother's life that I attempt to understand. Mostly, it seems I am concerned with her physical presence: how she carries her body, how she moves through the world, negotiates her gender and her sexuality. But also I am concerned with how the things I believe she has repressed end up resurfacing, rebounding on both her and me when least expected.

When my son Jordan was born three months early, when he stopped breathing long enough to receive brain damage, long enough for the doctor to tell us that he would be a vegetable, I phoned mum. In tears, I asked her to come and stay with us for a while. I told her I needed help. Support. I could have enlisted my husband's mother's help. I could have paid someone. But I wanted my mother. Was this selfish?

She came. She flew out from England. But she didn't help, not really. She made matters worse. My dad had been dead for seven years at that point and my mum was having an affair with a married man. I never knew what she saw in him. He was small, mean looking, and dishonest. He was a cheater and a liar. But mum was infatuated. In love, she said. She fretted all the time she was with us that he would be off with another woman. His wife? She burst into tears at meal times, marched out of the room. "Nobody

cares about me," she'd complain when I went to her bedroom to see what was wrong with her.



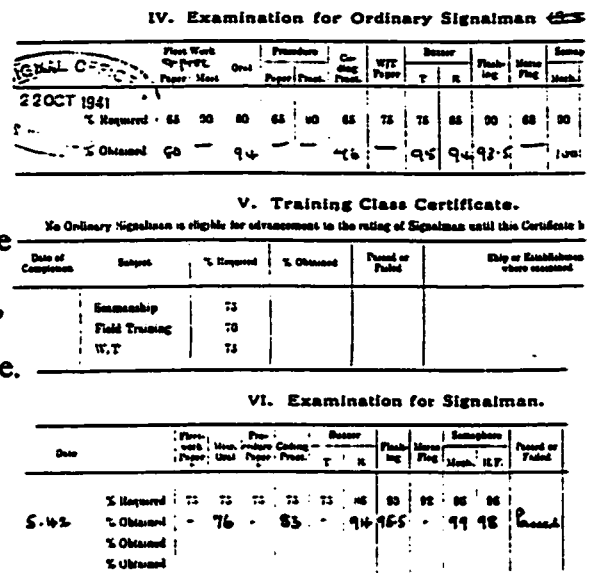
"All anybody is interested in is you and Jordan. That's all anybody cares about. Nobody cares that I flew all the way here from England to help you out. Nobody thinks what it means to me to leave Ron behind, to be here all this time and not know what he's doing."

As far as my mother was concerned she had sacrificed her life, her happiness, to help us. After all, she had raised her own children, hadn't she? After all, she deserved some happiness didn't she? She came out of duty and out of her love for me, but when she was with us she fluctuated between a desire to help us, and a desire to run back to her lover. She was torn between her duty and her desire for this man. It wasn't her decision to stay and help us, but the fact that she couldn't make the decision to leave that drove her into a state of deep depression. I recognized the symptoms. I knew, then, that my mother had been depressed for a long time. All her life? Only I had never given it a label before. I ended up taking care of her and my kids, and Jordan. I got gray hair overnight it seemed. Despite the fact that we love her, we were relieved when she left. When she ran back to England and her lover's arms.

There is a picture of my mother. When she comes to Canada she shows it to me. She was only in her early sixties then. She has spread herself out in a languorous pose on the bed that she shares with Ron, her married lover. She is wearing a corset of black lace, black stockings. She is looking seductively into the camera – at her lover who is holding the lens, framing her sixty- year-old body for his own pleasure. I say what is expected. "You look lovely," I tell her, "really sexy." It comes out false. She doesn't notice. She

smiles, proud. Preens herself. "I can still pull 'em," she tells me. "Not bad for an old lady eh?" I am confused; no, I am repulsed. My mother, the woman who still, at sixty something, thinks that life is all about getting a man and keeping him happy in bed. I imagine them together, I imagine her giving herself to this man, this beast who is married already and who only wants my mother's body, and I feel sick.[58]

Father (ii)



IV. Examination for Ordinary Signalman

22 OCT 1941

V. Training Class Certificate.

VI. Examination for Signalman.

My father became increasingly silent as he got older. It seemed as if he went inside himself and shut the world and us, his family, out. He didn't speak much. He liked distance. I always thought that the business of signals had been my father's true vocation. I often

[58] I didn't understand my mother's infatuation for this man until years later when my own marriage broke up and I met and fell in love with Larry. Correction, I didn't fall in love with him; I fell in- fatuation with him (he was fat, I was thin). An infatuation that lasted nine years and resulted in us having a daughter together. I cannot be judgmental of my mother because I, too, have pictures that speak of my desire to be a Barbie doll for this man: a man who tossed me to the side as soon as a better doll, or should I say better dolls, came along.

I feel like I must have read my mother's unwritten narrative. I identified with it; I lived it.It is how I came to know myself. It, she, is embedded in my voice, and in my body. She, me, the mother, daughter who occupies the sub-human, all-bodied space that the male subject takes, imprints himself upon. This has been my, and I believe my mother's experience of femininity. I find it depressing; I search for a way out.

I think that even if Freud is right, even if I am bisexual (and I totally buy his argument), capable of identifying with masculine *and* feminine figures, masculinity holds out little hope. What male figure do I identify with: an abusive lover, a manipulative, cold, controlling husband, a passive-aggressive father?

But I try. Now, in my forties, I strive, in my writing and in my life, for ambivalence. I try to maneuver a place within the contradictions, gaps, and spaces that structure my story, traditionally labeling me as woman, female, passive. I attempt to own my femininity and my masculinity. I try to look beyond my fears and beyond my own individual depressions. I am not always, not often, successful.

think that he should have worked in a lighthouse where, alone, he could have spent his time peering out into the darkness, sending his signals to ships who, like him, were unsure of their location.

In his later years he went fishing only occasionally. Mostly, he would go alone. It offered him an opportunity to stare out across rivers, seas, any stretch of water he could find, silently meditating, and thinking unspoken thoughts. His profile now was lined, deeply marred by the years, and by the fact that, in my mother's opinion, he had one too many signals missing. As the years went on she expressed her dissatisfaction more and more. She said he should have made something of himself, she told him he should have been more of a man, less afraid. He answered her by tightly zipping his mouth, emitting only a silent rage that went largely unnoticed.

Once, when I was a child, I tried to smoke my dad's pipe. I waited until he went to the bathroom, and then I snuck over and picked it up out of the ashtray. Trying to hold it in the same way that my father did, the pipe resting lightly on all five fingers, I held it to my lips and sucked. It was as though someone had burst a stink bomb in my mouth. My head was full of smoke and I was dizzy. And then I started to cough. I coughed so much that I was sick.

