

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

# “That Weeping Constellation”:

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Navigating Loss in Women’s Memoirs of  
Textured Recovery

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I acknowledge that this is my own work.

An article (with the same title as the thesis) taken from sections of Chapters 1, 3, and 4, is due to be published in *Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies* (forthcoming 2012).

An essay (taken from Chapter 3), “Writing the Self Into Being: Illness and Identity in Inga Clendinnen’s *Tiger’s Eye* and Hilary Mantel’s *Giving Up the Ghost*,” is due to be published in a collection of essays on “Identity and Form” by Sheffield Hallam University.

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the writing of grief within women's narratives of loss. It is concerned with the question, "How does one honour, in grief, all that up-rises? And how then does one write of it?" (Gail Jones 149). In Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she laments the absence of any significant body of literature that will help her through her grief. I propose that the grief memoir—a term new enough not to have been included in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's 52 genres of life narratives (in *Reading Autobiography*)—fills this gap left by professional literature of bereavement and itself contributes to "that weeping constellation" (Jones 147) or community of mourners missing from contemporary grief practices as identified by Sandra Gilbert and Darian Leader. This genre, new to literary analysis, provides fertile ground for the discussion of recent literary and psychoanalytic analyses of mourning that have resisted the neat split Freud draws between normal and pathological grief. My chosen texts deliberately complicate "packaged and frozen" (Ellmann qtd. in Payne et al. 78) notions of recovery while honouring what Jenny Diski calls the "texture of experience" (*Skating* 185). I'm essentially identifying a sub-genre of the grief memoir which I call "memoirs of textured recovery." What sets them apart is the performance of complex "recovered" selves that show how "recovery," ambiguous and shifting in nature, calls for more complicated theories of mourning able to accommodate an understanding of grief not in terms of Freud's absolute recovery nor Tennyson's "loss forever new" (qtd. in Krasner 226), but rather, a space located somewhere in between. In their refusal to conform to the compensatory paradigms of the grief memoir, these texts contribute to "a dialogue of mournings" (Leader 85) and encourage us to think in a new ways about loss.



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## PREFACE

### IMPOSTOR OF LOSS

How does one honour, in grief, all that uprises? And how then does  
one write of it?  
—Gail Jones

Many books on grief and loss are prefaced by the authors' own experience of personal losses, often given by way of explanation for how the book came into being. Robert A. Neimeyer's *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* begins thus: "When my father died on the eve of my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, one world ended, and another began" (xi). He goes on to consider the lasting implications of that "one abrupt gesture" resonating from his father's suicide and situates the publication of his book against the backdrop of fresh loss generated by his mother's move into a nursing home (xi). Nancy R. Hooyman and Betty J. Kramer's *Living Through Loss* is a purposeful integration of "the personal and the professional" (ix) and begins with a frank telling of the deaths of Hooyman's brother Tom (from a hit-and-run drunk driver), both of her parents (to pancreatic cancer), her best friend (killed by a tram in Prague), her son (who "fell to his death while guiding on Mount McKinley"), and her husband (killed by colon cancer and abandoning her before his death) (x-xiii). This is followed by Kramer's accounts of the death of her younger sister (when Kramer was only two), her mother's long period of incapacity and eventual recovery from a brain aneurysm when she was thirteen, her parents' divorce in her teens, the leukaemia diagnosis of her brother and his death at sixteen, and her father's sudden death from a truck accident (xiv-xv).

In light of these and countless other experiences I have come across in my research, it is hard not to begin this project feeling like an Impostor of Loss.

Inevitably, the question most often asked about my research into loss always focuses on whether I have chosen to study grief memoirs for some other (perhaps personal) reason? And my answer no doubt on some level always disappoints. This project has not been the direct result of any major personal loss, and I feel somehow inadequate for having failed to experience those catastrophic events that usually act as catalyst for the introspection and searching that often accompany loss. However, I am guessing that I am not alone in feeling this way. Paradoxically, it is Hooyman and Kramer—who have each accumulated enough loss to last several lifetimes—who remind us of the danger of attempting to prioritise experiences of loss:

Some people think that they have never grieved if they have not experienced the death of a family member or friend. But we are griever a thousand times over in our lives (Rando 1988). We all are subject to many “little deaths” and the subsequent lessons they teach us, including giving up our impossible expectations of others and ourselves (Kubler-Ross 1969; Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2001; Viorst 1986). (3)

I have been lucky enough to have experienced little of death in my own life, though the recent untimely death of a close uncle in his mid-fifties has left my mother’s family scarred with one of its first real tragedies, and the passing of a paternal aunt while in my teens has cast a dark shadow over my father’s family ever since. However, as this project seeks to highlight, loss itself can be about more than death alone. My own sense of loss resonates more closely with experiences of migration, the sense that I am somehow always leaving, living without roots in a place that is never fully home, reminding me that grief is “like a neighbor, who always lives next door, no matter where or how we lie, no matter how we try to move away

(Tatelbaum 1980; also see Becvar 1997)” (qtd. in Hooyman and Kramer 3). My recent marriage to an accident victim and chronic pain sufferer has played a part in informing my research, but, again, has not acted as catalyst for the project, which began before we met. My interest in grief and loss was sparked in 2005 by a course I took at the University of Sydney called *Journeys of Healing* (taught by Bernadette Brennan), where I came across an article by Gail Jones, “Without Stars: A Small Essay on Grief,” which poses but leaves unanswered two questions which have fuelled my research since: “How does one honour, in grief, all that uprises? And how then does one write of it?” (149). This project is the attempt to answer those questions, and it begins by asserting that loss is not hierarchical:

Some of us have undoubtedly experienced a loss that others dismiss lightly or quickly. . . . To imply that any type of loss is greater than another is to overlook the complex, intensely personalized nature of loss and its various meanings based on our family history and rules, personalities, past experiences, and cultural beliefs and value-systems—in sum, the essence of who we are. (Hooyman and Kramer 7)

My project expands across a broad spectrum of loss that includes but is not limited to experiences of bereavement. It also examines loss due to illness, as well as an integral part of many narratives of loss of varying subjects—the loss of childhood self. I hope that this discussion of the ways in which writers reveal the complex ambiguities of experience resonates with readers’ own personal losses (in whichever form they might appear) and helps to contribute to a community of mourners, or what Jones refers to as “that weeping constellation” (147).

## INTRODUCTION

the art of losing's not too hard to master  
 though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.  
 —Elizabeth Bishop (“One Art”)

In her essay “Without Stars,” Gail Jones grapples with Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of Disaster*, while trying to make sense of her own grief in the wake of a close friend’s suicide. In an essay struggling with Blanchot’s often numbing negation—“What ravaging . . . is at work, that repeats the word, obsessively and compulsively, *disaster, disaster*, in a kind of autistic echolalia” (139)—Jones shares with her readers a moving description of her own grief often at odds with Blanchot’s metaphysical arguments about death and suicide. Although she feels it is almost “a shameless act: to attempt to write of it” (139), she invites us through the process of forgetting, remembering and embodying grief, ending with Blanchot’s image of a boy’s unspeakable experience confronting “the disaster . . . the sky without stars” (149). According to Blanchot, the boy’s epiphany is that “nothing is what there is” (qtd. in Jones 149), a viewpoint Jones herself attempts to negate throughout the essay. Though an admirer of Blanchot—“Discovering Blanchot’s writing was a little like reading Sylvia Plath at nineteen” (146)—she feels that there is something missing in his discussions about death, particularly about the cadaver, an object that only resembles a former self: “there is no mention of affect, of weeping, of the so-typical distresses that undo and disarticulate” (146).

This sentiment is echoed in Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*. During the year in which she waits for her dead husband to return, Didion laments the absence of any significant body of literature that will help her through her grief. She

says, “Given that grief remained the most general of afflictions its literature seemed remarkably spare” (44). Other contemporary memoirists, such as Robin Romm, would seem to agree. In the “Afterword” to *The Mercy Papers*, she writes: “When my mother was dying, I found very few books that spoke of the particulars of loss. Much gets said about healing, but. . . . It seemed to me that most books sought to close the wound, hurry it shut” (207). Didion goes on to mention C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, protagonists’ responses to death in novels, medieval literature, ancient Greek plays, and elegies (which have occupied the limelight in literary studies of death). But she remains unsatisfied; a gulf opens up between her experience and the written word that might reflect that experience. And although she describes poetry as something she could “rel[y] on” (45)—particularly Matthew Arnold’s “The Forsaken Merman” and W. H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues” (45)—familiar poetry becomes an unsettling echo of something once enjoyed but now all-too-relevant. She says, “I could shut out what the undertaker was saying but I could not shut out the lines I was hearing as I concentrated on Quintana [her daughter]: *Full fathom five thy father lies / Those are the pearls that were his eyes*” (Didion’s italics, 19).

She remains unsatisfied also by what she calls the “sub-literature” of how-to guides and turns instead to the professional literature of psychologists and social workers. For Didion, this initially “*seemed* to promise comfort, validation, an outside opinion that I was not imagining what appeared to be happening” (italics mine, 46). Importantly, it “seemed” to help, because although it might be useful at first to learn that “the most frequent immediate responses to death were shock, numbness, and a sense of disbelief” (46), Didion later becomes frustrated with the inadequacy of scientific research to accurately transcribe the personal experience of her grief:



But from where exactly did Dr. Volkan and his team in Charlottesville derive . . . their special ability to “explain and interpret the relationship that had existed between the patient and the one who died”? Were you watching Tenko with me and “the lost one” in Brentwood Park, did you go to dinner with us at Morton’s? . . . Did you gather up plumeria blossoms with us and drop them on the graves of the unknown dead from Pearl Harbour? (56)

The gap Didion identifies could be, of course, a symptom of grief in itself—the feeling that nothing one reads in a bereaved state could help one deal with the loss. But I’m intrigued by what she doesn’t mention. Although she briefly refers to literary portrayals of grief, she doesn’t mention the vast amount of literary criticism on grief, loss and death, and she doesn’t mention personal narratives of loss, or “grief memoirs.” In her review of the book, Sandra Gilbert says “sophisticated as she is, Didion appears to be unaware that hers is one in a rich and poignant tradition of modern and contemporary grief memoirs” and goes on to list memoirs from John Gunther’s 1949 *Death Be Not Proud* to Carol Henderson’s *Losing Malcolm* in 2001 (555). Yet although narratives about death and loss are obviously not new, the term “grief memoir” appears to be relatively recent—at least new enough not to have been included in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s 52 genres of lifewriting in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide For Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). Though often derided as “misery memoirs,” both popular and scholarly interest in narratives of loss has increased in recent years, as evidenced by Kathleen Fowler’s article, “‘So New, So New’: Art and Heart in Women’s Grief Memoirs” (2007), and Michael Robert Dennis’s “The Grief Account: Dimensions of a Contemporary Bereavement Genre” (2008), which are both concerned with defining specific characteristics of

bereavement genres. This would suggest a renewed need to bring Gilbert's "rich and poignant tradition of . . . grief memoirs" to the forefront of grief studies.

I'm arguing that the "grief memoir" fills a gap left by the professional literature of bereavement and itself contributes to a community of mourners that is missing from contemporary grief practices as argued by Sandra Gilbert in *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* and Darian Leader in *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*. It is this community to which Jones refers when she describes those gathered at a close friend's funeral as "that weeping constellation, as a highly specific community" (147). If, as Gilbert believes, we are at "a historical moment when death [is] in some sense unspeakable and grief—or anyway the expression of grief—[is] at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal" (xix), leaving "some people feeling at a loss as to how to grieve appropriately" (Walsh and McGoldrick 124), then the grief memoir can contribute to what Darian Leader calls a much-needed "dialogue of mournings" (85) and shed new light on how we understand loss.

The grief memoir—unlike literary portrayals of grief, such as Mr. Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, or Sethe in *Beloved*—highlights (as Fowler says) "the therapeutic value of writing and speaking more private narratives of loss" (526). As such the genre follows on from a tradition of narratives of recovery called "conversion" or "survival narratives" that are often definite pilgrimages that emphasise recovery. "Recovery" itself remains an important aspect in Fowler's analysis of grief memoirs, and one of the five main themes she identifies in her texts (545).

Fowler is just one of many critics who emphasise recovery in texts with themes of loss. However, I wish to take issue with this definition of 'recovery' as necessarily therapeutic. Such assumptions of 'recovery' lie at the heart of Freud's

“work of mourning.” Recent literary and psychoanalytic analyses of mourning that engage Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” resist the neat split he draws between normal and pathological grief, complicating the definition of “mourning as a way of divesting ourselves of pain, of getting it over and done with” (Woodward qtd. in Tanner 94). This extreme reaction against Freud has led to theories of mourning in which grief does not end: sociology theorists like Paul Rosenblatt have said that the “hypercathecting” or “emotional neutralising of memory” may well last a lifetime (53). Literary critics Laura E. Tanner and James Krasner argue for an embodied theory of grief that proves how “the loss continually renew[s] itself” (Krasner 223). But the texts I’ve chosen do not fit neatly into either of these two extremes. Rather, in their attempt to “honour, in grief, all that up-rises,” they have written of a space of ambiguous recovery (theorised in Chapter 1), and the question of whether these women are in fact healed in the end is never clearly answered.

Therefore, I’m trying to identify what appears to be emerging as a sub-genre of the grief memoir that does not conform to the compensatory paradigms identified with that genre. These texts are not limited to bereavement alone, but include texts that deal with loss of self in bereavement and illness narratives as well as narratives of childhood loss. The women who write them align themselves with Joan Didion in resisting “packaged and frozen” (Ellmann qtd. in Payne et al. 78) notions of recovery, hackneyed self-help books, and what Tanner describes as the “tireless advance towards mental health” (93). The writers do not set off to tell a story of ultimate healing, nor to testify to—as in Suzette Henke’s “scriptotherapy” (xii)—the power of writing to heal. Yet neither do they insist on a grief that does not end. Frustrated with pop-psychology, Jenny Diski says it best in her memoir, *Skating to Antarctica*: “I deny *denial*, another word like *abuse* that wraps up the complicated and in effect itself

denies the texture of experience” (185). Although of course compensatory paradigms have their value in literature, it is also true that many memoirs can run this risk of simplifying recovery. Cathy Caruth sums up the danger of this cure-all mentality in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: “To cure oneself . . . by . . . the telling of one’s story . . . seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy” (vii). Caruth seems to be echoing Diski’s insistence on “the complicated,” on getting at “the texture of experience.” Following on from this, I am calling my chosen texts “memoirs of textured recovery.” What sets them apart is the way the women—in performing complex, “recovered” selves—show that “recovery,” ambiguous and shifting in nature, calls for more complicated theories of mourning which can accommodate an understanding of grief not in terms of Freud’s absolute recovery nor Tennyson’s “loss forever new” (qtd. in Krasner 226), but rather, a space located somewhere in between.

My chosen texts offer a refreshing spin on the much-degraded “misery memoir” not least in their ability to resist the consolatory promise of the genre through (i) the absence of any intrusive agenda insisting on recovery (or the impossibility of recovery) (ii) deliberately ambiguous endings; (iii) narrative structures that juxtapose healing insights with despair; (iv) narrative structures that complicate traditional movement from loss to renewal; (v) writers speaking from the present in order to complicate events indicating recovery and (vi) reflexive passages that complicate the relationship between writing and healing and are ambiguous in and of themselves.

## THE GRIEF MEMOIR AND A THEORETICAL PRISM

Although Nancy Mairs refers to “the literature of personal disaster or the memoir of mischance” (x) in the “Foreword” to *Recovering Bodies*, Kathleen Fowler was one of the first critics to argue that the grief memoir should be studied as a genre in its own right (525). As such, her study is important for my research as I attempt to define a sub-genre of the grief memoir. Her study will perhaps come to be considered a watershed in the study of the literature of grief not least for championing the grief memoir but also because of the staggering diversity of her theoretical approach.<sup>1</sup> The need for such diversity is recognized by critics like Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories and Methods*: “the study of autobiography explodes disciplinary boundaries and requires an understanding of other approaches, methods and practices” (1). In critiquing her four memoirs at an intersection of thanatology and literary analysis (526), Fowler’s study supports theorists who are concerned with bridging the gap between psychotherapy and literature and suggests valuable ways of emphasizing grief texts through a varied theoretical approach. This is an approach I have tried to emulate; it gathers apparently disparate theories into a kind of critical prism, dispersed across narratives of loss to inform the study of grief in literature.

Because the losses I discuss lie outside of pure trauma theory and beyond the professional literature of psychology, I will, like Fowler, be using an amalgamation of

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<sup>1</sup> Fowler draws not only on thanatologists (whom she says have largely ignored the grief memoir), but also on memoirists who critique the genre such as Nancy Mairs and Nancy Miller; on trauma critics such as Joann Silcox; psychotherapists like Esther R. Shapiro; psychologists Dennis Klass, James Pennebaker (and his research into narrative disclosure), and Janice Winchester; Bingley et al. and their study of 63 illness narratives, Finkelstein and Levy’s study of Holocaust survivors; Sloan and Marx’s observation of “the writing paradigm” (545); Brody and Park’s emphasis on “mindful strategies”; and Harvey et al. who “strongly advocate supporting the bereaved in telling their story of crisis and hope” (545).

sociological, psychological, and trauma theory, as well as drawing from scholars working in the field of autobiography today in order to analyse the writing of grief in its widest sense. I draw from key theorists who address the stages of grief (Freud and Kubler-Ross)—though I ultimately move beyond them to “new wave” grief theorists (Payne, Rosenblatt, Neimeyer, Attig, Hagman)—and those whose studies are not limited to loss by death (Horwitz and Wakefield, Rando); trauma critics who discuss its resistance to representation (Caruth); literary critics who emphasise the embodied aspect of grief (Merleau-Ponty, Tanner, Krasner, Kristeva, Abraham and Torok), and memoirists and critics defending the genre (Nancy Miller, Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Paul John Eakin, Helen Buss), as well as critics of pathography or illness narratives (Hunsaker-Hawkins and Couser).<sup>2</sup> I explore three main elements I’ve identified as key to the writing of grief: an exploration of truth and memory within experiences of loss; the writing process and identity-construction; and an embodied understanding of grief. These elements help to move the griever towards a space of complex recovery. I differ most importantly from Fowler’s approach by reading against “the healing nature of writing and publishing their accounts” (545). I develop some of her themes in my exploration, such as “trying to be honest” (531), seeking “to compose a new postloss identity” (539), and finding a “grief community” (540); however, my purpose is to expose the difficult, complex process of recovery and to question whether, after experiencing loss, it is at all possible to recover, or retrieve, even “a part of the former self” (539) (discussed in Chapter 3).

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<sup>2</sup> In a note to the preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Reconstructing Illness*, Hawkins says: “Unfortunately, I did not know about [the] special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, ‘Illness, Disability, and Lifewriting,’ which was published in the spring of 1991, while I was in the final stages of preparing *Reconstructing Illness* for publication. Couser and I, independently, seem to have arrived at the term ‘pathography’ to delineate autobiographical narratives of illness” (228).

## THE TEXTS

My chosen texts were all published roughly within the decade spanning the turn of the twenty-first century. They include: Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (1994); Mary Gordon's *The Shadow Man* (1996) and *Circling My Mother* (2007); Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* (1997); Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye* (2000); Kim Mahood's *Craft For a Dry Lake* (2000); Judith Barrington's *Lifesaving* (2000); Fay Weldon's *Mantrapped* (2004); and Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003).

I wish to look at grief and the pain of loss as universal experiences, as “complications in typical grieving” (Attig, “Relearning” 34), and so will be drawing on theorists who are interested in the “study [of] loss in all of its human complexity” (Neimeyer xii), and who recognise that “[g]rief is pervasive” (Hooyman and Kramer 5) and “not limited to loss by death” (Parkes 273). In *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*, Therese A. Rando asserts that “Grief is a reaction to all types of loss, not just death. Death is but one example of loss” (22). In recognising that “loss . . . subsume[s] a welter of human experience” (Neimeyer 5), we can understand how types of loss as varied as “getting a divorce, retiring, developing a chronic illness” (Rando 20), “the unsought end of a love affair, the news that one’s spouse has been unfaithful . . . the failure to achieve one’s cherished life goals,” as well as job loss, status loss, chronic distress, and disasters (Horwitz and Wakefield 33) are all part of the wider experiences of loss, though “such events are seldom recognized by others as losses generating feelings that require processing” (Rando 20).

Because of the scope of the project, however, I needed to put a limit on the types of loss I was researching in order to focus my reading and put some kind of border around the flood of narratives of loss currently available. I decided to narrow

my study of bereavement to parent-bereavement narratives, and to include illness narratives in my study because the diagnosis of serious illness is often akin to a state of bereavement, as Colin Murray Parkes says: “reactions to loss of physical health can give rise to many of the psychological responses that are found after bereavement by death” (215). In reading within these fields, I found another area of loss often emerging in parallel to experiences of bereavement and illness: the loss of childhood self, often experienced as a secondary loss: “we may regrieve losses experienced in our childhood” (Hooyman and Kramer 4). It became almost impossible to write of the two previous losses without taking this almost primal loss into account, and so this became the third area of focus.

I wanted, however, to limit experiences of loss to those not normally associated with trauma studies—not because I am suggesting that the losses explored here are in any way *less* traumatic—simply that the experiences normally associated with trauma, such as child abuse, rape, incest, domestic violence, prisoners of war, etc., have developed into genres in their own right surrounded by a wealth of resources and specific discourses dedicated to such issues. Furthermore,

trauma doesn't only refer to catastrophic moments. . . . Trauma can be a single incident or a series of incidents; it can be a broken finger received playing football or a psychic wound caused by the violent death of a close family member. In popular language we speak of one who has been “traumatized” by some terrible experience, but in point of fact no one can reach adulthood without some moments of trauma (MacCurdy 161).

That the experiences of loss discussed here might fall outside of what has become strictly identifiable as the field of trauma studies (despite emerging only fairly



recently as a movement in literary criticism),<sup>3</sup> is therefore not to suggest they are *not* traumatic, and indeed I will be borrowing from well-known trauma theorists in order to explore aspects of grief through its lens.

The experience of ‘loss,’ for the purpose of this project, then, is to be deprived of a vital element necessary to the understanding and performance of a self. The loss of this stabilising force threatens to violate or negate the self, undermining popular theories of the autobiographical process as engendering a stable and continuous self (Eakin). The loss of a beloved other results in the loss of a vital understanding of our selves in relation to that other—the whole concept of self must be reworked and revisited when we attempt to define ourselves within the literal (geographical) and psychically altered space that results from this new absence.

Any major disruption to an otherwise stable sense of self will have much the same effect—a chronic illness involves the loss of a former healthy self and acts as a severely destabilising force which can often completely negate self. In a way similar to the experience of bereavement, we must understand ourselves in terms of this altered self in the face of loss—a self that exists within an altered body, indeed, within an altered concept of time and space. The third area of loss related to this is the loss of a former childhood self—one that can exist in total disconnect from any fully realised adult self. This child self, lost to our full adult awareness, can—in the process of retrieval—conjure up memories that threaten again to derail the adult, stable self that has existed quite separately, even happily, from early memories of painful loss or trauma.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, Suzette Henke credits Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman with radically changing notions about literature and psychoanalysis in the early 1990s.

My project follows the effect which these losses have on fundamental aspects of self and looks closely at the ways in which contemporary women memoirists undergo a grieving process that I am suggesting is conscious, complex, and nuanced. It is ‘textured’ in that it resists the extremes that we are often presented with in both literary and psychological portrayals of grief. The ‘recovery’ they enjoy is not solely in terms of its healing or redemptive nature; it is rather as a retrieval of self (however incomplete). I’m interested in how this ‘recovered’ self complicates Eakin’s stable, continuous self of the autobiographical act, and I explore in detail how grief facilitates this process of acquiring self, however fragmented, however piecemeal.

I therefore look beyond texts that emphasise loss solely in terms of its healing or redemptive nature. Memoirs that openly seek recovery or celebrate healing are valuable in their own right—consolatory paradigms have an important place in literature and in lifewriting in particular. However, because there is such an abundance of these types of memoirs, with recovery as the sole focus of the narrative as well as critical analysis of them, we can sometimes run the risk of diffusing the complexity of loss. I was interested to find out what happens when memoirs contradict the dominant paradigm of healing. Memoirs of textured recovery are unlike “conversion narratives [which are] structured around a radical transformation from a faulty ‘before’ self to an enlightened ‘after’ self” (Smith and Watson 192); they are unlike “survivor narratives” or “self-help narratives” dealing with recovery from an addiction to drugs (Smith and Watson 202-206), in that these and other more traditional narratives of loss work within a model of consolation and recovery (such as Arthur Frank’s “restitution” or “quest” narratives). Of course, I don’t want to run the risk of smoothing over the complexity and ambivalence of many narratives of loss, and I am in no way suggesting that the sample I have chosen to talk about here is

in any way an exhaustive list of this type of nuanced approach to recovery. What I am arguing is that this sample of memoirs lends itself to new ways of understanding loss by highlighting the very complexity that more often than not goes unnoticed. My own reading of these texts is also different from how other critics tend to read narratives of loss because while other critics emphasise their healing nature,<sup>4</sup> I emphasise the complexity of the recovery process in line with “new wave” theories of grief that have been emerging since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

Within the last year of researching my project, Couser published *Signifying Bodies*, which helps to support my argument and points to a similar trend in lifewriting criticism that seems to be turning away from the emphasis on healing and recovery. This trend has been further solidified in the recent 7<sup>th</sup> biennial International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) conference, “Life Writing and Intimate Publics,” where keynote speaker Nancy Miller identified “recovery memoirs” as a kind of “literary methadone,” where “the compulsion [is] to have the story turn out well,” and questions why we seem to “need to be saved” and why we “need to be relieved from our anxiety.” She asks instead, “What does the narrative arc without redemption look like?”

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<sup>4</sup> Critics like Fowler emphasise “the healing nature of writing and publishing their accounts” (545); Helen Buss the “therapeutic process” (*Repossessing* 15); Janet Mason Ellerby that “Narration can heal” (xviii); Ann Burack-Weiss the “ten steps along the way from loss to renewal” (xix), G. Thomas Couser texts that “all in various ways base their comic plots on some sort of intellectual, emotional, or spiritual compensation” (*Recovering* 198), as well as Anne Hunsaker-Hawkins, Marilyn R. Chandler, Olivia McNeely Pass, and Celia Hunt (*Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography*).

<sup>5</sup> Other critics who write against recovery paradigms in literary criticism include Jackie Stacey (*Teratologies*), and Patricia Rae, who discusses how Jahan Ramazani challenges the “consolatory promise” or the “compensatory economy” of the elegy. Writers who complicate Freud’s theory of mourning include Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein, John Bowlby, Warren Motte, Laura Tanner, and James Krasner. Also “[Kathleen] Woodward’s ‘affective grief,’ [Sarah] Brophy’s ‘unresolved grief,’ and [Darlene Fozard] Weaver’s ‘inconsolable loss’ are all constructed so as to acknowledge the ‘present and persistent’ experience of grief” (Tanner 93).

This kind of thinking is emblematic of a move away from the emphasis on recovery, as in Couser's earlier work, *Recovering Bodies*, where most of the narratives discussed focused on illness narratives with comic plots and some kind of compensatory paradigm. In contrast to this, *Signifying Bodies* ends with an emphasis on disability narratives that write against these more traditional paradigms, which he calls "the new disability memoir." Similarly, in Hawkins's earlier work, *Reconstructing Illness*, she initially emphasises pathography as "a profoundly destructive experience [that] at the same time testifies to the capacity to transform that experience in ways that heal" (xix). However, in her article "Writing About Illness," in the collection of essays, *Unfitting Stories*, she seems to modify this:

I've . . . learned that neither treatment nor testimony ever can fully achieve its goal—healing, in the case of therapy, or witnessing, in the case of testimony. With neither model is there a total and final cure or reparation; survivors of trauma are never able totally to put the experience behind them and move on in life as though it didn't happen. (127).

Helen Buss, as well, although emphasising the therapeutic nature of memoir in *Repossessing the World*, in a later essay from the same collection describes "the human subject as survivor" as "one who can never overcome but can invent and reinvent tactics of survival" (Buss, "Authorising the Memoir" 42). (This is further discussed in Chapter 1). Nancy Miller ended her keynote speech by observing that no one is publishing against the "sunny arc" of recovery, but I feel that memoirs of textured recovery indeed write against and are a direct reaction to the prevalence of this "recovery arc."

I chose texts that are somehow atypical in that, because of their hybrid natures, they defy neat placement into genre categories. For instance, while choosing to focus on the broad category of parent bereavement narratives, I chose Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*, which defies the category not only because it is a bereavement narrative with a twist—Diski does not want to know whether her mother is alive or dead—but also because it operates on many levels, being both a light-hearted travel narrative as well as a deeply disturbing account of childhood loss whose attitude toward recovery is ambiguous. The other main parent-bereavement narratives highlight unusual circumstances as well: in *The Shadow Man*, Mary Gordon's father died when she was seven, leaving her to follow a paper-trail of his published work in order to discover who he really was; Judith Barrington lost her parents when they died on a cruise ship, and Kim Mahood's father died in a helicopter accident, though the narrative is at the same time a historical document of growing up female and white in the Australian Outback and is "an evocative, sensual and challenging blend of history, fiction and memoir" (Brennan 91).

In researching illness narratives, I tried to avoid what has been referred to as the "flavor of the name" phenomenon (Shenk qtd. in Burack-Weiss 11), where responses to particular illnesses fall into similar patterns of experience and already form what I see as genres in their own right (such as HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's/dementia, breast cancer, etc.). Thus I have chosen illness memoirs documenting somewhat more unusual cases to avoid "the handful of care situations" (Burack-Weiss 10) that normally are variations on a common theme as discussed by Couser and Ann Burack-Weiss. Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*, and Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost* discuss less-typical illnesses, such as surviving a liver transplant and the misdiagnosis of endometriosis, and they both also resist traditional illness narratives

in being hybrid constructions: Clendinnen's memoir is at once a collection of short stories, historical document, and a memorial for her parents, and Mantel's narrative is divided into two halves, the first of which does not even mention her illness, but gives a detailed account of childhood loss. Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, though well-documented as an illness narrative, is also unusual as a cancer narrative in the extremely rare nature of Ewing's sarcoma. As such, I am trying to read against texts that are "so invested in recovery that the achievement of closure often takes precedence over consideration of what dysfunction [and I would add—grief] feels like and how it alters self-perception" (Couser, *Recovering Bodies* 294). Although Mary Gordon's *Circling My Mother* is about dementia, the book is hybrid in being almost strictly a biography of her mother up until the last chapter, which is my focus. Also, this book essentially has its beginning in the last section of its predecessor, *The Shadow Man*, and so it is appropriate that I follow through with it in my discussion.

I've since discovered that some of my criteria for illness narratives overlap with Couser's discussion of "auto/somatographies" in *Signifying Bodies*, or what he calls the "new disability memoir" (164). Although he discusses disability primarily, his insights apply to my chosen illness narratives in that they are "devoted to exploring *bodily* experience" (Couser's italics, 164), and also in the distinction between the condition itself (or the impairment), with the disability (its social consequences). This kind of heightened awareness can be applied to illness narratives as well, and Mantel's memoir gives an excellent example. She describes the condition, "endometriosis" thus: "The endometrium is the lining of the womb. It is made of special cells which shed each month by bleeding. In endometriosis, these cells are found in other parts of the body. . . . Wherever they are found, they obey

their essential nature and bleed” (191). This is understood as distinct from its social consequences, where it was known as “the career-woman’s disease” (Mantel 211).

My chosen texts overlap with characteristics of the “new disability memoir” because they don’t focus solely on the impairment (or illness), but rather on “a shifting sense of *identity*” (Couser’s italics, 165); they are not about “triumph over impairment” (167); they show “sensitivity to the problems of representing disability [or illness]” (172), have a “sense of being unfairly discriminated against” (179) and give a sense of “history and community” (Finger qtd. in Couser 180) in not being about individual triumph over adversity, but in showing illness as a “socially constructed condition” (Couser 37).

I chose memoirs written solely by women—not because I wish to make an implicitly comparative point about the differences between the ways in which men and women deal with loss, but because I am interested in how these narratives of loss invoke and produce a gendered self. So while I do not make comparisons based on gender—i.e. that women write “more intimately about physical and emotional distress” (Mairs xi), or that “[w]omen take and conquer sorrow differently from men. They take it willingly with open arms” (Lindbergh qtd. in Hooyman and Kramer 6)<sup>6</sup>—gender does have implications for the experience of loss, particularly within the context of memoir: “The history of women’s secondary social status has tended to mark their life writings with a conscious exploration of the issues of gender roles” (Grice 360). If we understand memoir to be about a self, located in history, then

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<sup>6</sup> It is increasingly difficult to make these kinds of gendered comparisons because “[w]omen’s autobiography is now so omnipresent and various that it is difficult to summarize its characteristics. Like much contemporary male autobiography, it has become more sensationalized, more open, and more overtly tragic, with few autobiographers now hesitating to share their griefs with the public” (Sanders 2: 948).

gender becomes critical in understanding experience. As Helen Buss says in

*Repossessing the World:*

In my study . . . I will not be asserting these female-gendered selfhoods as essential and unchanging, as always necessarily different from men's. . . . What I do assert is that lives, and the stories those lives produce, are culturally mandated and historically contextualized at all times by the processes of gendering. A generic discourse such as memoir, one that is so directly a product of a life being lived in its "times," is inevitably a gendered performance of self. (14)

Theorists at least from Freud onwards argue that subjectivity is always inscribed by gender—this is significant in a discussion of how loss affects the construction of the self. The importance of gender on experiences of loss becomes obvious throughout my discussion of women's memoirs. In her book, *Unreliable Truth*, Maureen Murdock describes how the women of her mother's generation "had neither the time nor the permission to examine their lives. Women speaking their truth was taboo; convention, polite society and the Church did not allow it" (32).

Murdock's mother clings to her girdle for identity through Alzheimer's: "I see the root issue for so much of the feminine experience: the silencing and control of a woman's body" (59). The majority of women writing about death of parents towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are baby boomers documenting not only their mother's narratives of loss, but also their own struggles with gender constrictions during the 50s and 60s. "For many a woman, the forging of a strong independent identity does not occur until she leaves home. The bond she has with her mother (or her idealization of her father) is so strong that it takes years for her to differentiate herself from her family identity" (Murdock 37). This is certainly true for Mahood, as she



attempts to forge her own identity in the Outback as separate from her father's.

Hilary Mantel's narrative of childhood loss is gendered: "I realise—and carry the dull knowledge inside me, heavy in my chest—that I am never going to be a boy now"

(57). The same is true in her narrative of illness and in her experience of the gendering of medical diagnoses and endometriosis. She says powerfully:

Some people have forgotten, or never known, why we needed the feminist movement so badly. This was why: so that some talentless prat in a nylon shirt couldn't patronize you, while around you the spotty boys smirked and giggled, trying to worm into his favour. . . . It was assumed that marriage was the beginning of a woman's affective life, and the end of her mental life. It was assumed that she neither could nor would exercise choice over whether to breed; poor silly creature, no sooner would her degree certificate be in her hand before she'd cast all that book-learning to the winds, and start swelling and simpering and knitting bootees. (160-161)

Similarly, Fay Weldon describes what it's like to be a "feminist writer" in the 50s:

What she says is disconcerting to others. . . . She is by implication suggesting a revolution: that women need not be men's victims, that men are not automatically objects of adoration, that women are people too. Nobody wants to hear this at the time. To women it suggests that whole lives spent as daughters, sister, wives, mothers, to the abnegation of the self, have been wasted. (*Mantrapped* 161)

Indeed, it becomes impossible to understand experiences of loss outside of this kind of gendering.

Finally, because I am arguing that my texts illustrate “a nuanced sensitivity to the legacy of loss” (Neimeyer xii), grief as complex process, and recovery as “textured” and ambiguous, I decided the study would be best served by in-depth analysis of a few texts rather than a broad sweep of memoirs. Because a space of “textured recovery” by its very nature benefits from in-depth, complex analysis, I have chosen a few key texts that best illustrate features of this sub-genre, as well as some support texts which back up my theory. Again, I wish to emphasise that at this stage in the study, I am by no means suggesting that the small group of memoirs I discuss here are islands unto themselves—of course there are other narratives of loss that illustrate the complexities of grief. What I am suggesting is that these texts are prescriptive of a certain type of “grief memoir” that fall outside of “the dramatic fall and hard-earned rise” of typical “recovery memoirs” that “prove the impossible possible” (Miller, “My Body”). This sub-genre, in writing against the “simulated completeness” of the “recovery arc” (Miller, “My Body”), illustrates “new wave” theories of grief and contributes to new understandings of loss as complex, nuanced, and ambiguous.

Chapter 1 theorises this space in more detail. It gives an outline of the standard model of grief (which is highly dependent on Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”), summarises the “new wave” theories of grief that arose in reaction to this, and situates the “space between” among these varying theories (including some aspects of trauma theory) in order to provide a theoretical model in which memoirs of textured recovery operate. It further provides a brief history of the rise of the memoir and argues for the need for more scholarly inquiry into the genre. It ends with a discussion of the significance of a gendered approach to the study of memoirs of textured recovery.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the term “Life Writing” in that at its very core lay a questioning of traditional assumptions of truth and narrative normally associated with personal writing such as autobiography and memoir. Creative nonfiction has fluid boundaries that invite authors to extend notions of creativity within nonfiction and to participate in an almost borderless activity. This chapter explores recent debates within literary criticism that are concerned with the fluidness of these boundaries and how this affects our interpretation of texts ostensibly dealing with “Truth.” It complicates the fundamental premise that telling one’s truth is always a restorative process by exposing the intricacies behind the telling. It provides an in-depth analysis of the problematics of truth-telling in Gordon’s *The Shadow Man*, though it briefly considers as supporting texts her second memoir *Circling My Mother* as well as Mantel’s *Giving Up the Ghost*, Clendinnen’s *Tiger’s Eye*, Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica*, and Weldon’s *Mantrapped*, among other nonfiction writers and critics concerned with truth and memory.

In their book, *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson define “life narrative” as “a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (3). Chapter 3 takes up the theme of identity and writing within experiences of illness and bereavement in Mantel’s *Giving Up the Ghost*, Clendinnen’s *Tiger’s Eye*, and Gordon’s *The Shadow Man*. If illness and bereavement interrupt (or completely negate) a sense of self, how do these writers attempt to reconstruct “the observing and commenting ‘I’” (Clendinnen 189)? Couser argues that it is “only by reference to [an] ongoing interior autobiography” that many writers can assure themselves of a sense of self (*Recovering* 184). Indeed, Mantel asks the question that lies behind many of these narratives: “What’s to be done with the lost, the dead, but write them into being?” (231). The ability to articulate loss

(which forms the heart of Kristeva's theory of mourning) emerges as a central theme of the chapter and is the basis for the writers' emerging identities. But while many memoirs about illness often conform to the tropes of conversion narratives which give way to fully recovered, enlightened selves, Clendinnen and Mantel "resist consolation and subvert a literary genre whose function is therapeutic" (Rae 14). The chapter looks at how Clendinnen, after a liver transplant, and Mantel, after years of medical neglect, "write them[selves] into being" (Mantel 231), and show how writing itself becomes integral to the formation of an identity even as it self-consciously resists compensatory narrative paradigms. While a large section is devoted to illustrating the relationship between writing and healing, as well as the recovery of self, it also problematises this relationship and the extent to which writers succeed in performing stable selves.

Chapter 4 draws from critics who champion the body in the mourning process and who locate loss on or in the body. It expands on the embodied experience of loss only briefly touched upon in Chapter 3, and brings the body to the forefront of discussions of loss: "In their discussions of the role that memory plays in recreating and then acknowledging the absence of the lost object, psychoanalytic and cultural theories charting loss often marginalize or ignore the way in which *feeling* is both an emotional and a physical phenomenon" (Tanner's italics, 84). The chapter works within an interplay of narrative/self/body, assuming that any meaningful examination of embodied identity must consider all three, especially with the advent of neurobiological perspectives on narrative, as put forward by Eakin's adaptation of Damasio's work to the autobiographical process.<sup>7</sup> The main textual analysis revolves

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<sup>7</sup> In "Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Inside the Body in Fiction, Film, and Performance Art," Linda S. Kauffman accurately predicts: "We in the humanities will have to learn some very hard neurobiology,

around Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*, in order to trace the process of disembodied/re-embodied grief, though it also explores this process in Gordon, Barrington, and Mahood's parent-bereavement narratives, as well as Grealy and Clendinnen's illness narratives. It also shows how the experience of embodied subjectivity becomes rapidly gendered once they approach womanhood.

The link between these chapters is the "in-between-ness" or negotiation between two extremes that I feel makes these memoirs of textured recovery more interesting than more traditional recovery memoirs. Performance of complex recovery happens against the backdrop of this negotiation between two extremes of fact and fiction, stable/unstable identity, and disembodiment/re-embodiment, to end up in the space between.

Through resisting the compensatory paradigms of grief memoirs, these texts successfully avoid "dilut[ing] a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy" by honouring the rich texture of the experiencing self. As such, the writers discussed here join a group of women who address a literary and cultural gap in the way our society deals with grief. The poem at the beginning of Kim Mahood's *Craft For a Dry Lake* illustrates how women who place themselves within this sub-genre contribute to—indeed create—a community of mourners:

*And leaving, [I] felt an old wound seep,  
draining griefs too deep  
to be mine alone.*

## CHAPTER I: LIFE WRITING AND THE LITERATURE OF GRIEF

I think about the story of Job I heard in Carol Sharp's Sunday school. How he sort of learned to lean into feeling hurt at the end, the way you might lean into a heavy wind that almost winds up supporting you after a while. People can get behind pain that way, if they think it derives from powers larger than themselves.

--Mary Karr (*The Liar's Club*)

### FREUD AND THE STANDARD MODEL OF GRIEF

Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" is widely recognised as being "the first to articulate a perspective on mourning as a private, interior psychological process having specific characteristics and dynamics" (Hagman 17). One of the main characteristics of mourning according to Freud is that we can "rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be over-come" (153). True, Freud concedes that the work of mourning is a very gradual process, "carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and energy" (Freud qtd. in Motte 59), but in his view (at least in "Mourning and Melancholia"), the process is finite. Thus, as Didion discovers when she researches the professional literature, there are two kinds of grief: "The preferred kind, the one associated with 'growth' and 'development,' [is] 'uncomplicated grief,' or 'normal bereavement'" (48); the other kind . . . is "complicated grief . . . pathological bereavement" (48), or "chronic . . . inhibited . . . or delayed" grief (Parkes 199), which is classified as a disorder "in which the survivor and the deceased had been unusually dependent on one another" (Didion 48). The neat split begun by Freud between normal and pathological grief is especially apparent in studies outlining the stages of grief which share with Freud the assumption of recovery

(although in “new wave” theories of grief, as we shall see, “complicated” grief is not always seen as pathological).

What Didion is describing is the standard model of grief in the professional literature since the 1950s, which discusses “complicated” and “uncomplicated” grief and focuses on resolving it. It is also dominated by “universal phases [of] recovery” which proved very popular (Neimeyer 2), one of the earliest being Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s landmark study, published in 1969, which describes the stages through which the terminally ill pass in their movement towards death—stages which have since been accepted as applicable to bereaved people as well. The stages—Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance—and other common models after this remain very similar (Numbness, Yearning, Despair, Recovery) as summarised in Payne et al.:

For mourning to have a favourable outcome it appears to be necessary for a bereaved person to endure this buffeting of emotion. Only if he [sic] can tolerate the pining, the more or less conscious searching, the seemingly endless examination of how and why the loss occurred, and the dead person, can he come gradually to recognize and accept that the loss is in truth permanent and that his life must be shaped anew.

(Bowlby qtd. in Payne et al. 72)

The process is a painful one; many writers note that Freud refers to it as “work,” a concept that has reappeared countless times since and has been incorporated into our everyday lingo: psychiatrists talk about “tasks of mourning”; “to work through the pain of grief”; “to accept reality of the loss”; “to adjust to the environment without the deceased”; “to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life”

(Payne et al., 75-76). Yet the outcome here is “favourable”; it ends in acceptance, adjustment, and moving on with life.

## “NEW WAVE” THEORIES OF GRIEF

“New wave” theories of grief important to my study of complex recovery have been developing since the early 1990s and emerged from criticisms of Freud and the standard model as failing to “recognize the complexity and uniqueness of mourning experience” (Hagman 24).<sup>1</sup> Therese A. Rando’s motivation for publishing *Treatment for Complicated Mourning* in 1993 was because information about complicated grief had not been collected or discussed at any length. Robert A. Neimeyer’s collection of essays in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* showcases “a ‘new wave’ of grief theory” that advocates “an appreciation of more complex patterns of adaptation” (Neimeyer 3), and Thomas Attig, whose essay “Relearning the World: Making and Finding Meanings” appears in the collection, argues that “The net effect will be to highlight and promote more appreciation of some of the rich and subtle complications of grieving” (34). However, new wave theorists risk smoothing over the complexity inherent in Freud’s grief process by concentrating on his emphasis on the favourable outcome (as opposed to melancholia) and the end of mourning.