"Let that be a warning to you," my mother told me angrily. "Never smoke again!" My dad said nothing. I have never smoked. But my mother and my father always smoked. I have a memory of me as a child sitting there with them in our small front room. We are watching the telly and drinking tea, as they always did in the evenings

before bed. Above our heads is a thick cloud of gray smoke, hovering just below the ceiling. My mum is smoking cigarettes; my father has his pipe.

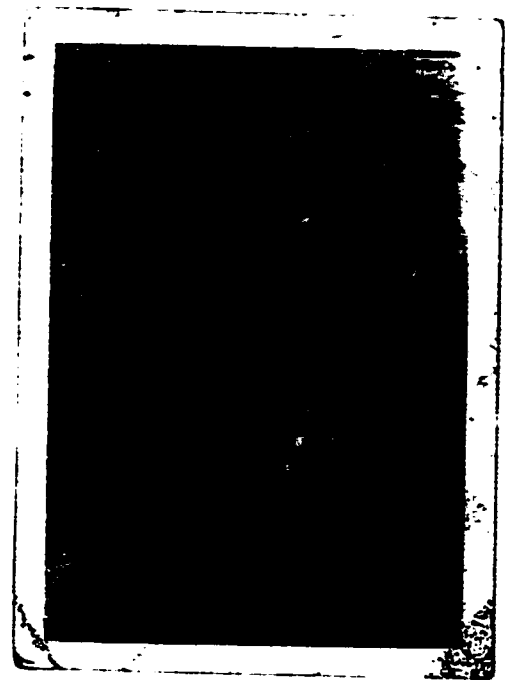
My father died of cancer. When I was around fifteen, he started to get sick. He was having pains in his stomach and in his chest. He was getting a lot of headaches. The doctors told him he had gall bladder stones and he went into hospital to have them removed. When I was seventeen he had his first stroke. I remember seeing his face, twisted and distorted in a look of frozen surprise as the ambulance men took his body, stiff with shock, out of the house on a stretcher. On the day I got married, he had a heart attack.

But I am living in Africa when my mother finally calls me and tells me to come home. "He doesn't have many weeks left," she says. She sounds exhausted, but she has him at home, in his own bed, in our front room. "I want him to die at home," she tells me, close to tears, "where he is loved. Where his family is."

The next day I am on a plane home. I am anxious. Pete, my sister's husband, meets me at the airport, drives me home. When the

taxi pulls up outside our house, the house in which I lived half my life, the house I played in, nursed my dolls in, I don't want to enter. I look at the front door, at the step where I sat as a child and read my girl's comics, and I want to turn around and leave. I look at the garage that my father built with his own two hands, brick by brick, and I remember how upset my dad was when my sister drove her brother-in-law's E-Type through the back of it. And suddenly I would give anything to go back to that day. Even if dad was raging mad. I gather up my suitcases. Going into the house is like opening a book you don't want to read, but you know you have to.

Dad died two weeks later. In the end he didn't recognize anyone, he lay in the small bed in our front room compressed between two white, crisply-starched sheets and stared vacantly up at the ceiling, his eyes registering only pain. Mum saw him die. She had been lying on the couch in our front room late one night watching him sleep. Watching his chest rise rhythmically up and down to the beat of the ticking clock. She said that when the moment came it happened quietly. He died the way he had lived his life. His chest heaved one last struggling breath and went still; air whistled out of his mouth, a soft phutt, and there was silence. A moment and it was over. She hadn't even had time to go to him.



Chapter Thirteen: Holiday

Last summer, when I am there visiting my mum, I find, in the small, brown leather suitcase that my mother keeps under her bed, a photograph of me and her at the beach. We are standing a few feet apart from each other, leaning against the hull of an old rowing boat. I am around eight or nine years old and my mother is in her late thirties. She looks well dressed in her straight gray pencil skirt, slim and conscious of herself as she smiles into the camera. I am a skinny, scruffy looking child, unformed in comparison. The wind is whipping our hair forward in and around our faces and we are squinting as we look into the lens of the camera. In the background, a gray mass of waves, their tops frothed with white, roll in towards us.

Mum tells me that the picture was taken at Heachem. We went there every year when I was a kid. And now, because I am home from Canada on holiday, and because mum needs a healthy dose of fresh sea air, my daughter, mum, and I are going back there for a holiday.

"A week of sun and sand." I smile enthusiastically at my mum as we sit over toast and jam at her kitchen table. Already a cigarette burns in the small ashtray at the side of her breakfast plate. She takes intermittent drags as she drinks her tea, breathing in the smoke like it is part of her breakfast. The image stays with me. I make a mental note to write about it later, but, right now, I can't sit for long. I have to gather up the suitcases,

the bedding, the pillows.[59] I make trip after trip to the car while my mum finishes up her cigarette. I can hear her coughing from out in the driveway.

We load up the car -- the small Ford Fiesta -- until it is bursting at the seams. Mum has her knitting and her cigarettes; Aila, my daughter, has her new collection of soft toys, bought for a pittance at the local boot sales, and her two blankets, and I have my note pad and my books. They fill up the space behind the driver's seat. Already having expressed her disgust at Aila for wanting to bring along so many of her teddy bears, mum is irritable. "As if you can ever read that much," she frowns. I know she is right, but I cannot decide which ones to leave behind, so I take them all. I tell her I am afraid that I might need them all. Aila tells her she feels the same way about her toys.

With mum tutting and shaking her head and Aila giving me that "you're in trouble now mum" look, we clamber inside and head for the seaside. Aila squeezes into the back, and cuddles up with her teddy bears and blankets, while Mum sits in the front. She adjusts her seat, bustling around as she shifts her weight from side to side attempting to get comfortable. She holds the map up in front of her face like a shield and stares at it hard. I know that it is all show; I know that her cataracts are so bad that she cannot even see the squiggly lines, let alone read the words. I turn the car east, drive through the city watching, along the way, for signs.

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[59] Friedrich Engels says that for the working-class, "work itself becomes unmeaning and monotonous to the last degree. It offers no field for mental activity, and claims just enough attention to keep him from thinking of anything else" (130). What I would give to be able to hand over all the daily mundane chores -- the cleaning, the cooking, the mending, the driving, the shopping, the paying of bills, the worrying about the paying of bills -- to someone else. Then I could write whenever the desire takes me. It is my own private fantasy.

As we pull out onto the highway leaving the crowded, jumbled city streets behind us, mum relaxes.

"It has been a long time since I have visited the sea side," I remind her, but she ignores me.