Critiques of Freud and the standard/phase models that “assume that the final outcome of grieving will be a return to normal psychological and social functioning” (Payne et al. 80) have led to equal and opposite reactions theorising grief as a process that in fact never ends. Many new theories argue that “Grief may not . . . have a definite end point which marks recovery” (Payne et al. 80); it cannot be “described as a time bounded process consisting of phases, stages or tasks. . . . New models have

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<sup>1</sup> For new developments of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” see *On Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”*, edited by Fiorini, Bowkanowski, and Lewkowicz.



been developed to account for the individuality and diversity of grief” (Payne et al. 87). In his book, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, Thomas Attig says phase models “wrongly suggest that we come to an end in our grieving as we either complete the stages or at last recover. In effect, they suggest that we can somehow finish coping with mystery” (45). In his article, “Grief That Does Not End,” Paul Rosenblatt agrees:

Would-be supporters of the bereaved often talk about getting over the grief and offer suggestions and help to facilitate achieving this goal. . . . Research and personal experience have led this author to believe that many Americans grieving major losses will not ever reach a time when they completely stop grieving. The expectation that they can and should reach the end of their grief is based on a misunderstanding of normal grieving and does them a disservice (Rosenblatt, 1993).  
(Rosenblatt 45)

The collection *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, from which the above essay was taken, emphasizes the importance of an undisclosed lapse of time for the grieving process: “Freud described grief work as a process of hypercathecting each memory and hope connected to the deceased. By hypercathexis he meant a kind of emotional neutralizing of each memory and hope, not a forgetting (Rosenblatt, 1983)” (Rosenblatt 53). Rosenblatt and others have explained that each memory of the deceased needs to be tested against the reality of his/her absence in order for the mourner to sever attachments and once again make new attachments to others. Their argument is, however, that because people don’t remember memories all at once, it seems reasonable that grief work would continue for a long time as Rosenblatt suggests, even a lifetime (53). In his article, “Beyond Decathexis: Toward a New

Psychoanalytic Understanding and Treatment of Mourning,” George Hagman says that “Once we move beyond decathexis” (24), which is “the incremental divestment of libido . . . from memories of the lost object” (15), then “it becomes clear that there is no need to declare an expectable endpoint to mourning. From this new perspective a person may mourn for a lifetime” (24). Theories that contest Freud argue that “some losses are so profound and life changing that the grief never completely ends,” that “once we have lost, we always live to varying degrees in the presence of grief (Klass 1996a, 1999)” (qtd. in Hooyman and Kramer 8) and that “mourning is not something that can be finished” (Gaines qtd. in Hagman 24).<sup>2</sup>

However, in focusing on the importance of a grief that never ends, new wave theorists risk paring Freud’s argument down to a single favourable outcome at the expense of ignoring what is in fact a very complex process. The major bone of contention for them comes largely from Freud’s assertion that the process is finite, and that “The fact is . . . that when the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 154). New wave theorists successfully add to the complexity of grief by suggesting that the outcome itself cannot be squeezed into one sentence that Freud presents as ‘fact.’ However, in doing so, they perhaps miss the opportunity for a much richer discussion of the “work of mourning” that grows out of Freud’s otherwise very brief and ambiguous description of the process itself.

The actual “work of mourning,” reinterpreted by countless theorists since the appearance of Freud’s essay, would seem to revolve around one main sentence: “Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought

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<sup>2</sup> See also Rando, for more theorists who argue that the mourning process may last forever, such as George Pollock and Lorraine Siggins (61), and Attig’s *The Heart of Grief*.

up and hyper-cathected, and the detachment of the libido from it is accomplished” (Freud 154). Beyond allowing that the process is “extraordinarily painful,” and “not at all easy to explain” (154), Freud does not say much more about it. On the one hand, this allows for rather simplistic interpretations of the process, such as Rosenblatt’s (given above): “By hypercathexis he meant a kind of emotional neutralizing of each memory and hope, not a forgetting (Rosenblatt, 1983)” (53). But on the other, it encourages much more complex interpretations because of its very ambiguity. If Rosenblatt is simplifying the process by describing it as an “emotional neutralising of . . . memory,” he is also gesturing towards its complexity by insisting that “the work of mourning” is not simply “a forgetting.”

In his book, *Another Kind of Love*, Christopher Craft makes more of this complexity and ambiguousness in arguing that “the work of mourning” is more accurately a “work of remembering” that serves a “double or ambivalent function” because it essentially accomplishes two things at once, both a “binding and an unbinding” (60). When a mourner remembers a lost beloved, the deceased person is made present or, as Freud calls it, “psychically prolonged,” somehow bound to the mourner; however, at the same time, through this very “labour of remembering,” the mourner also achieves, in Freud’s words, a “detachment of libido” by which he/she can be freed from the memory of the beloved (Craft 60). Thus, Craft shows there is much room for complexity in what Freud has left rather ambiguous; for Craft, Freud implies that “the duplicitous work of mourning” is “‘to prolong’ in order to ‘detach,’ to give birth in order to kill” (60). What this translates to (as opposed to Rosenblatt’s interpretation), is not only an “emotional neutralising,” but a much harsher “terminal forgetting” (Craft 60) as the mourner becomes “free and uninhibited again” (Freud 154). It is important that new wave theorists distinguish themselves from Freud in

arguing that “the work of mourning” for them lies outside of the constraints of his theory precisely because it is never “complete.” However, it is equally important to ensure that the grief process in “Mourning and Melancholia” be recognised for its complexity and for the rich scope of interpretation it can offer in its very ambiguity.

Another way in which new wave theorists differ from Freud is in the belief that grief, though never-ending, is not, however, of “a pathological variety” (Freud 161). As Neimeyer asserts, “Neither is it clear that a universal and normative pattern of grieving exists that would justify the confident diagnosis of symptomatic deviations from this template as ‘disordered’ or ‘pathological’” (3). Critics like Kathleen Woodward “want[] to clear those who continue grieving from the charge that their behavior is pathological. . . . We are not crippled if we will not be comforted. . . . Freud’s overly schematic portrait of the grieving psyche is contradicted by our common experience of a grief that, without ruining us, remains painfully immediate” (qtd. in Krasner 219). This is the subject of Allan V. Horitz and Jerome C. Wakefield’s study, *The Loss of Sadness*, which argues that a current problem in psychoanalytical practice is that it does not allow for enough “normal sadness” or “nondisordered sadness” (36) and instead rushes to diagnose the phenomena as a disorder. Hooyman and Kramer state that while there is a consensus that “problematic grief” exists, where the person does not “return to full or nearly functioning”—also called “complicated grief” (53)—they hasten to add, “we strongly urge caution when using the term *pathological*” (18) and that “those who take longer than the normative period of grieving are not necessarily suffering from ‘chronic or pathological’ grief (Wortman and Silver 1989, 2001)” (30).

Woodward’s article, “Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning,” written 20 years ago, argues for a “middle position” (100) between Freud’s mourning and his

concept of melancholia—her definition of this space reads more as forerunner to “new wave” grief theories in a number of ways: “there is something *in between* mourning and melancholia . . . grief that is lived in such a way that one is still *in* mourning but no longer *exclusively* devoted to mourning” (Woodward’s italics, 96). Importantly, Woodward argues that Freud’s work “lack[s] the complexity and charge of ambivalence” (96), yet her theorization of “a response to loss that situates itself between mourning and melancholia,” illustrated in part by Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, firmly occupies the other end of the spectrum in which grief is “interminable” (97), whose goal is “not to come to the end of mourning but to sustain it” (99); and where “[t]he end of mourning will be impossible” (105).

The problem with the standard model of grief with its cookie-cutter style of recovery, and the extreme reaction it provokes towards a never-ending grief, is that we are once again left to choose between two extremes along the spectrum of recovery. I am once again reminded of Didion’s dilemma when confronted with two kinds of grief—only now, neither is considered pathological. One offers a system of phases and steps leading to promised recovery; the other an undisclosed, limitless expanse of time in which we can never hope to be rid of the loss. I am suggesting that perhaps there are problems inherent in both extremes. In many memoirs we can see both ends of the “recovery” spectrum illuminated, whether they are triumphantly healing in nature, or whether they argue for a loss that never ends.

To understand the “space between” occupied by memoirs of textured recovery, it helps if we compare narratives of loss where writers have an explicit agenda to promote either of the two extremes. As I have said before, both types of narratives have intrinsic value in literature and life writing, being both inspirational and comforting in nature. In *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, Jewell Parker

Rhodes says of her story “Mixed Blood Stew” that “Maybe that’s why this particular creative nonfiction is so satisfying to me—it means I’ve survived. It signifies hope. I belong in the world and the world is alive—inside me” (394).

For example, in Lauren Slater’s *Spasm: A Memoir With Lies* (also called *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* in the U.S.), even though she deliberately resists closure (in refusing to tell the reader which of her illnesses are literal and which merely metaphorical), she still points to a time of healing: “I think secretly each and every one of us longs to fall, and knows in a deep wise place in our brains that surrender is the means by which we gain, not lose our lives” (50). Similarly, Australian writer Michele Drouart says in *Into the Wadi*: “When something fails, it was not all bad, and remembering has its own sweetness” (361). A memoir about her experience marrying into a Jordanian family, Drouart’s narrative documents the painful ending of personal relationships. However, she asserts: “I will not be among those who deny everything that was connected with their pain. . . . I break the massive grief into fragments, break down and distil, saving the best” (361). Catherine McKinley’s memoir *The Book of Sarahs*, also about the breakdown of relationships but within her own interracial family, ends with one clear, crisp last line in the “Epilogue”: “I am at the end of mourning” (289). In *Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir*, Margaret Forster takes pains to argue that life is indeed better for women at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than it was for her grandmother towards the beginning. Documenting her mother and grandmother’s narratives of loss and sacrifice for their families, she asserts that she has also “always . . . put family first but in my case, in the case of my generation, it has not been at ruinous cost” (306). She insists, with herself as living example, that women really can have it all and her agenda is clear: “Let no one say nothing has changed, that women have it as bad as ever. They do not. . . . Everything,

for a woman, is better now, even if it is still not as good as it could be. To forget or deny that is an insult to the women who have gone before, women like my grandmother and mother” (307).

Teresa Miller’s *Means of Transit* and Meredith Hall’s *Without a Map* both end with metaphors of healing. On an airplane that is landing, Miller notes “the simple joy of our descent—those gentle downward circles gradually bringing Tulsa into sharper focus so I could recover my bearings” (183-184). At the end of Hall’s narrative, instead of an airplane we have a cabin, a “sturdy cabin” that will “hold” (219). She says, “My shadow will float among those lengthening on the water. I will rise and make my way back into the cabin’s soft glow, and then return home, part of the world” (220). The fact that these writers celebrate healing is indeed inspirational. I wish to draw attention, however, to their certainty in the healing power of loss as opposed to narratives where that kind of consolation appears less frequently (if at all).

Jackie Stacey’s *Teratologies* recognises the problems inherent in a society that favours compensatory paradigms. She explains that narratives about cancer are “often a heroic struggle against adversity” (1) and that “[in] contemporary western culture, we are encouraged to think of our lives as coherent stories of success, progress and movement.”<sup>3</sup> She continues, “Loss and failure have their place, but only as part of a broader picture of ascendance. The steady upward curve is the favoured contour” (9). Couser also comments on the trend of “the Supercrip” (though written over a decade after *Teratologies*) in his latest book, *Signifying Bodies*:

Because disability is typically considered inherently “depressing,” it is most palatable as a subject of memoir if the narrative takes the form of

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of heroic paradigms in trauma, see Janice Haaken, who describes how the trauma story “anoints the survivor with a heroic status—as the bearer of unspeakable truths” (qtd. in Henke xvii).

a story of triumph over adversity; this positive (and unlikely) outcome is considered inspiring and thus generalizable to the lives of the general reading public. In this formula, a successful individual takes pride in, and invites the reader's admiration for, a recounting of his or her overcoming of the obstacles posed by an impairment. . . . Needless to say, the lives that fit this paradigm misrepresent the experience of most people with disabilities; this paradigm holds up the Supercrip, who is by definition atypical, as the model disabled person. (33-34)

Because these favoured heroic plots cannot possibly represent the experiences of most individuals coping with loss—whether disability, illness, or bereavement—the effect of such narratives can be devastating. Stacey points out “the dangers of narrative trajectories which promise closures of certainty” and the “disappointments” and “pain” (21) that can result from them. Those who may not have experienced these promises “may not feel wiser now, but more confused, bitter, cheated” (Stacey 15). Stacey recognises the attraction of narratives that emphasise healing; however, the kinds of cultural assumptions they give rise to might ultimately cancel out the comfort they purport to offer. As a cancer-survivor, Stacey's narrative could have easily adopted a heroic plot; however, she explains that she self-consciously avoided this:

I may have wished to write a triumph-over-tragedy story at certain moments, and some readers may want to read one (perhaps despite themselves). But I see such projects not only disappointing to (and even condemning of) the person who does not make it, but also as potentially very worrying in terms of the cultural ideals they promise.

(21)



One of those cultural ideals is the triumph of the individual, “of masculine invincibility, of individual effect” (Stacey 21). The problem with the “triumph over adversity” trope, as Couser argues as well, is that disability itself is presented as the problem, and it is up to the individual to overcome it: “overcoming it is a matter of individual will and determination, rather than of social and cultural accommodation” (Couser, *Signifying* 34). Stacey agrees that “the location of the problem within the self rather than in social, political or environmental spheres is easier and more convenient” (190). It means that the reader is not implicated in the perpetuation of cultural stigmas surrounding illness, disability, and death; it means that he/she is not invited to question unspoken assumptions; it means that “[t]he reader is conscripted as an appreciative, admiring witness of [the writer’s] victory but is not encouraged to question the status quo” (Couser, *Signifying* 34).

However, on the other extreme, we have those memoirs that consciously and adamantly resist recovery, reacting against the “tireless advance towards mental health” (Tanner 93). Yet these narratives may be paradoxically comforting in their assertion that grief never ends. In Robin Romm’s “Afterword” to *The Mercy Papers*, she says “But nothing got rid of the loss. If this book does land in the hands of those in the midst of a tragedy, I can tell you this: It will never leave you” (211). In Marya Hornbacher’s *Wasted*, she says in her “Afterword”: “There will be no stunning revelations now. There will be no near-death tunnel-of-light scenes, no tearful revelatory therapy sessions, no happy family reunions, no cameo appearances by Christ, M.D., no knight on a white horse galloping into my life” (276). These memoirs refuse to follow the road from loss to recovery: Romm says, “I am reluctant to call this healing. I’m not sure I believe in healing” (210); similarly, Hornbacher insists “And I am all right. We will not deal here with words such as *well*, or

*recovered, or fine*" (278). She says further, "My eating disorder was not 'cured'. . . . It was not cured during the three months I stayed there. . . . It was not cured. It will not be cured" (277). These narratives paradoxically offer a kind of comfort in their insistence on the impossibility of recovery: after Romm has told us that loss "will never leave you" she hastens to add, "And I think in the complex way of truth, that that is the most comforting thing" (211). For Hornbacher, "There is an incredible loss. There is a profound grief. And there is, in the end, after a long time and more work than you ever thought possible, a time when it gets easier" (286).

These sentiments, in either extreme, may be the kind against which writers like Didion and Jones are reacting in their grief. And while compensatory paradigms occupy an important place in literature and life writing, there is nevertheless the danger that they can risk becoming, as Robert Pinsky says in a review of Didion's book, "stoical platitudes [that] represent a communal, anonymous kind of magical thinking or denial of reality."

### THEORISING "TEXTURED RECOVERY"

In reading through memoirs of loss (about 40 in all), I noticed that a few resisted talking about recovery in the extremes outlined above. Rather, they seemed ambiguous in their reflections on healing and often resisted traditional compensatory paradigms that accompany narratives of loss without—at the same time—being compelled to assert an agenda in which grief never ends and recovery is an impossibility. The extent to which these writers "recover" is not easy to determine and often seems to lie somewhere between the model based on Freud and the extreme reactions against it. I am reading my chosen texts in light of new wave theories of grief as a way to illustrate this "in-between" space of "textured recovery." This third

space is at its most visible from the perspective of new wave theories which allow me to tease out subtleties and nuances within the grief process from a theoretical position that champions complexity. Such an exercise is absolutely necessary to new understandings of loss when we consider the alternatives above that view the concept of recovery in terms of binary opposites. Although there are some characteristics of new wave theories that do not apply to my analysis of textured recovery (such as the emphasis on grief as a never-ending process), and although I also bring to the discussion some aspects not mentioned by new wave theories (such as the importance of the body), I've put together an amalgamation of the main characteristics that help to define and characterise this space.

Memoirs of textured recovery illustrate the following aspects of “new wave” grief theories in their portrayal of loss:

- *Grief is nearly always complicated*: “‘complicated’ as ‘involved, intricate, confused, complex, compound, the opposite of simple’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, p. 729)” (Attig, “Relearning” 33). It requires “a nuanced sensitivity to the legacy of loss as a core feature of psychotherapy” (Neimeyer xii) and requires recognition of “the complexity and uniqueness of . . . mourning” (Hagman 24).
- *Loss as ambiguous*: “Loss always contains some ambiguity” (Hooyman and Kramer 4). These memoirs “recogni[se] the many types and meanings of loss and the inevitability of unanswered questions” (Hooyman and Kramer 2).
- *Grief is not an event that we must “get over” quickly, though neither must it last forever*: grief is recognised as “open and evolving” (Hagman 18); we don’t have to get over it quickly (Silverman and Klass 1996; Wortman 2002;

Wortman and Silver 2001 qtd. in Hooyman and Kramer 30), but neither must it last forever.

- *Gender informs experiences of grief*: “This constructivist approach recognises that no two persons can be assumed to experience similar grief in response to the same loss . . . each person constructs a different phenomenological world and occupies a distinctive position in relation to culture [and] gender” (Hooyman and Kramer 34).
- *Grief as a process that contains a wide range of emotions, not just negative*: Grief is not always experienced as “intense distress and depression” (Hooyman and Kramer 19), but rather can include positive emotions. The “work of mourning” under the standard model could not accommodate for the range of emotions included in the grief process.<sup>4</sup>
- *Grief as a process of redefining the self*: “In grieving we must relearn our very selves” (Attig, “Relearning” 40). This encourages a “greater awareness of the implications of major loss for the individual’s sense of identity, often necessitating deep revisions in his or her self-definition” (Neimeyer 4; Hooyman and Kramer 16; Hagman 24).
- *Recovery does not necessarily follow from sharing emotion/confronting loss*: “sharing an emotion and confronting and processing a loss does not necessarily bring emotional relief or recovery (Neimeyer 2000)” Hooyman and Kramer 31). As we shall see many of my chosen authors are critical of the “talking cure.”

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<sup>4</sup> See also *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* for a collection of essays which, “[i]nstead of imputing to loss a purely negative quality . . . apprehend it as productive rather than pathological” (Eng and Kazanjian ix).

- *Recovery as “accommodation”*: According to final stage of recovery in “R-model”: “*Recovery* and *completion* carry the same inaccurate connotations as *resolution*. In contrast, *accommodation* implies making oneself fit or congruous, or reconciling the loss” (Rando 40). “Whether one ever is able to accept a loss or to resolve one’s grief is unclear. But one can adapt to the changed situation. . . . With accommodation, the bereaved is able to recognize the interplay between life and death, integration and disintegration, and happiness and pain and to live with imperfect reality (Becvar 1997)” (Hooyman and Kramer 49). Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy emphasise “that healing is [not] a return to some former state of perfection” (“Introduction” 7).
- *Grief is both individual and collective*: this goes against “highly individualistic nature of traditional theories, which construe grief as an entirely private process, experienced outside the context of human relatedness” (Neimeyer 3). “We grieve individually and collectively in complex and interdependent interactions with others in our family and communities” (Attig, “Relearning” 33). This aspect emphasises “the important role of others in mourning” (Hagman 21), and the importance of the social and the cultural in contrast to intrapersonal models of grief (Hooyman and Kramer 12-13). Anderson and MacCurdy stress that “Healing . . . is a change from a singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to a more fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self” (“Introduction” 7).

There are, however, some aspects of new wave theories which do not apply to the textured space within my chosen texts. The most obvious, already discussed above, has to do with the fact that while new wave theorists consistently push the idea

of grief as a never-ending process that may conceivably last a lifetime, writers of textured recovery resist any clear agenda defining grief in such absolute terms. Rather, they leave this space open, layered, and textured without forcing interpretation onto the reader that grief will “never leave you.”

This textured space also resists the “meaning making” which is, according to new wave theorists, the central outcome of grief, “premised on this assumption that meaning reconstruction is the central process in what we conventionally refer to as grieving” (Neimeyer xii). However, in my study, it is not always clear whether writers successfully “find or construct meaning” (Hooyman and Kramer 49). Writers often couch meaning in ambiguity and avoid a straightforward interpretation of what loss has meant to them. Stacey points out “the lack of meaning” and “the futility of the pain and the arbitrariness of disease, the unbearable pointlessness of suffering” (15). Of course, to assert that there is no meaning in the grief process is in some way to make meaning from it (i.e. the “meaning” is that there is no meaning); however, there is a distinct lack of emphasis on “mourning as a crisis of meaning” (Hagman 22) that lies at the heart of new wave theories.

Although new wave theorists understand that grief is a three-fold process involving psychological, social and physical reactions (Rando 22; Hooyman and Kramer 8), I emphasise the importance of the body in understanding grief, which is not a primary focus for new wave theorists as such, but is taken up by literary critics Laura E. Tanner and James Krasner. Thus, grief is an embodied process: theories of loss that contest Freud insist on the embodied dimensions of grief and the importance of understanding loss on or in the body: “at no point does Freud address the way in which the subject’s relationship to the lost object is constituted through the body as well as through the psyche” (Tanner 94). Alongside these theories of the body I

consider key theorists who explore the autobiographical act as a bodily, neurological process to argue for the prominent placement of the body within this textured space.

Literary manifestations of these theories include:

- The absence of intrusive agendas insisting on recovery (or the impossibility of recovery): many memoirs (as outlined above) provide answers and have definite agendas for what the purpose of their memoirs should be, while memoirs of textured recovery do not;
- Endings that are often deliberately ambiguous with questions left unanswered;
- Narrative structures that juxtapose healing insights with despair;
- Narrative structures that complicate traditional illness narratives;
- Writers speaking from the present in order to complicate events indicating recovery;
- Reflexive passages on the relationship between writing and healing that problematise the assumption that this is always necessarily a healing enterprise.

## GRIEF IN LITERATURE

The pervasiveness of Freud's theory of mourning and the standard model of grief is evident in literature with grief and mourning themes. Didion and C. S. Lewis illustrate cultural expectations tied up with grief, and the expectation that they should have "got over" their grief by a certain period of time. Didion remembers being taught Walter Savage Landor's 1806 elegy, "Rose Aylmer," where "'the hard sweet wisdom' of the last two lines . . . suggest that mourning has its place but also its limits: 'A night of memories and sighs / I consecrate to thee.'" She remembers the lecturer driving home the poem's message: "*A night*. One night. It might be all night

but he doesn't even say *all night*, he says *a night*, not a matter of a lifetime, a matter of some hours" (54). By the end of the book, we see that on some level Didion has internalized this lesson. She clearly does not want her grief to end, "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account" (224), but she feels that it must: "I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead" (225-226).

In contrast, new theories of grief consider maintaining an attachment to the dead as a normal and healthy part of mourning—they emphasise "the need to preserve attachment to the lost person, and the importance of securing a sense of meaningful relationship, which transcends loss" (Hagman 22). The new theories also bring to the forefront the complicated mixture of feelings accompanied by loss: Rosenblatt speaks of "[m]ixed feelings [that] arise for people who experience the carrying out of grief work as like killing a deceased person again, like being disloyal, like giving up memories of good times, like saying they do not care about the deceased" (53). C. S. Lewis is disturbed by feelings that don't strictly follow the standard model of pain and sadness: "there's no denying that in some sense I 'feel better,' and with that comes at once a sort of shame, and a feeling that one is under a sort of obligation to cherish and foment and prolong one's unhappiness" (43). These examples show the conflict caused by an internalization of what is assumed to be standard practices of grief as influenced by Freud's model.

Sociologists and psychologists turn to literature within their professional work on grief and suggest that "the arts [are] in fact . . . a vital tool in allowing us to make sense of the losses inevitable in all of our lives" (Leader 6). Kubler-Ross begins with Rabindranath Tagore's "Fruit Gathering," which echoes the theme of overcoming grief: "Let me not beg for the stilling / of my pain but for the heart to conquer it";



Parkes begins with Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and the idea that there is no escape from grief; Horwitz and Wakefield's *The Loss of Sadness* is littered with literary references, beginning with *Death of a Salesman* and later including this vivid reaction of Achilles to Petroclus's death:

Overpowered in all his power; sprawled in the dust,  
Achilles lay there, fallen  
Tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands (30).

Thomas Attig's *How We Grieve* begins with a description of Munch's painting: "The Death Chamber," which though showing a room full of people, "None touch or embrace. Each is withdrawn and vulnerable, reacting in isolation" (viii).

Interestingly, psychologist Kathleen R. Gilbert leaves a sign on her office wall which reads: "We live in stories, not statistics" (qtd. in Fowler 525), as if a reminder of the importance of the arts and literature in depicting important themes over the dry facts of scientific or professional studies.

Thus, between the literary portrayals of grief throughout the centuries, as well as the proliferation of professional texts on grief and mourning discussed in this chapter (not to mention the avalanche of "self-help" books on how to deal with loss), it is difficult to understand Didion's comment: "Given that grief remained the most general of afflictions its literature seemed remarkably spare" (44), or Romm's that "very few books . . . spoke of the particulars of loss" (207). Psychoanalytic criticism of literary texts has been ongoing for decades, and since the 1990s we have seen the merging of trauma studies with literary theory. Among literary criticism of grief, the most common by far is the poetry of mourning, especially the "poetics of elegy," but

studies of death and mourning within all areas of literature abound.<sup>5</sup> The dominant theory applied to literary analyses of grief within texts is without doubt Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," most critics complicating that theory either more or less, but seeing the literary work always as informed by it. One example is Warren Mote's "The Work of Mourning" which gives a reading of George Perec's works, taking Freud's "work of mourning" to mean both the conscious effort or behaviour required in the grieving process as well as the finished product itself, i.e., the piece of work (59). Mote also complicates the notion of recovery because he argues that Perec's work "presents no recognizable prospect of the kind of full recovery that Freud postulated" (59). The stages of Kubler-Ross's landmark study are also applied to literary texts, such as Olivia McNeely Pass's article, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Journey Through the Pain of Grief," which uses the stages in order to trace Sethe's movement through grief, and Thomas Montgomery applies Parkes's work to poetry in "Jorge Manrique and the Dynamics of Grieving." However, Didion does not mention studies like these. Perhaps in her deep state of grief academia holds no more comfort than hackneyed self-help books; certainly her frustration extends to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" from which many psychological and literary studies spring.

I have already given a brief overview of the professional literature of grief and recent "new wave" theories that have developed in reaction to Freud. It is, then, also difficult to understand Darian Leader's comment that not much "on the deeper

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<sup>5</sup> Patricia Phillippy's *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England*, Robert Ziegler's *Beauty Raises the Dead: Literature of Loss in the Fin de Siècle*, Dana Luciano's *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*, Roberta Rubenstein's *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging. Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, Christian Riegel's *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning*, and his edited collection: *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, Rochelle Almeida's *The Politics of Mourning: Grief Management in Cross-Cultural Fiction*, and *Modernism and Mourning*, edited by Patricia Rae, all published since 2000).

psychology of mourning” (4) has been written since Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” that he can find nothing new written about loss on the nonfiction shelves (6), and that, compared to other psychoanalytic subjects, “the literature on mourning was minimal” (5). Woodward agrees that “discussions of mourning have not developed in a particularly fertile way theoretically” precisely because “Mourning and Melancholia” is such a “puzzlingly constraining text” (94). However, surely this has changed since Woodward published her article in 1990; as we can see “new wave” theories of grief offer fertile ground for new discussions of loss. Furthermore, apart from handbooks and guidebooks for social workers or the lay public with titles like *The Good Death Guide: Everything You Wanted To Know But Were Afraid To Ask*, any preliminary search on “grief” will lead to an avalanche of professional literature researching grief not only from the wider psychological and sociological perspectives outlined by Didion—and the philosophical (such as Blanchot in Jones)—but also from transpersonal, psychoeducational, cultural, anthropological, and spiritual perspectives, as well as studies on “an entire new field of palliative medicine” (Parkes 273). However, the perceived inadequacy of the professional literature to accurately transcribe experience opens up a curious gap in literature dealing with grief and loss.

## DEATH-DENYING SOCIETY

Perhaps this gap has less to do with the *amount* of literature available, and more to do with the *type* of literature available to a society ill able to adequately deal with death: “In a society that tends to deny and fear death, we often feel uncomfortable talking about grief and loss” (Hooyman and Kramer 4). In *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, Lynne Despelder and Albert Strickland write

about “the extent of death avoidance in modern societies” and “the role of *institutional denial*” (italics theirs, 5). Whereas we once lived closely with death, now, even at funerals, “death [is] tastefully concealed” (6). Perhaps this has something to do with Freud’s legacy: “in Western cultures, we tend to expect individuals to recover from grief quickly. . . . Friends, coworkers, and even family members may urge us to ‘get over it’” (Hooyman and Kramer 19). Fay Weldon recalls wearing a black armband when her father died, a public symbol of family bereavement:

The armband was kind a kind of half-way house, between the excesses of Victorian mourning and today’s way of achieving ‘closure’ as soon as possible, by way of Bereavement Support Groups. It was an explanatory statement to strangers. “Forgive me if I’m not as polite or considerate as I should be. If I cry in the street, on the bus, I am not mad. Someone close to me has died.” It should be revived: I should not have taken it off. (*Mantrapped* 25-26)

Jones also laments the lack of an outward sign to signify bereavement:

There is no simple sign by which outsiders know the community of the bereaved; and it is tiresome to re-tell, or to explain, or to have to retreat into pleading incapacities and disengagements. An icon which marks bereavement would require certain cautious and reticent protocols of behavior—a certain social gentleness. *And then one would not have endlessly to speak of it.* (Jones’s italics, 147-148)

Even though there has been more public interest in death, “people still display attitudes of avoidance when it comes to death” (Despelder and Strickland 35). In *Lifesaving*, Judith Barrington remembers when her parents died that friends and

family “thought they could protect me by pretending, when I was around, that my parents had never existed” (98). She adds “Most people don’t have safe opportunities to feel. I certainly didn’t—not there in Figueras, and not back in England either, where it had seemed to me that no one wanted me to feel bad around them. My family and friends had seemed as embarrassed as I was about being a public spectacle” (97). Mahood also remembers: “It was as if during those first stages of grief I understood something essential of the poised balance of life. There were other things too, which had no place or name in our sophisticated death-denying society” (253). The situation is not helped by the media, which doesn’t do “enough to help us explore the meaning of death” because after images of gratuitous violence, “[t]he ensuing grief and disruption of survivors’ lives is generally given scant attention” (Hooyman and Kramer 21).

Death, like illness, remains hidden from our everyday lives. Perhaps this is why images of death hiding behind a door abound: Despelder and Albert warn that “Death is intrinsic to human experience. We may try to cram it into a dark closet and shut the door. There it stays until, bursting the hinges, the door flies open and death is forced upon our awareness” (39). Barrington speaks of “open[ing] the stubborn door to sadness” (98). In her book utilizing a similar image, *Death’s Door*, Sandra Gilbert suggests “that the rise of the grief memoir, paradoxically coincides both with increased public discomfort with the sight or mention of death or grief and an upwelling of professional interest in death, dying and bereavement (xxi)” (qtd. in Fowler 527). For these reasons and others, I am arguing that grief memoirs help to force death and loss into view in a way that the professional literature of bereavement does not.

Trauma theory informs my research into memoirs of textured recovery in three main ways. One is in the evolution of the definition of “trauma,” where I find a reflection of the kinds of loss I seek to highlight in this project. The second is in its “anti-therapeutic stance” (Whitehead 117), which speaks directly to a complex recovery which defines itself against Freud’s concept of recovery. The third lies in its emphasis on “witnessing *to* someone or giving testimony *for* an audience” (Hawkins’s italics, “Writing About Illness” 123), thus highlighting the importance of the socialisation of grief in creating a “dialogue of mournings” (Leader 85).

In her book, *Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore discusses studies by Cathy Caruth, Shushana Felman, and Dori Laub, in which “trauma narratives . . . refers to both a person struggling to make sense of an overwhelming experience in a particular context and the unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 206-207). In her article, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” Laura Brown highlights the complex implications behind this classic definition of trauma. In this definition, the person must have “experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience” (100). She illustrates the absurdity of a definition such as this by retelling an experience in a courtroom where her testimony that “as many as a third of all girls are sexually abused prior to the age of sixteen” in fact negates the argument that incest is traumatic because of the very frequency with which it occurs (101).

In “Writing About Illness: Therapy? Or Testimony?” Hawkins explains how by the 1990s, “trauma theory had been shaped and reshaped to include a variety of conditions and issues” (117), and the above definition modified by removing that problematic phrase which compounded difficulties for trauma survivors instead of alleviating them. She says that “the omission of that important phrase, ‘generally

outside the range of usual human experience,' seems of great importance because it marks a cultural recognition of trauma as part of normal human experience—as ordinary, not extraordinary” (119). Such a revised definition means that conditions of trauma now include “returning veterans . . . the threat of biological warfare, the fact of genocide, the condition of people victimized by political torture and terrorism, and the problems of rape, spousal abuse, and violent and/or inappropriate sexual acts directed towards children” (117). It means that the definition has also been widened by psychoanalytic critics such as Suzette Henke, who argues that “trauma configures the parameters of modern life, as each of us is forced to endure a series of losses through the death of parents and loved ones, the disappearance of cherished friends, or the diminution of physical faculties through aging and illness” (qtd. in Hawkins, “Writing About” 119). Such an evolution in classic definitions of trauma is particularly important for my study because, as Hawkins says, “the category of trauma today includes conditions like sickness, loss, and grief that are, indeed, a part of ordinary human experience” (“Writing About” 119).

Another useful intersection with later trauma theory lies in the fact that recovery is not presupposed. In this sense it echoes “new wave” theories of grief: “Since the mid-1990s, trauma theory has tended to de-emphasise stage models of recovery . . . and sometimes perceiving the very idea of recovery as problematic” (Hawkins, “Writing About” 121). In *Memory*, Anne Whitehead echoes this: “There is, then, a distinct tendency in recent theorizations of trauma towards an anti-therapeutic stance, a scepticism regarding the inherent value of telling one’s story” (116-117). In direct contrast to the “meaning making” of “new wave” grief theories, however, Whitehead points out how Caruth “attributes the reluctance of many survivors of trauma to tell a comprehensible story of the past to concerns regarding

‘the loss . . . of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*’ (1995b: 154; original emphasis)” (116). Indeed, Caruth points out that within the story of trauma lie both “the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). In ways that complicate recovery, Caruth asks “What does it mean to survive?” (*Unclaimed* 60).

The third place in which my own research intersects with trauma theory is in its emphasis on the need for witnessing. This is perhaps best illustrated in Caruth’s privileging of Clorinda’s voice in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, used by Freud to illustrate the repetitive nature of trauma (*Unclaimed* 2). In Tasso’s poem, the hero, Tancred, accidentally kills his lover on the battlefield, while she is disguised as an enemy soldier. Some time after, while in a haunted wood, Tancred strikes out wildly with his sword in his fear, piercing a tree which contains the soul of Clorinda, thus wounding her a second time (2). While Freud uses this to illustrate the playing out of traumatic memories that are beyond the control of the victim, Caruth’s emphasis lies in Clorinda’s role as witness to the traumatic event: “[t]he voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated” (3). Thus, what becomes important here is Clorinda’s “moving and sorrowful voice” (2), illustrating “the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know” (3). In privileging Clorinda, Caruth privileges the witness, or the audience—the listener.

Importantly, this highlights a fundamental difference between trauma theory and Suzette Henke’s process of “scriptotherapy,” (which she coined at a conference in 1985): “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the



mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (xii). This process has at its foundation the idea that recovery is available through the process of writing. Henke explains further: “The term *narrative recovery*, now fairly current in the field of narratology, pivots on a double entendre meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (xxii). While I am interested in testing the process of “scriptotherapy” against my chosen texts, I also wish to take into account Caruth’s concerns about whether the writing process (or indeed, the “talking cure”) contributes to recovery, or whether it is a “giving-up” or a “dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy” (Caruth, *Trauma* vii).

Caruth seems to be asserting a shift in perception, because while “scriptotherapy” emphasises the victim in the healing process, she who writes the story and incorporates fragments into a coherent, narrative whole, Caruth brings the reader’s “ear” to the forefront and emphasises the importance of listening to “this call by which the other commands us to awaken” (9), and “stubbornly persist[ing] in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (*Unclaimed* 5). Caruth explains that the aim of her collection of essays, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which was published in the early 1990s, was to address a key concern of that time: “the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of suffering, without eliminating the *force and truth* of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit *to us*” (italics mine, vii). Ultimately, for Caruth, the act of listening, of allowing that sorrowful voice to be witness, is key.

Henke, however, places the “listener” or reader, in a much less privileged position:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering . . . in a discursive medium that *can be addressed to everyone or no-one*—to a world that will judge *personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter*. It is through the very process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis. (italics mine, xix)

While Caruth champions the “force and truth of the reality” of the experience, Henke believes the healing process does not rely on truth at all (a debate taken up further in Chapter 2). While Henke argues that narrative offers “psychological catharsis,” Caruth asserts that “the wound of the mind . . . is not . . . a simple and healable event” (4). While Caruth insists the tale be told “to us,” Henke assures us it “can be addressed to everyone or no one.”

An important part of my study of loss within memoir is this relationship between the writer and the reader, the interplay between subject and audience. What Tasso’s poem ultimately raises is the importance of the socialisation of grief; it is important “not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 8). As Hawkins says, people who write about loss “are not just writing for themselves, they are addressing an audience—even if only an imagined, future audience. Trauma theory tends to support this assumption, as it emphasizes witnessing *to* someone or giving testimony *for* an audience” (“Writing About” 123). For Caruth, “[i]t is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard . . . that . . . constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening”

(*Unclaimed* 9). Memoir itself has become the “shape that best expresses the human subject as survivor” (Buss, “Authorising” 42); memoir itself is this plea.

## THE RISE OF THE MEMOIR

It is well known that autobiography was considered an inferior genre within literary criticism until relatively recently. Lifewriting was often ignored because critics like William K. Wimsatt believed “the autobiographical is a form of marginalia about great works, not a kind of artful text in itself” (Smith and Watson 118). Nancy Miller’s *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives* seeks to defend writing and reading memoir against “the genre’s disrepute” (12) and “the almost religious fervor that underlies contemporary attacks on the literature of the self” (13). A critic and writer of autobiography herself, she makes no distinction between the two practices. In his essay written twenty years earlier, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction,” James Olney refers to autobiography as having been described as “the least ‘literary’ kind of writing” (and concedes that autobiography criticism itself has in the past been called anything from “a simple nuisance” to “a moral perversion” 7). If we are to stay with his analogy, then women’s criticism began scarcely five minutes’ ago. However, his concern lies less with the writing of autobiography (which he argues has been ongoing since Plato), and more with the critique of that genre beginning in 1956: “which is not even yesterday but only about an hour ago as such matters must be judged” (7). In 1980 Olney confidently asserts that if autobiography criticism was ever, indeed, a “perversion,” “it is well on its way to becoming a naturalised and normalized perversion” (7) and lists a number of journals that could boast of “devot[ing] special numbers to the question of autobiography . . . [the] *Sewanee*

*Review, New Literary History, [and] Genre*” (7), among others. Thirty years on, autobiography criticism is well established, with not only special numbers, but whole journals themselves devoted to auto/biography studies (*a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Biography, and Lifewriting Annual*) as well as journals that address such issues regularly (*Prose Studies, Narrative, Mosaic*).

In a climate where autobiographies currently out-sell novels,<sup>6</sup> and where we are coming up to almost half a century of literary criticism of the genre (where autobiography critics are in their “Third Wave” movement, as outlined in Smith and Watson’s *Reading Autobiography*) the genre hardly needs to be defended.<sup>7</sup> In 1979, Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as De-Facement” challenged the genre as “self-deluded” and “an act of impersonation” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 139)—a judgment that now falls flat in the face of well-established fields of academic inquiry into all areas of lifewriting, and the existence of scholarly communities such as IABA (with the launch of its European chapter having taken place in Amsterdam in October 2009), as well as Lifewriting Centres and degree programs that have sprung up in universities all over the country.<sup>8</sup>

The bias now, as Buss points out, is against memoir, a form that locates a self within history: “While the term ‘memoir’ has remained largely unexamined by literary critics and theorists, the term ‘autobiography’ has taken up central position in the history of what we now call ‘life writing’” (Buss 2). She explains how “One

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<sup>6</sup> “Within literature forms in the United States, since roughly 1994 personal memoirs have been routinely outselling novels” (Heywood 87); in July 2010, Mary Karr’s *Lit* was one of 15 books on the bestseller list, half of which were memoirs (Taylor).

<sup>7</sup> An amalgamation of decades of lifewriting criticism have appeared recently in works like Margaretta Jolly’s *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001), and Trev Lynn Broughton’s four-volume *Autobiography* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Life-Writing Research, King’s College London; Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research, University of Sussex; Centre for Life Narrative, Kingston University London, among others.

bookseller observed to me that autobiographies are written by famous people, while memoirs are written by the rest of us!" (Buss 7). At a recent conference I attended, one academic said I'd made her aware of a bias she didn't think she had: that she'd read every Joan Didion book except *The Year of Magical Thinking* precisely because it is a memoir. Examples like these are all the more reason to bring memoirs into the critical limelight: "The job description [of memoirist] needs codifying: memoir practitioners have no field yet (memoirship) for which, like psychologists, they can hang a shingle. (The field of books analyzing autobiography and memoir as a form is small but growing)" (Larson18). Marian M. MacCurdy supports this with regards to personal writing in her article, "From Trauma to Writing": "The intellectual depth and honesty required of the effective academic essay are lauded by the academy while the emotional and intellectual truth of the personal essay in the context of the academy is not always equally valued" (160). Similarly, Buss argues that: "Despite the welcome existence of anthologies such as Conway's and the veritable boom in the publication of memoirs by women, the genre has received little academic attention. The study of memoirs from a theoretical and critical perspective informed by scholarly research is now overdue" (Buss 7-8).

Whatever the case within academia, no one can argue against the genre's popularity among both authors and readers alike. In her introduction to the 2005 collection *In Fact: The Best of Creative Non-Fiction*, Annie Dillard informs writing students that "Eight books of nonfiction appear for every book of fiction" and that "If you want to improve the odds that people will read what you write, write nonfiction narrative [because] [m]ost agents won't touch fiction" (xvii). Within this general interest in nonfiction, memoir itself occupies a particularly privileged position. In his book *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*

(2007), Thomas Larson looks at the “[s]heer numbers” of best-selling biographies and memoirs on *Amazon.com*. Of their top 100, “fewer than 20 percent are biographies or autobiographies (maybe two are religious confessions). The rest are memoirs, by the hundreds, by the thousands” (21). A decade ago, in *Inventing the Truth*, William Zinsser announced that we were already firmly in “the age of the memoir” (3), and that remains true today—since the millennium, Nancy Miller and others have written extensively about “the spectacular rise of the memoir” (Miller, *But Enough* 1).

To account for this, in part, Drusilla Modjeska says in her article, “Give Me the Real Thing”: “As fiction turned its face elsewhere . . . there was a return to the narrative of lives and the sort of exploration of experience that could make sense of . . . some of the questions of identity and responsibility.” In *But Enough About Me* Miller offers some interesting thoughts on the reasons for memoir’s popularity (I’ve italicised those most pertinent to my study):

It’s the well-worn culture of “me,” given an expansive new currency by the infamous baby boomers who can think of nothing else; *it’s the desire for story killed by postmodern fiction; it’s the only literary form that appears to have access to the truth*; it’s a democratic form, giving rise to minority experience in an antielite decade; *it’s a desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author*. It’s voyeurism for a declining, imperial narcissism. It’s the market. (12)

Memoir facilitates construction of identity and allows performance of self. Memoir does the work of “identity making” (Buss 17). “It is a form in which one cannot be entirely in control of self-construction, but must come to see that act of self making as a process of performing the self” (Buss xiv). The self is seen as changing,

then becoming “more completely one’s self” (Buss xiv). As Paul John Eakin says in *Living Autobiographically*, we are our stories—he draws on Oliver Sacks: “This narrative is us, our identities” (qtd. in Eakin 1). So Eakin concludes: “talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction” (2).

The memoir form also facilitates the changing nature of memory. We are currently experiencing a “powerful anxiety about memory” as we “gather[] the testimony of the last living survivors of the Holocaust.” As such, “[w]e may be witnessing a kind of unconscious fear of erasure” (Miller, *But Enough* 14). Susannah Radstone recognises this trend as well in her essay “Autobiographical Times,” where she names a new form of autobiography: “‘remembrance’ [which] has recently risen to prominence. . . . Indeed, contemporary Western societies have recently been described as experiencing a memory ‘boom of unprecedented proportions’ (Huysen 1995: 5) and of being ‘obsessed by’ (Hamilton 1994: 10) memory” (201). For many reasons, the cultural climate is such that it has cultivated fertile ground on which memoir can thrive.

However, there is also “the dark side of the personal narrative boom” (Zinsser 5).<sup>9</sup> It seems that, now, for all its popularity, the surfeit of memoir, particularly confessional memoir, threatens to sicken cultural appetite. While autobiography has always been considered an inferior genre within literary criticism until recently, it has always enjoyed popular acclaim. But currently, the reputation of autobiography and memoir is suffering as “no remembered episode is too sordid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the wonderment of the masses in books and

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<sup>9</sup> See also Paula Fass’s “The Memoir Problem.”

magazines and on talk shows” (Zinsser 3). As Linda Anderson reminds us in *Autobiography*: “It is still the case today that popular ‘commercial’ autobiographies by, for instance, pop stars are often seen as lacking ‘integrity’, as debasing the self by commodifying it” (8). William Zinsser says further that

The national appetite for true confession has loosed a torrent of memoirs that are little more than therapy, the authors bashing their parents and wallowing in the lurid details of their tussle with drink, drug addiction, rape, sexual abuse, incest, anorexia, obesity, codependency, depression, attempted suicide, and other fashionable talk-show syndromes. These chronicles of shame and victimhood are . . . giving the form a bad name. If memoir has become mere self-indulgence and reprisal—so goes the argument—it must be a degraded genre. (5)

Lauren Slater’s essay, “Three Spheres,” offers a moving personal account of her experiences as both a patient in a mental institution and a psychologist. Here, she is less unabashed about using herself as the sole subject of memoir than she will be in her later writing, when she boasts, “Still, I like to write about me. Me! That’s why I’m not a novelist” (*Spasm* 144). In “Three Spheres,” even though she is honest about the confessional form—“For what purpose will I show myself? Does it satisfy some narcissistic need in me. . . . Perhaps a bit, yes?” (8)—she nevertheless agrees with these critics of the confessional, using Oprah as an example, “who extracts admissions from the soul like a dentist pulls teeth, gleefully waving the bloodied root and probing the hole in the abscessed gum while all look, without shame, into the mouth of pain made ridiculously public” (7). Lee Gutkind, founder of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* and one of the first teachers of the genre at the university level, mentions



that *Harper's* and *Poets & Writers* have recently “published articles critical of the genre,” citing James Wolcott as an example who, in his essay “Me Myself and I,” derides as “‘navel gazers’ nearly any nonfiction writer who had been the least bit self-revelatory in their work” (xxv). Wolcott says, “Never have so many [writers] shared so much of so little” (qtd. in Gutkind xxv).