"Mum and dad took us there every year when we were kids," I tell Aila. "We went during the factory fortnight. Seemed like the whole town would be on those roads heading for the sea at that time."

"And now we are!" Aila laughs, excitedly jumping up and down in the back seat.

"Yeah!" I laugh, throwing my arm forward in an "onward to the sea" motion.

"But it wasn't this easy," mum frowns. " None of these highways were here back then. It was all little country lanes. Took us forever to get there."

I remember the trip, but I don't say anything. It was hell. Always, we were caught in the traffic jams, and always, mum and dad argued. Mum worried about the traffic jams, searching incessantly for another route, while Dad worried constantly that the car would overheat or that some idiot, driving past us on the shoulder, would clip us on the side. Mum complained that dad was going to hit someone one of these days the way that he drove, in the ditch and all that, and dad moaned that mum was a lousy map-reader.

"Don't even know her left from her right," he had told us kids in a weak attempt to

elicit our support.

She said that if he didn't like the way she read maps then he should teach her how to drive. "I'd do a better job than you," she said loudly, squaring her shoulders and glancing at us in the back seat to see if we had noted that she had, once again, put him in his place. Both mum and dad shouted at my sister and me. They told us to sit quietly and not distract them.

But things are different now. It is only mum, Aila, and me making the trip today. Dad is no longer here. He died years ago, before Aila was even born. Today there are no twisty, narrow roads that must be traversed; there are big highways, wide stretches of straight road that roll forwards as far as the eye can see. I accelerate down one of them now, my foot to the floor. Mum's small, tinny car rattles and shakes, but it is zippy and it leaps forward as I change gear, a trail of black smoke dissipating in the air behind us. I am enjoying it. I am relieved not to have to stick to the strict Canadian speed limits. Driving here in England makes me feel free, as though I am breaking all the rules: driving on the 'wrong' side of the road, and exceeding the speed limit of a hundred kilometers an hour. I forget that I am English, that I learned to drive here before going to Canada. I forget that this is normal here, that I am merely going with the flow, keeping up with the rest of the traffic.

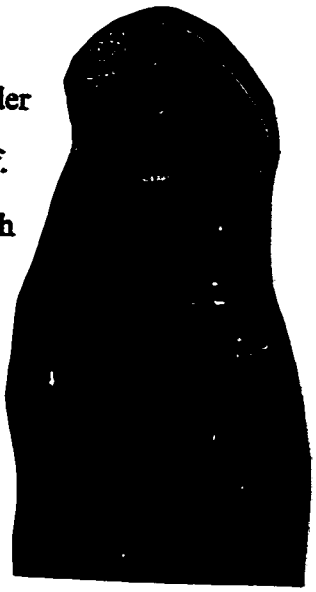
Steady now, with the straight stretch of road in front of us, I suggest that we sing a song. Mum agrees, and soon we are singing at the tops of our voices an old Cliff Richard favorite, "We're all going on a summer holiday." My daughter likes this. She enjoys having these women around her, feeling that she is part of a family that is larger than myself, and her brothers. She likes the song. She is not old enough yet to be critical of our liking for 'oldies'. She sings loudly at the top of her voice, repeating with mum

and me the five lines of the song that we know by heart:

We're all going on a summer holiday
We're all going for a week or two
We're all going on a summer holiday
Gonna make our dreams come true -- ue -- ue,
For me and you -- ue -- ue.

Mum is in a good mood. She is laughing. I am hoping that it will stay that way. I want to make the most of our time together. After a while, the singing stops. We lose enthusiasm and Aila falls asleep, snuggled up in the back with her head on Big Bear. I concentrate on the road. Grandma tries to keep me awake by talking to me and by looking at the map, which close. The map falls off her lap and slides to the floor of the car. Even in her sleep I can see that she is resisting. Her back is stiff, erect. Her head, not leaning against the seat, is propped awkwardly on her shoulders. Every once in a while it falls forward and she jerks it back, waking for a minute, concerned for a moment, as always, with how she looks.

> *Audre Lorde writes that women have been oppressed, "raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings" (57), raised to maintain "a distant / inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters." (54)*



The same way as I have wondered about my father, I wonder about my mother. I doubt if she, like him, has ever known herself. Always, she has existed for others. Confusing her own desires with those of others, of society, of men within society, she has, in her own way, attempted to conform, to please. I don't believe she has ever satisfied her deepest cravings. She has been too concerned with being good, "with knowing exactly how someone else is feeling" (Steedman 105), so that she might *appear* physically

"[Images] show him sights: sights of what he may possess" (Berger, Ways of Seeing 85)

and socially presentable: desirable. Dare I say, marketable?[60]

Once beautiful, my mother at seventy-four can, at times, still hold her own. A bit of make-up, the right clothes, a brush of her still brown, naturally curly hair and she can take twenty years off herself. At these times, which these days usually consist of nights spent in my sister's pub, she straightens up, controls her breathing (she has emphysema) and smiles for all to see. Often, in *The Plough*, if her breathing isn't too bad, or if she is on yet another course of steroids, she will dance until late into the night with any man she can persuade to spin her around and foxtrot across the floor.[61]

Alone though, or unguarded in the presence of her daughters or people she knows well, she looks old. Tired. I watch her now out of the corner of my eye as she sleeps. Her small frame, although upright even in sleep, is fragile. Bones jut out at angles and her skin is blue-veined, crinkled like old parchment paper. Her eyes -- once her best feature -- are now framed by big, black circles, and lids that sag at the outer edges. They make her look sad, uncared for. Deep lines run down the sides of her face, heavy creases that tell more about a life of toil and stress than they do of a life of smiles and laughter. As she

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[60] See Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," and Carolyn Steedman's working-class analysis of this in *Landscape for a Good Woman* (67-70).

[61] Ironically, it is now my sister who does most of the dancing. She has always wanted to be a singer and now, in her own pub, when she has had a few too many to drink, she becomes one. Usually, she stands on top of the table and sings Irish songs, laments for lost lovers, but sometimes she is more raunchy, singing songs like "My sister Belinda" (reminders of days following her husband, Pete, around the Rugby Club). Sometimes, she sings "Blue Moon," finishing her song by pouring beer over one of her drooling customer's heads. The men love her, adore her, despite the fact that singing isn't her strongest point. It doesn't matter.

sleeps, her mouth falls open and she begins to snore: a quiet whistle that is exuded, it seems, from somewhere deep inside her chest. I wonder how long she can hold on like this, rigid, determined. I wonder how far appearances and sheer determination can take her.