However, in *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, Larson asserts that the memoir form “has cleared most of the first hurdles, among them the rap that memoir must be tied to family dysfunction.” He believes that “Memoir’s diverse topics and authors of all ages squash that prejudice” (21). And yet, as we have seen, not only does that prejudice still exist, but the confessional nature of memoir is also being blamed for bleeding into and contaminating (particularly women’s) fiction. In 2007, in a title parodying the “grief memoir,” the “misery memoir” came under attack by the judges of that year’s Orange Broadband Prize, who complained that “the much derided ‘misery memoir’ [has] infected” women’s fiction (Higgins 17). The current cultural climate is perhaps reflected by Kirsty Lang, the chair of judges. In her description of the 120 books initially considered, she says, “I did find myself thinking, ‘Oh god, not another dead baby’ . . . There were a hell of a lot of abused children and family secrets” (qtd. in Higgins 17).

What is most worrying, is that although Lang concedes that the domestic dramas reflect most women’s experience, she suggests that personal experience within the domestic sphere is unimportant in and of itself by lamenting the lack of bigger political themes discussed only, if at all, “through the prism of the family” (qtd. in Higgins 17). This is reminiscent of Louis Simpson’s advice to Fay Weldon more than half a century ago: “that novels were not meant to be about domestic life, that the kitchen-table novel, written in and around the kitchen, was an egregious, pathetic

thing” (*Mantrapped* 93). Such thinking is worrying because it reflects a hostile climate that fails to take memoir and the largely domestic experience of women seriously: as Weldon asserts, “So much life, especially women’s lives—shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing—was taken up with the mundane, at least it should be properly honoured in literature” (*Mantrapped* 94). Failing to honour this threatens to unhinge women’s position within a genre which (as Buss suggests) may be particularly suited to women’s cultural and/or political agendas.

This has led to a renewed defence of the genre where craft and not content becomes the main focus of what constitutes a “good” or a “bad” memoir. Zinsser put together *Inventing the Truth*, his collection of writers discussing the art of memoir, to this end: “Whether the authors of certain notorious recent memoirs *ought* to have revealed as much as they did, breaking powerful taboos and social covenants, isn’t finally the issue. The issue is: Is it a good or a bad book?” (Zinsser’s italics, 5). In it he highlights the main elements of “good” memoir: “carpentry” or “a careful act of construction” (6), “personal history” (17), and the endurance of “considerable pain to repossess [one’s] past” (18), to name just a few. Miller describes memoir as “the most generous of modern genres. Indeed, the point of memoir—when it succeeds—is to keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art” (14).

The connection between art and experience is important when discussing a genre where “art” often takes a backseat to experience itself: “It’s all in the art. You get no credit for living” (V. S. Pritchett qtd. in Furman 24). Floyd Skloot puts it bluntly: “It can be tempting to forget that an essay or creative nonfiction piece must have shape and destiny, must be well written rather than spewed, and must lead somewhere other than the mirror” (306). Often, when confronting memoir, readers are most concerned with the author’s actual experience and less concerned with the

representation of that experience. Ann Patchett mentions a case-in-point in her “Afterword” to Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*, where she describes a time when Grealy was confronted by an audience who was more interested in her illness than in her book as a work of art. Patchett insists on the importance of reading Grealy’s autobiography as more than just the story of her illness:

In the right hands, a memoir is the flecks of gold panned out of a great, muddy river. A memoir is those flecks melted down into a shapable liquid that can then be molded and hammered into a single bright band to be worn on a finger, something you could point to and say, “This? Oh, this is my life.” Everyone has a muddy river, but very few have the vision, patience, and talent to turn it into something so beautiful.

(232)

To illustrate this point, Dillard describes the process by which Thoreau wrote *Walden*: “In repeated and self-conscious rewritings Thoreau hammered at its unremarkable and rather dreary acres until they fastened eternity in time and stood for the notion that the physical world itself expresses a metaphysical one. He picked up that pond and ran with it” (“To Fashion” 159). More and more critical studies defining and explaining the intricacies and implications of memoir as a serious genre (such as Buss’s *Repossessing the World*) are appearing in response to the kind of negative reception (both popular and critical) that memoir continues to receive. Women, because they have been excluded from the male tradition of the genre, occupy the forefront of this defence.

Autobiography criticism has always been tied up with gender, and so it has had serious implications for feminist studies since women entered on the critical scene from about the mid-80s onward (L. Anderson 8). Anderson’s *Autobiography* traces

the male tradition of autobiography criticism from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, to John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, to James Boswell, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Wordsworth. American critics similarly talk about key figures like Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Henry David Thoreau (Feminist critics have often written against James Olney's exclusionary definition of autobiography). Olney's acclaimed text, *Autobiography*, included only one essay on lifewriting by women (Brownley and Kimmich xii; Jelinek). Olney "took the maleness of autobiography for granted"; women did not share "the human condition" of which he speaks and had no "immediate community" (as Albert Stone says) to address (Heilbrun 17). As Estelle Jelinek observes in what is a landmark book within women's autobiography studies, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography*, up until the early 1980s, "critics exclude[d] women's autobiographies from their theoretical analysis" apart from a few such as Shumaker, Paul Delany, and Albert Stone (6). Kristi Siegel notes in *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*, that women have been traditionally frustrated with both their lack of representation within the genre—Jill Ker Conway writes that "Traditionally there has been only one female autobiography for every eight written by a male" ("Points of Departure" 46)—and within literary criticism of the genre. She writes that in 1983 Domna Stanton found only one listing in the card catalogue on women's autobiography; that, in 1980 Jelinek compiled a collection of critical essays on women's autobiography out of her frustration at finding hardly any secondary material during her thesis; that Norrine Voss in 1986 comments that in 'no other literary genre as in autobiography have women produced such a varied and rich canon, yet received so little recognition for their achievement' (218)" (qtd. in Siegel 11-12); and Siegel herself relates how in 1988 she found only fourteen separate references, four of which were book-length studies" (12).

Since then, and especially in the last fifteen years, feminist criticism of autobiography and lifewriting by women has been on the rise,<sup>10</sup> as well as anthologies dedicated to women autobiographers, such as Conway's *Written By Herself: Autobiographies of American Women* (1992) and others.<sup>11</sup> However, women are still far from achieving "something like full literary enfranchisement," as Olney confidently asserted in 1980 (16). In mixed anthology collections women have appeared less frequently: in *Modern American Memoirs* (eds. Annie Dillard and Cort Conley, 1995), 9 out of 35 contributors are women; in *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (eds. Gay Talese and Barbara Lounsberry, 1996), 4 out of 27 contributors are women, and in *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction* (eds. Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, 1996), an only marginally better 30 out of 83 contributors are women. So it is obvious that despite claims that "women are in the lead of a complex change in life-writing practice" (Buss, *Repossessing* 165), there is still a need to raise awareness of the important contribution women are making to the field.

Francis Russell Hart defines memoir as: "personal history; the personalizing of history; the historicizing of the personal" (qtd. in Buss xi). Memoir is a form that allows women to perform an identity that has been historically sidelined within

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<sup>10</sup> Such as Linda Anderson's *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* (1997); *Women and Autobiography*, edited by Marine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich (1999); *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, edited by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (2000); *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/biography*, edited by Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (2000); Janet Mason Ellerby's *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women's Memoir* (2001); *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2002); the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography* edited by Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin (2005); as well as other genres of lifewriting, such as Hilary Hinds's *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (1996), and Margaretta Jolly's *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (2008) to mention only a few.

<sup>11</sup> Conway's second edition re-titled *In Her Own Words: Women's Memoirs from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States* (1999); *Spinning Lifelines: Women's Autobiographical Writing* (2003), edited by Lucy Lewis; *Shaking the Tree: A Collection of New Fiction and Memoir by Black Women* (2003), edited by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah; and *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's Liberation*, edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (2007).

studies of lifewriting. It is a form in which women are “forging their own identity and redefining public discourse” (Murdock 40). According to Buss and Benstock, it allows women to access a “private self” which can then be understood in the context of historical treatments of gender, race, class, and politics (Buss xxi). If we understand the definition of memoir to be a form that locates a self in history, in an era, then gender necessarily informs that history and underscores all layers of that experience.

## CHAPTER 2: TROUT TICKLING FOR TRUTH IN NARRATIVES OF LOSS

Truth pools in the intersections of the multiple.

--Jo Ann Portalupi

Any study of women's memoir at the turn of the millennium reveals a marked preoccupation with "truth" as one of the dominant themes consciously held up for close examination. This performative gesture, or the search for "truth" and its elusiveness, gets played out within the palpable tension between fact and fiction and manifests around an anxiety of memory that is part and parcel of our own cultural zeitgeist—as we experience the death of the last British survivor of the WW I trenches, come closer to the end of the lives of the last survivors of the Holocaust, and attempt to deal with the onslaught of Alzheimer's victims. "The truth of loss is loud and ferocious," writes Robyn Romm (207); in this chapter I interrogate how my chosen writers arrive at that truth. It's certainly obvious that memory provides one key to unlocking the "truth" about the past; however, in my chosen texts I find it both facilitates and frustrates this enterprise. Paradoxically, truths can also be revealed when memory fails, and so this chapter looks at what truths may surface in memory loss as well. Attempts to tell the truth through facts alone prove futile and stagnant; therefore, my chosen writers often blend fact and fiction and use imaginative truth-telling to arrive at more than just surface truths. The performance of complex recovery happens against the backdrop of this negotiation between the two extremes of fact and fiction to create a liminal space somewhere in between.

I seek to complicate the fundamental premise of memoir writing as "a belief in the restorative power of telling one's truth" (Murdock 81) by exposing the intricate

processes involved in the telling. I problematise the popular belief that this is always a healing or consolatory enterprise. I further suggest that an emotional truth—however that is mediated by memory, and rendered up in all its experiential textures—poses an alternative to compensatory paradigms and sets up a space in which writers can play out complex recovered selves.

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the problematics of truth-telling in Mary Gordon's *The Shadow Man*, though it considers also her second memoir *Circling My Mother* as well as Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost*, Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*, Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* and Fay Weldon's *Mantrapped*, among other nonfiction writers and critics who are concerned with these issues. My chosen writers are all self-conscious about "truth," and spend a good deal of time discussing the subject in their memoirs, whether they claim, like Mantel, to have "an investment in accuracy" (24), or, like Diski (ironically, in a memoir where she spends the majority of the narrative waiting to find out the truth about whether her mother is alive or dead), claim they are "not fettered by history, by an absolute sense of telling-the-truth or making-things-up" (82). The first section of the chapter situates the discussion within the "creative nonfiction crisis" and the "culture of truth" and considers how the insistence on "truth" in memoir has been influenced by false memoir scandals. It briefly looks at both sides of the creative nonfiction debate, arguing that my chosen writers align themselves with those who occupy a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction. I attempt to define this space against the backdrop of extreme positions and use an amalgamation of theories taken from critics and writers of nonfiction. The majority of the chapter explores how writers go about telling their truths and gives textual examples of how they ultimately negotiate this space.



## LOSS IN NONFICTION

I must acknowledge the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in my study of loss even as I show how my chosen writers transgress these boundaries in order to tell their own truths. The study of loss within memoir necessarily differs from the study of literary portrayals of loss because nonfiction has a bearing on the way we critique texts ostensibly dealing with “truth.” It is important to explore grief in nonfiction texts because of what Andrew Furman calls “the distinct aesthetic impact of nonfiction” (24) and what Daniel W. Lehman sees as “the heft and shape of nonfiction, its ability to alter space and make noise” (335). But these are general observations that need further clarification and are, I believe, tied specifically to two important factors that influence our critique of nonfiction texts: first, the fact that these texts are tied to the real, and second, the dynamic that exists between the reader and writer as a result of this. Phillipe Lejeune’s pact formally ties the writer of nonfiction to the real as the “pact between reader and writer, confirmed by the use of the author’s name for both protagonist and narrator” (Blowers 105). Drusilla Modjeska further illustrates the importance of this in her article, “Give Me the Real Thing”: “Nonfiction, however literary it may be, however imaginative, however much it borrows from fiction, is not fiction. It is tethered, lightly maybe, but nevertheless tethered, to evidence, to record, to actual people, actual lives, the sensibilities of family, the constraints of the law.” Thus, the decision by an author to publish her/his work as nonfiction has a bearing on the way it is read. Lehman suggests that it is important for readers of nonfiction to “negotiate a text with the author by refusing to read safely within the printed page” (336). Understanding that nonfiction by its very nature is tied to the real outside of the text encourages a reading of that text where “we are still permitted to mourn the loss of human life as something more than the

ending of a story” (Lehman 341). However, within this understanding of nonfiction—and while conforming to “an integrity of intention” (Zinsser 6)—my chosen writers move beyond simplistic boundaries between fact and fiction in order to create a fluid space that allows for the telling of one’s own “very precious and private and shifting truth” (Gutkind xxx).

## THE “CREATIVE NONFICTION CRISIS” AND THE CULTURE OF TRUTH

However, it would be impossible to discuss the nature of nonfiction texts without some understanding of the current creative nonfiction debate, which, while not new, has been recently fuelled by trends towards a “culture of truth”<sup>1</sup> that runs across subjects like science, history, art and law alike.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, in academia, there seems to be an obsession with “The Truth” that perhaps indicates a turn away from postmodern concepts of truth and reality and the idea that “truth” is ultimately unknowable.<sup>3</sup> In the field of life writing, concerns with issues of “truth” prevail, and books like Thomas Larson’s *The Memoir and the Memoirist* ask key questions such as what does it mean to remember, while drawing attention to the honesty of our memories.<sup>4</sup> Nancy Miller has attributed the popularity of the memoir in part to “the desire for story killed by postmodern fiction” and claims that “it’s the only literary

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<sup>1</sup> Recent publications like Mick Gordon and Chris Wilkinson’s *Conversations on Truth*, a collection of informal interviews with influential thinkers of our time (such as Noam Chomsky), attest to a renewed preoccupation with “truth.”

<sup>2</sup> The moral and ethical implications of truth in law especially, is evident in a recent talk given by Carol Smart (Manchester University) called “The Politics of Family Secrets” where she discusses the rise of intolerance for secrets and the gender implications of reproductive secrets, arguing that the accuracy of DNA tests is one of the foremost factors influencing our perceptions of “truth” and paternity disputes.

<sup>3</sup> This trend has been highlighted in a recent call for papers, “Mindful of Otherness: Literature and Ethics” at Goldsmith’s University of London that argues: “The ‘impossibility of truth’ is gradually being eclipsed by ‘Truth’ claims.”

<sup>4</sup> See Nicole E. Meyer’s review of his book in *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 32.4 (2009): 874-75.

form that appears to give access to the truth” (Miller, *But Enough* 12).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, critics like Susanna Egan have identified “the . . . desire for some form of truth on the part of the receiving public” (52) and Fay Weldon wryly observes in *Mantrapped*, a work that blends fiction and memoir, that “the times have finally and sadly come to this, that a novel simply no longer feels meaty enough without some input of the writer’s life and sorrows” (59), and that “Novels are not enough. Self-revelation is required” (18).<sup>6</sup>

More and more we find this insistence on “truth” in life writing. While the creative nonfiction debate is not new—Lee Gutkind reminds us that “Henry David Thoreau lived for two years on Walden Pond while documenting only one year” (xxiv)—it is safe to say that the debate has increased in fervour in recent years. The question of whether truth matters in autobiography has been ongoing in magazines like *Poets and Writers* throughout the last decade in articles like Carolyn Hughes’s “The Creative Nonfiction Debate,” in 2003 and escalating to Andrew Furman’s “The Creative Nonfiction Crisis,” in 2007 and Aaron Hamburger’s “Why Truth Matters in Memoirs” (2006), and—in a recent volume of *Auto/Biography Studies*—Susan Egan’s “Faith, Doubt, and Textual Identity” where she is concerned about “what we believe to be true, and whether or how it matters if autobiographers, trusted as purveyors of their own truth, are impostors or liars” (52).

The debate is dominated by two camps vehemently split along this question of “truth” and its importance within the genre. On the one extreme, critics and writers

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<sup>5</sup> This view has been seconded by books arguing for “the value of memoirs as historical documents,” such as Jennifer Jensen Wallach’s *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow* (Brantley 856).

<sup>6</sup> Even in works that play with boundaries, like Tim O’Brien’s “autobiographical metafiction,” *The Things They Carried*, which includes the disclaimer in the beginning: “[e]xcept for a few details regarding the author’s own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary” (Silbergleid 129), the book calls attention to its “truthfulness” by including a protagonist-narrator who has the same name as the author.

advocate a strict adherence to factual truth; on the other, truth is less important than the story itself. My chosen writers tend to align themselves with those who occupy a space between these two extremes—who believe in a complex idea of “truth” made up of an “emotional truth” that, while conforming to Zinsser’s “integrity of intention” (6), is also not dependent on the facts alone. I will show how my chosen authors negotiate this space in their attempt to tell their own truths.

Critics who advocate truth, such as Furman, emphasise the importance of “a culture of reading and writing that continues to acknowledge the boundaries between the genres” (24). Furman remains disturbed by the outpouring of false or questionable memoirs by popular writers like David Sedaris and goes so far as to suggest the danger inherent in lax attitudes towards “truth”: “I believe our culture’s expanding tolerance for fiction presented as fact threatens to diminish the distinct aesthetic impact of nonfiction—that arresting sympathy we often feel for writers who immerse themselves in the fray of lived experience to extract real meaning” (24). In their article, “False Memoir of Holocaust is Cancelled,” Motoko Rich and Joseph Berger point to a more sinister threat: “Holocaust survivors and scholars are fiercely on guard against any fabrication of memories because they taint the truth of the Holocaust and raise doubts about the millions who were killed or brutalized.”

Perhaps because of the sheer amount of false memoirs, critics are insisting on ever-more stringent boundaries between the genres. Furman laments how “[w]riters today . . . increasingly blur the realms of fact and fiction as a matter of course—and readers . . . increasingly expect them to do so” (24). It’s not surprising that advocates of the “truth” side of the debate have been spurred on by what Furman terms our “post-James-Frey literary universe” (21) and the slew of false memoir scandals and narratives that have proven “to play fast and loose with facts” (Furman 24). A brief

overview of memoir scandals leaves us in no doubt as to how prevalent they indeed are. As well as Frey's heavily-publicised *A Million Little Pieces*, where he exaggerates details of his drug addiction,<sup>7</sup> there are many other nonfiction scandals,<sup>8</sup> as well as those less controversial.<sup>9</sup>

The existence of false memoirs, or memoirs that keep only a tenuous grasp on the truth, create a need for strong advocates of "truth," as well as new fields of inquiry like "contemporary imposture in autobiography" in which critics like Susanna Egan are engaged (52). Here, it is important to recognise that the nonfiction writer's identity is tied to the real outside of the text. Egan says,

given that I am not dealing with fiction here, this textual identity is also only authoritative and credible insofar as it can justly claim to refer to the human author as source or origin. Conversely, the text that breaks or loses its human connection loses credibility. For autobiography, the space between the living, breathing human being who writes and this verbal construct, this textual identity, provides room for the impostor. (53).

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<sup>7</sup> See also Geoff Hamilton's "Mixing Memoir and Desire: James Frey, Wound Culture, and the 'Essential American Soul.'"

<sup>8</sup> Including J. T. Leroy's *Sarah* and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*; misleading pretences of a false ancestry: Eva Salis's novel *Hiam*, a white woman writing as a Muslim; Nasdijj, or Timothy Patrick Barrus, who wrote three memoirs of Native American history (not a Native American himself); Margaret Seltzer's fabricated memoir "about her life as a white girl taken into an African-American foster home in South Central Los Angeles" (Rich and Berger); and the avalanche of false Holocaust memoirs from Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*; to most recently, Herman Rosenblatt, who in *Angel at the Fence* claimed he first met his wife when he was a child in a concentration camp and that she tossed apples over the fence to him.

<sup>9</sup> Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, which uses made-up dialogue (Hughes 62), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which he relied on memory to write, and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* in which he "made up transitions [to make] the experience easier for himself and more enjoyable for his readers, a process he called 'rounding the corners'" (Gutkind xx).

To illustrate an example of how this space between “the breathing human being” and the “textual identity” can be violated, I’ll briefly discuss Lauren Slater’s *Spasm: A Memoir With Lies*. Hamburger asserts that “[b]y calling your book a memoir, you are warranting that your book is true” (28). He does mention memoirs in which “ambiguity about fact and fiction is used as a purposeful tool,” such as Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club* and Mary Gordon’s *The Shadow Man* (28). However, although Lauren Slater’s *Spasm* deliberately plays with the idea of ambiguity, it falls short of the “emotional truth” or “larger truth” that can be found somewhere in the shadows of fact and fiction. According to Murdock, Slater “challenges the reader to examine the nature of truth as she constructs her memory” (54), reiterating that Slater “believes that the purpose of a memoir is to capture the essence of the narrator rather than the factual details of the life she recounts” (55). I agree that “Slater poses important questions about identity and truthfulness” (Murdock 55), and agree also, as Slater says in her “Afterword” that “we must start to experiment with unreliability in nonfiction, specifically in memoir; we must observe what unreliability in nonfiction does to the reader/writer contract, if it productively bends the contract, or breaks it all together” (223). However, instead of successfully using ambiguity as a tool, her memoir represents an example of the contract indeed broken “all together.” Slater makes it obvious that “truth” doesn’t matter. She says that her mother “was so full of denial, she’s not to be trusted. Then again, neither am I. And anyway, just because something has the feel of truth doesn’t mean it fits the facts. Sometimes I don’t even know why the facts should matter. I often disregard them, and even when I mean to get them right, I don’t. I can’t” (144). Hamburger wryly observes: “maybe it is more important for a memoir to tell a good story than to tell the truth. After all, in our postmodern age, how can we expect authors to tell the truth, anyway? Wasn’t it

Samuel Beckett who proved there's no such thing as truth?" (28). Somehow one guesses that his sarcasm would be lost on Slater, who insists, as a child of postmodernism, that the point of postmodernism is that "what matters in knowing yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful" (219). In her memoir she never lets us know whether or not she has epilepsy, or whether she is just using it as a metaphor for her life. She says: "I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother's heart" (5-6). (The alignment between "epilepsy" and "dirty" and "spastic," implying a relationship between the two, is a different problem that I address in more detail in Chapter 3).

She deliberately plays with her readers and forces us to confront our ideas of "truth": "That was not my story then, and it is not my story now, although it is the right story, the true story, not my mother but matter more basic still; or is it?" (12); "The summer I was thirteen I developed Munchausen's, on top of my epilepsy, or—and you must consider this, I ask you please to consider this—perhaps Munchausen's is all I ever had" (87); "I admit I sometimes faked my epilepsy, but I also really had it too" (90); "Perhaps I'm using metaphor to tell my tale, a tale I know no other way of telling, a tale of my past, my mother and me, a tale of pains and abuses and illnesses so subtle and nuanced I could never find the literal words; would it matter?" (192). She provides a disclaimer for this deliberate bending of the truth by admitting to her "slipperiness":

I truly believe that if I came completely clean I would be telling the biggest lie of all . . . to come clean in this memoir would be dishonest; it would go against my nature, which would be just the sort of

inauthenticity any good nonfiction memoirist, whose purpose is to capture the essence of the narrator, could not accommodate. (160)

Yet, despite her insistence that truth doesn't matter, she makes sure she emphasises "truth" as opposed to what might be metaphor. The book is littered with examples like these: "Here's what was true" (13); "The *real* truth is . . ." (59); "Now we get to a little hoary truth in this tricky tale" (87); "This is true" (163). Of course, this may be yet another device to play with the truth and play with her readers' idea of truth, but she does seem clearly troubled by her own approach: "This is a difficult book, I know" (159) and even includes a whole chapter titled "How to Market This Book." If truth doesn't matter, why the need to prove she is in fact adhering to the "truth" by being her paradoxically true, slippery self? In her "Afterword" she says, "Is this, then, an immoral book? I don't think so, for several reasons. The first is that I have openly tussled with my devices and deceptions. The second is that the 'deceptions,' or metaphors, serve the purpose of telling an autobiographical truth about me" (221). She then goes on to give what seems to be the "truest" account she can allow us: "All I can give you is this. I take anticonvulsant medication daily. . . . I have had several symptoms that doctors diagnosed as consistent with temporal lobe epilepsy" (222). She then gives us a hint as to where the confusion might be coming from because doctors also diagnosed the same symptoms as "borderline personality disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, bipolar, Munchausen's, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and autism" (222).

In attempting to show that truth doesn't matter, Slater's obsession with still revealing "the truth" shows that in fact, truth very much does matter, and the book's almost obsessive attempt to blur the truth seems more an attempt to cling onto the last vestiges of postmodernism, in a literary landscape that is increasingly showing less



and less enthusiasm for it. Certainly, the process has made Slater uncomfortable or at least in a position where she feels she must defend her lack of truth by paradoxically telling us a truth: the book is not the truth, I don't tell the truth, therefore the book is true.

I think memoirs like Slater's create the need for this insistence on "truth" that I've been outlining throughout the chapter—the need for insisting that "the text that breaks or loses its human connection loses its credibility" (Egan 53). Yet equally, there is a danger in advocating "truth" above all. As Greg Bottoms says in his article, "Truth, Lies and Outsider Art": "Only the most frighteningly zealous among us believe they own the 'truth'" (53). Gutkind refers to these people as "the creative nonfiction police":

And why, I wonder, are critics and journalists always questioning the ethics and parameters of creative nonfiction writers? Are there no ethical boundaries in poetry and fiction? And are we more deceived by Truman Capote, who supposedly relied on memory to retell the horrible *In Cold Blood*, or Michael Chabon, who disguised real characters and situations in his novel *Wonder Boys*? (Gutkind xxiii)

Gutkind here hints at an important part of the creative nonfiction debate that is lost on advocates who occupy extreme positions along the fiction-nonfiction spectrum: the hybridity that is inherently part of the genre. Critics and writers who are afraid that the term "creative nonfiction . . . gives . . . practitioners the misguided notion that they can make things up" (Sims qtd. in Hughes 62) have come up with a plethora of terms and definitions for it, from "narrative nonfiction"; "literary journalism"; "extended digressive narrative nonfiction" (Vare) to "literary nonfiction"; "immersion journalism, factual fiction, documentary narrative [and] the literature of actuality"

(Hughes 161). However, although these various terms attempt to define and categorise creative nonfiction, what they actually show is that the genre is “essentially a hybrid form . . . a sophisticated form of nonfiction writing, possibly the highest form that harnesses the power of facts to the techniques of fiction” (Vare). In ignoring the genre’s hybridity and insisting on strict genre boundaries there is a danger of stifling a creative, fluid space where “truth” lies.

If strict genre definitions and the insistence on truth can be stifling, there is yet an equally detrimental consequence to arguing that “facts don’t matter” (as we have seen with Slater’s *Spasm*). It’s important to acknowledge that nonfiction texts have a bearing on the way we respond to texts ostensibly dealing with truth. The text is tied to the real and this influences our response to it. However, within the boundaries of nonfiction it is important to allow for a fluid space that blends fact and fiction to allow for the telling of one’s own private truth.

## THE SPACE BETWEEN FICTION AND NONFICTION

I am attempting to define this space against the backdrop of extreme positions outlined above and using an amalgamation of theories taken from critics and writers of nonfiction. Lehman gets closest to theorising this space in his article, “Mining a Rough Terrain: Weighing the Implications of Nonfiction.” In it, he addresses debates sparked off by his book *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction*, where he “explicitly reject[s] the notion of an essential boundary between fiction and nonfiction” (335). To illustrate his point, he tells a story of how, as a child, he would collect rocks with a friend while out for a walk. While his friend was obsessed with geology and the classification of these rocks, he preferred to throw the rocks against a sign or a tree, or “pound the stone with a larger rock until it broke in two. Then, I might touch its

clean, cool interior to my tongue, tasting its solidity, its story, its history” (334). In the same way, Lehman tells us, his response to nonfiction cannot be contained within mere efforts at classification; he treats narrative much as he treated the stones he collected during his childhood: “My argument is that these considerations—the heft and shape of nonfiction, its ability to alter space and make noise—are more important than the business of arranging neat piles” (335).

Eric Heyne’s article “Where Fiction Meets Nonfiction: Mapping a Rough Terrain,” is a criticism of Lehman’s work. Heyne is most concerned with the lack of critical theory devoted to nonfiction and, in particular, the lack of any “useful way[s] of characterizing the boundary between fiction and nonfiction” (323), something he expected to find clearly explained in Lehman’s book. His main problem with Lehman’s argument is in its apparent contradiction: that on the one hand, Lehman’s “single most important theoretical claim is that the presence of flesh-and-blood characters in a narrative makes the experience of that narrative qualitatively different, creating a ‘boundary’ or ‘edge’ that must be crossed by writers and readers of nonfiction” (323), but on the other, Lehman also claims that it’s impossible “to delineate an exact boundary between fiction and nonfiction” (Heyne 324). Perhaps Heyne is making too much of the boundaries to which Lehman refers because he himself is so steeped in the necessity of pinpointing them from a theoretical viewpoint. It is likely that Lehman’s discussion of our treatment of nonfiction is not so much about creating these boundaries, but rather, transgressing them. Lehman seems to be advocating a space beyond boundaries where “we refuse to take refuge in a safe zone where rigid genre roles obviate the need for careful negotiation or the equally safe zone where all is text and facts don’t matter” (340). This is a difficult space to negotiate or perhaps even define (which might be the basis for Heyne’s

frustration) but it is important to occupy that space in a way that honours these texts precisely because it is a space left easily violated (as we have seen with *Spasm*) in its very resistance to strict genre boundaries.

This space that transgresses genre boundaries lies between fact and fiction but nevertheless holds fast to Zinsser's "integrity of intention" while also recognizing Gutkind's "very precious and private and shifting truth." This is a meeting place somewhere between fact and fiction where "truth" lies, a place "that will never be filled by either fiction or traditional nonfiction" (Callahan 381). This space holds an emotional truth that might not be a factual truth. In this way, it "provide[s] a higher or three-dimensional truth—a deeper truth—that simple fact and reportage sometimes doesn't allow" (Gutkind xxvii). Thus it has something in common with Gay Telese's definition of the "new journalism": "Though often reading like fiction, it is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks *a larger truth* [Gutkind's italics] than is possible through a mere compilation of verifiable facts" (qtd. in Gutkind xxvii). Importantly, it distinguishes between "facts" and "truth." As Toni Morrison says, "Fact can exist without human intelligence but truth cannot" (qtd. in Murdock 148). In his book, *Writing Life Stories* Bill Roorbach has a similar view of memoir:

Information is almost never the first goal of memoir; expression often is. Beauty—of form, of language, of meaning—always takes precedence over mere accuracy, truth over mere facts. The successful memoirist respects facts, uses them, rigorously represses the human impulse to lie or embellish, but knows that truth is different from facts, and greater than facts, and not always their sum. (9)

Murdock sums up this idea by saying “The job of memoir is to find one’s truth, not to determine the accuracy of what happened” (12).

Eakin describes it thus: “For Karr—and for the autobiographers who interest me the most—allegiance to truth that is the central, defining characteristic of memoir is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to the history of one’s self” (*LA* 64). It is true that, as Jo Ann Portalupi says, “An autobiographer may begin by pulling back the curtain on a life,” and that “it isn’t until she is done inventing that she steps into that life behind the curtain”(8-9). However, that life behind the curtain—while made somehow more “real” by “invention”—must, however, remain true to “the history of oneself.” Gerald N. Callahan offers a similar image in his metaphor for creative nonfiction: “For me, that is the great allure of creative nonfiction—working with the world as we find it. Piecing together a moment when it seems the world offered a glimpse behind the curtains and we saw, for an instant, some sense in it all” (381).

## TROUT-TICKLING FOR TRUTH

Clendinnen gets closest to this space in her memoir, *Tiger’s Eye*, “about the working of memory and the construction of self” (Murdock 63). For Clendinnen, as for others she says who “yearn after the trout-gleam of truth, memory is less a crystal than an eel, wily, evasive, as hard to hold as any truly vital thing” (242). She remembers trout tickling as a girl:

Tickling trout is an addictive enterprise. You find a likely river . . .  
and . . . you begin feeling delicately along bands, under rock ledges. . .  
. And then, if you are lucky, your fingertips touch something, a living  
something, holding against the current and very slightly vibrating.

Your job is to move your fingers tenderly along its length. Now you are mapping the body of the fish . . . until you have exactly learnt it with your blind fingertips. . . . And all the while tenderly, tenderly stroking, so that the fish is mesmerised by the sliding fingers. (74)

This becomes a metaphor not only for the elusiveness of “truth,” but also of the truth-making process itself: “It is that moment of tactile encounter which is supreme—the blind exploration, the tentative construction of an actual but concealed creature, of an actual but concealed world, from a series of obscure intimations. . . . The moment of touching the trout, when you know you touch some quite different way of being in the world” (75). I would assert the “truth” within my chosen texts is this complex “trout-gleam of truth” as writers seek to discover “some quite different way of being in the world.” Offering a glimpse behind the curtain, these writers “must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events” (Zinsser 6).

## MEMORY

We depend on memory’s capacity to hold many lives, not just the one we appear to be leading at the moment. Memory is a space for storing lives we didn’t lead, room where they remain alive, room for mourning them, forgiving them. Memory, like all stories we tell, a tissue of remembering, forgetting, of what if and once upon a time, burying our dead so the dead may rise.

--John Edgar Wideman

Memory is one medium through which writers attempt to get closer to the truth—the truth of the past and what they have lost. In Gordon’s *The Shadow Man*, loss and truth become intimately bound up in the narrative. It is an overwhelming project of loss. The loss of her father when she was seven has left her with a

“vocation as a mourner” (39), to which she clings fiercely: “It was a secret only my father knew: the depth and constancy of my sorrow . . . the unknowable depths of my real mourning” (103). But not only does she lose her father literally when he dies—she must also throughout the course of the narrative lose the idea of her father over and over again while new discoveries about his life emerge: “I won’t speak of him as a generality, a type. A self-hating Jew. A self-hating man. A victim of something or other. I speak of him as a daughter, as someone who had her origin in him, who was marked by his love and death” (94). Thus she is faced with “the end of the only father I could love without difficulty” (77). As well as this, during the writing of the memoir her mother is also losing her memory (though Gordon waits until *Circling My Mother* to write more fully about this), and so she describes herself as “being caught up in the enterprise not only of loss but of losing” (31). She says:

It’s a less hopeless prospect for me to imagine that I can find him than to imagine that he can find me. I am, after all, the one who lost him. “She lost her father,” I’ve often heard people say. “She lost her father when she was very young.” As if his death were the result of my carelessness, my inattention, my failure to keep him in sight. And now he is gone from my sight. I have lost sight of him. I will never have the sight of him again. (33)

She speaks of the profound impact the death of her father has had on her from a child: “How then, could lostness not be my most true, most fixed, most natural home” (33). The missing question mark here is interesting. She’s not really asking a question—rather, asserting the “truth” of her “lostness.” She tells us further: “This is the story of my reluctance, of my flinching from the loss I knew would follow the truth” (93).

Memory is essential to the attempt to discover the truth of our past. But Roorbach goes even further to suggest that: “memory is what people are made out of. After skin and bone, I mean. And if memory is what people are made out of, then people are made out of loss. . . . No wonder we crave firm answers, formulae, facts and figures. All are attempts (however feeble in the end) to preserve what’s gone” (19). Gordon recognises this from very young as a child. Memory becomes a means of reuniting her with her father: “I knew I wouldn’t see my father’s face again, or feel his breath, or hear his voice, but if I was journeying back in memory to places we had been together, I was engaged in a quest that was not only admirable but, most important, meaningful” (8). In order to do this, Gordon creates memories of her time with her father as though they are a film:

I had to replay and replay scenes until I had distilled the right image, which would have the simultaneous dimness and distinctness of a dream. What was finally projected was *the essential thing*, an unfolding event that was not only itself but the emblem of my father’s life with me, entirely our own, and yet suggesting something that had always been, and had always been *true*. (italics mine 21)

This image is interesting because of the tension between the murkiness of the dream that nevertheless reveals the “true . . . essential thing.” What is happening here seems very much a deliberate act of remembering that Toni Morrison calls “a form of willed creation” (Murdock 11)—a way of creating one’s identity. Murdock says “that is exactly what a memoirist does when she chooses a particular memory for illumination—she recreates her sense of identity” (11). This is very close to Nabokov’s belief that “memory is an act of will” (Clendinnen 240). According to Clendinnen, Nabokov “believes he holds the delectable images and sensations of his



childhood—the slur of snow under a sleigh, the exact shades of Russia’s taffeta winter skies, the sound of his mother’s silken skirts, the citrus fragrance of her skin—stored in the inviolable crystal of his mind, where they will be safe forever” (240-241).

However, I would suggest that the process is more complicated than an act of will—simply picking and choosing from a crystal ball of available memories. Glimpses of Gordon’s “true . . . essential thing” are rare in these narratives of loss, including her own. More often than not, memory seldom yields such a clear truth and is instead the source of great anxiety.

### *THE ANXIETY OF MEMORY*

Even though many memoir writers recognize that memory is inherently faulty, many of my chosen writers, in their efforts to tell their own “truth,” remain plagued by its unreliability. Murdock recognizes that “Memory is rarely whole or factually correct” (5), Leslie Rubinowski that “memory [is] the clumsiest editor of all” (Rubinowski 323), and Jewell Parker Rhodes that her “creative nonfiction is distorted by the fictional lies of memory and perception” (Rhodes 395). Some nonfiction critics and practitioners accept the faulty nature of memory as a necessary element of the genre: Roorbach suggests that while memory is sometimes faulty, that need not necessarily contribute to an anxiety about the “truth” it produces:

When I say memoir, I only mean memory put to the page and carefully arranged. I do mean a true story, unadorned, but always a true story laid down with the understanding that memory can be faulty, that images fade, that the I itself is a construction, a kind of fiction, only capable of representing part of the writer at any given time. (10)

However, my chosen writers are more anxious about memory. If memory is faulty, yet we are utterly reliant on it for our access to the truth about the past, then this presents problems for the role of truth within memoir. As a historian, Clendinnen is invested in the truth: “Historians live by believing truth can be extracted from people’s memories. Yet when I read my memories I am uneasy” (74). For Clendinnen, “it was only when the unnatural solitude of illness made memory my full-time companion that I came to appreciate the depths of its character defects—its unreliability, its affront at being questioned, its rage at being impugned, its incorrigible complacency even when caught out” (243). She remains anxious about “the flamboyant vagaries of memory” (221) and distrustful as they “flap and bang in the near-derelect premises of your mind” (172). Diski agrees memory is

utterly unreliable in some ways, because who can say whether the feeling or emotion that seems to belong to the recollection actually belongs to it rather than being available from the general store of likely emotions we have learned? . . . Memory is not tales in the sense that it is willfully bad, but it is excitingly corrupt in its inclination to make a proper story of the past. (147)

The “excitingly corrupt” nature of memory can be illustrated by Clendinnen’s portrayal of the relationship between her young self and her father. After she tells the story, she admits that upon re-reading, “I am disconcerted” because although the “compilation of the vignettes which come sidling into my memory [are] as accurate as memory allows . . . the interpretation they invite is false. It was not like that at all” (158). The interpretation—“Daddy’s little mate” (158)—is an example of memory’s “inclination to make a story of the past,” even if that story is not an accurate one. Writers’ awareness of this causes them to doubt their own ability to tell the “truth.”

Clendinnen reminds us: "I am both the sole informant and the sole teller, and I cannot be trusted as either" (140). Similarly, Gordon says: "As I began to explore my memories, I was caught up in the impossibility of memory as a reliable source. What I had trusted as a text to live by began to seem as malleable as last week's gossip, and as undependable. This loss of faith in memory was the first of the losses that came to me as a result of writing this book" (xx-xxi).

When Gordon tries to remember her childhood, she can recall it easily: "It is very easy for me to call back the atmosphere of that earlier time, even the quality of the light in which I lived" (10). She is speaking particularly of the light in the Holland tunnel, which reminds her of death. Yet even as she brings herself back into that tunnel, she questions her memory: "How did I know what I say I know? Who was my father, really? How as a child, a grieving child, did I construct the story that I have lived by? The story by which I named and knew myself, and in which I cloaked myself; the envelope in which I saw myself and presented myself to the world" (11-12). Diski has similar problems remembering her child self: "Who knows what Jennifer was like, with only memory as a guide?" (83). She says, "'I' seem to be remembering an occasion which I, as someone six times seven self-annihilating years removed from Jennifer, could not possibly have witnessed" (84). Gordon remembers a frightening incident on a merry-go-round with her father: "Now, when I replay this film, I ask myself if this can be a real memory. Where, in what possible place can there have been a merry-go-round in a subway terminal?" (26). Watching the films of her childhood, Gordon oscillates between certainty and doubt: "And now, when I feel my spinning head, taste the grape ice, see the horse's flaring nostrils, I am certain that these memories are in fact memories and not invention, that they are real, they really happened" (26). However, she immediately doubts her memories once again: "But

then I tell myself that it is impossible for me to remember what it's like to have a father" (26). Her doubt solidifies as the narrative moves on:

Now in 1992 I have become a woman who no longer believes in these conversations [she remembers having with her father]. I no longer have faith in my films. I don't know why this has happened. For the past several years, I've been living with my father in a new way: the way of a writer trying to make him visible and comprehensible to strangers. This has made me feel an urgent need to certify some memories as real. I keep wanting to rid myself of the false, knowing all the time there is no such thing as truth" (38).

The connection between memory and truth haunts her more and more: "Surely some things I remember really happened. But even if I can say what happened, how do I know which of all the things that happened will give me a true picture of my father?" (38-39). She says further that "I begin not to trust my own memories. How can I tell which images tell the truth?" (39).

Of my chosen writers, Mantel seems the least anxious about memory: "though my early memories are patchy, I think they are not, or not entirely, a confabulation, and I believe this because of their overwhelming power: they come complete" (24). In fact, Mantel's metaphor for memory seems more like Nabokov's crystal than Clendinnen's eel—it suggests memories can be laid out and are available on demand: "We talk about buried parts of our past and assume the most distant in time are the hardest to reach. . . . I don't think memory is like that: rather that it is like St. Augustine's 'spreading limitless room.' Or a great plain, a steppe, where all the memories are laid side by side, at the same depth, like seeds under the soil" (25). And yet, she admits to a certain anxiety—the process is not always as simple as shuffling

through memories like a pack of cards: “Writing about your past is like blundering through your house with the lights fused, a hand flailing for points of reference” (167).

Bret Lott believes creative nonfiction is “the attempt to keep from passing altogether away the lives we have lived” (qtd. in Furman 24). This hints at a deeper fear that underlies our culture—the fear of what will pass away unremembered. Murdock speaks for many of us when she says: “What I fear most is not death, but living the loss of my life. Awake. Without memory” (5). When Gordon looks for information in the National Archives, she hits upon this collective anxiety that is very much a part of our cultural zeitgeist at the turn of the millennium: “All of us in the archives are acknowledging the insufficiency of memory. The falseness of the myth of continuity. The loss of living speech. Our own ability to live with the blanks. To live in the enveloping whiteness of imagination and of love. Do we think that facts can make up for all of this? Did I?” (164)

### THE “FACTS” VS. THE “TRUTH”

To compensate for memory’s inaccuracy, Gordon turns to the facts of her father’s life in order to reveal the truth, though the facts themselves take up all of a few sentences. She lists them in a chapter called, “Placing My Father: A Police Investigation”: “My father was a Jew. My father was not born in America. My father was a Jew who hated Jews” (168). Yet the facts reveal difficult truths, and she is “constantly being presented with information that takes away more than it gives” (158). This is the other side of Clendinnen’s “trout-tickling” metaphor, the dark underbelly which includes the fear lying just under the surface of the water: “praying [the body you feel] will curve and swell, that it is not long and thin and sinisterly

muscled, that it will not transform under your fingers into a vicious-toothed eel” (Clendinnen 74). The other side of the “trout-tickling” metaphor is that truth can be not only “wily, evasive, as hard to hold as any truly vital thing”(242), but equally it can be “vicious,” ugly; truth can be dangerous. Certainly for Diski, “The truth was dangerous, the truth was poison” (94). For Diski, “truth” is bound up with the dysfunctional relationship between her parents; truth is a weapon her parents would use against each other: “Truth, I learned, was up for grabs, entirely dependent on who was doing the telling. Truth was something that happened secretly in the back of people’s minds and came out of those minds like exploding sewage when there was enough anger or fear to propel it” (96). Gordon describes how the new facts that she learns about her father

nose their way into what I thought was the past like a dog sticking his nose under a lady’s skirts. How I resent the insidious, relentless, somehow filthy nudging of these facts. Yet I cannot ban them. Just in case my father should appear, like a flame bursting suddenly from a pile of oily rags. His face in the center of the flame. Illuminated. Entirely visible. No longer in shadow. (125)

Early in the narrative, early in the grief process, she attempts to concentrate on the solid, concrete objects or “facts” within the “films” or memories she has of her father. She tries to “focus the camera on some objects I know without a doubt to have existed. I’m much more secure if, on the screen, but fixed, unmoving, I can project objects that I know once touched his body” (27). She tries to tie her uncertain memories to her father’s body in order to give them substance. She lists objects, such as “a pink shirt . . . a hairbrush with a light wooden handle and soft bristles” (27).

These by themselves are solid enough, yet they are not enough, as facts, to give her a true picture of her father because:

Set them afloat in a sea of stories and their certainty melts. Narrative corrodes objects' inherent truthfulness. It distorts; it beautifies or perverts. It thins the texture, clouds the air. Objects afloat in narrative give me no certainty. They are no proof against my great fear, that I have invented everything. The whole world. Including my father.

(27)

However later, when she has exhausted all other roads back to her father, when she has “come to the end of memory, the end of information, of what can be learned from record” (169), when she realises that “there is no fact in the world that will help me understand my father's life” (122), she turns back to story, to invention, as the only way that she can realize the truth about her father. She has been “swept away by a sea of story . . . [a] narrative flood” which she knows she “mustn't trust” (28). But by the end of the narrative, she no longer distrusts stories. The new facts she is learning about her father “challenge me to make a setting for them, the setting of imagination” (125). The facts, the documents, are not enough because they are “full of empty spaces” and “[t]here are no stories of him, no photographs” (171). So she decides to “make things up” (171).

## IMAGINATIVE TRUTH-TELLING

Navigation, at its heart, relies on fiction and illusion to discover absolute truth. It struck me that there is a near perfect parallel between a navigator's attempt to discover his exact position and the writer's attempt to express in an exact way what is so clear in his imagination, the perfect truth about being human, but which never survives intact onto the page.