In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Audre Lorde writes:

> In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (114)

Talking specifically about ageism in our society, Lorde points out that

> the 'generation gap' is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, "Why?" This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread. (117)

In pointing out the need to value, respect, and listen to the life experiences of our mothers, Lorde is encouraging us (as women, and as daughters) to recognize the ways in which we share similar oppressions. In recognizing these oppressions, we can also recognize the ways in which our lives have been distorted and inhibited. More importantly, as Lorde stresses, we can find ways to reclaim, define, redefine, and celebrate our differences. Together.

I like this idea.

As we go through the big roundabout outside of Kings Lynn, mum wakes up. We are almost there. The countryside has changed. We have left the tall trees and the thick woods that surround Sandringham, the Queen's summer home, behind us, and now there are only rolling hills, the odd farm, a distant medieval castle that we have never been to, but always meant to. I think I can smell the sea. It is just over the horizon.

"Uhh Sal'," mum groans, shaking herself from her sleep and pushing herself up straighter in her seat. "I've got to have a fag. Do you mind?"
I assure her I don't but, at the same time, I prepare myself by rolling down my window a little. She is used to it. My dislike of cigarettes and her smoking. But I no longer try too hard to stop her. The doctors say it will make little difference at this point. Her emphysema has gone too far. She lights up, her hands shaking, her mouth pursing as she sucks back the the smoke into her lungs.
"Almost there." I tell her.

What strikes me most about this picture is the way her legs look deformed.

* * *

I am reminded here of a poem by John Berger. Reading it, now, in my small house in Canada, I think I can almost smell the sea. It is all tied up with poetry, with the need to experience through words on paper, community. A shared vision? I feel like I am 'almost' there:

Poetry

Word by word I describe
you accept each fact
and ask yourself:
what does he really mean?

Quarto after quarto of sky
salt sky
sky of the placid tear
printed from the other sky
punched with stars
pages laid out to dry.

Birds like letters fly away
O let us fly away
circle and settle on the water
near the fort of the illegible.

1972 (*Pages of The Wound*)

* * *

We turn off at the Lavender farm, just before Hunstanton, and head for Heachem beach. The soft purple fields seem to me to be definitively English. My daughter is awake. I point the lavender out to her and I tell her that we will go there and pick some lavender to take home. I say we can even have a Cornish tea there: scones and jam.

"They put Lavender seeds in the scones and in the freshly whipped cream." I tell

her. She thinks it sounds disgusting.

"Just you wait," I insist, "it is delicious. It makes my mouth water just to think of it." Mum takes a long drag on her cigarette and holds it down in her lungs for a second, before blowing it out. A long puff of gray smoke spirals around her head and through the haze she leans over and peers in the back seat at Aila.

"Don't you believe a word of it," she says, coughing slightly, "they're awful scones. I'll take you up the sea front and get you some winkles. Now they're good." Aila looks horrified, and we all laugh.[62]

We are staying in a small chalet only a five-minute walk from the beach. Mum booked it back in the spring when I had first phoned her and told her I would be coming home on holiday. There are many of these chalets. One next to the other, next to the

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[62] This trip reminds me of the one taken by Kathleen Woodward to Southend. For Kathleen, this trip to the seaside represents an escape from the "[b]leak, unheeding world" (83) of the city. In going there she thinks she will find hope, a better life than the one she has been living in London. She sits on the beach, eats winkles, dreams of eating an ice-cream cornet (85). At night, she walks the streets, reads them as hostile, strange. Like the flâneur, she is lost in the city, but unlike the flâneur, she does not attempt to reconcile herself to middle-class values; walking the city, she attempts, rather, to reconcile herself to the intolerable conditions of her working-class experience (84). As a woman in this situation, she feels "miserable – and horribly alone" (86), but she also recognizes that she "must take hold of the world and deal with it" (91). She must go on because, in her words, within her is "the urge that knows no rest," she must follow her dreams, "following without seeing where they lead" (151), in the hope that she will, as a woman, find some meaning in her life (148). But, like the flâneur, as a working-class flâneuse, is she also, in her roaming, expressing a desire for the lost or repressed feminine, for the "gods, in the persons of the women" (91)? Is this also what I am doing?

other, little square boxes in long rows that look out onto a small strip of nicely mowed lawn. I am pleased that outside our chalet there is a big weeping willow tree. It offers us some privacy. Later, Aila is delighted that this tree seems to attract ducks by the dozen. They come there, ten or eleven of them at a time, some of them dragging their babies behind them and Aila sits in amongst them and waits until they come right up to her before she throws them the bread. Eventually, their long necks stretch out to take her offerings gingerly from her lap, or even her hand.

The first day we are there it is hot. Unbearably so, mum says, but Aila and I think it is a good day to go to the beach. We head out early. Aila has a ball, a plastic shovel, and the big rubber blow-up tire that I bought for her at the local store. I have towels, my sun tan cream, and one of my books, Kristeva's *Black Sun*, a book about women, writing, and depression.[63] Mum

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[63] Kristeva writes that the depressed person's speech is often "repetitive, monotonous, or empty of meaning, inaudible even for the speaker" (43). Further, "speech delivery is slow, silences are long and frequent, rhythms slacken, intonations become monotonous, and the very syntactic structures – without evidencing disturbances and disorders such as can be observed in schizophrenics – are often characterized by nonrecoverable elisions (objects or verbs that are omitted and cannot be restored on the basis of the context)" (34).

As I am reading, I realize that this is the way my mother speaks. Often, when I am speaking to her on the phone I am compelled to ask her if she is depressed. "You sound so down," I tell her.

"No, no, she replies, "everything's fine."

But it doesn't sound fine. She speaks slowly, tonelessly, one-syllable word answers to my questions (usually 'yeah'). When she does elaborate, her sentences are short, clipped, interspersed with silences while she tries, usually unsuccessfully, to remember the right word, or the right way to pronounce a certain word.

Kristeva suggests that "learned helplessness" might be a model that is useful for understanding the processes underlying the depressive state. She writes: "when all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or fight. The retardation or inactivity, which one might call depressive, would thus constitute a learned defense reaction to a dead-end situation and unavoidable shocks" (34).

I always think of mum as a fighter, but now I can see that it was all just show. Her aggressive, "I'll show 'em" attitude was just that, all show. It can be read analogously to the pacing and circling a dog does before he withdraws to the corner, lies down and falls asleep. In the fifties, a young, married, working-class woman had no escape route. After the war they fired all the women who were working in the factories and gave their jobs to the men: the heroes returning from the war. The women were told to go home, make babies, make England strong. Despite the fact that mum insisted on going out and having fun with her friends one night a week, she conformed. She tried to be a good wife; she had four kids. When we were small she worked nights at the local theatre to make ends meet, but when we went to school she took

her fag and her cup of tea in peace. I tell her that I will come back and get her later. Although it is only a short walk to the beach, she wants me to drive her there. She doesn't think she'll make it if she walks, not with her breathing the way it is. As we walk along the narrow path that takes us towards the beach, I tell Aila that the first look at the sea is always the best.

"It is the one you have been waiting the whole trip for," I tell her.

With hot sand oozing between our toes, we climb over the artificial ridge that serves as a winter wave-breaker, and we see the sea. It is in. The waves are big, they charge in, their white tops breaking just before they roll over, crash on to the wet sand.

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up full time employment at the local shoe factory. She said dad was happier to see her in the factory. He hadn't liked the thought of her meeting people the way she had as an usher at the theatre. I think, early on, mum realized that her marriage was, for her, a dead end. But divorce, in those days, was out of the question. She got into a routine: Monday to Friday she worked, came home cooked supper, cleaned up, watched a bit of telly, did some sewing, and went to bed. On Saturday afternoons she went shopping and cooked us a nice tea. On Sundays, she would send me to the store for a bottle of *Tizer* and we would sit and watch the Sunday afternoon film together. Once a year we went on holiday to the seaside, the nearest place – Heachem – because that was all we could afford.

One time, when I phone her from Canada, I ask her if she is satisfied with how she has lived her life. She sighs. "Oh, we all have dreams . . . but that's not what life's about. Life's about getting by, making do . . ." Almost as an afterthought, she asks, "Who is happy, anyway?" In the silence that follows, I realize that I don't know the answer to this one. Happiness, for me, isn't something that one suddenly possesses, it doesn't happen at the end of a fairy tale, it doesn't come in big chunks; it comes suddenly in moments when one least expects it. The nature of it, like desire itself, is fleeting and restless. We must work to notice happiness, to acknowledge it in our lives. I tell mum this. "Yeah," she says, but I know she hasn't really heard me. If I push the point she'll tell me that I don't know what the bloody hell I'm talking about. And maybe she is right. I do realize, though, that my mother is depressed, and has been for a long time. So long, that she can't recognize it in herself: it is a part of who she is. Who she has become.

As I write now, I am reminded of a passage from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. I look it up, read:

> *The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall. The waves were steeped deep-blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping (123).*

I like this. I like the ominous note of a "great beast stamping". But for now, I ignore it. Consciously, I turn back to last summer: to Aila, to Heachem, to the sun, and to the sea.

* * *

"Race you in," I say, dropping my stuff right there on the side of the path. I leap in, but after racing me to the edge, she follows tentatively. I remember that she does not know the sea; she is used to the small lakes that are scattered around her hometown in Alberta, Canada. With a lake you can see the land on the other side. The water is calm, still, black. Here it is a gray, foamy mass that extends as far as the eye can see.

"But crabs live here," she informs me. Facts gleaned from a book borrowed from the local library.

Once she is in, there is no stopping her. She jumps through the waves and swims confidently backwards and forwards. We play ball and then tag. I tell her I like to float in the sea. I show her how to do it, leaning back and falling into a wave. I had forgotten how easy it is, the salt supporting my body, keeping it afloat. She watches as my body bobs up and down in the water. When I straighten up again, she is shaking her head.

"No way!" she says.

I realize that it involves a certain amount of trust so I offer to hold her hand. Together we lie on our backs and float. Looking up at the bright sun I can feel her relax as the water swells and falls beneath our bodies. With my ears in the water, I am able to listen to the sounds of the ocean. I feel like I am in another world.

Later, when mum is there, I fetch us ice creams. We sit and watch the sea go out, the sun go down. Always, I am nervous that mum will have one of her "moods". They are irrational, unbearable. When I picked her up to come to the beach, I was afraid that she was already well on the way. Clearly, she had been crying. She made

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I look at the photographs and I realize that, like Roland Barthes, I long to discover the *essence* of the people who stare back at me from the past. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes, "Since Photography . . . *authenticates* the existence of a certain being, I want to discover that being in the photograph completely, *i.e.*, in its essence, 'as into itself . . .' beyond simple resemblance . . ." (107). Like Barthes, I want to strip away the masks and find the 'air' of the woman, her "luminous shadow" (110), her 'truth,' her soul (109). For, as Barthes tells us, "if the photograph fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow, and once the shadow is severed . . . there remains no more than a sterile body" (110): death.

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little attempt to hide it.

"You okay?" I ask her, and she nods, her bottom lip quivering as she gathers her things and we walk out the door.

"I have nothing to look forward to," she tells me, "that's the tragedy about getting old. It's like you just have to wait to die."

"That's not true," I tell her, "any of us might die tomorrow. And you have lots to look forward to." I'm not sure that I believe this, even as I am saying it. Her face is ashen, white. She has gone from using her puffer, to using the big, plastic contraption that she puts over her mouth and nose. Her breathing is coming in great long wheezes.

"If only you'd give up the smoking," I begin, simply because I don't know what else to say. "Even if you would cut down a bit. Things would have to get better . . ."

"It's not just the smoking" she says, shaking her head, "I wanted *so* much when I was young, and now, well now, I feel useless. I've done nothing with my life. Do you know what I mean?" I nod, because I, at the end of my life, want to be able to say that I have lived my life fully,

" to whom does the photograph belong? Is landscape itself only a kind of loan made by the owner of the terrain? Countless cases, apparently, have expressed this uncertainty in a society for which being was based on having" (Barthes, Camera Lucida 13).

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authentically, I want to know that I made a difference, that I lived my life on purpose. I want to feel that my life has been worthwhile.[64]

"If I hadn't had you kids," she begins and stops. I know the ending. If she hadn't had us, she would have done something with her life.

"Let's go to the beach and have some ice-cream," I tell her, somewhat abruptly. She nods, wipes her eyes, and we leave.

Always, it seems, mum has oscillated from wild joy to desperate depression. I remember that as a child, I would always be on tenterhooks, always concerned to ask the right question.

"Are you okay mum?" I would ask, "Did I upset you?" Sometimes she wouldn't talk to me or anyone for days, she would just bang around slamming cupboards in some

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[64] In *A Future For Astyanax*, Leo Bersani posits that the restless nature of desire can lead either to "suicidal melancholy" (6), or liberation. The most common form of desire, the type which is put into service of establishing a "distinct and coherently unified personality" (5), structuring and repressing that personality until it conforms to what is "least threatening to established psychological and social orders" (14), leads inevitably to "the impoverishment of desire" and ultimately to "the fantasy of death as the absolute pleasure" (6). According to Bersani, however, there is hope. In adopting a desire which is mobile, diversified, "nonstructured: (7), "fragmentary and discontinuous" (6), originating in "the peripheries of our desiring attention" (7), we are able to "shatter the desiring self" (14). Although "intrinsically violent", this shattering is necessary if we are to escape from the inhibiting dictates of society: dictates that demand mediocrity. In deconstructing, reforming, and reformulating all that we know, we can liberate the self: find freedom, meaning, and purpose.