--Philip Gerard

This section looks at another way in which my chosen writers compensate for memory's inaccuracy in order to get at the truth. When facts fail, they turn to invention. For John Edgar Wideman, we can get close to the truth through what he refers to as "imaginative truth-telling":

The collective effort of writing should be to keep the language alive as a medium for imaginative truth-telling, for communication that gives the lie to language as fact. All information includes a point of view, intention, and author. Facts pretend this isn't so. Good writing reminds us everyone's responsible for dreaming a world, and the dream, the point of view embodied by it, within it, is as close to fact, to reality, as we ever get. (147)

Yet to my mind it seems there are two kinds of "imaginative truth-telling" evident in narratives of loss. One is an unconscious act; it happens when memory fails and the brain believes something to have happened which we later find out is untrue. The second is the very conscious act of telling stories, constructing deliberate fictions to get at the truth. Both forms of "imaginative truth telling" grow out of memory's inherent faulty nature, accurately described by Murdock in her analysis of Diski's work:

Perhaps memory in a pure, virginal, untainted state can never exist and Jenny Diski is right. Perhaps memory is more than excitingly corrupt



[Diski's phrase]; perhaps it is purely invention, a particular point of view, an angle of perception. A created fiction. Perhaps it is the nature of memory to glow with contamination. And if the memoirist is a self-conscious cultivator of his or her own myth, then it is even more difficult to separate fact from fiction. (11)

Furman, who insists vehemently on the importance of "truth," also admits that "the most compelling moments of creative nonfiction are often those very moments when memory fails" (24). This concept is strikingly illuminated in Portalupi's article, "When Memory Fails and Invention Takes Over: The Role of Fiction in Autobiographical Writing," where she writes about the value paradoxically inherent in the failure of memory. In her article, she "want[s] to suggest that 'invention,' rather than jeopardizing accuracy, is the very means one uses to arrive at autobiographical truth" (3). She writes a scene where, as a child, she remembers picking blackberries on her own and eating them on her porch. It paints a picture of her as an independent and autonomous child. But after she sees the story published, she realizes the scene never happened. The incident illustrates how "[m]emory and the imagination work hand in hand to forge an 'interpretive connection between past and present that has a more compelling claim to accuracy than mere fact (Franzosa, 402)'" (qtd. in Portalupi 6).

Even though, as Clendinnen says, "the marshland between memory and invention is treacherous" (73), Portalupi insists that there is a truth that one can get to from these lies: "The function of memory often leads us to write fictions that serve as screens to other memories less palatable. This scene was concealing a child I didn't want to remember" (7). In the same way Patricia Hampl says:

Now that I have the fragment down on paper, I can read this little piece as a mystery which drops clues to the riddle of my feelings, like a culprit who wishes to be apprehended. My narrative self (the culprit who has invented) wishes to be discovered by my reflective self, the self who wants to understand and make sense of a half-remembered story. (qtd. in Portalupi 7)

Similarly, Rubinowski writes of her grandfather:

There are lies that attempt to hide, and then there are those that reveal. These are the ones that haunt me because of what they say about loss and hope. I could count on my grandfather lying to me the same way I could count on him loving me. . . . This is who I am, he seemed to be saying. Never mind that it isn't true. In his lies he offered up his best self, and he taught me the possibility of strange and powerful things.

(Rubinowski 328)

In the same way, Portalupi wants to discover the meaning that lies behind this scene that never happened and ends up getting closer to the truth. When she looks deeper she sees a very different child: "the child as fertile ground in which my mother planted countless seeds of fear. . . . This child would not have eaten a mound of dew-moist berries in the early morning hours of my neighbourhood" (8).

As readers, we might ask, why write the scene? In an interesting reversal of Lejeune's pact, she says that one reason she wrote the scene is because the narrative needed it—her readers needed it: "It is interesting to consider the way in which the presence of readers offers a liability to the autobiographer's contract to remain accurate" (7). Another reason is because "[w]e need our stories and our counterstories. Truth pools in the intersections of the multiple, often conflicting

stories we find ourselves compelled to write” (8). She couldn’t have found the hidden child without first writing the fiction: “This marriage between memory and imagination is what the autobiographer has to work with: neither stands alone” (Portalupi 8). Even though memories might be discovered to be false, they can still reveal a truth about the self: they are still part of “a certain kind of marriage: part of my unreliable, essential, personal record, and so part of my unreliable, essential, personal self” (Clendinnen 243).

In contrast, the other kind of “imaginative truth-telling” that surfaces in Clendinnen and Gordon’s memoirs is the very conscious act of telling stories, constructing deliberate fictions to get at the truth. In her essay, “Poetics of Writing,” Alexis Wright argues that “the work of fiction was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either” (13). She goes on to say that fiction “creates a truer replica of reality . . . [and] penetrates more than the surface layers” (13). For Clendinnen, fiction is a truer reality. Eakin calls it “a special kind of fiction . . . in which memory and imagination conspire to reconstruct the truth of the past” (*LA* 64). For Clendinnen, fiction represents reality more accurately than her attempts to capture real events through memoir. She says, “While I wrote the essays on my parents as honestly as I was able, I knew my account to be miserably inadequate. . . . Only fiction can redress the existential ambiguities which stalk the real world” (243-244).

As though to directly illustrate Clendinnen’s theory, when both memory and records fail her, Gordon at last attempts to discover the truth of her father by literally becoming her father through fiction. In order to do this, she writes from his perspective, adopting a first-person narrative:

*We land in Baltimore, Maryland. We are going to Ohio. A word like a wail: a good place for a Jew. To arrive at the place of mourning, of lament. . . . My mother and my father and my sisters will always be Jews. I can see by their faces that there is nothing they can do about it. But things are not so fixed with me. In dreams I plan, over and over, my escape. One day to awake to a rich, saturating silence. One day to awake without reproach. (173, 177)*

However, she “cannot bear to be my father” (177), and so the exercise is a relatively short-lived one, covering only a handful of pages in the narrative. Rather than a healing exercise, she feels completely subsumed by her father’s body and must separate herself from him until “[h]e is silent now. He has become a ‘he.’ That is to say, one of many” (177). So she imagines becoming witness to many immigrants, “[b]oys all over America” (178) dreaming of Europe, “swallowing loathsomeness and hatred, insult, terror, dread” (181). Then, in order to explain the voice that torments her father and immigrants like him, “I remain a witness. Then I become the police artist. Then the prosecutor. Then the judge. And then the executioner” (181). Drawing on “the skull of Bernard Berenson, the mouth of H. L. Mencken, the hair of Ezra Pound, [and] the eyes of Henry Roth,” she tries to construct “the face that stalked my father” (182) because as representatives of literary/cultural figures of the time who were also anti-Semitic, they were likely to have had some influence on her father and “what they said proves they were carrying within them the poison that made my father a person I cannot easily love” (183). In “The Lineup” (183) she invents dialogue between them in order to understand her father. But her father resists being understood; during the interrogation, he “writhes in torment” (184). When Gordon says to him “I wanted to know you,” he answers, “That’s impossible” (184). Instead

she accuses the men in the lineup: “‘I accuse you all of murder,’ I tell the men under the light. ‘You have murdered the father I could have loved without strain’” (185).

In the preface to the narrative, she says that “[f]inally, it was only by turning my father into a fictional character after all, by understanding that I could never know him except as an invention of my own mind and heart, that I could make a place for him in my life” (xxii). Yet the apparent consolation in this thought is complicated by the narrative itself, when, after Gordon invents him as both criminal and victim in trying to get at the truth of who he really was, she returns once again back to the facts—brutal in their truth in the way the stories are not: “My father is dead. We cannot know the dead. My father lied” (193). Furthermore, after a fairly large section of the narrative in which she invents her father from several perspectives, she doesn’t stop at the fictional character himself. It is as though it is not enough to invent him through story; she must also imagine herself telling stories to him. In this new approach she writes mostly allegorical stories representing her relationship to her father, told from the distanced, third person. As an archaeologist whose native city was destroyed, she is left with pages of a text: “She has chosen not to read the text, or to read it in a hesitant, reluctant way, almost an irresponsible way, although it is the thing most dear to her: the history of her city” (195). Or as a woman looking inside a bank vault, a woman receiving packages, some whose contents are intact, some with everything broken—the metaphorical situations, cryptic as they might seem, are, however, obvious representations of her failure to find out the truth about her father, and thus, by extension, the truth about herself (construction of the self through narrative and in relation to loss is something that will be taken up further in Chapter 3).

By the end of the narrative, it seems that “imaginative truth-telling” for Gordon is not as successful in revealing the truth as it is for Clendinnen. Clendinnen includes short stories within her memoir, and discovers “that fiction can make its own claims to truth; that I believed in fabricated Noah [character in “White Aborigines”] more completely than I believed in my account of myself as a girl. Fiction began to offer a balm for the obstinate opacities, the jagged inadequacies of memory” (Clendinnen 85). However, despite Gordon’s efforts at inventing the truth, she repeatedly comes up against “the silence of the grave” (26). After telling stories to the dead and about the dead, Gordon decides to focus on those living—the last section of the memoir is about her mother.

#### FICTION AND TRUTH IN FAY WELDON’S *MANTRAPPED*

A different type of text that uses similar techniques is Fay Weldon’s *Mantrapped*. In a discussion panel titled “Fiction and Autobiography” given as part of the “Dissecting the Self” series by the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King’s College, Fay Weldon and Hilary Mantel discussed their views on truth, memory, and fiction in autobiography. For Weldon, the truth she seems to have come to, in *Mantrapped* as well as in the discussion panel, is that there is no real difference between fiction and autobiography when it comes to “truth.” *Mantrapped* is a blend of memoir and fiction, where she tells the story of Trisha, Doralee and Peter, alongside the story of herself. In the discussion panel, Weldon said that she had set out to “prove what you write in fiction has nothing to do with real life,” but that she has now given up and admits that almost everything she has written has been one long disguised autobiography. This point is echoed in *Mantrapped* when she writes: “All my writing life I have argued that fiction and autobiography are separate” (58), and

then goes on to say “But what I wrote was all true, true, true” (59). She is characteristically tongue-in-cheek about this, quoting Flaubert’s famous saying, “‘*Madame Bovary*, c’est moi’” (59). Later on, when she tells us that her adaptation of *Madame Bovary* into a play met with unpopular reviews because she had changed the story, she explains: “The trouble was I knew the woman better than did Flaubert, and I knew the husband too, and the lovers, and what makes you spend too much, why you end up paying for your boyfriend to go on holiday with his wife, ‘to make it up.’ Forget Flaubert’s ‘*Madame Bovary? C’est moi!*’—C’était moi” (122).

Yet the dry humour with which she relates her life cannot undercut the fact that the narrative is riddled with loss: the loss of her childhood home and the country of her childhood, New Zealand, her father, the series of homes lived in with her mother, the series of lovers. Much of this story was told in her autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, which as she says was “conventional enough, other than—when I could no longer bear to incorporate the reality of certain sections of my past, I slipped over into the third person for a time” (*Mantrapped* 163). And so this leaves us with the question, what does she stand to gain by creating this blend between fact and fiction, a space she very obviously calls attention to throughout the narrative? She says:

You will have noticed the future and predictive tenses which surface every now and then in the previous section. Peter *was to be* in Trisha’s body, Doralee *is to fail* to find her little black dress with the shoulder straps, and *is to fly* into—Mrs Kovac is quite right—a *hissy-fit*. I move forward in time, I put the action into the future. I let you know not so much what is going to happen next but what I have decided is to happen next. At least, I am reassuring you, or possibly myself, I *know*.  
(107)

The fictional story is fantastical as though to emphasize its fictionality against the “real life” story of the author; the fantastical nature of two characters switching bodies serves to highlight the narrator’s own real-life experiences and provides a kind of “comic relief” to Weldon’s own story of loss. But the characters themselves, especially Doralee, a caricature of the modern woman in the 1990s, with the perfect flat, career, and the perfect man, contrasts starkly to Weldon’s own experience as a young woman and, by comparison, illuminates the truth of *Mantrapped*—which is essentially the collective loss experienced by women coming of age in the 50s. These two periods are continually offset against each other and mutually illuminating. While in the 1990s, Doralee has a “degree in pharmacology, had worked for a few years as a freelance journalist in the medical press, and then eighteen months ago had become a commissioning editor for *Oracle* . . . [and] Life itself was now glossy, and even leisurely” (66), Weldon’s sister—“who wrote poetry, had the same hot line to the appalling infinite as [Cynthia] Pell, [Sheila] Fell and Plath” (123) (the painter, Cynthia Pell was married to Ron Weldon before Fay)—and who is experiencing what would be completely alien to Doralee:

What my sister had was a notion that there was something out there, just beyond vision, which had to be reached no matter what. Trying to grasp it rendered a woman desperate and emotionally fragile. Before . . . the jargon of contemporary psychotherapy . . . and we learned to account for ourselves in terms of self-realisation and the need for self-expression, we were left with the vague and painful mystery of ourselves. . . . What drives the artist is an urge as powerful as sex and if denied, if the times are against her, if she doesn’t find the words,



doesn't find her audience, looks inside and finds only muddle and misery, why, it's enough to send a woman mad. (123-124)

Weldon witnesses and documents the gendered experience of "Pell, Fell and Plath": "I see all these self-destroyers of the Former Age as sacrificial martyrs to the New Feminism. The artists lead the way. This life is *impossible*" (118).

Through fiction, Weldon creates women like Doralee and Trisha, women who "are so vivid and mettlesome these days, so vigorous in their being, even when like Trisha down on their luck, I am surprised they do not subsume the whole male race" (54), in contrast to the truth of Weldon's sister and other women like her. Through a blend of fiction and memoir, she can best impart the truth to "Today's woman, busying herself demonizing the male gender, [who] finds it hard to understand the mewling mindset of yesterday's woman" (147), and who perhaps best understands the gendered experience of loss better through this contrast. The truth that lies between fiction and fact is the truth of the "mantrapped woman" who: "grits her teeth and achieves her aims, just about, and tries to concentrate but trauma leaves its marks through life, the left over life which is all the mantrapped and abandoned woman has" (146).

Weldon complicates the premise that writing one's own truth is always a healing or restorative enterprise:

I wrote a story last year, *A Knife for Cutting Mangos*, about a second wife going through the belongings of the previous one, who ran away, and scorning what she found. Until I wrote the previous paragraph [describing how she went through Cynthia Pell's closet] I had not realized to what degree I wrote from experience, and out of guilt. Writing is not in the least therapeutic, but it is how you may perhaps

earn the remission of sins, if acknowledging sin is to be excused from it. (121)

If writing is “not in the least therapeutic,” it is also not necessarily a doorway to the past. Though the blend of memoir and fiction generates certain truths, fiction itself can also prevent access to the past, because it can also act as a kind of denial, as Weldon is well aware: “In writing about an unnatural event, such as the swapping of bodies, I deny myself access to my own past” (121). Ironically, Diski suggests access to the truth of one’s past is impossible; her own attempt ends in anti-climax: “I left Paramount Court feeling a little disappointed, though I had found exactly what I remembered. I had revisited; but only the memory of my past, not the past itself. The past was gone; though the bricks and mortar remained” (89).

Interestingly, in the discussion panel “Autobiography and Fiction,” Mantel said that she does not feel that memoir is more revealing than fiction, but rather the opposite. She feels that writing her memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost*, was much more controlled. She adds that “if my memoir is dishonest, it is because I have softened a lot of things” because her mother is still alive. She maintains that “one can’t aspire to tell the whole truth—only a partial and controlled truth,” but she makes sure that she is truthful in telling the reader this.

If Mantel feels the whole truth is not possible in memoir, Diski, in her memoir, feels the whole truth is not even desirable. She has no desire to find out the truth about her mother, and this manifests in other areas of life; it becomes indicative of the way she lives her life: “It’s not the arriving but the not-arriving” (218) (discussed in further detail in Chapter 4). Towards the end of the narrative, she toys with whether or not, after taking so much trouble to get to Antarctica, she will actually leave the ship and step foot on the continent. Imagining herself back in London, she

asks “Did I or didn’t I get to Antarctica? At that delicious moment I really didn’t know what the answer would be. It wouldn’t make an iota of difference to the world, or in reality to me, if I didn’t actually stand on the Antarctic landmass. Been there, haven’t done that” (219). The space in-between knowing and not-knowing is what appeals to her. Not knowing the truth of whether she lands or not, and ultimately, not being invested in that truth, she discovers that: “There are infinite ways of telling the truth, including fiction, and infinite ways of evading the truth, including nonfiction” (220). Diski continues: “The truth or otherwise of a book about Antarctica and my mother, I saw from my swaying bunk in Cabin 532, didn’t depend on arriving at a destination. Nor in failing to arrive” (220). Ironically, when Diski says, “I found myself beginning to get a taste for non-fiction” (220), she is talking about her taste for evading the truth. In proving that she is “not fettered by an absolute sense of telling-the-truth or making-things-up” (82) she proves also the complexity inherent in those terms.

## EXPOSING THE TRUTH

In one of the last chapters of *The Shadow Man*, called “My Mother is Speaking From the Desert,” Gordon writes about her mother: “She has lost her memory. As I am obsessively involved with bringing back my father from the past, she is letting the past slip from her hand, a fish into dark water” (207). This section is a glimpse of her experience with a parent who has dementia, one that Gordon goes on to develop fully in *Circling My Mother*. She describes her mother now in contrast with her former youthful healthfulness. She says she is in “a deeper place, a darker place, perhaps one she feels to be more truthful,” and then she adds: “The place of

carriage” (207). In many ways, losing her mother in this way is more problematic than dealing with the death of her father:

It is possible to say that from my father I learned the sovereignty of the mind and the imagination; from my mother that there is nothing so important as piss and shit and flesh that can rot or be kept from rot. . . . But there is something so indomitable about my mother’s insistence on the body’s finality, its determination to exist, that it seems to have a stoic and tragic grandeur that my father’s vision—vague and watery—did not possess. . . . My father’s vision, less truthful, is far more full of hope. (*Shadow Man* 241-42)

In *Circling My Mother*, written when her mother died after having been in a nursing home for 11 years, Gordon struggles with having exposed the truth of her mother’s existence, the truth of her mother’s body, in that last chapter of her previous memoir. She says that many readers found her use of the word “rot . . . shocking” but that “I told myself I used it because it was the truth” (218). Yet she is clearly troubled by it, asking: “What kind of daughter uses the word ‘rot’ in relation to her mother? What is the line between truth-telling and punishment?” (219).

She interrogates her own motives and confronts the truth of what it means to write about her mother’s body, which had been disfigured by polio:

For a little while, I convinced myself that I would speak about my mother’s body for the good of others, particularly for the good of other children of the afflicted. This new (false) conviction began when a friend of mind told me that her husband’s father was the child of a polio victim and that his sense of his body, like mine, was greatly

affected by this. She said that it would be an important thing to write about, that no one had written about it. (218)

But, as she reminds us, she had already written about it in *The Shadow Man*. In *Circling*, she says that she does not need to describe her mother's body now she is dead: "Is it only because it no longer torments me that I no longer feel the need to describe my mother's body?" (216). Yet she clearly does still feel the need, and indeed much of the latter part of the narrative is taken up by her self-conscious exploration as to why she subjected her mother to this exposure—indeed why she is still subjecting her to exposure—in death as in life. Although she acknowledges exposing uncomfortable facts about her father as well in her previous memoir, the theme of exposure itself does not seem to be quite so emphasised in *The Shadow Man*. In her second memoir we see that this is something of which Gordon is guiltily aware:

I seem unable to give up the impulse to say some things about my mother that seem to me true. And in order to do that, I must describe her body. Because only if I describe her body, as something in space, as something that moved through space (awkwardly, uneasily), as something that was seen in space (misshapen, unpleasing), can the nature, the effect of her affliction be understood. But for whom is such an understanding necessary? The answer, of course, is only myself. (217).

Describing her mother's body now she is dead feels like a betrayal as much as it feels like the truth, and Gordon explores the link between truth and betrayal in the story of Noah's son Ham, the betraying son. She tells the story of the good sons who refuse to look at their father's naked body as he lies in a drunken sleep, unlike Ham, who does see: "*I, Father, will expose your nakedness. I will look at what you have*

*been all along, what you have always really been. If I don't look, there will be no one to witness this truth. Isn't truth-telling a kind of love?"* (Gordon's italics 216). But she continues: "He knows that it is not. He knows that it is hatred" (216). The good sons "have done the work of not seeing. . . . As someone had to do the work of seeing" (217). She is very conscious of her memoir as "the work of seeing," as exposing. She says that if Ham had been an only child, he would have had to choose between seeing or not seeing. Seeing implies betrayal. As such, the writer always has the choice—to expose or not:

For the writer, this choice is also possible. Although we tell ourselves that it is impossible, a betrayal of our vocation. But silence is a perfectly honorable choice. More honorable because no one knows about it. The most dishonorable choice: to speak and then to confess one's own (superior) knowledge of the dishonor of speaking. I know that this is what I am doing now. (217)

As Gordon exposes her mother, she also exposes herself. Her own "false" motives. Her own "superior[ity]" in knowing what she is doing and yet doing it anyway. Gordon offers no excuse for what she is doing, apart from being "unable to give up the impulse to say some things about my mother that seem to me true." We never get the feeling that things could be any other way. It is as if the nature of truth lies in its exposure. To illustrate this further, she gives the example of the painter, Vuillard, who painted Jeanne Lanvin (the creator of her mother's favourite perfume, Arpège) with her daughter. In studying Vuillard, Gordon explains what he says about this particular painting: "he wanted to get *les véritiés, les sévéritiés* of green and grey. Verities, severities. Is a kind of harshness the only way, to a kind of truth?" (229). Gordon certainly suggests that it is. She says further that

At the end of her life, Vuillard's mother's degeneration was exposed by her son. Disturbing images. In the last photographs, she is toothless, bald. She is washing her feet, paring her toenails. Did he have the right to photograph her like that? Vuillard and I, the exposing children, Noah's bad sons: saying that art is an excuse for exposure. (231)

Gordon does not give us any adequate answers for why she feels she needs to tell the truth in this way, or "what kind of a daughter uses the word 'rot' in relation to her mother?" Obviously, the excuse that she's doing it for "art" is no real excuse, as her ironic tone indicates. Nor does she seem to come up with the answer to whether or not there is a "line between truth-telling and punishment" (219). Is she punishing her mother? She admits to having been "tortured" by her mother's body towards the end, that it had been the "site of . . . rage [and] despair" but is no longer:

Now my mother is a skeleton, or ash. All those sites of attention, rage, despair, gone now. Where did they go? . . . The details of the bodies of the dead turn abstract once they are no longer in the world. Abstract, therefore no longer a cause for rage. Sorrow, rather, or regret. The burning rash of rage turning to the dull tumor of sorrow. (219)

The problematic relationship between herself and her mother is perhaps further revealed by her interpretation of the Lanvin trademark on the Arpège bottle of perfume. Towards the end of *Circling*, Gordon researches her mother's favourite perfume, and is shocked to learn that the symbol on the perfume bottle is a symbol of mother and daughter:

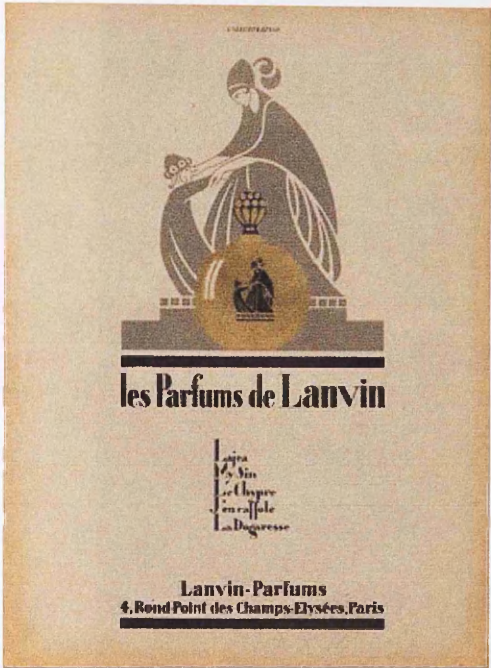
There it is—mother and daughter. The mother in an extravagant robe and turban, absolutely dwarfing the child, who kneels at her feet. Why

did I never notice this? Perhaps because the images aren't an obvious mother and daughter: the mother so huge, so exotic, and the daughter so insignificant, not on her mother's lap, not in her arms, but at her feet. Overwhelmed. (225)

Gordon doesn't follow up with research on the image. The Lanvin logo (Pic. 1) is based on a sketch by Paul Iribe (Pic. 2). It is true that the symbol itself is far less obviously "mother and daughter" than Iribe's original sketch, in which the mother is tall and graceful and looks down at her daughter attentively, holding her hand. The daughter, far from kneeling at the mother's feet, has one arm stretched upwards towards the mother and the other flung back in an attitude of almost uncontrollable joy. Her happiness is emphasised further by a small foot kicked back behind her. Of course, the symbol itself that Gordon was looking at could not have revealed so much detail, especially as it would be quite small on the bottle. Yet I don't believe the symbol on the bottle departs so starkly from Iribe's original image, nor can I see anything of the sinister that Gordon sees there. On closer inspection, the symbol is obviously mother and daughter, yet to me, the child does not appear to be kneeling. I can see the arms of the mother, outstretched, one caressing the daughter's cheek, and the daughter, reaching up towards her. The daughter's body is swaying outwards, almost an exact mirror-image of the mother's, and together, the two images almost complete a full circle. Sources describing the history of Arpège say further that the original sketch "shows the couturier and her daughter getting ready for a fancy-dress ball" ("Fashion Articles"), and there is evidence of a picture of a mother and daughter in the exact fancy dress shown in the logo, illustrating Gordon's sense of the exotic (Pic. 3). It is not clear from the online source whether this is Lanvin and her daughter;



**Picture 1: “Les Parfums de Lanvin.” Lanvin logo.**



Source: “Les Parfums de Lanvin.” n.d. *1000fragrances*. [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com). 2008. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.

**Picture 2: This sketch for Jeanne Lanvin by artist Paul Iribe is said to be the inspiration for the Lanvin trademark, still in use today.**



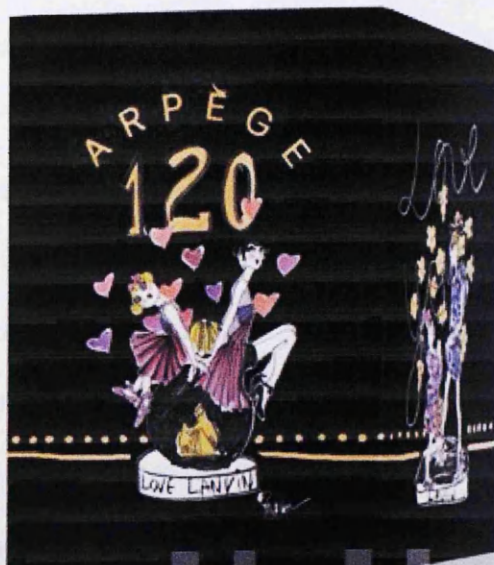
Source: Iribe, Paul. “Jeanne Lanvin.” n.d. *La Perle*. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.

**Picture 3: Mother and daughter, fancy dress.**



Source: “Jeanne Lanvin.” n.d. *Fashion Bank*. Web. Jun. 6 2010.

**Picture 4: “Arpège 120” packaging for Lanvin’s 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009.**



Source: “Arpège 120.” 2009. *Fashion Albedo*. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.

some online sources date Iribe's sketch at 1907, though I have been unable to find a definitive date for the sketch or the photograph. The perfume *Arpège* was created as a gift for her daughter's thirtieth birthday in 1927, so the picture could be of a young Marguarite, but it is difficult to find translated academic sources to confirm this and would require further research. The mother-daughter bond seems to be one reinforced in many of Lanvin's designs and was something she was famous for throughout her life (though her later estranged relationship with Marguarite is documented in Jérôme Picon's biography of her, as explained by Gordon). Lanvin's recent celebration of its 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009 shows a quite deliberate, continuing celebration of this mother-daughter bond (Pic. 4).

What is the significance of these different interpretations? Only that it reveals the extent to which Gordon's mother might have dominated and "overwhelmed" her (at least during her eleven-year illness), so that her immediate unconscious interpretation of the mother and daughter on the perfume bottle might actually reflect her feelings towards the real mother and daughter relationship. But even for all this, for all that she may have felt "so insignificant" and "overwhelmed," there is the sense that the truth she tells about her mother is not so much a deliberate punishment as a revelation of the nature of truth itself. Severe. Harsh. Punishing. The truth is that

At the end of her life, my mother's scent was a combination of a powder—called Shower to Shower—and the urine that she tried to cover up with the powder she sprinkled between her legs. From the elegant handkerchiefs and purse to the stained drawers. This was the trajectory of my mother's life, if you trace the trajectory of scent. The trajectory that moves from beguilement to recoil, from desire to horror.

(234)

In the end the truth that Gordon tells in the last section of *Circling* is “the inexorability of physical destruction” (222). But this is not the only truth. Because the truth about her mother is also the lost mother’s “beautiful hands and arms, dappled with freckles like the skin of a young apple; her beautiful hair; her large gray-green eyes and high cheekbones . . . her voice, charming, lively, robust, jocular, persuasive, sure” (214). Perhaps in the experience of loss, writers no more choose the truths they tell than the memories they write about:

For a painter, the requirements of truth are internal; for a writer, if she is claiming to speak of someone who really lived, some kinds of beautification are in fact a lie. There are lies and lies. The painter’s and the writer’s lies are of a different order. “Exaggerate what is essential,” van Gogh said. The other side of this: the essential cannot be left out. So, to be truthful, the writer places, replaces, illuminates some things, shadows others. (241)

Gordon comes close to answering why she is writing about her mother: “I am writing about you to witness to the mystery of an impossible love. I am sorry for the exposure that this entails” (239). It is as though the exposure is an unfortunate side-effect of writing the truth, which she cannot do anything about. Instead, there seems an inevitability to truth and to the writing process itself that is more complex: “I write about her because I am a writer and it’s the only way that I can mourn her. Perhaps, for a writer, there is no such thing as simple mourning. What we have we use” (239).

## COMPLEX RECOVERY

Throughout *The Shadow Man*, Gordon tries to repair the gaps in her knowledge with finding out the truth about her father. In the beginning of the

narrative, Gordon includes a separate section called “To the Reader” in which she speaks as though the project of loss has been completed, almost as though the “work of mourning” is complete: “I am always my father’s daughter. Having lost him, once, twice, I will have him forever. He is always with me, always mine” (xxiv). However, in the same section, she still admits that “occasionally he still overwhelms me. He’s like a wave that breaks over me, involves me, overturns me, exhilarates me, carries me, then disappears, leaving only a trace of itself in the sand, the print of a tongue, a lip” (xxiv). The “now” of the narrative takes us through her process of loss.

Throughout the memoir, during the different stages of investigation into the truth of her father’s life, she writes in the present tense and so the effect for the reader is that the grief process is continual. Furthermore, her struggle with loss is constantly highlighted throughout:

But he does not allow me, the reading daughter, the writing daughter, a place of rest. I hear him speak in tones of ecstasy and madness, of foolishness, vulgarity, love, hatred, humility, devotion, destruction, desperation, joy. The waters of his contradictions rise around my head and I am drowning in the seas that surround me. The sea of the impossible love of a child for her father, the sea of oblivion, the sea of a daughter’s shame. (105)

Thus, the beginning of the memoir speaks of a recovery that belies the complex process of loss that happens during the narrative.

At the end of the narrative, she attempts to lay her father to rest—literally—by disinterring his body from the grave of her mother’s family, “who at best tolerated or patronized him, at worst despised him” (245), and give him finally (quoting Shakespeare) “[a] local habitation and a name”(260). At the re-burial she says,



“Everyone leaves me. They leave me with my father. I touch the box. And this makes me very happy. Then I weep because I understand fully for the first time how much of my life I’ve lived without him” (271). She explains that “I feel happy and at peace” (273). Her recovery would seem to be complete because “There was something to touch, to be lowered, to put flowers on, and dirt, and a few stones. A thing to which it was possible to bid a farewell. This has made a great difference” (274). As a child, Gordon remembers the time immediately after her father’s funeral, after which she can never be sure of her memories: “When my uncle carried me out of the funeral home, the film snapped. The broken tape flapped forever in the air.” She asks, “Can I repair the break? Restart the film?” (250).

We can ask whether this ending at the graveyard has been enough, finally, to “repair the break, restart the film.” But it’s not clear that it has. Ellerby reads a healing paradigm into this ending which I feel smoothes over the complexity of the narrative: “Thus she concludes her memoir with equanimity and resolution, having reached a place where all of us who relinquish our secrets and reveal our pasts hope to arrive—a quiet center of peaceful acceptance” (207). Yet we have seen that the complex process of getting at the truth of her father has largely failed, and so in some ways the narrative as a whole belies the overly-compensatory sentiments at the beginning and towards the end. She tries to replace the loss of her father with knowledge of the truth of his life, but we’ve seen that this truth often threatens to break more than it repairs.

Recovery from her mother’s death in *Circling* is more complex still. At the end of the narrative, she calls her mother, “*Beautiful mother. Beautiful girl*” (236), yet laments not being able to speak to her in that way when she was alive. Her tone at the end of the novel is almost defeatist:

If I had been able to speak like this to my mother, words rooted in the body but beyond the degraded and the degrading flesh, would it have changed anything? Prevented anything? Rage, humiliation, stupor, degradation or despair? It doesn't matter; I was never able to speak to her like that. . . . I couldn't prevent her fate, or ours. . . . There was nothing I could do about it. My love prevented nothing. Not one thing. (236-237)

It seems that for a time Gordon is able to compensate for the loss of her mother by bringing back the young, healthy, beautiful mother through smelling her perfume (this is something taken up further in Chapter 3 when we see how she must move beyond writing to heal, beyond language, beyond words, beyond the body, into the realm of the senses). However, even this celebration of her young mother is short lived and the ending of the narrative remains unresolved:

She is among the dead. . . . She has become my words.

Or dust.

Both.

How is it possible to comprehend this?

My mother has become incomprehensible.

I can no longer recognize her.

I want to recognize my mother. Re-cognize. To know again.

. . .

I am trying to see my mother. I must begin now to learn how to look.

(254)

She ends with a quote from Bonnard at the end of his life: "I am only now beginning to understand. I should start all over" (254).

Within the context of an ambiguous space between fact and fiction, these writers perform complex recovered selves as they negotiate between the two extremes. Though there is a fluidness to the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, it is important, nevertheless, to acknowledge that we are critiquing texts ostensibly dealing with truth, and as such, tied to a human life outside of the story. As T. R. Johnson says,

To call this writing “creative” in the traditional sense of the word is to risk undermining or trivializing its extraordinary “real-life,” nonfiction relevance, the truth it seeks to generate. If we intend to take the notion of healing seriously, we must problematize the easy line between “creative” writing and writing that purports to be “factual”; we must understand both more complexly. (86)

However, there is also a danger in policing the truth, or in the assumption that truth is based on dry, cold, historical facts alone. Such strict adherence to truth above all risks stifling the careful processes involved in conjuring that truth—in truth as trout-tickling—the careful exploration and tentative grasping that leads to the moment when “you know you touch some quite different way of being in the world” (Clendinnen 75). In this chapter, I’ve shown how these writers problematise the pervasive belief that writing one’s truth is invariably a healing process by honouring the complexity behind the telling. In understanding the liminal space between fact and fiction, we can understand how these texts ultimately transgress boundaries in order to get at an “emotional truth” that nevertheless adheres to the integrity of the writer’s experience.

These writers also show how “in the act of remembering, we expand beyond ourselves” (Murdock 28). But again, remembering itself is a complex process



because memory can come in “jagged splinters” (Mantel “Fiction and Biography”); once incited, it can “roar like angry bees” (Clendinnen 55) and reveal difficult truths. Despite some compensatory tropes that surface throughout the texts, writers remain for the most part anxious about the process of truth telling and do little to further the assumption that this is always necessarily a healing process. In these narratives of loss, the dead “ensure that we will be, in relation to their lives, incapable of distinguishing fact from invention. They guarantee the falsity, the partiality, of our witness” (Gordon, *The Shadow Man* 26).

### CHAPTER 3: “WRITING THE SELF INTO BEING”: NARRATIVE IDENTITY IN MEMOIRS OF LOSS

Is this dark dot halfway up my arm  
the full stop

at the end of a death sentence  
or is it the only sign of something  
never written down,  
something too painful even to say?  
--Philip Hodgins (“Haematopoietics”)

How is it possible to “write [the] self into being” (Mantel 222), and how do writers construct narrative identities? This chapter looks at the construction of self in Hilary Mantel and Inga Clendinnen’s illness narratives, *Giving up the Ghost* and *Tiger’s Eye*, as well as Mary Gordon’s parent-bereavement narrative, *The Shadow Man*. Looking at the construction of self in narratives of illness and bereavement both proves and problematises Paul John Eakin’s view that the autobiographical self is whole, stable and continuous, as argued in his book, *Living Autobiographically*. On the one hand, the loss of a stable self through these disorienting experiences acts as a catalyst for the search for a unified, whole self. And to some extent, these writers do achieve a stronger, more concrete sense of self through the agency that autobiographical writing allows. However, the same experiences can be so destabilising that writers’ sense of a core being is left damaged in many ways and identity as a shifting, flexible concept becomes necessary to understanding the complex nature of recovery.

This kind of recovery calls for theories of subjectivity that allow for the performance of a shifting, fluid self even as it strives for wholeness and continuity. Mantel, Clendinnen and Gordon to a certain extent create a whole, stable sense of self

through writing: whether using narrative techniques of fiction, metaphor, or imagery. As they “write [themselves] into being” (Mantel 222), they attest to the fact that writing can heal a fragmented or destabilised self. However, at the same time, they problematise the narrative self and complicate the recovery process by challenging the assumption that writing the self is always necessarily a healing enterprise.

The chapter explores in detail the link between narrative and identity and examines Eakin’s claim that we are quite literally our stories: that “[w]hen it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self” (*Living Autobiographically* 2). He cites neurologist Oliver Sacks, who makes so “bold” a claim that “each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’ and that this narrative *is* us, our identities” (Sacks qtd. in Eakin, *LA* 1). He draws heavily on Antonio Damasio’s work on narrative and the self for his argument: “Nor is the story really told by *you* as a self because the core you is only born as the story is told, *within the story itself* (191)” (qtd. in Eakin, *LA* 74). Interestingly, this collapses traditional autobiography theory that sees a split between subject and predicate:

We tend to think of autobiography as a narrative container or envelope of some kind in which we express our sense of identity, as though identity and narrative were somehow separable, whereas Damasio’s account of self posits that our sense of identity is itself generated *as* and *in* a narrative dimension of consciousness. (Eakin’s italics, *LA* 76)

Thus, writers of autobiography are not merely writing about themselves, but are actually constructing their own self—“The writing completes and formulates an imaginative process that is *intrinsic to the experience it re-creates*” (my italics, Hawkins, “Pathography and Enabling Myths” 241). As Eakin concludes, “*self adheres in a narrative of some kind*” (Eakin’s italics, *LA* 74).

In a review of Eakin's book, David McCooley points out that "[i]t should be said that Eakin's interest in the narrative basis of identity is neither novel nor especially original" and cites both David Carr's *Time, Narrative, and History* as well as his own book, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*, "which similarly proposed that narrative was not merely a medium for the description of identity, but constitutive of identity itself" (344-45).<sup>1</sup> While Eakin is not the only one to have argued this—Anne Hunsaker Hawkins recognises that in illness narratives "[t]here is not the usual sequential division between the life and writing about the life" (241)—it doesn't diminish what I think is the most important outgrowth of this theory—the agency that necessarily comes along with it, or "autobiography as performance, as action" (Eakin, *LA* 85). If narrative is "constitutive of identity itself," then this has particular implications for "[t]he narrative activity . . . [as] an identity activity" (Eakin, *LA* 78) where "'self' is not only reported but performed" (Eakin, *LA* 84). Interestingly, Eakin calls this process "doing self, doing consciousness" within autobiography (*LA* 85). I believe this is similar to what Hilary Mantel describes as "writ[ing] myself into being" (222), and has particular relevance for the study of self within women's memoir because it leads to "more self, more agency . . . not less" (Eakin, *LA* 85).

## WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE SELF

Traditional male literary criticism of autobiography has focused on the self, which, before its dismantling by poststructuralist theory, consisted of the unified, Romantic version of the self (L. Anderson, *Autobiography* 55). However, because

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of narrative construction of self see *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self* (edited by Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden) and *Constructing the Self* (Valerie Gray Hardcastle).

women historically have not been considered autonomous subjects, and because autobiography necessarily involves a claiming of subjectivity, women's relationship to the genre has been a troubled one.<sup>2</sup> Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich's collection of essays in *Women and Autobiography* emphasise how it has been "particularly challenging for women to imagine themselves as the authors of their own life stories" (1); many women's autobiographies up until the 1980s "fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self-display" (Spacks qtd. in Heilbrun 18); and they suggest that women's autobiographies emphasise relationship and themselves as part of a larger social fabric (xiv). Though Brownley and Kimmich warn against making sweeping generalisations that will negate individual experience (1), essays in the collection such as Sheri Benstock's "The Female Self Engendered," argue there exists a decentred or absent self in women's autobiographies, opposed to the Hegelian notion of "an effort to recapture the self" (7).

Of course, poststructuralism collapsed the idea of the self as a stable entity, and male notions of a unified selfhood within autobiography could no longer hold sway. In direct opposition to Eakin's notion of self, for "postmodernists, the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time" (Sim qtd. in Malpas 57). Yet as male criticism began focusing on the self as fragmented and unknowable (Barthes, Derrida), feminist critics became uncomfortable with a leap which once again left female experience behind. The fragmenting effects of postmodernism and poststructuralism, which collapsed the

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<sup>2</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, this is well documented by critics like Martine Watson Brownley, Allison Kimmich, Estelle Jelinek, Carolyn Heilbrun, Sheri Benstock, and Kristi Siegel.

idea of the self as a stable entity and destroyed male notions of a unified selfhood within autobiography, failed to speak to women's experience of subjectivity: "As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world" (Waugh qtd. in Cosslett et al. 6). Or, as Nicole Ward Jouve says simply and powerfully: "You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it" (qtd. in L. Anderson, *Autobiography* 88). Nancy Miller attests to further damaging effects of postmodernism to female subjectivity: "[t]he postmodern decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not . . . necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them" (qtd. in L. Anderson, *Autobiography* 88). In her book, *Signifying Pain*, Judith Harris, a poet and teacher of writing, echoes Miller's frustration and suggests that "the author" in fact, is very much alive:

Postmodern challenges to meaning, self-presence, identity, and congruity have cast a sceptical shadow over the very idea of analysis, whether it is psychodynamic or literary, at its core. . . . Are we somehow so narcissistically invested in the text that we are unable to read through our own projections and idealisations that tend to conceal *the author's meaning or intention?* (italics mine, xiii)

Particularly for studies of the self in autobiography, a growing discontent for postmodernism is becoming more and more apparent. Jill Ker Conway says, "I'm impatient with the postmodern effort to obfuscate the validity of narrative" ("Points of Departure" 56). Ellen Friedman asks: "What kinds of autobiography are possible when the concept of a stable, unified identity is viewed as a fiction?" (717). She seems to be suggesting that it might be impossible to understand the self in

autobiography at all when viewed from within a cloud of postmodern doubt. In their book, *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, Neil Brooks and Josh Toth suggest that Linda Hutcheon “seemingly placed the final nail in postmodernism’s coffin” (1) in the epilogue to the 2002 edition of her book, *Politics and Postmodernism*, by declaring, “it’s over” (1); certainly challenges to the postmodern subject are apparent in academia in a recent call for papers, asserting that “Where it was once radical for literary studies to affirm the dissolution of subjectivity, the stability of the subject is now being upheld” (conference at Goldsmith’s, “Mindful of Otherness, Literature and Ethics” 13 June 2009).

The autobiographical act—writing the self—challenges postmodern theories of fragmented subjectivity by offering the possibility of the creation of a unified self. It therefore has enormous implications for female autonomy and agency. As L. Anderson argues, “There remains, therefore, if our emphasis shifts to the future, a political imperative for women to constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects” (*Autobiography* 90). This is a point further explored in Cosslett et al.’s *Feminism and Autobiography*: “[w]omen writers are beginning . . . to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective identity” (Waugh qtd. in Cosslett et al. 6).

## THE STABLE SELF OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACT

This sounds very much like Eakin’s stable, continuous, whole identity which he argues forms the basis of the autobiographical act. Eakin’s recent research into identity and autobiography using Damasio’s understanding of narrative as a biological process, posits the autobiographical act as a quest for a unified, stable self. Damasio

focuses on homeostasis, the body's regulatory system responsible for keeping everything in balance, and Eakin uses this as an analogy for the act of autobiographical writing itself: "I would extend this view of the human organism's homeostatic regulatory activity to include our endless fashioning of identity narratives" ("Living Autobiographically" 4).<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this "neurobiological story" translates into the creation of a whole, stable self: "As self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders [in Damasio's words] 'the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same'" ("LA" 4).

This desire or need for a whole, stable self at first sounds much like the traditional male quest for autonomy in autobiography when Eakin describes "our need for a stable sense of continuous identity stretching over time" (*LA* 77). He says that "When we talk about ourselves, and even more when we fashion an I-character in an autobiography, we give a degree of permanence and narrative solidity—or 'body' we might say—to otherwise evanescent states of identity feeling" (*LA* 77). The language Eakin uses to describe this "need" for a particular type of identity is telling: it is "stable", "continuous", "permanen[t]", "solid," within a "narrative anchor" (*LA* 8). Furthermore, it is not so much a quest as a natural, biological, "largely unconscious" (*LA* 22)—he suggests, in comparing it to homeostasis—need to regulate our sense of self in autobiography. It's a process that seeks continuity—even in its "ever so gentl[e] . . . change . . . across time"—a "regulatory activity" that creates an identity made up of "a bounded, single individual that . . . stay[s] the same" ("LA" 4). On the surface, Eakin's original and exciting use of neurological processes to understand

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<sup>3</sup> The article, "Living Autobiographically" first appeared in *Biography* three years before Eakin's book by the same name was published, and is reprinted there as the last chapter.



identity seems vaguely oppressive, serving only to shackle us to a view of identity as permanent and fixed, perhaps not unlike an ideal self or a “private Platonic essence” (Johnson 87) which could be misinterpreted as isolationist and individualistic.

However, there are several reasons that suggest this isn’t the case (beyond the fact that he discusses in depth the social and cultural forces that shape identity). Rather, I think that Eakin also posits an idea of self that, while desiring stability, is nevertheless composed of multiple identities. This is because Eakin talks of the autobiographical process as an “endless fashioning of identity narratives” (“LA” 4), and in this way suggests that we have many identities—an idea he repeats throughout, though does not elaborate on: he refers to “remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states” (*LA* 64), and “autobiography’s tracking of identity states across time” which “maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states” (“LA” 4). If “self adheres in . . . narrative” (*LA* 74), then we have an “unending succession” of narrative identities that make up that self.

Secondly, Eakin accounts for this apparent contradiction in part by using “identity” and “self” as different terms, and not interchangeably as is often the case: “Whenever I variously think of myself, for example, as a literary critic, as a father, a Midwesterner, a bourgeois suburbanite, and so forth, I am thinking of myself in terms of identity. *Self*, then, is the larger, more comprehensive term for the totality of our subjective experience” (xiv). Thus, the autobiographical act is the attempt to formulate a “whole”, “stable” self from our “unending succession of identity states.”

This theory of subjectivity is interesting because it reconciles the dichotomy inherent in these different concepts of self as either whole or fragmented. It is also important for the construction of female subjectivity because it necessarily grants agency—in “the political imperative for women to constitute themselves as

subjects”—while at the same time allowing for “multiple subjectivities” (L. Anderson 90) which has been so essential to theories of female selfhood. Instead, the two need not be mutually exclusive: we have many identities, and yet the self of the autobiographical act as Eakin refers to it is the whole self, Neisser’s extended self: “the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing continuously across time” (LA 3). It is a self that claims the same key features as Damasio’s “core consciousness”: “Individual first-person perspective, ownership, agency—these primary attributes of core consciousness are also key features of the literary form of self, the ‘I’ of autobiographical discourse” (Eakin, LA 71).

Just as the autobiographical act engenders a whole, stable, self, Harris argues that personal writing can “be a means of creating a stable identity and regaining ego strengths” (xv). Psychoanalysis gives us the perfect arena in which to meld these seemingly contradictory views of self. Harris melds apparent contradictions in these two opposing notions of self:

With its emphasis on the unconscious and on what one does not yet know about one’s self until it is uttered or written down, psychoanalysis offers a view of the writing subject in process. Rather than seeing the writer as someone who is chameleonlike and changing with each protean discourse he adopts, the more holistic approach of psychoanalysis enables us to view the individual as a *core being* whose identity is *fluid, mercurial, but self-constant*. (italics mine, xiv)

This view of subjectivity is somewhat akin to Virginia Woolf’s in *Moments of Being*, a view of the self which “emphasizes simultaneously the *change and continuity* of the individual identity” (italics mine, Shulkind 14) and echoes Eakin’s “endless fashioning of identity narratives” in its “ceaseless transformation of personality”

(Shulkind 12). It too somehow collapses dichotomies: “That self was an elusive will o’ the wisp, always just ahead on the horizon, *flickering and insubstantial*, yet *enduring*” (Shulkind 12, italics mine). The autobiographical act is one that “help[s] us to *anchor* our *shifting identities* in time” (italics mine, Eakin, *LA* xi).

As Eakin’s analogy to homeostasis affirms, this search for a whole self is somehow innate in us. However, one of the shortcomings of *Living Autobiographically* is that Eakin does not provide many practical examples for this theory: “It is perhaps telling that Eakin’s ‘practical’ criticism on the biological sources of autobiography comprises the shortest chapter in *Living Autobiographically*” (McCooley 348). This chapter tests Eakin’s theory of the stability of the self against my chosen writers and in light of these theories of self, examines the interplay between multiple identities and whole selves. I’ll consider further to what extent a “whole” self is indicative of a “healed” self and show how writers complicate traditional notions of recovery.

In his review of Eakin’s work, McCooey writes that the analogy to homeostasis, “which aims to create a sense of stable identity” (347), although exciting, is also problematic:

If identity is indeed “part of” homeostasis, and therefore biological, then presumably it would make sense to consider those events and literary forms that mark and narrate a *loss* of stability. If identity is homeostatic, then bodily and psychological crises, conversions, and traumas would be the main challenges that a homeostatic model of identity would face. (McCooley’s italics, 347)

It is certainly true that these kinds of crises threaten to destabilize self, and often do fragment or negate sense of self. Yet paradoxically, in narratives of loss, where the

self experiences a loss of stability, the impulse towards creating a stable self is actually more immediately apparent. The very nature of loss, which McCooey argues “challenges” Eakin’s theory, actually goes a long way to confirming it. If the search for a whole self is neurologically “hard-wired” in us as Eakin has argued, then nowhere is this more manifest than in illness and bereavement narratives. The relationship is similar to Eakin’s discussion of Galen Strawson’s theory of Episodics—who “believe that their identity states are discontinuous . . . (they are not now who they were)” (*LA* 11-12) and Diachronics—who “believe that their identity states are continuous (they *are* in some sense who they were)” (*LA* 12); Eakin suggests that “Episodics may have a special motive for an interest in narrative precisely because they are Episodics” (*LA* 13). The same is true for writers of narratives of loss, whose interest in performing a whole self may grow out of the extremely disorienting experience of loss. It’s a fair point McCooey raises, that “[u]nfortunately, Eakin shows no sustained interest in the large literature (both ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’) on crisis and conversion” (347), but Eakin does begin his book with two examples of the “jolting” that happens “[w]hen this identity story practice is disrupted” (*LA* 4). Other critics have discussed the connection between illness and disability and the search for a whole, stable self, an argument that is related to Eakin’s theory and which both complements and problematises it.

Many critics have argued that experiences of illness, where the self is under threat, act as catalyst for the search for stable identities. Indeed, G. Thomas Couser has argued that it is “only by reference to [an] ongoing interior autobiography” that many writers of illness and disability narratives can assure themselves of a sense of self” (84). In her article, “Pathography and Enabling Myths: The Process of Healing,” Hawkins gives a possible reason for this:

In narratives describing illness and possible death, the reader is repeatedly confronted with the pragmatic reality and *experiential unity* of the autobiographical self. The self of pathographical writing is the self-in-crisis: When confronted with serious and life-threatening illness, that fictive “ghost” of the self is contracted into a defensive ontological reality. (italics mine, 227)

For Hawkins, these kinds of crises force what may be an insubstantial or fragmented self into a concrete, unified one. In this sense, it echoes and reinforces theories of subjectivity put forward by Eakin and Harris, where two apparently contradictory sense of selves are united. In her article, “What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?” Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan recognises the tension to which Harris refers, and suggests that it is more apparent within illness narratives:

“Autobiographical writing about illness may be an attempt to control the uncontrollable, and hence it can become a battleground between two competing principles” (244). She says further that “The tension between a thematization of disintegration and a writing that preserves qualities of narrative order may be a dramatization of the struggle between an acceptance of fragmentation and the need to overcome it by creating a coherent narrative” (244). A similar process emerges in bereavement narratives, where the search for identity is motivated by the experience of a fragmented self in loss. This “battleground” exists within narratives of loss in general, because this type of personal writing becomes “a means of creating a stable identity and regaining ego strengths lost in crisis or infirmity” (Harris xv). However, in order to understand how writers create a stable identity, and the ways in which the self is made an “experiential unity,” we need to consider how illness and bereavement narratives contribute to a loss of stability in the self.

## THE SELF DESTABILISED

In our culture, illness itself is destabilising for a number of reasons. One is that it is regarded as a stigma, as discussed at length by critics, theorists and practitioners of illness narratives.<sup>4</sup> This idea is culturally instilled in us at a young age, as evident in Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost* and Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*. Both Mantel and Clendinnen initially refuse their symptoms, attempting to deny that anything is wrong because they had both been brought up not to complain. In Mantel's household, "Illness was bunk" (142), and Clendinnen tells us that her mother "was stoical about her own ailments, ironic about mine, so I still dread making a fuss about nothing. When I was a child, even vomiting didn't impress her" (6-7). As a child, Mantel earned the nickname of "Miss Neverwell" with her stepfather: "now Mr. Neverill had become stepfather to Miss Neverwell" (142). One morning, in her early teens, when she comes down the stairs, "my uniform skewed, my flesh grey and my teeth chattering" his response is typically vicious: "feel *ill* do you? Easy for *you* to say! I *also* feel ill on a Monday morning! But I have to bloody *work*, don't I?" (142). Mantel's response is not only characteristically humorous and without self pity, it also demonstrates the prevalent view in a culture where illness isn't acceptable: "It was already a weakness in my case that I was hanging about, that I was sitting down and no doubt wanting some toast; for Jack was perfect and so was his morning nausea, a spiritual quality I should try to emulate" (142). Only when numerous "small" symptoms add up to "one big thing" does Clendinnen "admit[. . .] it, like a guilty secret: I was not well" (6). Our culture is one in which illness is something that

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Susan Sontag, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, G. Thomas Couser, Nancy Mairs, Jackie Stacey.

makes one feel guilty—a secret to be kept so as not to burden others (a point elaborated on further in the discussion of detrimental effects of metaphor below).

One reason for why illness is stigmatised stems from Hawkins's observation that in our culture more than in previous ones, illness is separated from daily life: "in earlier times, illness seems to have been considered an integral and inseparable part of living (and dying). . . . It is only in the twentieth century that serious illness has become a phenomenon that can be isolated from an individual's life" ("Pathography" 223). It is the fault of modern scientific medicine and how "it tends to focus on the disease process and on ways in which this process can be interrupted and reversed," rather than on the individual, who is "only peripherally, or secondarily" considered ("Pathography" Hawkins 223). Clendinnen gives a chilling description of how hospitals are set up to dismantle one's sense of self. The process begins with "that initial submission" of admitting oneself into a hospital, which "once taken cannot be rescinded" (22). Then:

Great doors eye you glassily, pause to reflect, decide, gape, you step inside—and you are swallowed up as sure as any Jonah. . . . Social trappings are surrendered along with clothes and other valuables at the door of the ward. Abruptly naked, you are thrust into a vestigial smock. . . . When you move, your buttocks show. It is at once lewd and sexless, an outfit designed for depraved choirboys. When you climb into the bed . . . you feel thick rucked stuff under you, and chill with forgotten shame: rubber sheeting. . . . Then you are labelled. It is unnerving to be tagged around the wrist, more unnerving to be tagged around the ankle as well, as if you might come unstuck and they will have to match up the parts. (22-23)

The result is that illness carries with it feelings of isolation, shame and humiliation—indeed, of the self fragmented, interrupted from the goings-on of everyday life. Clendinnen feels that “Illness . . . isolated me socially. Now I lived behind the invisible cordon of the chronically unwell” (15). Both Mantel and Clendinnen identify themselves in opposition to those who are healthy. Their memoirs “display a kind of postcolonial impulse—the impulse to define oneself in resistance to the dehumanizing categories of the medical and health-service institutions” (Couser, *Signifying* 46). Clendinnen describes what it is like to be on the waiting list for a liver transplant. She says the ill person “hang[s] between the world in which well people plan, arrange to meet, have expectations of themselves and of others, and their own secret world of perfected solipsism” (171). In describing the long, painful years before her diagnosis, Mantel tells us that “[e]ach day I was taking, though I didn’t know it, a small step towards the unlit terrain of sickness, a featureless landscape of humiliation and loss” (167). In the discussion panel, “Autobiography and Fiction,” Mantel adds that “the process is humiliating” and calls it “a negotiation with shame.” In this way, Mantel and Clendinnen “recognise[] and write against the social and cultural isolation of disabled [or in their case—chronically ill] people” (Couser, *Signifying* 178).

Although the medical profession may be responsible for sidelining the individual in the illness process, Mantel’s story of medical neglect is particularly horrifying, especially given that much of her misdiagnosis was due to gender-specific prejudices of the time. At twenty, Mantel is married and living in a slum house in Sheffield. She is in pain, but does not know at this point what it is. Although she is vomiting, the doctor puts it down to her taking too many aspirin. When she goes back, she is prescribed anti-depressants, which have the opposite effect of what they



are supposed to: her “spirits had sunk”, she feels “a dull apathy” (172). When she begins vomiting more frequently, her GP “did what you do when someone says she is vomiting: send her to a psychiatrist” (173). Because no one can find a physical source for her ailments, they think it must be her mind. At “Dr. G’s,” she receives her first serious misdiagnosis: “stress, caused by overambition. This was a female complaint, one which people believed in, in those years, just as the Greeks believed that women were made ill by their wombs cutting loose and wandering about their bodies” (174). Again, Mantel’s wry humour almost undercuts the insidiousness of this because this incident actually serves to start her on a path of complete debilitation. Dr. G. suggests that Mantel become less ambitious, an under-achiever. He paints for her an image of a future self that Mantel finds unbearable: “I could see her: a clerk very conscientious and quiet and dull, who wore snuff-coloured garb and filed herself in a cabinet every night and whose narrow heart fluttered when anyone mentioned a flying freehold or an ancient right of way” (175-176). Her violent weeping during her subsequent visit causes Dr. G. to prescribe stronger drugs and the first trip to the university clinic. She is diagnosed with a mental illness, although she is sure it is a physical one. Her experience has the effect of reinforcing the fact that going to the doctor in the first place was a “big mistake” (167); it reinforces the stigmatisation of illness and what she had been told throughout her childhood—don’t make a fuss. “I think, in retrospect, that it would have been better if I had denied that I had pains in my legs, if I had taken it all back, or brightly said that I was well now. But because I didn’t, the whole business began to spiral out of control” (176).

In Mantel’s narrative, illness does more than fragment and destabilise self. It goes beyond this by robbing her of her sense of self and entirely negating self as well as agency. She develops feelings of helplessness: “I was an invalid now, and I wasn’t

entitled to a policy, not a policy of my own" (176-177). In 1979, at 27 yrs old, Mantel describes her complete lack of agency: "I was in St. George's Hospital in London having my fertility confiscated and my insides rearranged" (185). After her operation, during which they remove her womb and "a few lengths of bowel" (209), she finds she has lost the decision to choose; she has lost her autonomy: "Neglect—my own, and that of the medical profession—had taken away my choices. Now my body was not my own. It was a thing done to, a thing operated on. I was twenty-seven and an old woman, all at once" (211). Later in the narrative, when a doctor in Saudi Arabia, who had worked on the clinical trials, admits that hormone treatment was "effective: but but but" (217), Mantel's response movingly encapsulates her feelings of lack of self and indeed, self-worth at the hands of the medical industry: "I knew the buts. I was a walking but. A butt of ridicule, in my own eyes; a sad sack enclosing a disease process, no longer an object of respect, or self-respect" (218). Unable to perform to society's expectations, Mantel feels even further robbed of self because of the gender implications associated with her illness:

It used to be fashionable to call endometriosis "the career woman's disease": the implication being, there now, you callous bitch, see what you get if you put off breeding and put your own ambitions first. I was no good for breeding, so what was I good for? Who was I at all? . . . I was old while I was young, I was an ape, I was a blot on the page, I was nothing, zilch. (211-212)

Clendinnen echoes this sense of absolute negation of self. After her transplant, she says "I am one of those shreds of silk, streaming, tearing in the wind" (185) and that she is "held together by shadow knitting" (186). Two months after her transplant operation she says:

They will be disappointed, now that I know what I am made of. Not sugar, not spice, not snips, not snails. Not pretty tales, either. Just a ragbag of metaphors, a hank of memories and a habit of interrogation, held together by drugs. And if you say “Aha! what then is this observing and commenting ‘I’?”, I answer that it is a shred, a nothing: a sliver of shattered silk whirling in the wind, without anchor or destiny, surviving only because the wind happened to drop. (188)

Both Mantel and Clendinnen find their sense of self violated by illness—destabilised through fragmentation, or completely negated altogether. Mantel reminds us that “what is certainly true is that we can be made foreign to ourselves, suddenly, by illness, accident, misadventure, or hormonal caprice” (54). The result is the same—the self destabilised.

The self can also be destabilised through loss of health because of disruption due to changes in the body and sense of time. As we shall see in more detail in the following chapter on embodied experience of loss, Eakin, drawing from Damasio, argues for a theory of embodied identity where “Self . . . is first and last *of* and *about* the body; to speak of the *embodied* self would be redundant, for there is no other” (*LA* 70). Thus, if we understand self to be tied in this way to embodied subjectivity, then sense of self for writers of illness narratives becomes necessarily interrupted because of the changes illness wreaks on the body. Rimmon-Kenan describes how writers often experience a discontinuous sense of self because their bodies are changing. She gives as an example Barbara Rosenblum, an American sociologist who died of breast cancer at age 44, who feels as though her changing body creates a changing sense of self: “When you have cancer, you have a new body each day, a body that may or may not have a relationship to the body you had the day before” (Rosenblum qtd. in

Rimmon-Kenan 242). Mantel describes the effects of hormone treatment on her body: “A few weeks on, I had developed a steroid moon-face. My hair had come out in handfuls. I was deaf, my eyesight was blurred by constant headaches, and my legs were swollen like bolsters” (172). Mantel’s body quickly becomes beyond her control. She quite rapidly reaches a size 20 and from her description the link between body and identity is clear:

When you get fat, you get a new personality. . . . I was assumed to be placid. . . . I had acquired serenity. A whole range of maternal virtues were ascribed to me. I was (and am) unsure about how I am related to my old self, or to myself from year to year. The hormonal profile of an individual determines much of the manifest personality. If you skew the endocrine system, you lose the pathways to self. (221)

Rosenblum describes it thus: “I’m hostage to the capriciousness of my body, a body that sabotages my sense of a *continuous* and taken-for-granted reality” (my italics, qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 242). As Hawkins says, “Serious illness threatens not just the existence of the body but also the integrity of the self” (241).

Rimmon-Kenan also explains how “the bodily, visceral level entertains intimate relations with the sufferer’s sense of time and hence with the shaping of narrative” (245). Rosenblum “feels the present to be severed from the past by the huge alteration of the body” (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 250), and British novelist Christine Brooke-Rose, in *Life, End Of*, experiences her past and present as two separate lives: “As if this second life [her past] were separate and gone elsewhere, since all these ailments hit” (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 250). For both, “the future is blocked” (Rimmon-Kenan 250). Clendinnen says, “Hospitals respect neither moods nor memories. They are the Now, and impose their own rigorous, obscure, testing

agendas” (75). She feels like “Time was collapsing, and society receding daily” (168).

The experience of loss through bereavement is destabilising in other ways. In *The Shadow Man*, Gordon’s identity and her father’s identity are inextricably bound together because of his death: “I placed what I called my memories of him at the center of what I called myself” (38). Her own identity becomes absolutely bound up with his dying: “death was victorious, swallowed my father up, and in so doing was victorious over me, marking me as one touched by death, as one belonging to a dead man” (90). His death dictates her sense of self for years afterwards: “On his anniversary day, I knew exactly who I was”—it dictates who she is throughout the progression of the narrative—“as I know exactly who I am when I read his letters. I am the daughter he loved. Not witness, not critic” (103). Therefore, the search for her father’s identity becomes inseparable from the search for her own identity, and her construction of self more and more depends upon finding out the truth about her father: “In everything my father wrote, I am looking for myself” (61). So when her search reveals truths she is unprepared for, her own stability is threatened. When she finds out in the National Archives that her father has lied about his name and that “David Gordon” was born “Isreal Gordon” (110), she asks “Who am I, if my father is not himself?” (112). When her research fails to yield answers, she concludes that “he has become someone with whom I can feel no connection” (135). This realisation leads to a loss of self: “And if I am not connected with him, who am I? If he’s not a person I can recognize, I can no longer recognise myself” (135).

Loss culminates in the destabilising experience of the self—fragmented, interrupted, discontinuous, negated. It’s hardly the picture of Eakin’s whole, stable self that stays the same over time. However, the destabilising experience of loss does

not necessarily challenge Eakin's theory if loss proves motivation for the construction of a whole, stable self: "disturbances to temporality and self-perception ('falling out of time') that result from illness produce a desire for predictable trajectories and guaranteed survival" (Stacey 10). To what extent do these writers perform whole selves? And to what extent is this a performance of a complex "recovered" self?

### "THE OLYMPIAN AUTHORITY OF WRITING"

One of the outcomes of this fragile, fragmented sense of self which is particularly amplified in narratives of loss is that it fuels a strong desire for agency. This agency is not unlike the traditional male authoritative voice that has been linked to male writers throughout the history of autobiography, and is one that these women seem to be adopting for themselves. Importantly, as stated earlier, it gives a "sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world" (Waugh qtd. in Cosslett et al. 6). Mantel says that "[f]or a long time I felt as if someone else were writing my life" (71). She writes about her initial struggle with the genre of autobiography:

I seemed able to create or interpret characters in fiction, but not able to create or interpret myself. About the same time I reached mid-life, I began to understand why this was. The book of me was indeed being written by other people: by my parents, by the child I once was, and by my own unborn children, stretching out their ghost fingers to grab the pen. (71)

This is especially true of the medical sector, which often labels writers and rewrites their story for them: in an interview, Mantel says: "When I wrote my story, I re-experienced the shame of being disbelieved. I relived old feelings of futility. I was

conscious that it was doctors who had written it first—in a very different version, recorded in my medical notes” (qtd. in Blake 7). But pathographies reclaim the individual’s story of illness back from the medical profession: “Pathography restores the person ignored or cancelled out in the medical enterprise, and it places that person at the very center” (Hawkins, “Pathography” 223).

Clendinnen certainly refers to “the Olympian authority of writing” (73) which emphasises the power of writing to heal a violated sense of self. Towards the end of her narrative, Mantel says, “I have been so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, so thin and so fat, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being” (222). For Mantel, writing is absolutely about constructing the self: she says in an interview, “As I write, pieces of the past fall into place. Sense emerges where there was no sense. And I begin to construct myself, complete with the missing bits” (qtd. in Blake 8). Similarly, Clendinnen says “It is largely through the sustained internal talking which gives rise to words on the page that I discover what I am thinking and feeling” (14-15). In the rehabilitation hospital, she writes on a notepad in order “to find myself and my life again” (22). Clendinnen explains that although “My old panoply of self-representing devices was in full mutiny,” in order to “continue to be ‘myself,’ whoever that might be, I would have to do some systematic thinking. To do that, I needed to write” (14). Writing is remedy for Clendinnen’s sense of being “a sliver of shattered silk whirling in the wind, without anchor or destiny” (188). For Mantel, “When you have committed enough words to paper you feel you have a spine stiff enough to stand up in the wind” (222-223). She further attests to the close connection between writing and the self: “I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one

letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are” (222). Mantel and Clendinnen illustrate Eakin’s argument that we are quite literally our stories, and that being able to tell a story is to have agency: “I began this writing in an attempt to seize the copyright in myself” (Mantel 71).

### “WRITING THE SELF INTO BEING”

As we have seen, to some extent, Clendinnen and Mantel attest to the connection between writing and healing which has been the subject of much recent research. Writing allows them to reclaim agency and begin to piece together a fragmented identity as well as concretise a self that has been at times completely negated. However, it is questionable whether they restore the whole, stable, core self of which Eakin speaks through the autobiographical process. The new interest in autobiography for what it “does” as opposed to what it “is” (L. Anderson, *Autobiography* 91), perhaps accounts for, in part, the increasing interest in the potential of writing to heal. This section looks in detail not only at *what* writing does, but also *how* it does this. It looks at the ways in which writers successfully articulate loss through various modes of writing (such as fiction), as well as the use of metaphor and imagery, to “write themselves into being.”

The relationship between writing and healing is a huge area of research that is often associated with trauma studies. As Judith Herman explains in *Trauma and Recovery*, this has to do with the particular nature of the traumatic memory, which becomes encoded in the brain as an image, separate from the memories of linear narratives that become part of everyday experience (177). As T. R. Johnson says, “the traumatic memory becomes an ‘idée fixe—an assemblage of vivid sensations and images that insistently and spontaneously intrude on the fabric of ordinary



consciousness” (89). In 1985, Suzette Henke coined the phrase, “scriptotherapy . . . the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (xii). The healing that takes place during writing depends on the writer’s ability to incorporate the traumatic memories into their ongoing narrative: “the process of recovery is, in large part, the process of weaving the raw fragments of the traumatic memory into a narrative that can then find a place in the lore—that is, in the larger fabric of narratives—that constitutes the person’s life experience and a sense of identity” (Herman qtd. in Johnson 89). This process has at its foundation the idea that recovery is indeed available through writing: “In the very act of articulation, the trauma story becomes a testimony, a publicly accessible ‘ritual of healing’ ([Herman] 181), that inscribes the victim into a sympathetic discourse-community and inaugurates the possibility of psychological reintegration” (Henke xviii).

However, while studies to do with writing and healing were originally dominated by trauma studies, research has been expanding across disciplines from psychology and sociology to composition rhetoric and education, and even the field of medicine. In 1999 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) published the results of what has become a landmark series of studies into the relationship between writing and healing (C. Anderson, “Editor’s Column” ix). In the study, patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis were asked to write about the most stressful experience they have ever had, while a control group wrote merely about their plans for the day. The authors concluded: “This is the first study to demonstrate that writing about stressful life experiences improves *physician* ratings of disease severity and objective indices of disease severity in chronically ill patients” (C. Anderson’s italics, ix). Although—Anderson cautions—it is difficult for biomedical

science to “measure, test and certify” effects such as improved immune system (x-xi), this study makes a solid claim for the healing power of writing and its effect was enough to make even the medical community turn its head. It is important because “It asks us to break the rules, to probe with different instruments, to look with different eyes” (C. Anderson, “Editor’s Column” xi).

We have seen that Mantel and Clendinnen attest to the power of writing to heal. But I’m asking further not only *what* writing does, but also *how* it does this. In what ways do my chosen writers attempt to make the self whole, stable—in short, “write [themselves] into being”?

One way is through the articulation of loss. Results from subsequent studies that have been conducted over the last decade support the ones published in JAMA, with more and more emphasis on the power of narrative to heal. These studies are not always limited to trauma, but as psychologist James W. Pennebaker points out in “Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative”: “What is critical in all of these studies . . . is that people are encouraged to explore their emotions and thoughts no matter what the content might be” (7). Pennebaker’s findings from over a decade of experiments show that “When people put their emotional upheavals into words, their physical and mental health improved markedly” (3). Thus, one of the critical components of healing is the ability to articulate experiences of loss.

In her article, “Bestselling Bodies: Mourning, Melancholia, and the Female Forensic Pathologist,” Clare Hansen discusses Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s re-working of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (her emphasis is on locating loss in the body, explored further in Chapter 4). For my analysis here, however, I wish to emphasise the importance of locating loss in words. Abraham and Torok argue that “Mourning depends on the recognition and articulation of loss” (qtd. in Hansen 89),

as does Herman, where the primary goal of therapy is “to put the story, including its imagery, into words” (177). However, in order to do this, the mourner must recognise the loss; failure to do this results in melancholia: “[m]elancholia is linked with resistance to the recognition of loss” (Abraham and Torok qtd. in Hansen 89). Abraham and Torok, as well as Kristeva, argue that in the “normal subject it is recognition of this loss which creates the possibility of symbolisation, as words come to stand in for the lost object” (Hansen 90). This is the definition of successful mourning, of being healed. Likewise, Pennebaker finds that “translating experiences into language” results in significant “[h]ealth gains” (8).

Translating experience into language also involves translating it into narrative. Pennebaker’s findings support Eakin’s argument that this process is somehow innate: “the participants intuitively knew how to put their life experiences into remarkably coherent narratives” (5), and many critics argue that the ability to construct a coherent narrative, to order and shape experience, lies at the heart of understanding that experience as well as ourselves: “the act of constructing stories appeared to be a natural human process that helped individuals understand their experiences and themselves” (Pennebaker 3). This link between narrative and self is emphasised by many theorists such as Guy Allen who argues that “there is a connection between the ability to build a coherent story, ‘and the sense of self-esteem and effectiveness which underlie a strong sense of identity’ (Holmes 13-17)” (Allen 283).

However, the ability to transform loss into words, and the healing this act necessarily produces, is in theory easier to understand than in practice. It’s not a simple process, as Clendinnen points out: “to try to understand any of this [the experience of illness] by transforming inchoate, unstable emotion and sensation into marks on paper is to experience the abyss between fugitive thought, and the words to

contain it” (1). In her attempt to articulate the experience of illness, Clendinnen uses narrative in several modes: fiction, biography, and, of course, the dominant mode of memoir which contains the illness narrative as a whole. Each mode of writing becomes important in the attempt to garner a whole self.

Clendinnen uses fiction to reclaim a sense of identity and escape the dissolution of self she feels at the hospital. Writing fiction becomes important for the first time when a woman who shares the hospital room with her dies: “Now for the first time I felt the desire to write fiction. I wanted to feel I could change this inexorable place, these lonely, shapeless deaths, even in imagination: fiction as defiance of exigency” (77). It’s interesting to track the short stories she writes, the artificial worlds she creates: “worlds where madness or death, even, murder, is a fiction” (86). The first story is told from the point of view of a young male surfer, whose friend Noah deliberately unfastens the leg rope on his board, committing suicide and disappearing into the water. The second story is again told from the third person point of view, from the perspective of Josh. In order to win points for bravery, he sets himself an ordeal that ends in murder. In the third story, the main character is a 40-year-old teacher who murders her neighbour and gets away with it. The fourth story is the first fictional story that uses the first person, and we can detect what may be elements of the autobiographical in it from what we already know of Clendinnen’s own mother: the narrator says, “My mother was always accusing people of faking. Even when they died she’d still manage to look sceptical” (100). However, Clendinnen separates this fiction from her personal narration. The fourth short story ends the second section of the book, and the next section is titled “Parents,” where she slips into the genre of biography as she writes a memorial for her parents. Although Clendinnen’s memoir is a hybrid form, mixing fiction, non-fiction, and historical

biography, it seems as though each mode contributes in a different way to her own sense of self. Fiction is a way for her to escape the struggle with memory she experiences when writing about her child self or her parents: “Being able to make a story from nothing instead of concocting it out of elusive memories made me happy. It also relieved my fear of being trapped ‘inside.’ My labelled body might be lying on my labelled bed, but my mind could be anywhere, keeping whatever company I chose” (85). Thus, it is a way of establishing a sense of identity as separate from the one forced on her by illness.

Clendinnen’s motivation for writing about her parents is fuelled by the realisation that “my days were probably measured” and so she feels the need “to memorialise” them (120). Up until just before the transplant operation, in writing fiction and writing about her parents, she “had used writing as diversion, to memorialise parts of my past, [and] *as a weapon for the preservation of self*” (italics mine, 168). However, after her operation, she turns towards historical biography, writing about Mr. G. A. Robinson, Protector of the Aborigines in Tasmania, using his journal over a five-month horseback journey during 1841. She describes writing about Mr. Robinson as “therapy” and says that writing about other people allowed her the “pleasures of immersion” and “gave me a future. He made me aware that other tragic human histories had been masked by my own” (221). In one sense, writing about other people, like fiction, affords a kind of escape. But in another sense it allows her to see her own story as part of a larger, historical identity as a whole.

Writers also use metaphor/imagery to restore the self. Rimmon-Kenan discusses *Love’s Work: A Reckoning With Life*, by British Professor of Philosophy Gillian Rose, who writes about the problem of communicating the experience of a colostomy. Rose is concerned with two dangers inherent in writing about illness: (i)

using the language of medical discourse, which is ultimately separate from the embodied experience of illness, and (ii) using illness as metaphor, a subject famously highlighted by Susan Sontag, who as early as 1978 pointed out the detrimental effects of seeing illness as metaphor, as “a doom deserved or brought upon oneself” (Sontag qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 246). Sontag compares past attitudes surrounding TB with those surrounding cancer and HIV: “it was still thought that a certain inner disposition was needed in order to contract the disease” (qtd. in Stacey 46). In her book, *Teratologies*, Jackie Stacey argues that “the cultural taboos surrounding cancer continue to reproduce a sense of blame and shame with considerable potency” (45) and that not much has changed since Sontag’s observation that “there is mostly shame attached to a disease thought to stem from the repression of emotion. . . . The view of cancer as a disease of the failure of expressiveness condemns the cancer patient: expresses pity but also conveys contempt” (Sontag qtd. in Stacey 47). Stacey points out that “according to this belief system, cancer is a *disease of the self* . . . the disease is a physiological expression of the person’s helplessness, hopelessness, or lack of self-love” (Stacey’s italics, 191). In *Signifying Bodies*, Couser also points out damaging metaphors that attack character, referring to Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen*, where she gives examples of damaging metaphors of blindness: “If you want to talk about stupidity, prejudice, weakness, or narrow-mindedness, no other word will do” (qtd. in Couser 173). In first reading Lauren Slater’s *Spasm*, I was disturbed by some of the descriptions and assumptions about epilepsy that come through in her use of epilepsy as a metaphor, such as her equating “epilepsy” with the adjectives “dirty” and “spastic” (39): “Epilepsy does not mean to be possessed, passively; it means to need to possess, actively. You are born with a hole in you, genetic or otherwise, and so you seize at this, you seize at that, your mouth so hungry you’ll take

your own tongue if you have to” (156).<sup>5</sup> As Couser says, “In claiming to have epilepsy and an epileptic personality . . . she may not only have misrepresented herself, she has perpetuated a harmful notion of epilepsy as entailing a character defect” (*Signifying* 128).

However, using metaphors to describe illness is not always detrimental. Sontag’s own metaphor of illness as a “kingdom” has been often quoted, and Sontag herself acknowledges in later writing that “one cannot think without metaphors” (qtd. in Stacey 48). Hawkins argues that even Sontag’s admonition not to use illness as metaphor is nevertheless “organised around a mythic formulation; in this case, what might be called the myth of ‘metaphorlessness’ [because] even if we agree with Sontag that illness should be stripped of metaphor, myth, and symbol, it is an expectation that few could live up to” (“Pathography” 230). Indeed, in this chapter there have already been numerous examples of metaphors used by both Mantel and Clendinnen outside of those I will shortly hold up for discussion. Perhaps, then, we need to look not only at metaphors themselves, but beyond to their cultural construction. As Stacey argues,

It is thus not metaphor of which we should be wary *per se*, but the cultural uses to which its heightened applications may be put. If . . . metaphorical readings of illness are inevitable because of the ways in which language works, what we need to focus on in careful detail is how metaphors might serve the purposes of constructing particular illnesses as shameful. (63)

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<sup>5</sup> Since writing this, confirmation of my ideas have surfaced in Couser’s *Signifying Bodies*, in his chapter titled, “Disability as Metaphor: What’s Wrong With *Lying*.”

So while this requires diligence and a certain exploding of metaphor to reveal hidden assumptions, it can also open up the discussion towards positive uses of metaphor in opposition to those that are detrimental. As Hawkins argues: “mythic formulations of illness [can be] empowering” (“Pathography” 240). We have seen how Mantel and Clendinnen use narrative to cope with illness, make sense of things, or “bring it under control” (Anatole Broyard qtd. in Hawkins, “Pathography” 229). Hawkins argues that metaphors are “heuristic devices that give meaning to the illness, organizing and interpreting it” (“Pathography” 230). Hawkins disagrees with Sontag’s view that illness as metaphor is necessarily harmful and destructive and argues that they are actually part of the healing process: “The process of selective remembering, ordering and re-ordering, interpretation, and mythic formulation helps heal the trauma of illness, enabling ill persons not just to get through their experience but also to move beyond it” (“Pathography” 241).

Clendinnen, while describing the hospital itself as “a child’s nightmare” (1), nevertheless likens falling ill to falling in love: “‘Fall’ is the appropriate word; it is almost as alarming and quite as precipitous as falling in love” (1), and also to “falling down Alice’s rabbit hole” where “like Alice, you are subject to unscheduled and surprising transformations” (1). This (initial) world is markedly different from Mantel’s “unlit terrain of sickness, a featureless landscape of humiliation and loss” (167). Even at the end of the narrative, while Clendinnen acknowledges that as liver-transplant survivors, “We will remain guinea pigs, experimental animals, for as long as we live” (281), she amends this image: “Or, if you prefer, angels borne on the wings of our drugs, dancing on the pin of mortality” (281-283).

Other images similarly point to healing. Hawkins says “Many pathographers will use a particular metaphor or mythic construct to describe and explain their



experience” (“Pathography” 232). For Clendinnen, this is the almost mythic construct of the tiger. Early on in her hospital stay she remembers a nearby zoo and the tigers there: “He was my favourite beast, because he was the only animal who did not acknowledge he was in a cage” (20). She describes her experience in the hospital as “the kaleidoscope of the horror of helplessness” (21), but she acts as the tiger does and refuses to acknowledge it—“I withdrew my consent from it” (21). There’s no doubt that the image of the tiger has a healing effect: “Thereafter, whenever I felt the threat of *the violation of self*, I would invoke the vision of the tiger and the freedom that vision gave me, to be at once the superb gaze, and the object of the gaze: an incident in a tiger landscape” (italics mine, 21). This directly illustrates how imagery can sustain the self.

Imagery is also used in a very interesting way in Mantel’s narrative. Just before Mantel’s surgery—when doctors are still unsure of her diagnosis and think there might be a possibility that the growths in her abdomen might be malignant—she remembers “Litany for a Happy Death” which she had read in the back of a prayer book as a child while bored at church. The Christian imagery reads as almost a bizarre kind of mirroring of the list of symptoms she gives earlier for akathisia, which she develops shortly after she is given anti-psychotic drugs, where: “The patient paces. She is unable to stay still. She wears a look of agitation and terror. She wrings her hands; she says she is in hell” (181). Although the two are unconnected on the surface, the description of the affliction in the prayer evokes similar imagery used to describe akathisia, and therefore echoes back to her previous experience. For ease of comparison, I’ve set these descriptions side by side below:

## Akathisia

“You are impelled to move, to pace in a small room. You force yourself down into a chair, only to jump out of it” (181).

“Your hands pull at your clothing and tear at your arms. . . . Your voice is like a bird’s cry and your hands flutter like wings” (181-182).

“Every fibre of your being is possessed by panic” (182).

“You choke. . . . Your breathing becomes ragged” (181); “The tension rises in your throat. Speech is dragged and jerked out of you, your ribs heaving” (182).

“You whisper that you are dying, you are damned, you are already being dipped into hell and you can feel the flames on your face” (182).

## “Litany for a Happy Death”

“my feet, benumbed with death, shall admonish me that my mortal course is drawing to an end” (205)

“my hands, cold and trembling, shall no longer be able to clasp the crucifix” (205-206).

“my imagination, agitated by dreadful spectres—” (207).

“my lips, pale and trembling, shall pronounce for the last time Thine adorable name” (206).

“When my face, pale and livid, shall inspire the beholders with pity and dismay: when my hair, bathed in sweat of death, and stiffening on my head, shall forebode my approaching end” (206).

The plea repeated throughout the prayer—“*Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me*” (206)—evokes a healing refrain absent in the tortured description of akathisia. Of course, it’s impossible to know whether Mantel intends for the prayer to be read back towards her experience of akathisia, but it appears to lend some comfort at a time in the narrative when she is waiting to hear if she has a life-threatening disease. However, more importantly for my discussion of writing and healing, Mantel is moved by language—by the bodily detail of language in the prayer: “I admire particularly the phrase about the hair stiffening on the head” (207); she’s moved by the use of the semi-colon: “Note that excellent semicolon. People ask how I learned to write. That’s where I learned it” (207); in other words, by the power of language to express experience, to articulate loss, more than any religious message inherent in the words. In *The Shadow Man*, Gordon takes refuge—not in the church—but in the language that the church provides. As a child she tries to remember her father

by enclosing my understanding of his life and death in one of the shining vessels that the Church provided. Ecclesiastical language is full of names for vessels: chalice, ciborium, monstrance, pyx; there must be containers to enclose, keep safe, keep intact, keep protected from the world’s contamination the sacred matter—the Body and Blood of Christ—in the form of the natural and the ordinary—bread and wine. (10)

In this way Gordon can restore her sense of self: “I needed to think of [her father’s death] as only appearing to be ordinary—like the host and the wine—so I could bring myself to life, or back to life, so I could save myself or resurrect myself” (10).

Importantly, these two examples from Mantel and Gordon show the significance that lies in transforming experiences of loss into words. An extreme

example of transforming images into words is when Clendinnen experiences nightmarish hallucinations just after her liver transplant. The hallucinations come in the form of a film, controlled by a malicious camera that has developed particularly nasty human traits. If Clendinnen refuses to accept what she is being shown, then “There is a furious blur like a hive gone mad: the camera is angry. Then it squats down, eyes me. Pure malevolence” (178). The images become more and more horrific the more she denies their truth. She is absolutely helpless at this stage: “I am watching, but I am also behind the camera. I do not control it, I cannot control it, but I am there. Somewhere. I must get control of the script” (181). The way she does this illustrates the importance of writing. Only by transforming the moving images into words is she able to regain control of them, and thus control of her self: “Initially helpless before [the images], I could detach myself from them only by turning moving images into words. . . . Then I would be able to read the cryptic history of the unknown self which had unspooled behind my eyelids” (189). Clendinnen’s example illustrates vividly Hawkins’ argument that “The subject of pathographies is generally something that is so destructive and disorienting to the experiencing self that it stimulates a counter impulse towards creation and order” (“Pathography” 231). Writing can turn abstract, frightening, images into a narrative with order. Before the transplant, Clendinnen’s mind becomes “a sluggish pond, with obscure shapes blundering around on the muddy bottom. Only through writing could I hope to identify those shapes: to develop a slower, muddier interior conversation with my slower, muddier self” (15). It illustrates the importance of putting the image, the experience, into words.

Thus far we’ve seen that through various means, Mantel, Clendinnen and Gordon go far towards creating a whole, stable sense of self through writing: whether

through different modes of narrative, metaphors, and imagery. Writing allows them to make sense of things, construct themselves, locate themselves, discover what they are thinking and feeling, find themselves and their lives—in short, write themselves into being. We have seen here how writing is “a weapon for the preservation of the self”; it in turns emancipates, protects, identifies, memorialises, sustains, saves, resurrects, creates, orders, and recuperates the self. These writers have done much to build a solid sense of self from the fragments left by the experience of illness. On one level texts conform to what studies between writing and healing show: narrative can heal.

#### PROBLEMATISING THE NARRATIVE SELF

However, Charles Anderson reminds us that though “[w]riting, as one of our richest and most powerful symbolic acts, naturally creates the conditions within which healing may take place . . . it is important to understand that writing is not healing nor does writing about difficult experience guarantee healing” (“Editor’s Column” x). And although he hastens to add that “this does not invalidate its effects or diminish its importance” (xi), it does, however, complicate assumptions of healing the self through narrative, and we need to be aware of all the nuances within this relationship.

If narrative is bound up with identity, and we are ourselves embodied subjects, then “Narrative identity . . . the notion that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind” (Eakin, *LA* 74), has particular implications for healing the self. Healing the self through narrative would seem to suggest that one has healed the literal, bodily self. However, my chosen texts also complicate ideas of self and self as narrative. If we say that narrative is so closely linked to our selves so as to be inseparable, what happens to people who do not have a narrative? Eakin recognises the problems

inherent in his theory and points out that it is not ethical to say a person without a narrative is diminished as a self (30). I will first look at the implications of his argument for those who do not have a narrative and show how this complicates theories of “self as narrative” and therefore “narrative as healing.”

The main problem with the theory that “we are our stories” is that the next logical premise is: “therefore, without a story, we are no one.” The connection between story telling and identity surfaces in Mahood’s *Craft*. She says there have always been stories in her family:

When I left home I took the stories with me. They protected and identified me. They gave me a conviction, which amounted to arrogance, that I came from a world whose values were superior to any I might encounter elsewhere, and concealed, from me at least, the fact that I was afraid of a world in which I might turn out to be *no-one at all*. (italics mine, 25)

Furthermore, Eakin argues narrative identity is firmly rooted in our culture: “Such an expectation is culture specific: as Linde sees it, we happen to live in a culture that subscribes to ‘the idea that we “have” a life story, and that any normally competent adult has one”’ (Eakin, *LA* 29). The idea that a “storied” person is a normal person is prevalent: “For others, we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story; when we perform these stories, we establish ourselves for others as normal individuals” (Eakin, *LA* 4). Kay Young and Jeffrey Saver conclude in their study “The Neurology of Narrative” that “Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narrative . . . have lost their selves” (qtd. in Eakin, *LA* 23). Furthermore, Jeremy Holmes, a British National Health Service psychotherapist says “to become a person is to know one’s own story” (qtd. in Allen 283). Mantel suggests that to lose the

power of story is to lose a solid sense of self: “But when you stop writing you find that’s all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen” (223).

This assumption leaves us with some difficult questions: What happens when we lose the power of narrative? Are we then diminished as a person/self? Eakin gives the extreme example of Mr. Thompson from Oliver Sacks’s *The Man Who Mistook*, a patient who had lost his memory through brain damage and “could not remember who he was for more than a minute or two at the most, he spent his waking hours in frenetic self-invention, seeking to construct new identities to take the place of old ones that he forgot as soon as he created them” (LA 2). Eakin keeps asking “What is this man without his story?” (LA 2); “Who would judge him to be diminished as a person?” (LA 15). Eakin is opposed to “an ethics that would link narrative capacity and personhood” (15) but at the same time he does say that most of us fear “memory loss and the death of the extended self that follows from it” (15). Eakin emphasises that “I would not want to assent to the proposition that the de-storied person has become de-selved” (LA 30). His phrasing here is telling. He doesn’t say “I will not assent,” or “I do not assent,” but rather, “I would not want to.” But might he have to? This leaves open the possibility that perhaps “the de-storied person has become de-selved.”

Even though the example of Mr. Thompson is extreme, there is no doubt that to an extent loss leaves people “de-storied.” In the previous section, we saw how writers “recogni[se] and “articulate[e] loss” (Abraham and Torok, qtd. in Hansen 89). However, an inability to translate experience into language ends in failed mourning, or melancholia (Kristeva, Butler): “In *Black Sun* Kristeva writes of melancholics as having ‘lost the meaning—the value—of their mother tongue for having lost the

mother', the lost body of the mother thus remaining 'walled up within the *crypt* of the inexpressible affect'" (Kristeva, qtd. in Hanson 90). For Derrida, "mourning continues but remains beyond conscious articulation" (Riegel 7). Loss can rob writers of language. So what happens when writers lose the power of narrative? Do they then have no sanity, no self?