I like the sound of this. Too often, I have repressed my desires in favor of doing what is right, expected. I am like mum in this way. It is, at first glance, a seemingly safe thing to do. I can identify myself by certain terms -- female, heterosexual, mother, wife – and these terms rarely upset people. Ultimately, though, I am left floundering in the labels that I have used to describe and know myself. I discover at thirty, at forty, that I don't really know myself at all. Who am I, I ask, apart from my labels, from my desire to be something I am not? I have a mid-life crisis, I have several of them, and I discover exactly what Bersani is talking about. I am no single thing, no single label. I am a splay of surfaces, free to assume and celebrate any identity, any mask I desire. I am liberated.

But am I? When my crisis is over, when I go to work, visit my family, take my kids on an outing, I find that I am still, to some extent, mediated by, and bound up with the structures, the culture, the institutions that have formed me. Escaping, I decide, is a life-long occupation.

contained fury, bursting into tears and rushing upstairs at regular intervals. PMS my sister said; "the change" was my father's opinion. "Old age," she is telling me now. Manic seems to fit for me. But if this is true, all the labeling in the world won't help her because she refuses to go to the doctors with it. After the ice-cream, I fetch us a cup of tea. I am hoping that this will cheer her up, but when I give it to her she mutters about the Styrofoam cup. "Tea is not tea in a Styrofoam cup," she tells me irritably. And, once again, I agree.

At one time I would have tried to fix this for my mother. But now I don't. I had to go to therapy to stop it, but stop it I have. I pick up my book, Hélène Cixous's *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, and read her reading Clarice Lispector: "I offer white lilies to what hurts me in you. For we are beings of lack . . ." (154), and suddenly I understand. Neither of us, none of us, are perfect.

> *Interestingly, Leo Bersani, in his desire to reinstate the need for developing what I read as an authentic self, advocates a literature that is capable of shattering the self. It is a literature that works against the normal narrative: it is counternarrative, nonnarrative, antinarrative. It expresses the alienation and fragmentation of modern life but, more than this, it is a writing that is capable of reviving – through the word, "experienced partially as an insubstantial sign referring to meaning beyond itself," and through "verbal stimulation – memories of intense bodily pleasures" (10). This kind of narrative, which is undoubtedly a disturbing narrative, presents the reader with numerous access points where, entering into the conversation, he or she can begin to interpret, translate, and negotiate his or her self-identity. It seems to me that there is a certain integrity in this. Writing should try not to pin desire down; it should try not to give structure and continuity to what may be "fragmentary and discontinuous" (6). It should not, it can't, tell the truth, and nothing but the whole truth; it can only gives us shades of reality, different stories.*

> *As Kristjana Gunnars writes in <u>The Prowler</u>, "The story is always somewhere else. I imagine a book that pretends to tell an official story. In the margins there is another story. It is incidental, it has little bearing on the official story, but that is where the real story is" (47).*

Looking up now as we sit on the beach, I stare at my daughter. She has made some friends and they are busy hunting for crabs around the wooden breakers. After a while, she carries one over to where we are sitting. I put my book down, at last having had a chance to read it, and she shows me the crab. It is big, with a large, round encrusted shell. I am a little afraid -- I have never liked things that crawl -- but I try not to show it.

"Nice," I say.

"One of the kids", she tells me, "has pulled off its claws." She is upset. She wants to take it home with us. I tell her that we will see if it is still there when it is time to go and she is satisfied. I take a photo of her holding it. I still have it now. She is smiling into the camera, looking slightly sad. The crab is hanging from her hand, its eyes are bulging, and its little legs are waving around, clawing at thin air.

Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast within cultural discourse as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a valued norm which is assumed to possess natural corporeal superiority.

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The next morning we get up and switch on the news. The man on the weather station tells us that the weather will be hot and sunny until lunch time. After that there will be increasing clouds, possibly late afternoon showers. "The temperature will drop in to the low sixties" he tells us. Aila thinks we should go to the beach and I agree. But mum wants to go shopping. She has run out of fags and besides, she wants to see what is in the stores.

"Can't we go later?" I ask. "This afternoon it is supposed to get cloudy. I could go get your cigarettes for you, bring them back." But her body is hostile. It wants what it wants. I debate suggesting to her that she drive herself, as she would if I wasn't there, so that I can take Aila to the beach, but I don't. I know from experience, from the mood she is in, that this will only result in her complaining that I love my kids more than I love her.

"You wait until your kids desert you," she will say, I know it. And today, on holiday, I don't feel like fighting with her.

> *In A Future For Astyanax, Leo Bersani argues that "desire itself is an activity within a certain lack, and the logic of our desiring fantasies leads ultimately to the annihilation of all otherness" (13). I relate to this. Irrationally, maybe, I have often felt like my mother is annihilating me, psychically, little by little every day. I do it to my own daughter. It is not intentional.*

A cupboard door slamming takes my mind off what mum could say. I turn and she is making herself another cup of tea, pouring the boiling water in to the cup with one hand, while mashing the teabag furiously with a teaspoon with her other hand. Her body is rigidly upright and she is turned away from me. I know without having to look, that her lips, tightly pursed, are already starting to quiver. She walks into the bedroom and I

know she is crying.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I think, but I don't say anything. I am caught between my mum and my daughter. We go shopping. I tell my daughter that it will be a quick trip. But it isn't. We trail around after my mother as she looks for little treats in the store that will supposedly make us all happy. We follow her into the newsagents, watch as she looks at the post cards. "Having fun in sunny Heachem" one of them says. I buy my daughter a disposable camera, as if that alone can make up for the lost time.

By the time we eventually arrive at the beach it is cold. The clouds have come in. Mum decides to stay in the chalet. "It's too cold" she says. But Aila and I head off, swimming costumes on, for the sea. We are brave for a while, but it is freezing. The water is like ice. But we stay there. We are not alone. There are a few other brave souls determined to enjoy the beach while they can.