Eakin says that in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, "sanity and identity are linked to language" (LA 2). This seems an apt observation as Clendinnen describes her obsession with words in the face of losing narrative. Before her transplant, and suffering from encephalopathy, or "inflamed brain sickness" (167)—due to the release of toxins into her bloodstream—she documents the loss of narrative ability: "struggling to write a story to catch these panicked thoughts about the fragility of the self, the recognition of the self as reflex of happenstance, and illusion, I discovered I could not do it" (168). Because she is unable to sustain a coherent thought, she focuses on phrases—remembered metaphors that are entirely unrelated to any sense of narrative: "metaphors, as I now see, from my childhood, some of them heavy with ancient dread. The death knock. In at the kill. Over the hill. Snake in the grass. Others were resolutely gay: the cat's pyjamas . . . the giddy limit" (169). Then, she is able only to concentrate on single words: "At first they were engagingly elaborate. In-can-des-cent. Incan Descent. Skedaddle. Skidoo. . . . Rip Van Winkle words which have been snoozing in their caves for decades yawn, stretch, come blinking into the light" (169). She becomes obsessed with single words: "I've never written it down before. Caboodle. Now that spelling's a problem I have to pay strict attention to the sequence of letters. There are some very fine and surprising words when you think about spelling. Like ex-tri-cate. That's a marvellous word, with intricate and articulate both mixed up in it" (169). Gently poking fun at herself, she



recognises a kind of loss of sanity: “Message to Self: I OF IN-CAN-DES-CENT WILL EX-TRI-CATE MYSELF FROM THIS WHOLE CA-BOO-DLE POST-HASTE” (169-170).

Yet she remains completely sure that faced with the loss of narrative structure, words are a source of comfort: “I began grabbing at a word as it flew past, examining it, turning it in my hands. Worrying, sometimes, whether this was sane behaviour, but taking comfort from it: this word at least will not escape me. The word would glow and revolve in my empty mind like a sun” (171). Words “were vivid, real, solid in a way that, increasingly, I was not” (169). Clendinnen “insists on using language to recuperate the incoherence of loss” (Tanner 5). When she wakes up from her liver transplant she continues her increasing attention to individual words: she hears “whispering, lots of whispering. Someone keeps whispering to me: ‘Now, Inga, I am going to . . .’ Whisper whisper. On and on. Susurrating. I have never used that word before. . . . I am pleased to have the right word” (173). In this sense Clendinnen offers us a different insight into language; it is not always necessary to form the experience into a narrative *per se*, because language, words, isolated from any story, divorced from narrative, are still important for their ability to articulate an experience (even if only for a short duration of her illness before she ultimately places that experience within a narrative).

In contrast to Clendinnen’s experience above, where she used words—precise words that could capture an emotion—in order to fill the gap in narrative, sometimes there are simply no words to describe some experiences. Words fail. During her illness, Rosenblum says, “I became aware of the limitations of language in describing those sensations and thus relieving myself of their burden” (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 245). For Mantel, words are often inadequate. She says:

The story of my own childhood is a complicated sentence that I am always trying to finish, to finish and put behind me. It resists finishing, and partly this is because *words are not enough*; my early world was synaesthetic, and I'm haunted by the ghosts of my own sense impressions, which re-emerge when I try to write, and shiver between the lines. (*italics mine*, 23)

The experience in the garden is one such experience where words fail. She questions her ability to write it: "Sometimes you come to a thing you can't write. You've written everything you can think of, to stop the story getting here. You know that, technically, your prose isn't up to it" (106). The experience forms a tangible gap in the narrative, because although Mantel has described something of the "formless, borderless evil" that had "come for [her]," (107), in taking up only a couple of pages in the narrative, it calls attention to itself as more of an absence because it is never fully explained.

Illness takes away the power to narrate. Rimmon-Kenan says Rosenblum "stresses the resistance of a collapsing body to verbalization" (245). Mantel speaks often of not being able to name her illness. Before her diagnosis she says:

My vision blurred. . . . Sometimes there were gaps in the world: I complained one day that the front door had been left open, but the truth was that I just couldn't see the door. Sometimes it seemed that some rustling, suspicious activity was going on, at the left side of my head, but I couldn't put a name to what it was. I couldn't put a name to lots of things, my speech came out muddled: I called a clock's hands its fingers, and a chair's arms its sleeves. (184)

When she has to cross London in a dressing gown in order to go for an ultrasonic scan, she says “I felt emotional, but couldn’t put a name to my emotion” (198).

Ultimately, she describes the gulf between her and her illness as a language she would never understand. During the scan she says “For the first and last time, I saw my womb, with two black strokes, like skilled calligraphy, marking it out: a neat diacritical mark in a language I would never learn to speak” (201). It implies that her illness is something she will never be able to fully translate into language.

In *The Shadow Man*, Gordon initially turns to language in order to find a place for her father: “I am trying to make a resting place for him in words, a place that won’t be torn apart by the words he insisted upon using: words that make me feel I have no right to love him” (104). This quote illuminates the fact that writing her father has less to do with him per se, and more to do with her struggle with losing him. She recognises this, and cross-questions her own motives. Why is it important to write her father? Not to resurrect him. But to finally bury him and come to terms with her loss: “Do I believe that if I get him into words properly, he can live again? Or is it that by getting him properly into words, I can finally allow him to be dead” (261). Again, the absence of the question mark here (a signature of Gordon’s writing) suggests that the answer is already provided for us. We see her struggle throughout her narrative to get him into words, to articulate their relationship. She deliberately plays with language:

I tell myself that it is impossible for me to remember what it’s like to have a father. What it’s like not to live without a father. Not to live as fatherless. To live as not fatherless. To live as one fathered. As I repeat the word “father” in all these forms, the word becomes unreal,

meaningless, and infinitely precious, and I lose his face, or what I believe to be his face. (27)

In this way she plays with the language of negation in an attempt to mirror the experience of her loss. However, like Clendinnen and Mantel, she discovers that language is inadequate: “The details of my life with my father require a language for which there is often no place in what has become my present life” (17). The gulf between the experience and the writing of it becomes too wide.

In *Circling My Mother*, Gordon attempts to preserve her mother in writing: “But, if I speak of her, if I write about her, it is possible that I can prevent her disappearance. She will not evaporate, like a scent that is absorbed into the air, into a nullity. My mother will not be nothing” (237). But again, words fail: “But no, it isn’t words that will perform the miracle I need. There are no words that I can use to call her” (237). Words lie beyond experience; Clendinnen has seen “a scatter of words lying like broken beads in an unlit corner . . . words were whirring away like sparrows spraying from a hedgerow” (168). She asks, what can be done when words fail? “How to write when your word store turns into a scree-slope, when memory begins to break up, when whole chunks shear off and drift away?” (168).

How, then, to tackle the “age-old problem (and challenge) of narrating the unnarratable”? (Rimmon-Kenan 249). These are all examples of the failure of language to adequately describe experience. However, Gordon suggests that in our articulation of loss, we must go beyond words: “Must it be the way of language, or the flesh? Can’t it be some way that is beyond time, beyond words? The way of the beautiful smell” (233). When she fails to put her mother into words, she resurrects her through smelling her old perfume: “I put my nose to my wrist. And she is risen from the dead. She is risen indeed” (237). It seems here that she is able to recover the

loss of her mother within a place beyond words, a place based purely in the senses: “I put my nose to my wrist. Arpège. The music: the arpeggio. I can follow the scent, like music, beyond the body, beyond words. I don’t need to be in the ruinous place. I can be in the paradise with the mother I desire” (235).

Of course, these writers all paradoxically create a narrative in the very expression of the failure of words to adequately transcribe the experience of loss. Despite Mantel’s insistence that her illness is “a language I would never learn to speak,” she has created an illness narrative. These examples can hardly be used as a complete example of the breakdown of language theorised by Kristeva. Failure to “displace the object (the body), [the loss] into words” is linked to “the refusal to recognise loss.” Such refusal of recognition is invisible. It’s literally not there, not in language. At the moment a writer claims that she refuses to recognise loss, she’s recognised it. The un-narratable indeed remains un-narrated and unseen, as in Joan Didion’s case, though we have to look beyond the narrative to see this. In Gilbert’s review of Didion’s memoir, she points out the “striking lacuna . . . namely, her ‘refusal’ (or more accurately, her repression) of mourning for Quintana,” who died only a few months before her memoir was released. Gilbert notes that in subsequent interviews, Didion asserts that this omission was a stylistic one, because the memoir was “an elegy for a marriage into which it would be inappropriate to interject an elegy for a child” (556). Gilbert suggests that perhaps Didion is unaware of her own melancholic actions in failing to transcribe her daughter’s death into narrative: “Perhaps, then, Didion’s decision not to speak of Quintana’s death is, like her difficulty in reading her husband’s obituaries, another case of ‘magical thinking,’ unwittingly (or maybe wittingly) dramatized before our eyes . . . if Didion does not *say* that Quintana has died, perhaps Quintana has *not* died?” (Gilbert’s italics, 557).

Perhaps this is a better example of Kristeva's theory of a failure to recognise loss and transform the experience into words.

Compared to this, the question of whether my chosen writers perform healed selves and "successful mourning" in the end might seem obvious. However, they complicate the relationship between writing and healing because, despite the "Olympian authority of writing" and reconstructing self, they are still left with ambivalent feelings about self—in some cases the self remains fragmented at the end of the narrative—and writing itself is not always necessarily seen as a healing enterprise.

## COMPLEX RECOVERY

Even while Clendinnen conforms to Eakin (and Damasio's) "notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (qtd. in Eakin, "LA" 4), she also problematises it. From the beginning of the narrative, in self-consciously resisting conventional illness narratives, she highlights the important focus on subjectivity: "This is not the story of a medical crisis. . . . To lie still as a crusader on a tomb while dreams spin behind closed lids, to surf the tumble of disordered memories as they dolphin away, to feel the mind disintegrate and to fear the disintegration of the self, is to suffer an existential crisis, not a medical one" (1). At some points throughout the narrative, Clendinnen's sense of self aligns with Eakin's theory. She too acknowledges that the self changes through time: "the invisible transformations wrought by accumulating experience, and the development of a conscious narrative of the self—which . . . will change through time" (239), yet she still believes in a stable sense of self, and that "it

is on memory that the whole enterprise of sustaining a reasonably stable sense of self, depends” (221).

However, in direct contrast to his theory, she says after her transplant operation that “I was beginning to suspect . . . that we are . . . *not coherent and continuous objects in a changing sea*, but half-illusory creatures made out of the light and shadows cast by that sea, articulated by our own flickering imaginings” (italics mine, 191). In suggesting that we “articulate” ourselves by “flickering imaginings,” she directly contradicts her previous statement not only that memory can “sustain” a “stable sense of self,” but also whether consciousness is indeed continuous enough to maintain this. Very close to the end of the narrative she seems unsure of the “self” she has performed throughout. After she writes about Robinson she goes back to write of her childhood:

In the course of my childhood-retrieving exercise I was troubled, first, by the unreality of the person invoked as “me”, and then by the implicit claim that I still was that person merely grown larger. Am I that person? Is my consciousness really continuous? To put it more elaborately: it may not only be a question of whether I state my memories truthfully (sometimes), or whether I remember accurately (I do and I don’t), but whether the “I” is sufficiently continuous to claim possession of those early memories at all. (238)

This is certainly not the whole, stable self of which Eakin speaks, that changes over time but largely remains the same. In questioning whether the self is at all continuous, Clendinnen questions the whole basis of autobiographical writing as a homeostatic process, upon which Eakin’s theory rests.

Despite what she has said about the “Olympian authority of writing” and the power of writing to recover self, in the last chapter of the narrative, titled “Now,” she still does not have a particularly solid or continuous sense of self: “I am back. That is how it seems to friends: the person they know, the voice, the manner, the little box of social tricks, is back. . . . Except now I know more of the processes which made her, and therefore know her to be a fiction: a thing made out of idiosyncratically angled experiences and an obstinate habit of writing” (282). It does not seem as though she has regained a solid sense of self at the end of the narrative; in fact, the attempt has, in the end, made her less sure of her self. In the “Epilogue,” she all but shatters everything that we have seen her work for through writing:

Now both the energy and the desire to look further into the self are dead. I am tired of blundering about in the funhouse of the personal, with its multiplying images and its faces around corners. This stuck-together “I” is tired of introspection, that interminable novel of the invention of the self. I am tired of the “I,” with its absurd pretensions to agency, so elegant, so upright, moving so serenely through the thickets of lesser words, surveying them from such a height. Poised on so narrow a base. It is difficult to take that preposterous pronoun seriously when you know it to be a fabricated, chemically supported, contingent thing. (286)

This admission, detrimental as it is to feminist theories of subjectivity and agency, detrimental as it is to Eakin’s theory of a stable self, illustrates complex recovery. It is true that recovery in *Tiger’s Eye* is much less ambiguous than in *Giving Up the Ghost*, but it is not without its complexity. After her transplant, Clendinnen and her husband settle on an island in Far North Queensland. Although



the new beach feels different—"The sand is wrong—too grey, too white, I don't know. Wrong" (284)—there are no ghosts (as opposed to her old beach) and "we sleep well here" (285). There is the sense of healing with this image, followed up by the last line of the narrative: "I *think* we will never go back" (italics mine, 285). But then there is some ambiguity in the word "think"; it is less definitive than, "We will never go back." In the "Epilogue" Clendinnen tells us that what she has been doing "all this time [is] taking a journey out, beyond and around myself, and into interior territories previously closed to me. At the end of it, battered, possibly wiser, certainly wearier and, oddly, happier, I have returned to where I began: to history" (289). The narrative ends on a positive note, yet there is this play on "possibly," and "oddly" which, as well as carrying ironic undertones, allows for a certain openness of interpretation which we don't see with other memoirs driving home a pre-determined agenda for the reader (again, if we rewrite the sentence without the ambiguity, the difference is obvious: "battered, wiser, wearier and happier"). Although perhaps *Tiger's Eye* is in many ways the least ambiguous of my chosen texts, it still departs from "the typical trajectories [of] crisis, rescue and recovery" (Stacey 7). The experience of loss, then, becomes much richer in all its complex nuances.

Mantel's narrative highlights its complexity towards recovery most obviously in its title. "Giving Up the Ghost" in the negative sense can mean (as well as dying), giving up on life—giving up a struggle. But in Mantel's case, where she is haunted by many ghosts of the past, giving up the ghost may mean more positively, giving up the past and its ability to haunt her. Mantel's attitude to mourning is also ambivalent when she says: "Mourning is not quick; when there is no body to bury, mourning is not final" (230). This could be interpreted in two ways: it could mean that mourning is not final, as in mourning is not "The End"; it is not a finality, it goes on and on, it

never ends, there is no relief. Or it could mean mourning is not final—it's not the final word, not the be-all and end-all but rather, there are possibilities beyond mourning, the chance that you can get beyond it to somewhere else.

Despite Mantel's recovery of self through writing, her use of the present tense problematises this. Towards the end of the narrative, she says "I was (*and am*) unsure about how I am related to my old self, or to myself from year to year" (*italics mine*, 221). At the time of writing—more than 20 years after her experience at St. George's hospital—Mantel says, "everything about me—my physiology, my psychology—feels constantly under assault: I am a shabby old building in an area of heavy shelling, which the inhabitants have vacated years ago" (222). This presents problems for the solid sense of self we have seen her create through writing.

At the end of their narratives, both Clendinnen and Mantel remake their lives. Mantel moves to a new house. In the beginning of the narrative, Owl Cottage housed the ghost of her stepfather, and at the end her second house holds the ghost of her unborn child, Catriona, who would be "nothing like me at all. She would be strong, like my mother, broad-shouldered like my husband. . . . I see her small competent hands, chopping an onion; making unwritten dishes, which she has never been taught to make" (227). It is important that she be rid of both ghosts. They move to an apartment in a converted lunatic asylum, built in the 1860s in London. When people ask her "Aren't you afraid of ghosts?" her reply suggests recovery from her past and the ghosts who have haunted her: "But I smile and shake my head; I say, not I. Not I: not here: not now" (250). Again, it's important that Mantel doesn't choose to end the narrative on this note, which clearly indicates recovery. But there are other incidents she chooses to include after this. At the end she sees a figure that is herself: "a figure shrouded in a cloak, bearing certain bulky objects wrapped in oilcloth, irregular in

shape: not heavy but awkward to carry” (251-252). The shapes are “books that, God willing, I am going to write. But when was God ever willing? And what is this dim country, what is this tenuous path I lose so often—where am I trying to get to, when the light is so uncertain?” (252). Here, writing seems more of a burden instead of a path to healing, and there is no grand understanding of self reached at the end. She moves “back from the window, [it’s] dawn or dusk” (252), hope or hopelessness in equal measure, laying the table for her ghosts, once again inviting them in.

In remembering her life as a child before her father died, Gordon asks a question directly pertinent to Eakin’s work: “Is the girl walking with him, holding his hand, always the same girl?” (39). Gordon’s questioning of a stable identity is never really reconciled. In *The Shadow Man*, she does not discuss her own sense of herself without her father. The narrative becomes more about her struggle with loss and laying her father to rest—which she must do in more than words—as we have seen when she literally moves her father’s body. She complicates the relationship between writing and healing by saying that the writer’s task is to try to understand through writing, yet argues that this is “[a] job that is never completed, and never anything but a failed attempt. And yet we begin, and we begin again, because it is the thing we do” (*Circling* x). In *Circling*, she attempts to arrive at some understanding of her aunt when she writes about her cruelty:

But then sometimes I thought that if I could write about her [aunt Rita’s] childhood, that if I could describe the sadness, the abandonment, the betrayal of her childhood, I could give up hating her, and this would prove something else about writing: that it could be used to heal, that it is a moral force in an immediate way that *I do not for a moment believe*, because I want writing to be unconnected to

good behaviour, I want it to be irresponsible, as a beautiful woman is irresponsible in her beauty, as it is not her fault if men or women fall in love with her, suffer for her, commit crimes for her sake. (*italics mine*, 84-85)

Writing about her aunt cannot heal Gordon's feelings towards her. In the end, writing doesn't lead inexorably to healing; in fact, "The task has exhausted me. It is time to end it now" (Gordon, *Circling* 239).

Thus, "the process of autobiographical recollection is part self-discovery and part self-creation" (Hawkins, "Pathography" 226). While Clendinnen and Mantel on the one hand engender a whole, solid sense of self through the autobiographical act, the tension between self as either fragmented and discontinuous or whole and continuous—a tension never fully reconciled, and these selves juxtaposed—is the basis for this nuanced, "textured recovery" that I'm arguing forces us to rethink theories of the self, narrative, and healing. Emily Nye says "Once a thought or story is written down, its memory and value are preserved, and one's mind is at peace" (394), but I have tried to show in this chapter that the process in memoirs of textured recovery is more complex than this. I do not wish to diminish the important connection between writing and healing (and indeed, I've devoted a large section of the chapter to this subject), nor detract from the fact that many writers such as Anne Lamott find that "[t]his page held some space, perhaps for whole scenes, in the way that—after a loss—a great friend holds some space for you in which to grieve or find your bearings" (qtd. in Anderson et al. 58). Indeed, Clendinnen and Mantel to some extent recover fragmented and negated selves through "the Olympian authority of writing." Clendinnen illustrates how our "endless construction of identity states" can become more concrete through the autobiographical process: she describes how

Before I began to retrieve my five-year-old . . . self, my eight-year-old egg-buying self and those unreliable adolescent selves from beach-house summers, they had been lying around inside my head like a clutter of old photographs in a forgotten drawer. Now they have been pulled out and arranged in an ordered sequence of pages, a material bundle existing within the material world. (73).

However, Mantel, after having asserted agency through writing, remains “a figure in a shrouded cloak”; Gordon is left “exhausted” by writing and a process that will “never be anything but a failed attempt,” and Clendinnen remains frustrated with the “I” and its “absurd attempts at agency.” This shows that the relationship between writing and healing is no simple process, and indeed the relationship between writing and the construction of the self no straightforward enterprise.

## CHAPTER 4: “NO BONES BROKEN”: EMBODIED EXPERIENCES OF LOSS

For many writers, the experience of loss takes place within the body; it is felt at a cellular level. In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Kim Mahood believes death of family members can be felt “in the cells of your body, a kind of genetic shudder that recognises the extinguishment of some of its own material” (253). After her father’s death she says, “I wanted to consume this damaged body and make it a part of myself” (253). Indeed, the lost thing (person, childhood, self) often takes up residence in the body. In her memoir *Tiger’s Eye*, Inga Clendinnen tells us how her brother, who died thirty years before, “Now . . . rests quietly enough, just below the breastbone, where grief has hollowed a place for him” (160). The texts discussed here are “what Arthur W. Frank might call body stories”—though not only limited to “illness or impairment” narratives—(Mintz 52), where the body figures heavily in understanding the process of grief.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter, I explored Eakin’s argument that narrative and identity are so closely related so as to be inseparable, and that “our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us” (LA x). This chapter focuses more closely on Eakin’s understanding of the autobiographical act as a neurological, biological process. Damasio’s theories have encouraged Eakin to add a bodily dimension to his work, exploring “the somatic bodily sources of narrative identity” (LA 61). Like Eakin, Damasio believes that our “bodies can be said to have stories” (“LA” 3), and, therefore, Eakin concludes, “Narrative identity . . . the notion

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<sup>1</sup> See Frank’s *The Wounded Storyteller*, and for other critics who write the body in pain see Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, and Janice Williamson’s “‘I Peel Myself out of My Own Skin’: Reading *Don’t: A Woman’s Word*.”

that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind, is not merely the product of social convention; it is rooted in our lives in and as bodies" (*LA* 74). Similarly, in writing about Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, Susannah Mintz says that "the very title of Grealy's text speaks to the fact that bodies are stories (they are constituted in language) and that they have stories to tell" (55).

This chapter works within this interplay of narrative/self/body, assuming that a meaningful examination of embodied identity within grief memoirs must consider all three. Within the (often argued, male) tradition of autobiography, the autobiographical "I" has been said to be an "I" of pure consciousness, separated from the body of the subject. Critics like G. Thomas Couser, Nancy Mairs, and Anne Hunsaker Hawkins were some of the first to recognise autobiography of illness and disability as a distinct sub-genre and bring discussions of the body to the forefront of autobiography studies. In *Recovering Bodies*, Couser says: "It is obvious upon reflection (though most of us rarely reflect upon it) that we have our being in the world, and act upon it, through our bodies. Yet, although our selves and our lives are fundamentally somatic, the body has not until recently figured prominently in life writing" (5). Although Couser refers to the long absence of illness and disability narratives from even the fairly inclusive genre of autobiography, what he calls "the flourishing of illness narrative[s]" (*Recovering* 293) during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fuelled and made possible such a pioneering study. It's interesting, however, that ten years on, critics like Laura E. Tanner are still concerned with a lack of focus on the body and "the way in which the body of illness or grief is absent from critical discourses and lost to cultural view" (2).

I'm interested in highlighting the body within narratives of loss, in particular focusing on embodied performances of self and the extent to which this complicates

traditional notions of recovery. Privileging the body within the mourning process means that the importance of the body—or its absence—is brought to the forefront of the discussion. Thus, even disembodied experience is a reaction to the body in the sense that it is a desire to escape the body as the site of pain in grief. This is opposed to theories of grief that only discuss the grief process on a cognitive and emotional level, where the discussion of the body is not present at all. In this chapter I trace a pattern of disembodiment to embodiment that is not, however, always a clear one-way journey, and although an embodied self suggests a recovered self, it is still a recovery fraught with complex ambiguities. Loss can be understood literally in terms of the absence of the body: whether the loss is of the physical body of a beloved other, or the loss of the body of the innocent or idealised child-self, or the loss of the former healthy body in illness.

I will focus on three main areas of the embodied experience of loss: (i) the impact of the absence of the loved one's body on the mourner's experience of grief, (ii) the loss of the mourner's own embodied subjectivity, or the desire for a disembodied existence, (iii) the mourner's movement back into the body facilitated by embodied memory (or the presence of an "other") which suggests a kind of complex recovery. As such, I'll be drawing on critics who emphasise embodied identity and those who discuss identity from the newly-emergent neurological, biological perspective. I'll be exploring theories of loss that contest Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" by insisting on the embodied dimensions of grief and the importance of understanding loss on or in the body. Couser argues that "autobiographical narratives of illness have comic plots almost by definition: those who tell stories of illness have lived to tell them, and although not always cured, they generally write from the perspective of some sort of recovery or healing" (*Recovering* 183). My chosen texts



in some way challenge these compensatory paradigms by representing “recovery” as an ambiguous, often incomplete process.

Like Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others, Damasio believes “the body is the basis for the self” (qtd. in Eakin, *LA* 70). “Self, then, for Damasio, is first and last *of* and *about* the body; to speak of the embodied self would be redundant, for there is no other” (Eakin, *LA* 70). Merleau-Ponty “stresses the implication of human experience in the body” (Tanner 88), and he uses “the figure of the chiasm, which he describes as an intertwining, to image a reciprocal model of embodied perception that he figures as an intertwining of the embodied subject and the world” (qtd. in Tanner 87). Understanding subjectivity in embodied terms is essential to any understanding of grief (as Tanner argues), and essential to my research into how loss affects the narrative performance of an embodied self. Is an embodied self indicative of a recovered self within memoirs that deliberately resist traditional narratives of healing?

Recent literary and psychoanalytic analyses of mourning that engage Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” resist the neat split he draws between normal and pathological grief, as well as his notions of complete recovery, complicating the definition of “mourning as a way of divesting ourselves of pain, of getting it over and done with” (Woodward qtd. in Tanner 94). However, in *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death*, Tanner points out even as such theorists challenge Freud, they, like him, continue to “marginalize the role of embodiment in the experience of grief” (90). She argues that it is impossible to understand grief without accounting for the role of the body in the process: “In an attempt to resist dynamics of cultural displacement that reduce embodied experience to a footnote, I figure the subject in terms of the body” (2). This is particularly significant because she believes that any

embodied theory of grief necessarily unravels Freud's narrative of mourning because it removes his assumption that the process is purely a psychological one: "at no point does Freud address the way in which the subject's relationship to the lost object is constituted through the body as well as through the psyche" (94). Similarly, James Krasner, in his article "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs" argues for an embodied understanding of literary portrayals of grief: "We can most fully ground grief in embodied life by trying to understand our pain for our lost loved ones in neurological terms, as a bodily—as well as a psychological and an affective—phenomenon" (220). Both Tanner and Krasner emphasise the importance of looking at grief "not simply as an emotional state but as an embodied condition" (Krasner 218).

In this chapter, I wish to emphasise how theorists literalise loss in or on the body. In resisting loss, "the lost object is introduced 'into' the body as a result of a refusal to mourn the loss or even to acknowledge the fact that there has been anything to lose" (Hanson 89). When this happens, the trauma of the loss becomes wedged within the subject's body in what Abraham and Torok term a "secret vault" (Hanson 89). Derrida describes it in bodily terms (in an image almost the inverse of Krasner's metaphor of the phantom limb); it becomes "an 'artificial' unconscious lodged like a prosthesis, a graft in the heart of an organ" (qtd. in Hanson 89). Abraham and Torok see loss as Kristeva does, "the primary loss . . . of the maternal body" (Hanson 90). An inability to recognise the loss results in the failure to translate the lost body into words (as we saw in the previous chapter with the example of Didion), and the resulting effect is melancholia: "the place of the maternal body [or the loss] is established in the body, 'encrypted' . . . and given permanent residence there as a dead and deadening part of the body" (Butler qtd. in Hanson 90). Importantly, "according to Butler [this] is an anti-metaphorical activity, literalising loss on or in the body"

(Hanson 90). The importance of these theories is that loss must be understood in terms of the body.

My interest is very much aligned with G. Thomas Couser's in *Recovering Bodies*. He says in his "Epilogue" that he is "particularly enthusiastic about writing [where] the significance of embodiment more generally comes to the fore" (294). Although he mentions some texts which satisfy this type of "body writing,"<sup>2</sup> he mostly finds that the redemptive experience of illness overwhelms the embodied experience of it: "generic illness narrative is, understandably, so invested in recovery that the achievement of closure often takes precedence over consideration of what dysfunction feels like and how it alters self-perception" (294). And so my research takes off from the point where Couser leaves us in *Recovering* and highlights issues which still concern critics of embodied identity and grief theorists today. The texts I've chosen for discussion, in defying the consolatory promise of most grief narratives, concern themselves primarily with the embodied experience of loss and bring the body to the forefront of grief.

Taking the body into account for Krasner and Tanner necessarily ends in failed mourning according to Freudian theory: "What lurks at the margins of Freud's essay—what the essay itself disavows—is the urgency of the one loss that cannot be recuperated: the loss of embodied presence" (Tanner 104). They conclude that "the loss continually renew[s] itself" (Krasner 223), grief does not end; there is no hope for recovery. Tanner believes that "the work of grief" can leave the mourner with "an

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985); Leonard Kriegel, *Falling into Life* (1991); Nancy Mairs, *Carnal Acts* (1990) and *Plaintext* (1986); Samuel Wilson Fussell, *Muscle* (1991), John Hull, *Touching the Rock* (1991); Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face* (1994); Tim Brookes, *Catching My Breath* (1995); Anatole Broyard, *Intoxicated by my Illness* (1992); Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels* (1991); Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast* (1996); and John Updike, *Self-Consciousness* (1989).

experience of grief nameable under Freud's model only as melancholia" (104).

Abraham and Torok, however, differ mainly from Freud because whereas Freud believed melancholia was "inaccessible to consciousness" they offer "the possibility of *recovering* that which has been encrypted" (Hanson 90). Perhaps this points to a space between inconsolable grief and absolute recovery.

## LOSS OF BELOVED'S BODY

Both Tanner and Krasner emphasise the importance of the lost body and how that loss shapes the mourner's grief. Krasner argues that because the loved one is part of our "body schema," we "experience our loved ones' bodies as contiguous with our own" (221), so much so that when that body is lost to us, the experience is analogous to an amputee suffering from phantom limb pain. The literal experience of this is movingly captured in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* in which she writes of her mastectomy: "My breast which was no longer there would hurt as if it were being squeezed in a vise. That was perhaps the worst pain of all, because it would come with a full complement of horror that I was to be forever reminded of my loss by suffering in a part of me which was no longer there" (38). While it may seem problematic to equate a 'contiguous' other with a lost limb, Krasner's analogy is part of his larger theory that emphasises the mourner's "posture and location" (218) and the mourner's changed perception of his/her own embodied subjectivity in an environment devoid of the lost beloved's body: "A child no longer accompanied by a mother still reaches a hand toward where hers should be. . . . Our grief becomes a series of slight physical adjustments based on the fact that a body that was always here, in a certain relation to our own, is now gone" (219).

This is illustrated in Mary Gordon's *The Shadow Man*, who says "Whatever I learn about my father, I will not see his face or hear his voice or feel his hand taking mine, as I often pretend to, stretching my hand out in the darkness" (146). In an image directly echoing Krasner's analogy of phantom limbs, she describes feeling, after her father's death, "abandoned, cut off, like a limb that grows gangrenous because the heart's work is not being done" (248). The metaphor is not entirely uncommon. In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel offers a similar analogy. She says that although her father "didn't kill himself until I was nearly twenty" (23):

His absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him. Maybe it was the converse of the way amputees feel pain in a missing limb. He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials, smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne. But I ached as if he were already gone. (23)

Gerald N. Callahan, Associate Professor of Immunology, writes about the neurological basis of memory in "Chimera." He explains that if something changes abruptly in our external environment, "it may not be within our power to so abruptly change such deep-rooted images of ourselves and the world" (377). He asks, "[a]re the dead, then, living within my neurons—inside my own pictures of me?" (377). He too, makes a direct comparison between the death of a loved one and an amputated limb: "And then, if that man or woman is amputated from us, clipped as quickly and as cleanly as a gangrenous leg, our minds are suddenly forced into a new reality—a reality without the other, a reality in which an essential piece of us is missing" (378).

Krasner points out the similarities between Melzack's theories of phantom pain and Freud's description of the grief process: "in both the mind cycles,

continually returning to ‘the object that has been abolished’; in both the expectation is repeatedly met by the ‘verdict of reality’” (Krasner 224). But whereas in Freud’s theory, the mourner’s “repetitive laments” are accompanied by the completion of another “bit” of the grief process, the repetitive messages sent to the absent limb are “continually frustrated by the lack of exterior reassurance” (Krasner 224), directly echoing Lorde’s “full complement of horror that I was to be forever reminded of my loss by suffering in a part of me that was no longer there” (38). Indeed, Krasner would seem to support many “new wave” theories of grief in arguing that this is a pain that lasts forever: as repetitions become more and more painful as the brain sends futile messages to something that doesn’t exist yet to which it is nevertheless attached, “[t]he brain, if you will, shrieks and beats the ground, tears its clothes and pours ashes on its head, but does not sever its attachments” (224).

Even if we fail to “make the leap of considering another person’s body an element of one’s own body schema” (Krasner 225), Krasner’s argument is particularly important for the analysis of “grief in which physical disorientation becomes concomitant with emotional pain” and how the mourner is affected by “an unaccommodating physical environment in which the absence of the beloved’s body changes their habitual motion through space” (219). Didion’s own experience illustrates how the mourner’s “posture and location” (Krasner 218) changes when a loved one dies: “There came a time in the summer when I began feeling fragile, unstable. A sandal would catch on a sidewalk and I would need to run a few steps to avoid the fall. What if I didn’t? What if I fell? What would break, who would see the blood streaming down my leg?” (167). Here, grief is “manifested as crippling” (Krasner 219); it brings the body to the forefront of grief in recognising that “losing a loved one means losing not just a body but also one’s bodily engagements with it”

(Krasner 222) so that “the lost bodies seem also to remain . . . pressing against and moving past our bodies’ edges” (Krasner 225).

Tanner takes up this discussion, pointing out the problems inherent in a culture that ignores the importance of the body in loss, an importance that is recognised almost instinctively in *Tiger’s Eye*. After the death of her mother, Clendinnen speaks of “the absence of my mother’s lips” and asks, “what is grief but lack of particular lips?” (8). To illustrate the importance of the lost beloved’s body in the configuring of grief, Tanner uses James Agee’s novel *A Death in the Family*, to show how the young boy Rufus reacts to his father’s dead body laying in state in the living room. Rufus focuses on his father’s hand, which “he longed, in shyness, to touch [but knows] that he must not” (qtd. in Tanner 85). The importance of this scene as Tanner describes it is that “[a]lthough Rufus is invited—even commanded—to look at his father’s body,” he must also “internaliz[e] a cultural prohibition against touching that familiar form” and ends up “alone in his own body” (86). Though Tanner points out how Agee “captur[es] the torment of a young boy’s response to the presence of a beloved body he is forced to see but forbidden to touch, [and] encapsulates cultural assumptions about grief that deny the role of the body in loss” (87), I wish to explore further how the internalisation of these cultural assumptions contribute to a damaging, polluted sense of embodied self without the beloved other.

In *The Shadow Man*, Gordon develops chicken pox directly after her father’s death. This prompts her to ask: “Did I make myself sick so that I could enact, on my own skin, my sense of defilement? . . . Did I believe that my loathsomeness without my father should be marked?” (248). Her altered identity in the absence of her father’s body manifests itself literally on the body and is interpreted by her as a sense of defilement because of the very cultural assumptions that Tanner refers to which

deny access and even disavow the desire for the beloved's body. At the funeral, she says: "I know I wasn't wearing my white gloves because I remember the cold feeling of my father's hand, which I tried to hold. I wanted to climb up to embrace him, but I was prevented. I had the sense that everyone wanted me taken away" (249).

Gordon's sense of "defilement," of "loathsomeness," at the loss of her father is directly linked to the loss of his body: "Why does losing the beloved to death make one feel polluted? I touched my father's dead hand; I was glad to touch it. That wasn't the thing that made me feel polluted; I was sorry to give it up. What is the source of the pollution? Touching the dead hand, or letting go of it?" (248).

Importantly, I believe Gordon's question addresses the essence of Tanner's argument but goes even further in highlighting how a "polluted" sense of subjectivity comes from cultural stigmas towards death and the absence of any discussion of the loss of the beloved's body in the mourning process. As a child, Gordon is led to think that she is somehow polluted in wanting to touch the dead hand, in wanting to crawl into her father's coffin: ("everyone wanted me taken away"). Yet being made to "let go" of the beloved's body prematurely, and being unable to figure the body's absence as important in the mourning process, is what is ultimately polluting.

Instead, the mourner is encouraged to convert the desire for touch into a more acceptable desire to gaze: "Although Rufus is invited—even commanded—to look at his father's body, his internalization of a cultural prohibition against touching that familiar form pushes him into a desperate attempt to re-establish intercorporeality through the gaze" (Tanner 86). Tanner argues that this process can never end in Freud's theory of "normal" mourning because memory, or the image of the lost beloved, is a constant reminder of the absence of the body of the beloved. Both Tanner and Krasner argue that taking the body into account unravels Freud's theory of



mourning, especially in terms of the role of memory in mourning. For Freud, memory “provides a form of recollected presence against which the absence of the lost object can be measured and eventually absorbed” (Tanner 104); the subject separates herself from the lost object “bit by bit” and eventually is healed under a normal process of mourning. For Tanner and Krasner, however, this process can only ever end in what Freud terms as “melancholia” because of memory’s failure to accurately replace the lost beloved’s body with a mere image: Tanner says “The testing of past presence against present absence that Freud describes in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ depends upon memory’s ability to restore the missing object in imaginative terms” (104) but she believes any attempt to do so fails because the embodied deceased can never be replaced and so the subject “finds itself spiralling into an experience of grief nameable under Freud’s model only as melancholia” (104). To illustrate her point she analyses Ruth’s response to her mother’s death in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, where Ruth is obsessed with her mother’s missing body (97) and where “visual images of lost bodies mock her in their seeming presence” while “the tactile interaction of her own body with those bodies is so irrevocably absent as to call into question even the fact of its past existence” (99).

#### LOSS OF THE MOURNER’S EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY

These people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves invisible. I myself felt invisible for a period of time, incorporeal.

--Joan Didion

In the last section, we saw how for Tanner and Krasner, the actual lost body of the loved one absolutely informs the experience of grief; however, for the rest of the chapter, I’m shifting the focus of my analysis from the “missing . . . inaccessible” body of the lost loved one (Tanner 97), to the mourner’s loss of her own sense of

embodied subjectivity, her sense of her body as “absence” (Tanner 102). I’m concerned with how the mourner’s perception of self as embodied subject changes during experiences of loss.

Tanner explains that the mourner’s experience of grief is necessarily a disembodied one: “grief remains primarily a disembodied process that exaggerates—not mitigates—the sudden isolation of one body from another” (101) and uses Ruth to illustrate “a state of contingency in which she experiences her body as an absence” (102). In this section, my analysis explores how “[l]ife’s greatest and most grievous losses disconnect us from ourselves” (Hooyman and Kramer 2) and focuses on how the mourner’s experience of grief affects her own sense of herself as embodied subject in parent-bereavement narratives: Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica*, Mary Gordon’s *The Shadow Man*, Judith Barrington’s *Lifesaving*, and Kim Mahood’s *Craft For A Dry Lake*, as well as Inga Clendinnen and Lucy Grealy’s illness narratives *Tiger’s Eye* and *Autobiography of a Face*.

#### JENNY DISKI’S *SKATING TO ANTARCTICA*

The primary text analysed in detail in this chapter, Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica*, is essentially a survival narrative that resists the common tropes of that genre. On the surface it reads as a humorous travel narrative; and yet, Diski undertakes a journey to Antarctica having accumulated losses that could easily appear in any number of trauma narratives: coming from an unstable home with suicidal parents, she experiences neglect, abuse, and homelessness as a child, ends up in a mental institution at 14 when she attempts suicide herself, and battles ongoing depression throughout her life. The main thrust of the narrative, however, concerns itself with Diski’s journey to Antarctica, a journey fuelled by her desire for oblivion.

Since 1966 when she last saw her mother, she has carefully avoided finding out whether she is alive or dead, preferring to cocoon herself in a state of blissful ignorance. At the beginning of the narrative, Diski compares her mother to Schrodinger's cat: "so my mother is, in quantum theory terms, both dead and alive at the same time for as long as the box is closed" (22). Diski's life up until this point has been concerned with keeping that lid closed, but when her daughter insists on ordering "Rachel Simmonds's" death certificate (the woman who might turn out to be her mother), the lid is precariously propped open and Diski's carefully constructed oblivion comes under threat. And so, at the outset of her journey, she has much to lose. She has used oblivion to protect herself against the truth of her mother's existence; yet overshadowing this journey is the knowledge that when she gets back she will no longer be able to live in the state of oblivion to which she has been accustomed. Perhaps that is why she seeks it so desperately throughout her trip: "Some realities you *can* get away from" (29)—the reality that her mother might be alive—"I had no desire for the option of her still being alive to become real" (29). And so we will see how her journey, the pursuit of oblivion, becomes an almost studied exercise in disembodiment as she seeks to maintain a detachment from her environment and stave off the dismantling of the protection she has fought so hard for, the loss that will inevitably come with knowing the truth. This exercise in disembodiment still argues for the primary placement of the body at the locus of grief, even in its desire to be free of the body.

One of the dominant features of the narrative is whiteness. The narrative opens with a description of Diski's white bedroom, where, every morning she "arrange[s] [her]self carefully" so that she "can open [her] eyes to nothing but whiteness" (1). It's immediately obvious that this "wish for whiteout" (that began

during her hospitalisation) stands for a desire for nothingness, as Diski tells us:

“Oblivion, strictly speaking, was what I was after” (2). This whiteness is intimately bound up with her search for oblivion, and indeed, it’s easy at first to miss the serious implications of such a wish because of the dry humour undercutting the whole experience. Diski’s sense of humour can on the surface negate the seriousness of her quest for oblivion, at once a desire triggered by several traumatic losses—she describes always having had a “private hankering for oblivion” (180)—and a device that keeps them at bay. If it were not for the sheer relentlessness with which Diski pursues her “will to emptiness” (57) and the extent to which this desire colours the entire narrative, it might be possible, at first, to mistake it as an almost idle wish for peace and quiet, as something unrelated to traumatic loss. For instance, during the stopover at Buenos Aires she says, “I wondered what it is like to be avid for experience, but not for long, as I sank blissfully and incuriously into sleep” (41). Later, contemplating her need to take the journey she reflects: “So what it came down to was that I wanted to be there, in a white, empty, unpeopled, silent landscape.” But then comes the undercut immediately after: “Perhaps I urgently wanted to be on the moon, but that was marginally more difficult to arrange” (121).

Asides like this are a distinct feature of her writing style and help to disguise some of the more serious aspects that appear in trauma narratives. But despite the light undertone, the wish for oblivion is repeated in so many ways that it becomes impossible to ignore. In Ushuaia she wants to “sleep away the unsettling sense of being still in transit” (47) and though she’s not unaware of the irony of seeking stillness on a journey that keeps her constantly in motion—again humorously referring throughout to her “constant wish to stay where I am” (60)—her need for solitude in her cabin on the ship becomes more and more urgent. Early on in the trip

she remarks, “It was already not solitary enough” (45) and she wants to be in her cabin “like a mole wants to be in its dark hole under-ground” (47). The solitude she craves and the detachment she strives to achieve are just outgrowths of this wish for oblivion. It leads to a performance of a disembodied self as she detaches from the people around her externally, while also detaching from internal painful memories. We will see how this leads to a disembodied state that becomes more apparent when contrasted to her childhood recollections and the extent to which such memories facilitate a re-embodied performance of self.

As the narrative progresses, we see just how important oblivion, or solitude, is—it is her self-protection, her cocoon, the thing she most stands to lose. And so her need for oblivion pervades all aspects of the narrative and colours her relationship with other people. She seeks solitude and tries to remain detached from all the other travellers on the trip. Somehow, instead of the “ice princess” that her mother tries to make of her, she becomes self-professed “ice-maiden” (19). Her description of the ice in the ice rink at the beginning of the book foreshadows this: “You slide over its surface, but there is no engaging with it” (15). It’s an apt metaphor when we see how she remains detached and continually keeps her emotions at bay. Not only does she desire to not-know (whether her mother is alive or dead), but also to not-feel. Although initially taken with the elderly Jewish couple, Emily and Manny Roth, when Diski witnesses them arguing, she says: “I was an outsider and not obliged to absorb whatever pain went along with all this” (69). Also, when she thinks about the Scott/Shackleton feud: “I did not wish to feel very strongly about them” (158). In the landscape too is a reflection of herself: “I ached for the endurance and the indifference of this landscape” (162). This detachment, indifference, unavailability, isolation, is

all an expression and an extension of the oblivion and nothingness she craves as a way of protecting herself from the loss of her defences.

Yet in her descriptions of the people around her, even as she tries to maintain this distance, we can increasingly find connections between them and her—reflections of what we already know of her. Mona's husband Ted and his "refusal to countenance the reality of death" (42) is not unlike her own reaction to the dead fox and her refusal to think about the reality of her mother being dead, or worse, alive: "I had only wanted landscape" but she is "confronted by the evidence of mortality" (the dead fox). "I wasn't in search of the drama of life and death, but of what there is or isn't before and after. Changeless stuff. Empty stuff. Oblivion" (49). The same is true of her description of John and James: "There was an isolated part in each of them that you suspected was utterly unavailable to anyone" (127), and if Diski doesn't make the connection to herself explicit with them, she does with Janice. Janice is detached, "chronically depressed . . . a wraith throughout the trip . . . face . . . set as if in perpetual mourning" (134). Despite her attempt at isolation and detachment, Diski's interaction with Janice acts as catalyst for an embodied performance of self. It seems to illustrate Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm: "By locating the basis of perception in intercorporeality, [he] not only stresses the implication of human experience in the body but exposes the impossibility of disentangling bodies from one another" (Tanner 88). The only point where the narrative implies that she is mourning, the only place where Diski almost admits to mourning, is when she identifies absolutely with Janice's condition: "I think Janice is someone who lives deep, or perhaps not so very deep, inside me" (135). Up until this point the narrative has been a kind of refusal of mourning. But here, Diski admits to feeling as though Janice is somehow part of her own body, "deep . . . inside me." It illustrates that

“Given the chiasmic structure of one’s identity, one cannot be oneself without already being the site of the interfolding of other bodies, of other beings into one’s own embodied existence” (Hatley qtd. in Tanner 88). Thus, from a feverish wish for detachment and isolation at the beginning of the journey, Diski comes to identify so closely with another’s experience of grief so as to incorporate Janice into her own embodied existence, an existence which, before this, consisted not really of a body at all but of white, empty, oblivion. Though it is such a fleeting incident within the narrative, made up of only a few sentences, it is an important example of how Diski begins to write herself into her body, begins to perform an embodied self.

Diski’s detachment from the other travellers is an outward manifestation of the inward struggle she undergoes to remove herself from painful childhood memories. Two key incidents help illustrate how grief is “primarily a disembodied process” (Tanner 101). Yet, somewhat ironically, at the point of achieving the oblivion and detachment she craves, she is thrust into an embodied performance of self. This, however, is short lived, as Diski deliberately detaches herself from painful embodied reactions and once again enters a disembodied state where she can protect herself. I will go on to look in detail at how these two incidents (though they end ultimately in Diski’s deliberate disembodiment in the face of loss) also offer important examples of brief performances of an embodied self. These experiences, though fleeting, are important in moving Diski into her body, into an embodied self that is—to some extent—a recovered self.

When Diski reaches her cabin on the *Vavilov*, which is scheduled to leave from Ushuaia, “the southernmost city in the world” (56), she is immediately thrilled with her environment, which is reminiscent of the description of her bedroom at the beginning of the narrative: “Plain white walls . . . The bedding, to my delight, was all

white. Sheet, pillow cases and thin padded duvet, neatly folded and ship-shape.

White, all white" (58). She can enjoy her "inactivity," again, laced with gentle undercutting humour: "my watching of empty space. . . . I looked with great care at nothing in particular and noted deliberately the nothing I was looking at" (60). That night her description of the sea closely echoes all that she has been desiring:

There was nothing out there, just an arc of horizon. . . . We really were in the middle of nowhere and there was nothing but sea and sky as far as the eye could reach. Not white, but real emptiness. . . . Our first stop was to be at South Georgia, 800 miles to the south east of Ushuaia, and there was not a thing between, only sea, sky and space. At this point on the planet you could travel its span without bumping into a single piece of land before returning to where you started. . . . I was beguiled by the sea and so much of it; snow and ice and white places were in abeyance for the time being. (75)

But perhaps because the sea is all that ice is not—"the sea moves, engages with the body of the swimmer, while the ice is enigmatic, separate from the skater" (15)—that night the rocking of the ship leads to one of the most intensely embodied moments she experiences as an adult: "I felt the stern to bow rocking laterally, across my body. . . . It was a kind of dance my body was doing to the music of the ship . . . until I was being rocked by the planet itself" (76-77). This movement in her bunk leads her to think about "that other kind of watery floating—suspended in amniotic fluid" (79), the body-memory of being in her mother's womb. But the memory is not pleasant: she says that she would rather be "an alien even, than to suppose that I spent nine warm contented months in my mother's uterus. That my first comfort was from within her body. Her body nurturing me" (79). In terms of narrative structure, this



chapter has been a deliberate break from the opening scene which ends abruptly when Diski gives her daughter permission to order the death certificate. This chapter has dealt largely with the first leg of Diski's journey, a deliberate, significant break that structurally mirrors her "hopeful voyage into whiteness" (120), removing the subject of her mother from the narrative altogether until now. But the thought of her mother's "body nurturing me" leads her for the first time to think about the fact that soon she will find out whether her mother is alive or dead. It is also the first time (since she recalls ice skating as a child) that she is really rooted in her body: thinking suddenly that her mother really could be alive results in "the [same] sort of vertigo I was currently feeling at the idea of being my mother's foetus: a dizziness in my head and in my solar plexus as if I was standing on a high place looking down" (79). The bodily feeling overwhelms her and she deliberately detaches herself from it, resolving not to think any more about it until there is positive proof of whether her mother is alive or dead. The effect is immediate: "the feeling of dizziness disappear[s]" and she enters a disembodied state, "once again deliciously on my floating bed, absolutely where I wanted to be," where her only view is of the sky "occluded with dove-grey cloud and . . . shadowed white" (80). Surrounded by white, she is able to detach herself, "floating" out of the bodily discomfort that comes with attempting to lift the lid on Schrodinger's box. For now she is able to maintain her protective state of oblivion.

Another incident on the ship that parallels this one happens not too long after, when she is on the navigation deck with two other sailors, feeling as much at home as she has in her cabin: "It was as close to being alone in the ocean as it was possible to get" (137). Finding the solitude she has been craving, and in the space of this stillness, she thinks for the second time about the death certificate: "What did I feel?

Nothing . . . and then a shock: if she is dead, then she has been alive all those intervening years, living, breathing, sharing the same air on the same planet" (137). The reality of her mother being alive has always been the worst reality she could contemplate and yet now the prospect of her death accompanies worse thoughts still. It is as though the concept of intercorporeality, crucial to Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm, is something unbearable to Diski. The "ongoing interaction between the flesh of the body, the flesh of others, and the flesh of the world" (Gail Weiss qtd. in Tanner 88) is something that she physically cannot endure. The thought of her "living, breathing" embodied mother "sharing the same air on the same planet," in essence, sharing "the flesh of the world" is too "concrete" (137) for her to bear and she slips familiarly back into that "abstract" (137) disembodied state she was in before the thought occurred: when she, like the sailors, "had that unfocused, dream look in their eyes" (137). She deliberately unravels the chiasm (the effects of which is the basis of Tanner's study), pulling herself back from thoughts of an embodied mother connected to her through space, and contemplates instead unanswerable questions about the horizon which allows her to "return [to] some tranquillity" (138), not unlike, I suppose, "floating" on her bed in her cabin. These examples are deliberate detachments from the body in the face of loss.

In fact, we can call this almost a "default" mode of detachment into which Diski slips every time she confronts the thought of her mother and the impending loss of her protective layer of oblivion. Her response is similar when confronting childhood memories, though the effect—the performance of a disembodied self—is more dramatically apparent. Here her response to a lost childhood is to completely separate the child from herself. Chapter 3, the first chapter in the narrative of childhood recollection begins with an introduction of "Jennifer," as distinct from the

adult “Jenny” or “Diski.” She remembers Jennifer as she might remember a fictitious child character in a book, “no more certain than any other figment of my imagination” (82). Jennifer is so much a part of her psychic construction so as to be a separate person altogether, completely disembodied from her: “she was a separate incarnation, not a present remembering self. . . . Jennifer inhabited her own existence, physically other, not me, not part of the continuum of me” (83). Diski insists that the Jennifer in her writing remains a character (or characters) with its own autonomy, but that “Jennifer, the faded child, remains as faded as ever” (82). Diski continually emphasises the immateriality of Jennifer and how, “with each remembering, each re-remembering, the living, flesh-and-blood fact of her slips incrementally from my grasp” (81). But does it? If we look at what goes on during the process of remembering, we see something interesting happening in terms of self-performance. “With each . . . re-remembering” of childhood, Diski’s descriptions become more and more rooted in the language of the body until she has effectively written herself back into the childhood body, into her own adult body and a performance of a firmly embodied self. Later, I’ll consider whether this embodied self indicates a recovered self not otherwise immediately apparent in these texts which complicate traditional notions of healing.

#### *ENTRY INTO THE BODY THROUGH CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTION*

Up to this point we’ve seen how, for Diski, the grief process involves detachment, disembodiment from any thoughts of loss. The loss of her child-self has resulted in a split so absolute that Diski can no longer reconcile her own sense of self with the child she once was. At which point in the narrative, and how exactly, does Diski begin to reinhabit her body and reconnect with her child self? I want to draw on

Tanner and Krasner's reworking of Freud's theory of mourning in order to place the body firmly within that process and explore the implications this has on memoirists' performance of an embodied self as a symbol of recovery. Tanner talks about "the unspoken, bodily dynamics of grief" to refer to Ruth's wish to restore the body of her mother by imaginatively constructing her out of snow (100); I am looking at the unspoken, perhaps unconscious need for the mourner to restore her own body in the face of a disembodied self. In the novel *Housekeeping*, Tanner discusses Ruth's "attempt to regain some form of sensory engagement with the bodies lost to her" (102); I look at how the mourner regains sensory engagement with her own body, how she experiences herself as once again embodied.

When we start to look at the language Diski uses to describe her child-self, we see a person strikingly present in her body. When the narrative of childhood recollection begins, even after her assertions regarding the incorporeality of Jennifer, the descriptions are embodied: we see a child who "would lie in bed and *feel through her spine* the presence of the horror which lived under her in the space between the bottom of the divan and the carpet" (85)"she knew *in her very marrow* that the monsters were there" (85), she "got down *on her hands and knees*" to check and opened the cupboard door with "*heart pounding*" (italics mine, 85). However, the first description of herself as a child of two appears just a couple of pages into the book. The bodily description here is facilitated by body-memory: "My feet also remember the awkwardness of walking on the rubber matting to get on to the rink. Sitting on the chair next to my mother with my boot on her lap, first one pushed firmly on, then the other, the jerking taut of the laces at each eyelet—the tightness of the laces around the ankle" (16). Along with the sensory feelings in her feet, she can remember the ice hitting her face: a "cold dry sensation on your cheeks" (16), and

“push[ing] away the barrier with my hand” (17). In explaining how “My feet have retained the memory of skating” (15) Diski reminds us of the importance of embodied memory, a subject that informs Paul John Eakins’s study of autobiography. In *Living Autobiographically* he summarises Proust’s views: “For Proust, the body, prompting memory, is central to this saving work of orientation, keeping us from falling out of our lives. . . . We can count on embodied memory to lift us from ‘the abyss of not-being’” (2). For Diski, embodied memory lifts her out of her disembodied state. So that even while she may assert that “Jennifer, the faded child, remains as faded as ever” (82), in fact, memories of the child are embodied, and in writing the body of the child, the adult Diski begins to inhabit the flesh-and-blood body of Jennifer through memory.

#### *COMPLEX RECOVERY*

If Diski’s journey to Antarctica can be understood as a search for oblivion, the narrative recollecting her childhood (and intersecting with the first) is a search for answers. That search culminates in her conversations with Mrs. Rosen and the other neighbours that take place over two separate visits told in dramatic dialogue which is itself interrupted by Diski’s non-linear memories of her parents and her childhood. In terms of catalyst, “the threat of my live or dead mother suddenly coming back into my life” (207) sparks off her visit which chronologically takes place before she leaves for Antarctica. This is interesting in terms of narrative structure because within the time-frame of the book, the person who is travelling away from the reality of the past and towards Antarctica is simultaneously seeking what really happened in the corridors of Paramount Court. The narrative structure speaks directly to the ambiguities inherent in loss. These ambiguities carry over into the metaphors of whiteness and oblivion.

Diski knows that “Oblivion is a place that has no co-ordinates in space. . . . In my dreams though, I was after a state where nothing would or could happen” (180). Yet there is a turning point when oblivion becomes associated not so much with emptiness, as with meaning. When she reads Melville’s description of whiteness as “a dumb blankness, full of meaning” (181), she comes to the conclusion that “My attraction to blankness, to oblivion, was just as Melville described it, a sense that at source absence was everything” (182). The narrative structure mirrors this as she travels farther and farther away from her past to Antarctica and oblivion, yet closer and closer to answers and confrontation with that past. The narratives are separated by alternating chapters, and yet, there are moments, perhaps not unlike wormholes, where the voice of the author of the Antarctica narrative appears in the childhood recollection narrative, for example, when she thinks about Melville’s meaning of whiteness during the recollection narrative, or when a recollection of childhood surfaces in the Antarctica narrative, as we shall see in her experience at St. Andrew’s Bay.

But one of the most striking differences between Diski’s reaction to loss within the two narratives is that while she deliberately detaches herself from painful embodied memories on her way to Antarctica, in the childhood narrative, we actually see a woman keen to confront what went on at Paramount Court. Instead of designating Jennifer to “her own existence, physically other, not me, not part of a continuum of me” (83), Diski wants to discover whether the child self she has been remembering (and “re-remembering”) is real. Her meetings with Mrs. Rosen allow Diski to test the reality of her memory of Jennifer against the real person that Mrs. Rosen remembers (even as a disembodied Diski attempts to escape to Antarctica). The process mirrors Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm: “Insofar as the human subject always

approaches the world through the locatedness of the body . . . perception must be understood as a dynamic, interactive process in which the subject can see and touch only insofar as it is seen and touched by the surrounding world” (Tanner 87-88).

Thus the presence of Mrs. Rosen and the other neighbours is vital in giving Jennifer, in essence, back to Diski: “Me. I was. Nerve-racking that. . . . Someone had been watching, it wasn’t just me, myself and I waiting for it to end. I wasn’t entirely a figment of my imagination, and up to that point, I could have been. They remembered Jennifer. Remembered me” (186). This moment is important because it is now, when the adult merges with the memory of the child that Diski firmly occupies her body: “I was shaken, shaking actually” (186). It’s reminiscent of what happens the first time she hears Mrs. Rosen call her “Jennifer” over the phone, when she feels an “odd wooziness come over [her]” (90). As she learns the truth about her child self and the parents of that child: “I felt weak, fraudulent, and I could almost physically discern the flaky genes pumping around in my system, in my heart, my veins, my chemistry” (187). This is similar to her reaction in the cabin—the dizziness and nausea—yet this time she does not deliberately detach herself from the painful memories. Instead, this merging of adult and child reminds her of another self, one that existed between the two, a self engulfed by depression. A self she had “avoided acknowledging” but now accepts as “being what I really was, what I couldn’t help but be” (188). Although she remembers debilitating depression and must continue to struggle with it, she knows that “however bad the depression, [although she might be] in a particular place [she can’t] get out of, . . . [she knows] other places exist[.]” (188).

A key incident parallels this within the Antarctic narrative, where we see Diski again confronting painful childhood memories, but for the first time on her trip, she doesn’t immediately detach herself from them or seek protective oblivion. Her

experience of the cold at St. Andrew's Bay (via body-memory) transports her back to the childhood trauma of being homeless, and Diski experiences perhaps one of the most intensely embodied moments of the book: She describes the wind:

It picked up the black sand and hurled it painfully against my face. . . . It was also now no longer raining but sleeting horizontally. My eyes wept, my nose ran, and within a few minutes I had a sharp pain in my left eye which radiated down my cheek, although it wasn't pain, it was cold such as I had never experienced. Cold as pain rather than mere discomfort . . . when it reached the flesh, I felt I had an inkling of what it means to be cold, but then it went deeper, and after half an hour it had gone beyond the skin and directly into the bones. My very marrow was chilled. I felt iced and saturated from head to foot. It was as if the wind, having got my measure, was denying my existence and simply rattling through me. (164-5).

Here body-memory propels her back to childhood and the memory of being homeless. In remembering she moves back into her body: "I remember watching my feet walk on the shiny wet pavement" (167) when they were waiting to be evicted. And "though my heart and everything else was already cold, it turned icier still with something more than the effect of windchill" (167). But here, importantly and for the first time in the Antarctica narrative, she doesn't detach herself from these memories. In living, intensely, the painful childhood memories, in experiencing herself intensely as embodied, she is able to confront the past:

Some things I'll never get away from, not even in the farthest reaches of the South Atlantic, but, with a bit of effort, I can recognize them as a passing wind blowing through me, chilling me to the bone, an act of



nature that isn't personal, or not any more. If I wept on the beach at St. Andrew's Bay, they were tears belonging to another time. The past can still make me shiver, but no bones are broken. (167).

So it would seem that re-entry into the body is linked to a recovered self. In speaking to Mrs. Rosen, Diski recovers her child self, and the experience which leaves her "shaken, shaking actually" (186), leads also to the acceptance of a self that exists between the child and the adult, a self damaged by depression. On St. Andrew's Bay, an intensely embodied moment leads to the confrontation of childhood trauma through body-memory, but the confrontation ends with the knowledge that though "the past can still make me shiver, no bones are broken" (167). Chronology isn't important here; it doesn't matter that her encounter with Mrs Rosen took place before her journey to Antarctica. In terms of narrative, Diski merges with her child self and enters into her body only when her journey to Antarctica is well underway. These incidents speak to each other across wormholes in the two narratives. In the narrative of loss (loss of protective oblivion, loss of childhood), the progression of mourning shows detachment/ disembodiment followed by childhood memory-retrieval, a process which is rooted in the language of the body and facilitates the mourner's movement into the body, allowing for the performance of an embodied self, an embodied self that is at least somewhat recovered, healed from trauma.

This experience, then, doesn't seem to fit the absolute failure of mourning described by critics who refute Freud. For Tanner, memory will always fail in its attempt to recover the lost beloved. However, we have seen how memory plays a very different role within the recovery of a lost child-self (in contrast to the lost body of the beloved). Whereas according to Tanner the mourner can never replace the lost body of the beloved other, we have seen how the mourner here can in fact re-occupy

the body of a (previously disembodied) remembered self. Instead of “experience[ing] memory as a violation that taunts her by parading images of her mother’s body before her eyes but rendering that body invulnerable and untouchable” (Tanner 98), in remembering her child self, images of the body surface to the extent that Diski can reinhabit the self that was lost to her. So we can say that remembering is like ice skating: “The clear distinction between yourself and the ice you are on strengthens the sensation of your own body” (16). In this case, some recovery is available to Diski, her experience does not end in “a mourning [that] would not be comforted” (Tanner 105).

But neither can we say that her experience is the clean process of mourning that Freud outlines, or those typical “narrative[s] of psychologically successful mourning that propels the subject through memory toward healing” (Tanner 105). We’ve seen how Diski is propelled through memory towards embodiment and thus a measure of healing. But mourning is not quite over in the Freudian sense because of several features of this narrative—features that manifest within the performance of an embodied self and complicate recovery.

Diski complicates the traditional “survivor narrative” (and thus traditional notions of the survivor being “healed”) in the way that she encourages us to think differently about the term “abuse.” Three incidents describing Diski’s embodied child self call attention to the ambiguity of this term and serve to highlight Diski’s impatience with the current climate of fascination with sensationalised stories of child abuse. When Mrs. Rosen asks whether her father abused her, the word shocks her:

I realized fully how the word “abuse” has become such a pervasive modern euphemism, suggestive yet unclear, a declaration of something shocking without *saying* anything shocking. As effective as a

Victorian covering for table legs, concealing but pointing to the thrillingly vulgar, the word *incest* tickling the back of the throat without being spoken. (109)

The question sparks off an intensely embodied memory of sleeping in her father's bed when her parents had had a fight.

He would put his arms around me and hold me against his hairy chest. . . . I relished the feel and smell of his warm body, as I nuzzled into his hairy chest, and squeezed myself tight up against his beating heart. I adored being held in his arms and feeling his big hands stroking me. Stroking me where? Everywhere, I think. (110)

This leads to a similar memory about the game she and her parents would play after her bath, when she would “run naked between them as each . . . reached out for my vagina and tried to tickle it. When they caught me, their fingers at my vulva, I would squeal and shriek and wriggle with the equivocal agony tickling engenders” (110).

These descriptions, ambiguously ominous, complicate the term “abuse” and serve to highlight the complex and troubled relationship between her parents. In fact, in thinking back on the game it occurs to Diski that her parents were using her as a sort of conduit or go-between because of how very poorly they related to each other: “It was my family's way of having a good time, and there were so few good times that these occasions have a golden haze over them as I recollect them” (110). It would seem as though these embodied memories lead to a kind of healing. Certainly, with her father, she says “I took in his physical affection like draughts of delicious drink. I don't recall feeling anything but safe and loved in this private midnight comforting” (110).

And yet, for all this, her train of thought ends with the memory of her mother's real attempt at sexual abuse when she was fourteen and Diski's subsequent suicide attempt the following day. Although we've seen before this that Diski does not blame her mother—"Bad, sad luck; human child-rearing arrangements are a crap shoot. You might as well be enraged at the ice for being too fragile to hold your weight" (103)—the ominous tone beneath these embodied descriptions culminate in the memory of how her mother "slipped a hand around my pelvis and down between my legs, and began to caress me" (111). Diski implies that perhaps as a child she could not have been aware of the implications of what she has just described as "It was only later with the arrival of a sense of sexual privacy when I was fourteen that I responded in what might now be considered an appropriate way" (111). In the end Diski writes off "those dark nights in bed with my father" and dismisses the idea of a "private exchange between me and him" as "just a child's misreading of herself as the centre of the universe" (110-111). The ominous undertones, confusion and ambiguity surrounding these incidents, however, complicate notions of recovery otherwise implied by the "golden haze" (110) of memory. Certainly, this complicated and painful experience of "embodiment" as a child sets up the longing for disembodiment that is so obvious later in the text.

Further, the healing or recovery that accompanies an embodied performance of self comes with a sort of "disclaimer." I want to revisit the two pivotal embodied episodes (the visit with Mrs. Rosen and St. Andrew's Bay) where we have already seen a measure of healing take place. When Diski visits Mrs. Rosen, she "offered me four-year-old Jennifer standing up for herself. . . . There was a tough child, right from the start, with a sense of herself. A survivor" (207). Yet even as the adult Diski and the child Jennifer merge, the adult undercuts our traditional view of the survivor:

“Sometimes I am ashamed of this survivor. Some less positive aspect of myself dislikes the degree of will, the determination it implies” (207). Furthermore, the acceptance and insight into depression that Diski gains from this encounter is undercut at the end of the narrative as a sort of paradox inherent in depression. Diski says “the silence and absence of the place where depression puts you brings the possibility of getting close to contentment” (226). She makes it clear that she is not glorifying depression, but explains that having survived it, with support, “I found it was possible after a time to achieve a kind of joy totally disconnected from the world” (227). Although she has written herself back into her body and experienced herself as an intensely embodied subject, which comes along with the degree of healing we’ve already seen, this does not completely eradicate that early yearning for detachment. “I wanted to be unavailable and in that place [where depression puts you] without the pain. *I still want it*. It is coloured white and filled with a singing silence. It is an endless ice rink. It is antarctic” (italics mine, 227). The subtle shift in tense here alerts us to an adult Diski who, at the end of her journey has perhaps not found what she has been looking for. This yearning for detachment fuelled by depression at the end of the narrative frustrates the recovery we have seen when Diski goes through the embodied experience of merging with her child self: a “survivor” that she’s nevertheless “ashamed of”; and a “depression” that she paradoxically yearns for. Similarly, at St. Andrew’s Bay, we see that the painful childhood memory that she relives is not something over and done with, but a moment that repeats itself in a way that is reminiscent of trauma victims. The fact that the painful reliving of this childhood trauma is ongoing is again evident in the shift in tense:

It was a new notion, the idea of being on a street in London with no destination. It truly scared me. Sometimes I find myself in London at

night looking for a taxi and fall, unreasonably, into a panic. I suppose it's a regurgitation of the 'nowhere to go' fear from those weeks when I was eleven. Suddenly, I am bereft, lost, and a terror wells up, for all that I am an adult in the centre of London with a centrally heated flat waiting for me not very far away. I've wept once or twice on the street, all of a sudden certain that no taxi will appear, all the buses will be full, just that I am out on the street and not securely at home. (167)

It's no mistake that Diski places pivotal moments of the clearest declarations of recovery half-way through the narrative and frames them with embodied performances of self that complicate notions of healing. Despite (or perhaps because of) having gone through cathartic episodes at Mrs. Rosen's and St. Andrew's Bay, Diski spends the last leg of her journey sick in her bunk. Following on from her experience at St. Andrew's bay, the extreme physical discomfort, as well as the difficult memories of embodied childhood trauma (watching her feet walk the streets homeless), perhaps it is not surprising that she wakes up with "a small damp weight inside of me" (208). This contrasts starkly with the beginning of her narrative, when she wakes up to the whiteness and oblivion so necessary to her detachment and her ability to not-feel. Suffering from a cold in a bunk on the *Vavilov* she is much more an embodied self at the end of her journey than she was in the beginning. She's gained certain insights and has recovered from her loss to a degree. She's proved that her lost childhood self, like Abraham and Torok's notion of loss, is finally recoverable. Yet painful memories of a lost childhood may remain what Tennyson calls a "loss forever new" (qtd. in Krasner 226), and what Tanner and Krasner believe ensures no end to grief. Having gone as far as she can in her journey, she finds a landscape "so untroubled by itself that the heart ached" (222), illustrating the

complexity of recovery in this last embodied performance—a self nevertheless still “troubled by itself.”

Diski tells us that the impetus for her journey was “simply an irrational desire to be at the bottom of the world in a land of ice and snow” (120). At the outset, she does worry about what will happen when she gets there, whether, since “[t]he point of desire is desire itself” (7), her trip to Antarctica will turn out to be not unlike the ice-skating rink of her childhood “[a] promise made purely for the pleasure of creating disappointment” (8). Rather worriedly, she asks, “If you could have what you dream about, if I could have Antarctica all white and solitary and boundless, there would finally be no excuse. Imagine, you are exactly where you want to be—and now what? Yes white, yes solitary, yes boundless, but will it, in its icy, empty, immense reality, do?” (7). It’s a question we don’t quite get the answer to. Ice has operated throughout the narrative as a metaphor for her detachment, her desire not to engage with the people around her, not to engage with her memories, but instead, to skim a hard surface. (This is in contrast to the gentle rocking of the water, which transports her back to her past and forces her to engage with her past through body-memory). When she finally comes face to face with an iceberg, the experience does not live up to her expectation, though again, she is characteristically understated in her retelling of what should be the climax in the narrative: instead, the discrepancy is “in keeping with the interesting but not fatal disparity between my fantasies and the rest of the trip so far” (211). The revelation is that “the icebergs close up, even quite far away, were not daydream white at all. Blue. Icebergs are blue” (211). Perhaps unexpectedly, the blue colour “does no violence to my hankering for white.” On the contrary, the iceberg becomes a metaphor for her experience of loss: the “aching blue” (212) “belonged with and in the ice, making it seem colder, emotionally empty,” echoing

the detachment and oblivion she has been striving for, and yet, at the end of her journey, turns out to be “more dense, layered beyond what could be observed” (211-212), not unlike her own narration of loss. What she finds at the base of the iceberg is not oblivion, but something else more ambiguous, something “uncanny and peaceful, a near oblivion, but deceptive” (222). She finally resists telling us whether this will “do,” as she resists a clear message of recovery in the narrative’s closing sentences. When her daughter asks, “Good to know about your mother at last eh?” her answer is a non-committal, “Mmm. Yes, I think it is” (240). Again, the use of “think” resists definitive agendas of healing and leaves the ending open to ambiguity: “Yes, I think it is,” (but it might not be). Finally, complex recovery in this narrative is like Diski’s description of Melville’s “notion of whiteness, it makes clear and it obscures; it is purity and complexity” (Diski 211).

#### EMBODIED LOSS AND COMPLEX RECOVERY IN GORDON, BARRINGTON, AND MAHOOD

This section traces the similar movement in grief from disembodied to embodied performance of complex recovery in three parent bereavement narratives: Mary Gordon’s *The Shadow Man*, Judith Barrington’s *Lifesaving*, and Kim Mahood’s *Craft For a Dry Lake*. In *The Shadow Man*, when Gordon’s father dies, it is not only her life that gets split in two, “into the part when my father was alive and the part when he was not” (5); the split is also internal: “Sometimes I wasn’t sure whether or not I too had died. . . . I was looking down at myself like a spirit peering at a corpse. And yet neither the spirit nor the corpse had any connection with each other or with me, the thing once comprehensively known as ‘I’ but now something else, something I couldn’t name” (7). As a child after the death of her father, she lives “a kind of



incorporeal life” (9)—she feels she has no body: “I had to allow for the possibility that I might be only an idea—but in the mind of whom?” (7). In a way reminiscent of Diski’s wish for oblivion, she tries to remember her father, but is left “spinning again and lost in the spiral, the darkness, or becalmed in the still ocean of oblivion” (27). Even though the narrative is a search for her father’s true identity, she maintains this wish for oblivion, especially when knowledge about him proves painful: “A fatigue comes over me. A desire to sleep. Not to speak about him anymore” (92). When she does find out information that contradicts her idea of her father, such as when she finds out her father’s real name, her response is detached. Leaving the National Archives, she says: “The farther I am from the building where I found the news, the more *unreal* it seems. The dark room with everyone bent over their microfilm machines had the *dreamy quality* of a movie theater when you enter in the middle of the film” (italics mine, 112). This dream-like quality is bound up with a disembodied subjectivity; echoing Didion, Gordon likens the loss of her father’s identity as she had known him to the nakedness Didion describes: “Then slowly, like the realisation in a dream that you are wearing no clothes, I understand something that is the last thing I would have thought of in my father’s history. He didn’t graduate from high school” (126-127).

In Barrington’s *Lifesaving*, as a nineteen-year-old she loses her parents in a cruise accident and spends the majority of her young adult life in Spain, attempting to forget about their death in a series of dangerous affairs with strangers. She also describes the experience of feeling disembodied, or split in two: in a convertible with hitchhiker Tony, she describes how she “seemed to float above, looking down at myself as if I were a character in a movie” (34). When one of her many liaisons, Pepe, follows her back to England, her response to his leaving becomes emblematic of

all of her wild relationships and of her time in Spain, coloured by a dreamy, detached quality: “once his train pulled away out of sight, it all faded very quickly until, a few weeks later, it might have been a dream. A siesta dream, heavy and deep. A dream you wake from, tired and slightly grouchy, with no recollection of where you have been. And no idea at all why you went there” (107). Yet interestingly, her oblivion, her detachment, comes from physical, bodily engagement. She is aware that in this phase of “denial,” she is using sex as a way of distracting herself from having to remember how her parents died:

I had created not one but two distractions from grief: an intense affair with a woman . . . and a series of meaningless sexual encounters with men. My heart remained besieged by the first, while my body was assaulted by the second. They both worked, as narcotics work, for a while. Still, my need for distraction was a daily, hourly thing. I drank, worked, danced, drove my sports car, and picked up men at every turn as if it were the only possible way of life. (111)

In a way reminiscent of Diski’s Antarctic adventure, everything she does is with this single pursuit of detachment—in the chapel, staring at the ceiling, she likes “being overwhelmed by something that, for once, wasn’t sex or falling in love, but which functioned as effectively as either one of those to blot out my mother approaching the ladder that dropped to the black swells of the Atlantic” (120).

Mahood’s *Craft For a Dry Lake* is very much about the embodied experience of loss. Mahood’s memoir is triggered by the death of her father who died in a helicopter accident—the inscription at the beginning of the book says, “To my father, whose death made the book necessary.” *Craft* is about her return to the station previously owned by her father in the Tanami desert, and now given back to the

Warlpiri people who had been dispossessed. In her essay, “Kim Mahood’s *Craft for a Dry Lake: A Work in Progress*,” Bernadette Brennan describes how Mahood “acknowledges the complexity of emotions she experiences returning to a place which has ‘mapped itself into my body . . . and breaks out on my adult self like stigmata’ (201), and to which she can no longer take for granted her right of return” (96). Mahood’s journey into the Outback, then, becomes not only a journey she takes in order to deal with the loss of her father; it is also an attempt to “find” her own identity as separate from that of her father’s, as well as to better understand her own relationship to country. From very young she says, “I began to glimpse the possibility that the identity I clung to would not serve me” (26). Her narrative is “a work of mourning, not just for Joe Mahood but also for the lost, irrecoverable (unknowingly false) innocence of childhood” (Brennan 96). Mahood’s journey mirrors Gordon’s in many ways: in her attempt to understand herself—her sense of her own identity—as separate from her father’s. At first, it is not obvious that she spends much of the first half of the narrative in disembodied subjectivity. Yet Mahood is strikingly absent from her body in the first half of her memoir. Her musings on identity and memory (as well as her use of imagery) are linked almost entirely to the mind: there is a “someone” in her, “inarticulate and storyless . . . a primitive psychic noise which cannot be ignored” (26). Yet unlike *The Shadow Man*, it is only after reading the second half of the narrative, with its emphasis on the body, that this absence shows itself.

#### *MOVEMENT BACK INTO THE BODY*

While reactions to loss can trigger disembodied subjectivity, or the wish to detach oneself from the bodily experience of grief and to seek a kind of oblivion, the

after-effect of this numbing phase<sup>3</sup> sees loss felt strikingly, even violently at times, within the body. Barrington says that “If you store it up every time something horrible happens to you, or every time you see someone starving or beating a child or going berserk in the way people do, what with wars and families and loneliness and all the rest, it stands to reason it’s going to do something to your body sooner or later” (97). We’ve already seen how this is illustrated in *The Shadow Man*, when Gordon’s failure to grieve manifests itself in her body, and she develops chicken pox when her father dies: “Did I make myself sick so that I could enact, on my own skin, my sense of defilement?” (248). After the initial, dreamy quality of shock at hearing the truth about her father, Gordon has “shaking hands” and feels “the ribbon of sweat that runs down my back” (113), she leaves the library and “walk[s] into the freezing air. I step in puddles, letting my feet get soaked” (127) and “feel[s] nauseated” (127). About a year after her parents’ death, when Barrington is in Spain at a concert with Serra—a sort of surrogate father—listening to cellist Pablo Cassals, she thinks of how much her mother would love the concert and thinks of writing to her but: “I jerked out of this reverie with the kind of jolt that wakes you from a dream of falling. My heart was pounding. There would be no letter. I had no mother” (83). In discovering the loss of the Lorain synagogue records dating back to her father’s time, Gordon feels “like an ox who has been stunned by a blow to the head with a mallet” (131).

As well as this bodily experience of loss, embodied childhood memories also help to facilitate movement back into the body through the act of remembering. When writers remember child-selves, those selves are almost always firmly located in their bodies, connected intensely to their own bodies. Inga Clendinnen remembers a

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<sup>3</sup> Well documented by psychologists such as Kubler-Ross as “Denial” and in similar later models as “Numbness” (Payne et al. 72).

time of conscious happiness that is experienced through physical sensation: “stretched on the back lawn, buffalo grass prickling my thighs . . . and languorously milking the chilled juice of an orange into my mouth. And thinking, as the juice trickled down my throat, ‘Here, now, I am completely, utterly happy’” (223). There seems to be something in childhood that firmly roots memories within the language of the body. The first half of Mahood’s narrative, which is so absent of body imagery for the most part, nevertheless contains a short description of her recollection of her own childhood memories from the point of view of a small girl who firmly occupies her body: “The green armchair in which she curls gives off the smell of sweaty vinyl, an ochre-coloured smell that sticks in the back of the throat and leaves an aftertaste” (57). Gordon maintains intensely embodied memories of childhood. Spinning in her driveway, deliberately making herself dizzy, she says: “I am lost and yet I know where I belong, exactly where I am, in the blur, in the whirl, in the heat and breeze created by my body” (23). She describes not only the bodily experience of injury, but also the physical sensations of taste: “My head is throbbing and the throbbing spreads, deep into the soft organs of my stomach, in the strong bones of my back. Deep, too, is the taste of purple [a grape ice pop]. I can drop down to this taste; it will support me” (24). Barrington remembers a time spent with her parents on their boat: “I can still feel the clammy fog on my face” (19) and although she claims that she cannot “capture . . . the daughter,” she goes on to describe her as “the twelve-year-old with the sulky expression who *dragged her feet* annoyingly against the grainy cabin top when asked to go to the bow and look out” (19-20, italics mine). She remembers also “the bodily shape of [her mother’s] worry, the worry that never failed to stir up a panic in my stomach and make me want to save her from it all” (19). So, even though she says, “hard as it is now to see that twelve-year-old *hugging her knees* in her bunk”

(23, *italics mine*), we in fact get a very clear picture of this firmly embodied twelve-year-old “who wished she could do something heroic to save her mother” (23). These intensely embodied descriptions of a lost childhood self help to propel the adult writers into an embodied experience of grief that can be realised only after an initial period of disembodiment during which the self wishes to detach itself from the body and its suffering.

However, for Mahood, Barrington, and Clendinnen, their experience of embodied subjectivity becomes rapidly gendered once they leave the idealised world of childhood. Their experiences, once they approach womanhood, are oppressive and characterised by patriarchal constructions of “female-as-polluting syndrome” (Clendinnen 135). While Clendinnen’s mother delivers a sanitised version of the facts of life, she is busily cleaning and gutting a chicken:

There it sat, like a ruined person, opened, inert, violated, with its little flab of stomach and its pimpled chest and the skinny thighs splayed on each side of that obscene hole. Did she know what she was doing? I don’t think so. I think she had been subliminally reminded to tell me about women’s business by the disgust she felt both for it, and for the bloody task at hand. (135-136)

Halfway through the narrative, as her confrontation with past memories intensifies, Mahood begins to process the past through a realisation linked inextricably to her body. As a teenager she experiences the strict gender roles assigned to women in the Outback: “I had no real limitations placed on me for being a girl. . . . And yet I absorbed through my own skin and the antenna of adolescence a sense that to be female was to be subtly contaminated” (107). Brennan also writes of Mahood’s “discomfort with her femaleness” (102); perhaps in part this derives from her

adolescence. At fifteen years old, she realises rules are not to be broken: “This was the taint I had smelled on my own skin, that we could not be relied upon, as women, to understand the rules properly, that our unruly bodies and emotions might force into the open things which would then have somehow to be dealt with” (110). In a church in Spain, Barrington notices something similar in the women—something she goes on to connect to herself in the experience of these women:

There was a potent thrill, a fear of discovery, which I recognized from my secret life with Sophia. But what I recognised most, as I watched those women approach the church and slide through the brass-studded door, was their shame—the way their bodies shrank into the black folds of their clothes as if to say I’m sorry, as if to say I’m full of unseemly passions, as if to say, as I, myself, would say through the years to come: I am unworthy, I am nothing, and finally, in the seductive light of a thousand candles, I am yours. (119-120)

While Mahood and Barrington seem to tacitly recognise themselves in these descriptions of “unruly bodies” and “unseemly passions,” being initiated into this world of women is something that Clendinnen fiercely resists. When Clendinnen’s mother gives her daughter what is essentially an invitation to occupy her body, Clendinnen says: “I would resist her in everything, because I knew something she did not: she was my enemy” (138). Clendinnen’s sick mother drops her towel as Clendinnen enters the bathroom to help her:

This most modest of women wanted me to see her body, to count the cost of being a woman: the veined legs, the pouched belly, the flaccid breasts, the stained nipples. She looked at me with a glance that was at once an appeal and an apology. She was confessing the real sin of the

flesh: that it aged, that it betrayed you. The display was also an invitation, and a threat. You are a woman now. Join us. (137-138).

These negative experiences of embodiment, of female body as polluted, of female guilt and shame, make it particularly difficult for women to experience embodied subjectivity. These incidents appear as obstacles to the process of re-embodiment. However, rather than being an obstacle, Mahood's experiences of the Aboriginal women contrasts sharply with the above incidents because the women do not perpetuate harmful cultural messages that are ultimately damaging to women's sense of embodied identity. In *Craft*, the bodies of the Aboriginal women act as a catalyst for Mahood's ultimate movement into her own body. True, she sees these women, "Their bodies are used, misshapen and damaged. So much flesh" (133); however, in retrospect, she remembers almost enviously how "[t]hey inhabit their bodies unapologetically" (261). But this movement into her body happens slowly. It begins with a movement away from the third person into the more subjectively intense first person. And even this happens only after an extended attempt to delay a confrontation with her body. "Recovery" is still a long way off. In the middle of her journey to the bush, Mahood regrets the step she has taken: "I do not want to come back here. I do not want to live here. I came back in order to free myself from this place, but it leaks through my bloodstream like a disease" (144).

Mahood goes through the type of physical purging (mentioned in Chandler's essay) of pent-up emotion. Her narrative "is mapped physically and symbolically onto the groundsheet Mahood uses while camping in the desert, a groundsheet which accumulates both the ash and dust from her campsite" (Brennan 92). In the final movement into her body, under the intense pressure of remembering her childhood



and finding that the bush in fact yields no answers, Mahood experiences a climactic physical outlet for her grief:

I feel angry, full of wild physical unease, suffocated by memories and maps and history. . . . I strip off my clothes, plaster my body with the mess of ash and ochre, and print it onto the black space, again and again. The prints come up like red bones. . . . What I am feeling is physical, almost sexual. I want to scrape my flesh against the ragged bark of the bore, draw blood, crawl naked into the blinding stillness of the lake surface. (194-195)

Significantly, Mahood smears the ochre and ash over her body shortly after spending time with the Aboriginal women, “after the tough confronting energy of the women’s business” (187). These women, who live firmly in their bodies, and whose bodies are firmly rooted to the earth, prove instrumental in easing her into confrontation. A confrontation whose climactic, physical impact can only be communicated through writing the body.

Through her concrete, bodily imprint she has managed to assert herself in the world, no longer “inarticulate and storyless” (26). No longer “ashamed to inhabit myself, I am not ashamed of my own anarchy, I am not afraid of the scent on my skin, which is not contamination” (102). The experience has led to a validation of self (similar to Diski’s visit to Mrs. Rosen’s) as Mahood quite literally makes an imprint on the world:

The red bone shapes of my own printed flesh lie spread-eagled on the canvas groundsheet beneath me, a repetition of crosses which refuse to submit to the boundaries I have drawn for them. This body I inhabit, pale-skinned, female, unobtrusive, has announced itself emphatically,

used its angry, ochre-coated physical presence to blot out the abstraction of the grid lines. Anarchic, sexual, it refuses to be reduced to an idea. *I am here*, it says. *I am real*. (240)

A similar interpretation in Brennan's article has since confirmed this reading: Brennan writes: "It seems that she cannot come to terms with the country until she has learnt to unapologetically inhabit her body" (101).

It's certainly true that after this, Mahood self-consciously lives through her body. This meditation on what the ochre-coated printed flesh means for her is followed by an embodied memory of herself at seventeen, feeling herself the intense object of sexual desire for a man who stands on the opposite side of the fire, "feeling [her body's] own vigour and power" (240). Then the narrative snaps back to the present, she refers to "the work," any physical exertion, in this case, walking her dog, as "the means through which I explore and engage with life. The body, using the body, the physical presence within the work. . . . A way of holding together the thinking process and the unthinking process in a kind of poised tension" (242).

However, the recovery and balance which this image suggests does not endure throughout the narrative. I wish to complicate Brennan's analysis of how "the groundsheet charts a journey of healing" (92) and her observation that "[i]n mapping her body into country she is able to begin divesting her body of the grief it holds for her father's death" (102). It's actually never clear whether Mahood has recovered from the loss of her father and has indeed "divested her body of the grief it holds." Throughout her journey, everything she has attempted to find—her father, herself, herself as separate from her father—remains just out of reach. The Outback hasn't yielded the answers she has been searching for: "The life I drove away from only a few weeks ago has ceased to signify in any meaningful way" (240). On her way back

home, her solid sense of identity escapes her body and detaches itself, quite alarmingly: “I have prided myself on having a clear mind, but the space out here has invaded it, breached the skull so that the thing I call self has got loose and is wandering about on the brittle plain, stalked by something primitive and wild” (244). It would seem she has begun to separate her own identity from her father’s: “He had to die before I could begin to escape his idea of me” (249). Brennan points out that “[t]he journey is ultimately ‘about telling the man in my head, this “father,” who has taken up the space the dead man left, that I no longer need him to authenticate me”’ (99). But it seems that she does. Her dream of her father is telling as she struggles to carry him on her back:

In the dream I carried my father’s body on my back, searching for the right place to put it down. He was frail, but even so I had difficulty carrying him. I stumbled and struggled along the slope of a hillside. His limbs flopped and dragged, and I was angry with him that he had not taken better care of himself. I laid him down for a while in order to rest. . . . I considered leaving him there on the side of that strange hillside. The look on his face was tired and a little sad. After a while I lifted the body onto my back again and kept on searching. (248)

She says that he has enabled her “to do the things necessary to free myself” (249) yet the repeated gesture of picking up and laying down the body, as well as her dramatic cry, “—Help me! I say to the stars.—Help me to put his body down” (249) shows that she is anything but free. The country is neither her father’s nor hers, but their stories are: “By coming back I reinvoké them. At all the points of intersection I feel the other journeys, ancestral, contemporary, historic, imaginary. They are all under my skin” (258).

Although Mahood reclaims her body and leaves her imprint on the world, she is not free of her father, but must feel, even at the end, the weight of his body on her shoulders.

*Craft for a Dry Lake* is significant in the extent that Mahood resists “recovery” in any conventional sense. She insists that “I belong to an age whose experience is one of displacement and a kind of loss. The thing lost will continue to haunt me” (257). But this doesn’t mean that Mahood’s memoir is devoid of any healing insight—almost at the end of the narrative, there is this juxtaposition of insight along with despair. On her way home, Mahood finds the words for “beauty and faith” within an image of the night sky: “I am looking at a carpet made of light” (247). And she does point to the possibility that grief needn’t overwhelm and destroy; that it can come for a time to visit; that it is ultimately something we can hold: “Now, as I look out across the star-illuminated landscape, I see the shapes of grief, settled and quiet in the crouching hummocks of the Pedestal Hills. Hold it for me, I tell them quietly, hold it for me here in this place which he loved” (254).

Yet a recurring feature of my chosen texts is that the writers deliberately choose not to end their narratives with this kind of healing insight. Instead, they choose to “honour, in grief, all that uprises.” Passages like these are just one layer in a many-textured illustration of recovery. After reading this, Mahood’s chosen ending is perhaps all the more poignant for its sense of defeat:

The puzzle of fragments I have tried to reassemble frames the shape of absence. The conversation with my father is finished, and I have had the last word. There is no sense of victory. Only an emptiness, a lacuna in the soul, sucking into itself the scraps and fragments of a human life. Mine or his? It doesn’t matter. (265)

In this way she has, at the end of the narrative, a more embodied sense of self, and this embodied living would seem to illustrate a recovered self. Yet the healing that was apparent in her description of living life bodily is undercut by the last chapter. Here, she effectively negates whatever healing insights she might have had by moving beyond ambivalence towards what can even be interpreted as apathy: “it doesn’t matter.”

According to Marilyn Chandler, healing through narrative requires three steps reminiscent of the standard model of grief: “catharsis, or purgation; restoration, or return to wholeness; and transformation, or making new” (7). Brennan’s analysis successfully highlights “the many interlinked, nuanced layers of this narrative” (92). However, although she acknowledges Mahood is “not yet whole,” I believe her emphasis on the healing elements of the narrative risks smoothing over the texture of Mahood’s experience by arguing for “a more comfortable acceptance of her fractured subjectivity” (104) and emphasising the transformative nature of the ending. I agree that “[t]he narrative ends on an ambiguous note of loss, Mahood has not only failed to lay to rest the ghost of her father, she has raised more haunting ghosts” (104). However, I do not agree that “there is a sense that this ending is less interested in closure than in possibilities for new beginnings” or that “[a]t this memoir’s end there is a sense of catharsis” (104). The sense of catharsis to which Brennan refers has been seriously compromised by the dejected tones of the final lines—and the extent to which Mahood has been unsuccessful in separating her own identity from her father’s. Suffice to say, then, that although Mahood reclaims her body and leaves her imprint on the world, she is not free of her father, but must feel, even at the end, the weight of his body on her shoulders.