Later, when the sea goes out, I show my daughter how to dig for cockles. We walk out across the bare, ocean floor, spade and shovel in hand and pry them out of the sand. Behind us, we leave clumps of clay sticking out of the water. They look like rough, primitive birds. They crouch down, sticking their heads in the water, or they reach up towards the sky, hoping to fly. There seems to be no in-between. I tell Aila that this must have been how primitive man, in astounded surprise, began to first mold images in his own form.[65]

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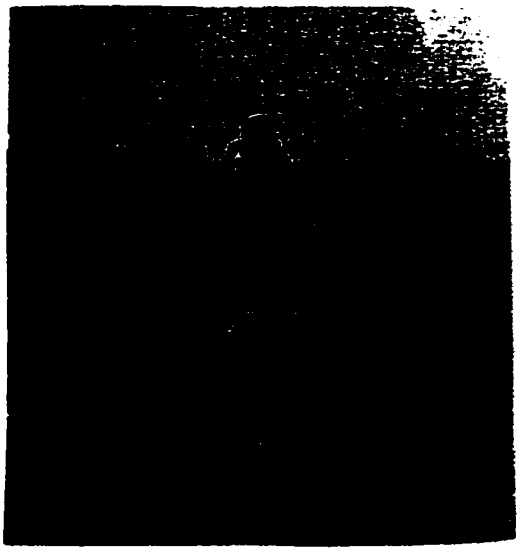
[65] I too attempt to mold images in my own form. While on this holiday, in the odd moments I have to myself, often late at night lying in bed with my daughter tossing and turning in the bunk bed above me, I try to write. Often in the middle of a sentence, I fall asleep. There never seems to be enough time to get down on paper what I want to say. Always, it seems, I am too busy.

In "The Writer on Holiday," Roland Barthes informs us that the writer (a bourgeois male character)



We also find crabs. They are buried in the sand. As we walk, we surprise them and they quickly scuttle out of our way. We laugh at how they move in their crooked sideways gait.

The rest of the week is more of the same, gray clouds and rain. It seems like it is forever raining or about to rain. Every morning I go for a walk on the beach regardless. Every day we go somewhere. We go to the miniature animal farm and see tiny horses, we go to see a windmill and we go to Holkham House. This is the country home of the 'Coke' family. It is big, sprawling. I think

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develops, while on holiday, an affiliation with the Proletariat: "By having holidays, he displays the sign of his being human" (*Mythologies* 30), of being "part of the proletarian world, or at least the world of the working people" (29). For Barthes, this is a false connection granted to a writer and his readers by a bourgeois society anxious to subject themselves "to the common status of contemporary labor" (29). Barthes emphasizes that the desire to maintain a "spectacular alliance of so much ability and so much futility" (31) still points to the contradiction, the gap between the working class and the bourgeois, between the ordinary working person and the 'genius' (31). In truth, "the function of the man of letters is to human labor rather as ambrosia is to bread" (30). "The god remains" (30), along with the myth.

Such neat categories, none of which I fit. It is all very well pointing to the frailties of the bourgeois thinking, but where, in all of this, is the proletarian writer, the female proletarian writer? Or doesn't she exist? Am I just a figment of my own imagination: so much futility scratched across a blank page?

that you could fit my mother's entire house in their dining room. I see the bed that Queen Victoria slept in. I see the same satin bedspread that was pulled up over her body. I touch it. I like being this close to history, to a woman of such power. But we leave the stately rooms, go down into the kitchens. And I know that this is where our family belongs. And there is something noble in it. The high ceilings, the old grate-ovens, the big cast iron pots, and the big leather water jugs speak to me of something more real, more tangible than the stiff room above us. I tell mum that I think that the working classes are undervalued.

"What are you on about?" she asks in a disgusted tone. I think she is simply resisting any attempt I might make at making our heritage seem more noble than it really is. Aila puts it into perspective for us.

"I'd hate to live here," she says, "it's so old and dirty, and its all crumbling to pieces."

I hadn't noticed before, but now I look at it with her eyes, I can see she is right. And maybe mum is right too. I laugh. It sounds somewhat hysterical even to my own ears. Later, though, as we sit in the tearooms, eating cucumber sandwiches and drinking tea, I feel like an outsider sitting here at this our small table in this big, stately room.[66]

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[66] I have doubts about my writing, about my ability to convey to my reader the appropriate feeling, mood, tone. I am wondering here if I have managed to capture the essence of the relationship between my mother, my daughter, and myself. I want my reader to understand that, despite our dysfunctionality, despite all our sideways crab-like movements, we three generations of women are together. A family of sorts. In *The Rose Garden: Reading Marcel Proust*, Kristjana Gunnars writes:

> What makes a work of art go from being good to great: the presence of doubt. It is not something directly spoken in the narrative; it is a thing you feel when you are in the presence of the text. Like a vague scent of blossom somewhere. The

On our last day at Heachem, I go for my usual walk. The car is packed and ready to go. Aila is playing one last time with the ducks. Mum is annoyed that I am taking off. She is sitting down, having a quick fag and one last cuppa.

"What's it to you?" I ask her. "I want to see the sea one last time. I want to remember it. In a few weeks I will be back in Alberta with no sea for thousands of miles. I'll miss it."

"Well go ahead," she huffs. "But there's work to be done here. We have to pack up, clean, get everything into the car . . ."

"Don't worry mum, I'll do it all when I get back. There's lots of time."

"This is typical of you," she snaps, "we'll be late, I know it. You're always late. Disorganized. I hate it. If only you weren't so airy-fairy, what with your walks and your books and all that . . ."

"Oh for christ-sakes mum," I suddenly burst out, unable to contain myself any longer. "Why do you always have to go on so. I'm sick of it." I throw up my hands, not only in frustration, but rage. Controlled rage. "I'll do it when I get back okay." It isn't a question. I turn and leave, slamming the door as I go.

> sorrow of knowing at the last moment you have failed. For this reason, photographs frequently show writers as pensive and sad. They know something you do not: that the work you admire is really a failure. Because Language itself fails. There may not be words for the ambition of what you wish to utter. (56-57)

Maybe there are no right words to show the tensions, the doubt, the pain, the hesitation, the frustration, and the love that was present as these three negotiated their space, their words, their lives. But I try to present a clear picture. My picture. In doing this project, then, have I failed?

The wind is so strong today that even walking is difficult. It almost stops me in my tracks. Leaning forwards as I struggle my way up the beach, I notice that the sea, still a few hundred yards out, carries white, foam topped waves along with it. From this distance it looks like a frill, a fur collar. As usual I have my book with me, but I cannot read and walk today. The sand is getting in my eyes. I can feel it behind my lids, gritty. I am feeling depressed. If only I had someone to share, really share, all this with. But I am alone with the wind and a sky that looks like it is brewing up a storm.

Diverging off the beach into the sand dunes behind, I see an old shed. Funny that I have missed it up until now. Inside it looks like someone began to make a sauna and then stopped. Wooden benches line the walls, but where the oven should be, there is just an open space. There is no door so I walk in and look around. I think to myself that I will sit here a while. Out of the wind. Find myself again, put myself right with the world before I return to the chalet, to the cleaning and the packing, and to my mother.

Some of the local teenagers have forayed here on dark nights, their hormones running high. Someone has written on the bench "My name is Marc and I am fucked."

Someone else has written "Neil tossed me off here." Another: "For gay sex 7p.m Wednesday." A bird flies in the door -- a sparrow-- I see its nest in the corner. I stay for a while sitting on the bench where these uncertain illicit acts have happened, looking out of a small square window at the sea. It is nice here, sort of odd, private.

Sheltered from the wind, I open Kristjana Gunnar's *The Rose Garden*, and read:

> *She [Anais Nin] knows what a chimera a piece of writing may be. What a changeable thing a life is. How subject to fluctuations of mood and temperament. What an illusory thing personal identity can be. How unattainable meaning is. What inaccuracies lurk in every portrait, especially self-portrait. (119)*

I look out of the small open window, stare at the waves, still a hundred yards or so out, and notice that, to my left, someone has printed on the plywood wall in thick, black ink, "By the time you read this I will be in Australia, but I will *never* forget you." The never is emphasized, underlined. I feel the same way.

But I don't stay too long. I can see from looking at the skies that it is going to tip it down and, besides, I know mum will be impatiently tutting or tapping her fingers on the kitchen table, waiting for me to load up the car. I head back along the beach in the direction I came. This way, the wind pushes me along. Sand whips at the back of my legs. It creates a low beige cloud in front of me. The wind whistles in my ears, and I pull the hood of my sweater up. I can see that the waves, closer now, are being worked into a white-foamed frenzy. In my hand my book becomes furled at the corners. I cling to it tightly. A moment and it would be gone. One moment and it would become meaningless debris, more garbage littering the beach. I think that it is as if the beach itself, the wind, the sea, the sand, are telling me that it is time to move on, to go home.

Suddenly, I make out two figures coming towards me. It is mum and Aila; they are bracing themselves against the wind. After a while mum gives up. Waving to me and pointing to Aila, she turns around and goes back the way she came. Aila keeps coming. As she gets closer I see that she has a bucket in her hand. But she stops before she gets to me and walks out on to the small pier, the one built to disguise the outlet where the river

water drains into the ocean. I find her around the back of the pier, poking with her shovel into the small cracks and crevices formed by the sand at the base of one of the concrete pillars.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I made grandma drive me down here," she says, "so I could find Ben. I can't leave here without him."

"Ben?"

"My crab," she glares at me, "the one who had his claws pulled off. He'll die out here on his own. I have to take him home."

I know there is no use arguing with her. I begin helping her to look for him, but all the while I am thinking how I can prevent her bringing a crab home in the car with us.

"I'm not sure he will live at home" I tell her, "even if we do find him."

"You said . . ."

"I know, but I've been thinking about it. I think he will be better off in the sea, it's where he belongs."

"But he'll die! He has no way to protect himself without his claws."

"Sure he does," I say.

"How?"

"Well, he can hide, bury himself in the sand. Find a quiet corner somewhere, some place small where nothing else can get in."

"Well I'm finding him," she says, turning her back on me and digging determinedly in the sand.

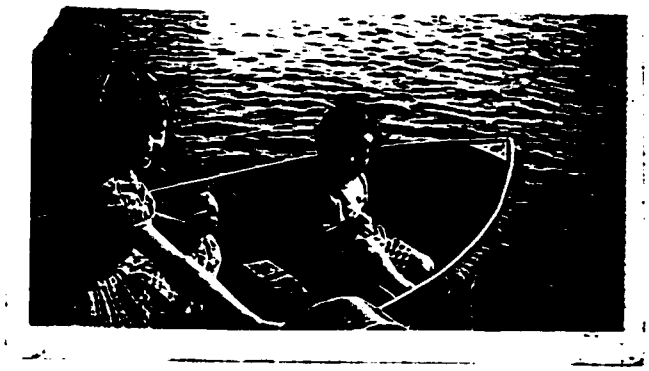
Suddenly, just as I am beginning to think I will have to insist that we go and leave Ben to his fate, she finds him. Holding him up in the air, she whoops with joy.

"Here he is," she says. "See, I told you I would find him." Triumphantly, she puts him in the pail. But she doesn't turn for home; she bends down and starts with her fingers to pry out a piece of loose concrete from the pillar. I stoop down and try and help her. Against the side of the pier she meticulously forges a little house, made out of pieces of concrete and rocks. As a finishing touch, she decorates it with shells. I don't say anything. I watch as she takes him out of the bucket, kisses him on his hard shell and pushes him inside his little den.

"There," she says turning to me, "I think he'll be alright now."

We leave him there, hidden under the rock.

"I think he will be quite safe in *that* home." I lie to her, and she smiles. My daughter has a strong will, a determination to do things her way, a determination to make her own decisions in life. I admire this about her. I don't want to take this ability away from her.



Together, we walk back to the chalet. The wind rushes us along. When we get there the clouds finally break and rain falls like a soft blanket shading everything a light gray. Mum is struggling out to the car with one of my suitcases. She has a raincoat on, but already her hair is plastered to her head. It makes her look small, vulnerable.

"Leave that to me mum." I shout as I run the last few paces towards her. "I can take care of it."

She shakes her head, an emphatic no, but I notice that she is wheezing, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps, and I take the suitcase, put it in the back. She lets me. While mum is having one last fag, I finish the cleaning and load up the rest of the suitcases. Aila helps me. The rain slows to a pleasant drizzle. Mum is waiting at the car when I come out of the chalet one last time, key in hand. It is time to go, her body language is telling me. Just as I reach her, she starts to cough; it is a long, racking cough, one that is attempting to move what cannot be moved. It exhausts her. Leaning against the car, between coughs, she shakes her head, "It's time to go," she says. I shout to Aila, acknowledge that yes, it is time. I put my arm around mum, give her a hug, help her, with one light hand on her elbow, to sit herself in the car.

It is warm; the rain on my back feels pleasant. I notice how, when it falls, runs off my skin, it shrouds me in silence. There is a certain knowledge, a peace, in the falling: the shedding. It is the same peace that exists in the unspoken spaces of our stories, in the spaces between what is said, and what is not said. As readers, we know it as an understanding, a familiar knowing, a coming home. A recognition. As a woman, a person walking in the rain, it exists somewhere between the being who is my mother, and the being who is me: myself. I feel it fall.

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