Gordon goes through a similar journey in an attempt to separate her own identity from the idea of her father. She is as connected to her father as she is to her own body—her ideas about him “were simply something I always had, like the colour of my hair, the shape of my mouth” (127), and she needs him, as a child, to define her sense of embodied self. Having fallen while spinning, “I hear myself cry out, but it is a cry without knowledge. I don’t know who I am” (23). She needs the presence of her father to bring her back to herself: “Then my father is beside me. My head spins and pounds, but I feel only delight and transport” (23). In a parallel incident later on in the narrative, she feels similarly discomposed on hearing the truth about her father, and in the face of the loss of her idea of him, finds her identity in her daughter’s body: “I allow myself to lose my fear in the solidity of her thirteen-year-old body. . . . So that is who I am—I’m someone’s mother. Someone recognisable” (112). Towards the end of the narrative, still at a loss as to how to define a strong sense of self in the absence of the father she thought she knew, she attempts to completely blot out her own identity and occupy her father’s body by absorbing completely into him: “I will become a filament, an X ray, the negative of a photograph, the chalk outline on the sidewalk after the dead body has been removed. I am knife-thin, or iridescent, or composed entirely of shadows. Ready above all for absorption and interiority. Incorporeal, waiting only for embodiment” (170-171). Yet she remains wary of being completely subsumed in his body: “I can easily walk where he walks. But I cannot allow my mind to be swallowed up in him. His body pleases me” (171). Eventually, only in almost losing her own embodied self to her father’s memory can she come to firmly take up residence in her own body: “I cannot bear to be my father. I sink down to my own identity: his daughter. My body takes its shape” (177).

In Barrington's years of denial in Spain, her sadness at the loss of her parents has only one outlet—through her body. While in Figueras, she is ill a lot and many of her diary entries say simply: "*Felt dreadful. Stayed in bed*" (Barrington's emphasis 95). On the long drives back to England on weekends to see her lover, she says, "I was tired and lonely. I sighed a lot, as if something was trying to get out of my body on the back of the exhaled breath. It might have been those images from the Christmas of my parents' death" (95-96). In a way similar to Mahood, she finds comfort in a bodily connection to nature, and nature indeed facilitates her embodied experience of grief, though it is a calmer, gentler connection, not the violent catharsis experienced by Mahood. During her breaks on the beach from work, she seeks the shade of pine trees:

To lie under those scrubby trees, looking straight up through their emerald, long-needled branches at the expanse of blue was soothing. The domed sky was a cradle. There was enough vast space up there to dissipate whatever poison I was carrying in my insignificant body. I was only an ant. A speck. My breathing in and out was simply a part of the whole, great mechanism, as was each pine needle that collected dew to nourish a wind-battered tree, which, in turn exhaled into the great blue atmosphere as I did. (99)

Nature, linked to the body in this way, aids the expression, or expulsion of grief at the level of the body: "My heartbeat quieted after a while" and she wonders "if the trees, too, had days like this, days when their exhalation were full of miseries—all the miseries the winds picked up and blew relentlessly across the wide Ampurdán plain" (99).

Towards the end of Barrington's "long journey from the fear of grief into grief itself," (168), at 40 years old, she goes to see her parents' grave in Gibraltar, wanting to obtain the clear recovery from grief outlined in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia": "All I knew was that I wanted to be finished with all this. Wanted to be able to look back and say I had come through it and made it out the other side" (168). She does acknowledge how grief would leave a lasting change within her: "Not that I would emerge untouched" (168), but nevertheless, she seeks some kind of uncomplicated closure towards her parents' death. And it would seem at the end of the narrative that she gets it. The scene at her parents' grave seems to heal Barrington as she performs a ritual with her partner Ruth. Reading aloud questions and voicing what she had been unable to say up until that point, Barrington tells her parents who she has become: "It was then that the tears came—the first uncomplicated tears I had shed since the accident. Standing by the headstone, the simple fact I had been so afraid to face settled there beside me: I missed my parents. I missed them and that was all" (172). Yet that is not really "all," and indeed this deceptively simple ending becomes compromised both by the use of the present tense in the narrative, and by the addition of an "Epilogue." In the narrative, the author speaks from the present, from the position of someone for whom grief lingers, for whom "that was [not] all": "But I still have those *felt dreadful, stayed in bed* days. . . . What I really think is that they're hangovers of sadness or anger and that they probably always have been" (Barrington's italics, 96-97). The use of "still" echoes Diski's use of the present tense and a voice not completely recovered.

In the "Epilogue," she begins an anecdote about learning to save a drowning person when in Lower Fifth. With the recollection, she allows herself to fully face how her parents died, juxtaposing scenes imagining her parents' death with



recollections of getting her lifesaving medal: “Is that what my parents tried to do when they found themselves in the ocean, the suction of the burning ship threatening to slam them against the hull over and over?” (176). We see with the addition of the “Epilogue,” that the ritual performed over the grave has not been enough—even though if we were to end our analysis with the end of the narrative, it would conform to traditional healing tropes. However, in the “Epilogue,” we are privy to a more complex view of loss where she must enter into her mother’s body, and imagine the embodied experience of her mother’s last moments of life:

I spent years trying to picture my parents leaving the burning ship. . . .  
 Sometimes I glimpsed a close-up of my mother putting her foot on the  
 first rung of the ladder that led over the side but I always drew back.  
 For years and years her foot hovered over that top rung, as if held on  
 perpetual pause, while I did everything I could to avoid feeling the icy  
 water creeping up my legs as her feet groped for the rungs below.  
 (185)

When she witnesses a shipwreck in a film, she reacts at the level of the body: “I felt profoundly shaken,” (186); she is forced to live the experience and to finally feel at the level of the body all her mother must have experienced. Finally, she “back[s] down with my mother into that awful mass of water” (186) to feel what she has avoided feeling for so long:

I hadn’t felt my mother’s clothes bind themselves around my kicking  
 legs as her shoes fell away from my feet and started their slow, twirling  
 journey to the bottom of the Atlantic. I had never splashed away into  
 the darkness with her, losing sight of the others who were abandoning  
 ship. I had never struggled away from the blaze of light, a briny taste

in my nose and mouth, and the numbing cold working its way into the centre of my body until the ship was a distant mass of smoke and flame, the lights of its Christmas tree still bright on the upper deck while its guardrails melted in the heat. (186)

This scene is a far cry from the one at the graveside with its healing rituals. She is, finally, able to give up her “fantasy of saving” them in being able to finally confront their loss; however, her embodied experience of her parents’ death does not end with any clear insights of recovery from their loss—despite the “awful power of the water . . . stopping both their watches, and perhaps their hearts, at the same moment” (186).

PERMISSION TO SUFFER: THE “SLOW WALTZ” OF EMBODIED RECOVERY IN *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A FACE* AND *TIGER’S EYE*.

Bizarrely, after they removed half of my jaw, I limped. . . . None of us understood the body is a connected thing.  
--Lucy Grealy

Couser talks about the pressure from society and publishers to have disability narratives “adopt the hegemonic narrative paradigm of transcendence over bodily injury rather than to challenge its cultural construction” (198). However, certainly Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* challenges cultural constructions of illness and ideals of beauty, and this is what most critiques of her memoir focus on. Yet, as “a declaration of inimitable embodied experience” (Mintz 70), I’m interested in this embodied experience of illness because while it includes Grealy’s struggle to “transcend bodily injury” it is questionable as to whether she succeeds, or indeed as to whether transcending the body is even desirable. The struggle itself gives us insight into “what dysfunction feels like and how it alters self-perception” (Couser 294). Moreover, in an interesting twist to this illness narrative trope, Grealy often champions the body itself (damaged and pain-wracked though it may be) over the

mind and spirit. It is only through inhabiting her body during chronic pain that she can experience her own embodied identity. This embodied identity, however, like the others we have seen, while indicative of a recovered self, is nevertheless not without its ambiguities and complications.

Diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma at the age of nine, half of Grealy's jaw is removed and the narrative covers over thirty attempts at reconstructing her face. At first, like Clendinnen, illness robs Grealy of her identity; she feels as though illness has erased her and she has no body: "I felt as if my illness were a blanket the world had thrown over me; all that could be seen from the outside was an indistinguishable lump" (130). Then her illness becomes her all-consuming identity so that she cannot separate herself from her body and writes of being "trapped in her body" (91). So she attempts to disembody herself, to detach herself from her face. Suzanna Mintz's analysis of *Autobiography of a Face* in *Unruly Bodies* is largely about the process Grealy goes through in order to be able to look at herself again, to reclaim her own gaze. I believe that what is interesting about this process is that, in a paradox perhaps not recognised by Mintz or at least not explicitly stated, the movement away from her body provides Grealy with a vantage point from which to firmly reoccupy it, to recapture her ability to look at herself.

One example that illustrates her disembodiment from her illness is when, as a teenager, she looks up Ewing's sarcoma and finds out the survival rate is five percent. Her reaction is unconsciously physical because at that point, language is inadequate:

Five percent. I felt obliged to say something, but no one was there, and I didn't know what I was supposed to say anyway. Placing my hand on my neck, feeling the pulse there, I stood for some minutes on the verge of moving or speaking or sitting or *something*. Then the

impulse passed, and I was on the other side of it, feeling as if I'd forgotten something, some name or object or emotion I'd meant to take note of but had carelessly allowed to slip by. (68)

Her impulse is to react with her body, feeling her neck, her pulse, moving, speaking, sitting. But in the end she finds herself “on the other side” of the impulse, detached and outside of her body in an inability to process the severity of her illness which “slip[s] by . . . forgotten.”

As she comes more and more to identify with her body—her sick, disfigured body—this identification becomes more and more oppressive. In a dramatic illustration of Eakin and Damasio's argument that we are our stories—“our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us” (Eakin x)—narrative, identity and body become intertwined as Grealy finds it impossible to separate herself from her face, writing “I *was* my face” (7). As Mintz says: “To the degree that we cannot detach her narrative from her disease, Grealy suggests that there is also no way to disentangle the physical from the thinking mind or writerly consciousness we discover in *Autobiography of a Face*. She is her body, so far as we come to know her through her text” (52).

And yet because Grealy loathes her illness and what it has done to her body, or her face, she attempts to detach from it as a way out of “the deep, bottomless grief I called ugliness” (180). “Grealy repudiates the structural reality of her face as having anything to do with her ‘true’ self, dissociating the effects of surgery from her sense of who she ‘is’” (Mintz 56). Mintz describes the moment, post-chemotherapy, when Grealy examines herself in the mirror, as a pivotal moment of detachment: “It is a moment of definitive rupture: like Frankenstein's creature peering in at the window, the reflection in the mirror confronts Grealy with a face she cannot fit to any other tale

but one of gothic horror, and shocked at the embodiment of her worst fears of alienation, she detaches from it altogether” (60). This affects her so much that she doesn’t allow herself to look at herself for at least two years afterwards; she completely detaches from her body.

*Autobiography of a Face* is an excellent example of complicated healing because what complicates her recovery is her agonising over suffering—over not giving herself permission to suffer: “I had the capacity of imagination to momentarily escape my own pain, and I had the elegance of imagination to teach myself something true regarding the world around me, but I didn’t yet have the clarity of imagination to grant myself the complicated and necessary right to suffer” (126). We can trace this back to her mother encouraging her during chemotherapy to *not* respond with her body, to *not* cry, to *not* suffer, encouraging her, in essence, to disembodiment herself. Grealy’s inability to do this leaves her feeling a failure and a disappointment to her mother: when “I wasn’t able to not suffer I felt I had only myself to blame, felt that I had failed in some unknowable, spiritual way” (87) and that “with each successive visit to Dr. Woolf’s examining room, my feelings of shame and guilt for failing not to suffer became more unbearable” (90).

Grealy inverts illness narrative tropes because she chooses to inhabit her pain-wracked body over championing the mind and the spirit, or the disembodiment normally associated with a more heroic emphasis on *not* suffering. Only in surrendering, in suffering, can Grealy engage her pain at a physical level. After chemotherapy she would “lie in bed and concentrate on letting the tremors run their course, allowing them free access to all of me so that, like some bear sniffing me out, they’d gradually grow bored and amble away, leaving me alone and exhausted but still alive” (90). This is reminiscent of the way she approaches recovery after half of

her jaw is removed: “How could I explain that I just wanted to lie there, becoming ever more intimate with my body? . . . The smell of my wound was sweet and ever-present, the skin on my elbows and heels as sore and red as holly berries. . . . I became a machine for disassembling fear. Even the worst pains could be rendered harmless if you relaxed into them, didn’t fight” (57).

After chemotherapy: “Each breath was an important exchange with the world around me, each sensation on my skin a tender brush from a reality so beautiful and so mysterious that I would sometimes find myself squealing with the delight of being alive” (91). These incidents remind us of an earlier incident during childhood, when Grealy was completely happy in her body. In satisfying the animals’ needs in her job at the stables, she finds a healing space for a time: “There was a primacy to it, a simplicity I recognized from coping with the pain of my treatments, a shedding of all extraneous grievances to reveal a purely physical core, a meaning that did not extend beyond the confines of one’s body” (149). The ability to meet these needs brings with it “a sense of rest that felt ancient and good” (149).

Importantly, Grealy’s championing of the body, and her place firmly within the confines of her body, resists the heroic paradigms of disfigurement as something to be overcome: “Ultimately, however, the inescapability of her sense of disfigurement leads Grealy to rewrite—literally to reconfigure—her face as a foundational aspect of her identity rather than a grotesque error to be overcome” (Mintz 19).

As we have seen at length in the previous chapter, *Tiger’s Eye* is also a struggle with identity after Clendinnen undergoes a liver transplant. Kristi Siegel considers “how organ transplantation may alter the shape of autobiography” (156) and describes how “[a] hospital’s depersonalization and infantilization of its patients has

long been documented. One becomes, first of all, a body” (160). In the time after her liver transplant, Clendinnen experiences a disembodied subjectivity and describes herself as “a naked worm, skinless, blind; I am a blind leech, I must find a body” (175). She refers to the odd sensation of the nurse Muna fashioning a body for her out of pillows: “Inga, this is for your back, this is for your legs. And this, gently now, gently, this is for your front” (175). For the time immediately after her operation she emphasises this feeling of disembodiment: “I am one of those shreds of silk, streaming, tearing in the wind” (185); “I am held together by shadow knitting” (186); “I still seem to have no skin” (186). These are all examples of how “[t]ransplantation disrupts the notion of bodily wholeness and unity” (Siegel 156).

In a similar yet much less dramatic way than in Grealy’s narrative, Clendinnen moves into her body as she begins the process of complex recovery. In illness Clendinnen emphasises her disembodiment, but in recovering she begins to use language of the body. She experiences “the slow, lurching waltz of recovery, step forward, step sideways, step together, step” (281). As we have seen, during her illness, Clendinnen had remained always intensely aware of her lack of a body. Clendinnen’s bodyless-ness defined her existence and (perhaps paradoxically) shaped the way she saw herself after the operation. At the end of her narrative perhaps it is fair to say that she is equally aware of inhabiting her body because she emphasises our physical nature: “The experience has also ratified my conviction that I, and therefore you, are unequivocally physical constructs, if spectacularly complicated ones” (288).

Certainly Clendinnen ends up firmly in her body. At their house in Queensland at the end she describes ghosts of the dead and the living on the beach, and includes herself as well, her past selves, but it is significant that her remembrance is littered with images of the body, contrasting to the disembodiment of her illness.

She is on a swing, “feet first towards the sun . . . dancing with my shadow on the beach, feet stitched together, arms wild. I am seventeen, panting . . . ; twenty-seven, dabbling a baby in a warm green pool; forty-seven, scratching the flaws on the skin of my thighs” (283). These selves, firmly embodied as they appear, would seem to suggest an embodied self as a recovered self. It seems rather a direct illustration of “an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one’s self” (Eakin, *LA* 64). That self is firmly an embodied self on the shores of Far North Queensland, and, after her liver transplant has left her mostly disembodied throughout her narrative, comes to understand the inherent, embodied nature of self.

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to answer Eakin’s question, “How does the body manifest self?” (*LA* 72). My focus has been on the grieving body itself and the effect of loss on the griever’s performance of an embodied self using theorists that literalise loss on or in the body. The process seems to happen in two main stages: the beginning stages of grief are accompanied by hyper-awareness of the loss of the beloved’s body and the experience of a disembodied subjectivity. Here writers perform disembodied selves. Memories of childhood lead to embodied memories of a lost (idealised) child-self which in turn leads to a re-entry into the body and a re-embodied performance of self. Grievers learn through memory to re-occupy their bodies, or they are encouraged by other women to re-occupy their body, or they simply surrender to the experience of bodily pain in illness. It seems that for the most part, a re-embodied performance of self is linked to a certain level of recovery, though not indicative of the end process of grief nor of fully whole, recovered selves under Freud’s model. The recovery is ambiguous and complex because my chosen memoirs



“resist consolation and subvert a literary genre whose function is therapeutic” (Rae 14).

Couser has said “One significant pattern [of the texts he analyses] is the redemptive shifting of emphasis from the body to the mind. Self-rehabilitation involves in large part redefining the self as more a function of mind and spirit than of the flesh” (*Recovering* 185). Yet these writers here redefine themselves as body—as flesh. Complex recovery of identity within experiences of loss in these narratives depends on re-entry into the body, re-inhabiting the body.

This is not to say that I am trying to negate the redemptive function of illness and bereavement narratives and I agree with Couser that “the . . . emphasis on bodily distinctions [then as now] is justified if it contributes to the reduction of stigma and marginalization. It does so . . . by helping us to see through the body in two senses: to think *about* and *with* our bodies, to re-examine the implications, cultural and political, physical and metaphysical, of our embodiment” (*Recovering* 291). But in arguing that writers are not fully healed I’m arguing for a more complex understanding of recovery to examine further what may be happening in the space between “crippling grief” and total healing. These texts of illness and bereavement leave the narrative (and the writers’ own identity) open-ended. Mintz argues that this is one important function of Grealy’s narrative: “to keep the ‘story’ of the female body in motion, to show how the ‘truth’ of particular bodies is open to revision” (68).

## CONCLUSION: “WEEPING CONSTELLATIONS”

In using new wave theories to illuminate a third space offered by my chosen texts, I have tried to tease out the subtleties and nuances of grief not apparent in the binary oppositions of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” and the extreme reactions against it. The long-term, damaging effect of “cast[ing] the difference between mourning and melancholia in clear-cut binary terms” has been to create a “false opposition” that has “paralysed discussions of mourning ever since” (Woodward 94). New wave theorists since the 1990s have attempted to lift this paralysis by insisting on a more complex understanding of grief. In their reaction against Freud, however, they may have missed an opportunity for a richer discussion of grief allowed for by the very ambiguity underlying his “work of mourning” as both a prolonging and a letting go, as both a remembering and a forgetting (Craft). In characterising a space of textured recovery, I have tried to dissect and understand the ambiguity of grief, an exercise particularly timely in light of popular consolation paradigms and the almost endemic pervasiveness of what Nancy Miller has called “the recovery arc” in many narratives dealing with loss.

This space of textured recovery is most visible from the perspective of new wave theories, though they cannot accommodate for every aspect of this view of recovery. However, many characteristics of new wave theories of grief manifest in the particular literary techniques which I have highlighted within my chosen texts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of a new view of loss and recovery. The standard models of grief view recovery as “completion” or “resolution,” but new wave theories define recovery as “accommodation,” which means “living with

imperfect reality” (Becvar qtd. in Hooyman and Kramer 49); this is manifested within the texts when writers speak from the present in order to complicate events indicating recovery. “Recovery” in Freud’s sense of completion, where “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud qtd. in Hagman 15) has been an enormously influential concept since “Mourning and Melancholia” was written. Recovery has been likened (and still is in Hunsaker-Hawkins’s “Writing About” and Buss’s “Authorizing”) to a “return to a previous state of innocence” (Tal qtd. in Hawkins, “Writing About” 121).<sup>1</sup> But I have attempted to show that recovery is neither complete, nor a “return to innocence,” nor an impossibility, but a process more complex in which the survivor instead adapts to the loss. Memoirs of textured recovery come closest to “new wave” theories of recovery as “accommodation” where it is never clear “[w]hether one [is] ever able to accept a loss or to resolve one’s grief” (Hooyman and Kramer 49).

New wave theorists further argue that recovery does not necessarily follow from sharing emotion or confronting loss, and they are critical of the “talking cure.” This manifests in reflexive passages on the relationship between writing and healing that problematise the assumption that this is always necessarily a healing enterprise. These texts deviate from “new wave” theories in that they reject “therapy” in any conventional sense. Diski resists self-help theories of recovery and ignores her GP, “a believer in psychological healing,” who tells her that she is not dealing with her “deprivation and despair,” and answers: “But I do, in my way. I deal with it all the time, and quite well” (30). And she shows herself consistently aware of psychoanalytic processes to which she is “not immune” (20), such as when she comments on her hasty friendship with the Roths: “I am not unaware of being drawn

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<sup>1</sup> For a full summary of Kalí Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt* see Hunsaker-Hawkins’s “Writing About” pp. 121-122.

to unfamiliar couples a generation or so older than myself” (69) as sort of surrogate parents. She derides such popular psychology that assumes “a denial of attachment is a failure to confront the reality of mother-attachment” (20), and questions, again with her particular dry humour, the wisdom of exposing herself to something that she may not be able to cope with: “What, apart from Puritanism, even perhaps sadism, makes anguished awareness of the kind our unconscious seeks to prevent, so very desirable? . . . I gave up searching for anguish and settled for naïve tranquillity” (21). Because her trip to Antarctica begins abruptly after she has given her daughter permission to order Rachel Simmonds’s death certificate, it would be easy to classify the whole experience as one long trip in “denial,” and yet, to do this would be to ignore what Diski herself insists on highlighting—the full “texture of experience” (185).

When discussing the role of psychoanalysis within these types of texts, Mantel said, “I wouldn’t be so bold as to say I’m not in need of a cure. But I’m not in need of a talking cure.” Weldon echoes, “Psychoanalysis is fine as long as it doesn’t attempt to cure you” (“Fiction and Autobiography”). She echoes this sentiment in *Mantrapped*: “But see how the very existence of the phrase ‘tough love’ cheapens and weakens the very concept it stands for? We know how to explain ourselves to ourselves well enough, but with every handy phrase, every useful shorthand, we lessen the complexity and interest of our lives” (49). She adamantly writes against the idea that writing is therapeutic in both of her memoirs. In *Auto da Fay*, she asserts that “The writing of this memoir causes pain as well as pleasure. It is not in the least therapeutic, on the contrary, but then I have never been a believer in the theory beloved by psychotherapists that recollection cures, or ‘closes’” (*Auto da Fay* 173). The process does not get any easier in the hybrid memoir which follows where she again repeats, “Writing is not in the least therapeutic” (*Mantrapped* 121).

In “Writing About Illness,” Hawkins shows new concerns with the relationship between writing and healing. She asks: “do these performative narratives help people get past their experience and incorporate it into their sense of self so they can get on with their lives? Or do such narratives serve to embed them further in the experience, in the way that trauma victims often seem compelled to enact an experience over and over?” (“Writing About” 115).<sup>2</sup> This is the question that occupies Caruth’s research within the early 1990s, though oddly, Hawkins does not mention Caruth in her essay. On the one hand, we’ve seen how writing can heal to an extent—I do not wish to undermine this important function of narrative. But on the other, “the power of narrative is not always enough to pull us through” (Stacey 9). In these narratives we see examples of the kind of recurrences of which Henke speaks: Diski’s “regurgitation of the ‘nowhere to go’ fear from those weeks when I was eleven” (167); Barrington’s “hangovers of sadness or anger” (97); Gordon’s continuing effects of “losing” her father: “I don’t only lose objects; I often lose my way. Walking, driving, I am overcome, smothered in confusion. I don’t know where I am. . . . The buzz of the furies is in my ears. ‘No one will ever find you. . . . You will be unable to find shelter. Eventually you will die of exposure, and no one will take pity on you” (*Shadow Man* 32).

Even though there has been much research into the relationship between writing and healing, there are criticisms of those studies. As Stacey points out in *Teratologies*:

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<sup>2</sup> Olivia Sagan researches what has been called “toxic narrative,” or “further hammering oneself with one’s pathology.” In her research she asks, “when are forms of lifewriting not therapeutic and also potentially destructive?” She also looks into the damage that can be caused by “any lifewriting that is excavating to potentially a raw degree” (“Therapeutic Effects of Life Writing”).

These interpretations point towards the idea of writing as restoration and, indeed, there are those who have celebrated the idea that writing can somehow heal the wounds of life. But this belief in the “restorative powers of writing” has also been attacked for being part of a more general “culture of redemption” that characterizes the twentieth-century reliance on art to cure the ills of history. (23)

In her essay “Story Language: A Sacred Healing Space” Mediha Saliba is critical of the groundbreaking 1999 study researching the connection between writing and healing published in JAMA<sup>3</sup> because the subjects were writing in isolation:

“Tragically, none of the participants discussed any of their writing with staff or others in the project. Cutting oneself off from the communal healing that takes place in . . . conversational interchange . . . serves to reinforce the isolation of our individualist or ‘parts’ view of society and the medicine it practices” (42). Thus, the “other,” important in autobiography criticism, should not be ignored in the research into writing and healing as well. In Pennebaker’s research, he emphasises “the social dynamics of disclosure” (Pennebaker 14) and says that the current research agenda is not only about healing the self: “Is it possible that writing . . . a story can bring about a richer connection between the storytellers and their social networks?” (14).

New wave theories describe grief as a process of redefining the self that involves “a reorganization of the survivor’s sense of self as a key function of the process” (Hagman 24). Often, traditional illness narratives end with a fully recovered, realised self; however, my texts complicate this process because it is not easy to redefine the self in the face of fragmentation or outright negation of self. Eakin

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<sup>3</sup> *Journal of the American Medical Association.*

argues that the autobiographical process involves “anchor[ing] our shifting identities in time” (*LA* xi) in order to create a stable, continuous one: “the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity” (“*LA*” 4). These texts complicate grief as a process of redefining the self because, although in some cases, writers recover the stable, continuous sense of self within narratives of loss, they also illustrate what happens when the self becomes “unmoored from [its] narrative anchor in autobiographical memory” (Eakin *LA* 8).

This difficulty in redefining a whole, stable self is intimately bound up with the fact that memoirs of textured recovery resist new wave theories that emphasise “meaning making,” recovery as “transformative,” or the assumption that “we can, and often do, grow positively through the experience” (Attig, “Relearning” 43). In my chosen texts there is a distinct lack of emphasis on “mourning as a crisis of meaning” (Hagman 22). Perhaps their reluctance to impart the “meaning” of their journeys to their readers comes in part from resisting heroic or healing paradigms. Couser says that “At base, narratives of illness are efforts to give meaning to, or find meaning in, bodily dysfunction and thereby to relieve suffering” (Couser, *Recovering* 293). He reiterates this in *Signifying*, where most “personal narratives of illness and/or disability [have] an undeniably comic plot . . . what Arthur Frank calls a ‘narrative of restitution—a narrative of complete healing in which a physician would play a transformative role’” (44).

However, this is not the case with my texts. Clendinnen includes a sort of disclaimer at the beginning of the memoir where she insists that her illness “was not . . . like a religious experience . . . [and] came with no moral or metaphysical messages attached” (21); Diski also insists: “I didn’t plan this journey as a pilgrimage

of any kind, just a hopeful voyage into whiteness. My motives were as indistinct as the landscape I was wishing to travel to. There was simply an irrational desire to be at the bottom of the world in a land of ice and snow” (120). Rimmon-Kenan gives the example of Gillian Rose’s *Love’s Work* as breaking a contract because she does not tell the reader about her cancer until halfway through the narrative: “The deferral of the illness narrative . . . dramatizes Rose’s philosophy, according to which illness is not something to be singled out, but an integral part of the joys and sorrows, the banalities and dramas that constitute the process of living” (Rimmon-Kenan 249). This is also true of Mantel’s narrative, where we are not introduced to her illness until the second half of the narrative. Even though she has said that her main goal for the book was to tell two aspects of her life: “My childhood and my own childlessness” (qtd. in Blake 8), she succeeds in “performatively . . . putting the reader in a position where he or she has no choice but to experience illness as part of life” (Rimmon-Kenan 249). The narratives refuse to conform to set rhetorical paradigms.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis has discussed illness narratives that “refuse cultural pressure to treat disability [or illness] as an adversity to be overcome or an embarrassment requiring apology” (Mintz 9). Both illness and bereavement continue to be stigmatised conditions in our culture, exacerbated by the dangerous use of metaphors, which, “according to Sontag . . . wrongly, make the individual responsible for the cause and cure of their own disease and thus add a psychological burden to the already unpleasant and painful physical one” (Stacey 47). Whereas most traditional illness narratives follow the “rhetoric of spiritual compensation . . . [or] rhetoric of conversion” where disability is still a personal problem, “not a social or political

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<sup>4</sup> See also Couser’s discussion of Anne Finger who writes: “This won’t be the elegiac story with its expected arc beginning with normalcy . . . then ascending into crisis. . . . And then the hard-won ending, with its return to the empire of the normal” (qtd. in Couser, *Signifying* 178).



matter” (Couser, *Signifying* 36), the emphasis in these narratives is “on the context of impairment [or illness], rather than impairment [illness] in vacuo” (Couser, *Signifying* 174). Mantel’s desire to place her misdiagnosis and illness in the wider context of how women were treated in medicine shows how she “seeks to understand her place in a larger population, and to illuminate what it meant to have [endometriosis] in a particular place and time” (Couser, *Signifying* 177). By resisting “triumph over tragedy” tropes, memoirs of textured recovery locate the problem not in the self, but “demonstrate how all illnesses [and experiences of loss] are inseparable from the meanings ascribed to them within their specific cultural location” (Stacey 47).

I also emphasise the importance of the body in understanding grief—not a primary focus of new wave theorists as such. The importance of embodied subjectivity in understanding loss is emphasised by theorists who locate loss on or in the body. Yet even in theories of grief that contest Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” the role of the body continues to be marginalized (Tanner). In bringing the body to the forefront of grief studies, we can understand the importance of the lost body of the beloved on the mourner’s experience of grief and the way in which loss affects the mourner’s own embodied subjectivity. The futility of trying to substitute the image for the lost body of the beloved is movingly captured by C. S. Lewis as he rails against what sounds like very much like Freud’s process of “hypercathexis”:

What pitiable cant to say “She will live forever in my memory!” Live?

That is exactly what she won’t do. You might as well think like the old Egyptians that you can keep the dead by embalming them. Will nothing persuade us that they are gone? What’s left? A corpse, a memory, and (in some versions) a ghost. All mockeries or horrors.

Three more ways of spelling the word dead. It was H. I loved. As if I

wanted to fall in love with my memory of her, an image in my own mind! It would be a sort of incest. (19)

Importantly, the experience of loss is always a bodily experience; it is first and foremost about the body. Writers use “a language of the (wounded) female body” (Brennan 91), as illustrated by Mantel: after three years in Africa, back in England in the hospital, she bleeds profusely during the professor of gynaecology’s examination: “I thought he’d have been hardened to that, but he said, ‘I am afraid I am hurting you. I am sorry. I will stop now.’ I would have liked it if curiosity would have propelled him onwards: pushing into the unseen, smoking meat of my body, and finding out its truth” (189). Here, Mantel writes against male traditional illness narratives that privilege the mind over the body by making her body, and her illness, undeniably, present.

The link between memory and the body is important in the embodied experience of grief. Essayist Michael Ventura dissects the word “remember” to build an image reminiscent of Krasner’s analogy of our loved ones as an extension of our bodily selves: “To re-member. To put back together. To re-attach a lost member” (Ventura qtd. in Murdock 21). To this Murdock adds: “The idea of reattaching a lost member of our tribe through memory is a remarkable concept, because, in truth, that may be the most tangible experience we have of one another” (21). Embodied memory plays an important part in helping writers to re-enter their bodies after the experience of loss: “For all my training in scepticism, I cannot repudiate my memories, or even much refine them: mine, like yours, are simply there, as indubitable, as particular, as our feet” (Clendinnen 227). Childhood memories are particularly grounded in the body: Murdock says, “I tell this story because my memory of this childhood experience resides in my fingertips” (18). My analysis of

embodied experience in narratives of loss also contributes to the dynamic between reader and writer: “they help to take us out of our bodies and into others’: ultimately, though, they return us to our bodies with greater understanding of how they may shape and condition our identities: our bodies, our selves” (Couser, *Recovering* 295); “they orient[. . .] themselves, their narratives, and their readers toward new ways of being bodies” (Mintz 51).

According to new wave theories, grief is also both individual and collective. This goes against the “highly individualistic nature of traditional theories, which construe grief as an entirely private process, experienced outside the context of human relatedness” (Neimeyer 3). What is important here is that new wave theorists emphasise both the individuality of grief—where gender necessarily informs experiences of grief—as well as the social aspect of the recovery process. Hooyman and Kramer state that “no two persons can be assumed to experience similar grief in response to the same loss . . . each person . . . occupies a distinctive position in relation to culture [and] gender” (34). The influence of gender on experiences of loss is intimately bound up with understanding loss as a process of social integration. For this project, memoir is understood as locating a self in history. That self is informed by gender and by a distinct era which provides a unique context for experiences of loss. In this way, we cannot underestimate the importance of gender on experiences of loss, particularly for the genre of memoir. Memoir is a form that allows women to perform an identity that has been historically sidelined.

If we think of some of the particular concerns of our era in terms of loss, one would be the frustration that many feel at the inadequacies of professional literature to

accurately transcribe the experience of grief.<sup>5</sup> There appears to be a gap in the literature of mourning: it is “remarkably spare” (Didion 44), attempting to prematurely “close the wound, hurry it shut” (Romm 207). Tanner explains how, “Turning to those [standard] theories of mourning after my father’s death, I came away unsatisfied” (Tanner 84); Leader argues that, since Freud, not much has been written “on the deeper psychology of mourning” (4), and Woodward that “discussions of mourning have not developed in a particularly fertile way theoretically” since then (94). However, I believe that the problem is not so much the amount of material available (as I have shown in Chapter 1, there is an avalanche of texts on the literature of grief), but rather, the nature of that material, which is why I propose that memoirs of textured recovery in particular, help to fill this gap. In these memoirs, the private experience of loss becomes representative of a larger communal grief that is limited in its outlet for expression.

Another concern of our era is that we live in a “death-denying society” (Mahood 253), and that illness and death are separated from life, leaving us ill-equipped to deal with grief: “The horror of diseases such as cancer and HIV and AIDS is precisely that they bring death into life where it finds no legitimate place in this culture” (Stacey 241). In *Lifesaving*, Judith Barrington recounts an experience when she was nine or ten, when a horse she was riding collapses and dies. She captures the invisibility surrounding death, and shows how we are subtly, culturally conditioned to view death as unspeakable:

I remember with the clarity of a well-learned lesson that [her mother] never mentioned what had happened that morning, and I remember, too,

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<sup>5</sup> As expressed by Joan Didion, Gail Jones, Robin Romm, Katherine Woodward, and Laura Tanner.

the feelings that took over my body on that short car ride: the ache in an unidentifiable spot inside my ribs; the tightness in my arms as I hugged them around my chest. Ten years later [after her parents' death], frozen with that same strange ache, I hadn't unlearned what my mother taught me so well that day: in the presence of death, it's best to change the subject. (136-137)

It is no accident that Barrington learns to remain silent from her mother. Past generations of women learned to be silent because they "had neither the time nor the permission to examine their lives" (Murdock 32). If we understand memoir to be about a self, located in history, then gender becomes critical in understanding experiences of loss.

Memoirs of textured recovery make mourning present. They haul experiences of grief and experiences of women into the public eye where they can be held up and seen instead of hidden behind "death's door." Because they refuse to offer "cookie-cutter" styles of recovery and easy solutions, these experiences of grief must be peeled back layer by layer to reveal complex textures that offer up new ways of understanding loss. They open up a space in-between Freud's absolute recovery that is "over and done with" (Woodward qtd. in Tanner 94) and "new wave" theories of a grief that never ends.

The influence of gender on experiences of loss must be understood in the context of the social and cultural aspects of mourning. Although this is indeed one of the criteria of "new wave" theories of grief, some critics state that "it is not necessary for the loss to be socially recognised or validated by others" (Rando 22). However, it is as published, shared accounts that memoirs of textured recovery have their importance, and how they are able speak directly to our culture's inadequacy in

dealing with loss. In the decision to publish, the loss gets placed in the social sphere to be witnessed by others. As a child, Clendinnen remembers playing old records from the southern states:

There was an antiquated wind-up record player inside the hall cabinet, its one dusty record permanently on the spindle waiting to be cranked into life. . . . I would wind the handle, lower the needle, and a voice would come spindling out, a voice too old and frail to be male or female, but still ineffably human. It would sing: "Carry me back to old Virginney, there's where the cotton and the corn and 'tatoes grow," the voice quivering, the sound attenuating, almost vanishing, but always, barely, audible, and I thought the voice had somehow been trapped back there in long-ago Virginney, a slave voice mourning in that alien place, and that I was briefly liberating it from the black Bakelite to mourn and tremble in the afternoon stillness. (225)

Readers of grief memoirs release the voices of female mourners much like Clendinnen's record playing releases the slave voice "trapped . . . in that alien place." It's a voice that has been mostly silenced, a voice not represented in traditional forms of autobiography, a voice of secondary social status, where "speaking their truth was taboo" (Murdock 32), where "the choices connected with femaleness seemed hopeless" (Gordon 50), where to be female is to be polluted, "the taint I had smelled on my own skin" (Mahood 110). Although Henke insists that "the tale of pain and suffering . . . can be addressed to everyone or no-one. . . . No matter" (xix), I argue that in order to create a community of mourners, where female experience of loss can be made open and visible, it is indeed important that the tale be told to "everyone." The writer, or the voice of the mourner, "commands us to awaken" (Caruth,

*Unclaimed* 9), and like Clorinda in Tasso's poem, to "stubbornly persist in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 5). It is the presence of the listener, the audience, that allows that voice to "mourn and tremble," to be released and "transmit[ed] to us" (italics mine, Caruth, *Unclaimed* vii).

Certainly, memoir encompasses the universal—this has characterized autobiography since the Enlightenment, as "celebrat[ing] the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story" (Smith and Watson 3). Nancy Miller further understands the term "memoir" to describe texts that blur "boundaries between private and public" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 198). The importance of memoir as I approach the genre lies in the fact that though authors move inward on a self-reflexive journey, their experience moves outwards to encompass those beyond the text. Gordon's *The Shadow Man* is not only a narrative about a young girl who loses her father; it also concerns itself with the larger story of immigration, world war, and the Great Depression. *Circling My Mother*, as a mixture of memoir and biography, is not only the story of Gordon's mother's life, but it is also about the complex truth behind caring for an ailing parent, and the harsh methods involved in telling that truth.<sup>6</sup> Clendinnen connects her own crisis with other "tragic human histories" in writing about "The Protector of the Aborigines" (221), and "[t]he journeys narrated in *Craft* . . . tell a history in which the personal stories and memories of Kim and Joe Mahood are interwoven with a larger, more complex narrative of ongoing Australian frontier history" (Brennan 91).

Yet although these experiences are capable of encompassing the universal, we cannot ignore the importance of how loss is necessarily gendered in these texts. In the

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<sup>6</sup> See also Nancy Miller's *Bequest and Betrayal*: "telling the story of parents and children as adults confronted with the peculiarly modern horror of technologically advanced styles of dying—and living—that often make the experience of losing a parent more unbearable than the loss itself" (xiii).

discussion panel, "Fiction and Autobiography," Mantel explained that her illness narrative was very much about raising awareness for endometriosis, where there is still an average of nine years from complaint to diagnosis: "This enrages me" (Mantel). It also highlights the problem with the gendered approach to medicine and diagnosis, when "the medical profession seemed to have it in for women. The whole movement that everything was in the head" (Weldon, "Fiction and Autobiography"). Weldon suggests that the catalyst for this kind of writing is "Indignation about the way of the world and the desire to explain it." Thus, these narratives of loss by women are very much about "affirm[ing] solidarity with a marginalized group" (Couser, *Recovering* 233). Memoirs of textured recovery allow a revision of cultural contexts so women's experience is not excluded. It can bring "female gendering to bear on our previously male-gendered narratives of the self" (Buss 3). Mintz adds: "it seems important to bear in mind what such scholars as Sidonie Smith and Leigh Gilmore convincingly argue: that a woman does, in the very act of telling her own story, enter a political arena by asserting the legitimacy of her participation in a domain until quite recently dominated by the *res gestae* of narratives of men" (9).

Thus the importance of gender can hardly be separated from Diski's discussion of "abuse" and the ambiguous physical games she plays with her parents as a child; nor from Clendinnen's initiation into the world of women through seeing her mother's body; nor from Mahood's lessons in embodied subjectivity from the Aboriginal women; Grealy's illness and disfigurement in a culture that obsesses over women's appearance; Barrington's daring sexual exploits in the patriarchal culture of Spain, nor from Gordon's first experience of living solely among women when her father dies: "I didn't recognise myself at all in the world where I was placed. The



choices connected with femaleness seemed hopeless to me, hopeless in their mutual exclusion” (50).

The study of grief in memoir, as opposed to fictional, literary representations of grief, has to do with the “truth” of nonfiction texts, which has a bearing on the way we read them. That the person is tied to a world outside of the text has a bearing on the way we read that text, so that we are “still permitted to mourn the loss of human life as more than the ending of a story” (Lehman 341). Our “culture of truth” reflects our investment in the reality outside of the text: “[t]his emphasis on the factual nature of testimony reflects our cultural preoccupation with the authority of personal experience” (Hawkins, “Writing About” 124); “‘Authority,’ as G. Thomas Couser reminds us, has been located in an ‘extratextual reality’” (Buss, “Authorizing” 35), and there is a general belief that the writer is trying her best to get at that “truth”.

Getting at the “truth” of loss often involves creating a liminal space between fact and fiction that belies the simplicity of the “the restorative power of telling one’s truth” (Murdock 81) in that the experience is riddled with anxiety over the faulty nature of memory and may also necessitate the painful exposure of loss in all of its “ugly” truth. It involves conjuring an “emotional truth” (that mirrors the careful, deliberate mystery of Clendinnen’s metaphor of trout tickling) that nevertheless adheres to the “integrity of intention” (Zinsser 6). Lejeune’s pact, though it has been criticised,<sup>7</sup> has come the closest to successfully theorising this relationship between writer and reader where the reader trusts that the writer is adhering to the “truth” as far as possible. The outrage that erupts out of false memoirs is testament to how ingrained at least the principles of his pact are in our culture.

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<sup>7</sup> See Philip E. Baruth’s “Consensual Autobiography” for just one example.

The writers' struggles with truth can be understood as a kind of cultural engendering, showing how notions of "truth" come with strictly gendered assumptions. Even though our culture is obsessed with "truth," the idea of "truth" as entirely factual and accurate is seen in masculine and ultimately unfavourable terms, while an emotional truth is seen as feminine. "Information" and "expression" are seen as opposite, "mere accuracy" defines the former, while "Beauty" defines the latter (Roorbach 9). Getting close to the truth for Clendinnen is the almost mystical action of trout-tickling, "when you know you touch some quite different way of being in the world" (7), but truth can also be ugly and dangerous, as the other side of this metaphor shows. It can also be "long and thin and sinisterly muscled [and] transform under your fingers into a vicious-toothed eel" (74), and for Diski the truth is "poison" (94), an "exploding sewage" (96). The gendered assumptions about truth, however, are revealed clearly when Gordon describes how the new facts that she learns about her father "nose their way into what I thought was the past like a dog sticking his nose under a lady's skirts. How I resent the insidious, relentless, somehow filthy nudging of these facts" (Shadow 125). This "filthy nudging" is contrasted to memory as "a pure, virginal, untainted state" that can, however (perhaps like this feminine ideal), never exist (Murdock 11). Memory cannot be entirely accurate, and so it is "excitingly corrupt" (Diski's phrase) [and] glows with contamination" (Murdock 11). Truth and memory are understood in quite explicit, gendered terms.

The telling of one's own truth is also tied up explicitly with gender, as we see with Weldon and Gordon. Weldon, through a blend of fact and fiction, exposes the collective loss experienced by women coming of age in the 50s, women like her sister, who was an artist yet "if she doesn't find the words, doesn't find her audience, looks inside and finds only muddle and misery" which is "enough to send a woman

mad” (*Mantrapped* 124). Gordon exposes her mother in telling the truth, and asks, “What kind of daughter uses the word ‘rot’ in relation to her mother? What is the line between truth-telling and punishment?” (*Circling* 219). The truth that Gordon tells is “the inexorability of physical destruction” (222), yet it is also the truth about her lost mother’s “beautiful hands and arms, dappled with freckles like the skin of a young apple” (214). Memoirs of textured recovery attempt to complicate the dominant paradigm that insists on the importance of truth above all (seen in masculine terms) to arrive at an emotional truth that while “excitingly corrupt” nevertheless creates a fluid, shifting space beyond simplistic boundaries between fact and fiction to create a truer replica of reality . . . [that] penetrates more than the surface layers” (Wright 13).

New wave theories hold that grief is nearly always complicated and understand loss to be ambiguous. Part of this ambiguity lies in the fact that grief is also understood as a wide range of emotions, both positive and negative. The standard model assumes the process only involves pain, and so cannot accommodate for a range of emotions; this manifests within the texts as narrative structures that juxtapose healing insights with despair. New wave theorists also insist that grief is not an event that we must “get over” quickly, and assert that it can indeed last a “lifetime.” However, I disagree here with new wave theorists in a way that I think actually enhances the ambiguity of grief because I argue that while we cannot presuppose an end to mourning, neither must we insist that it last forever. My texts support this view specifically in the absence of intrusive agendas insisting on recovery—or the impossibility of recovery—as many memoirs often have definite agendas for what the purpose of their memoirs should be, while memoirs of textured recovery have endings that are often deliberately ambiguous and leave questions

unanswered. The complexity and ambiguity of loss thus manifests itself through a number of literary techniques, which we can look at in more detail.

Grief is not an event that we can “get over” quickly; on the contrary, Hagman describes grief as “open and evolving” (18). In the ongoing, “endless fashioning of narrative identities” (Eakin, “LA” 4), Mantel explains: “I don’t think of this memoir as a thing achieved or finished with, but as part of a process—it’s almost as if there is no full stop at the end” (qtd. in Blake 8). In the narrative she says: “The story of my own childhood is a complicated sentence that I am always trying to finish and put behind me. It resists finishing” (23). Gordon adds: that writing is “a job that is never completed. . . . And yet, we begin, and we begin again, because it is the thing we do” (*Circling x*).

One technique that contributes to this “open and evolving” aspect of grief is the use of the present tense. The present tense shows that the “now,” outside of the narrative, continues. They have not been able to leave the past behind in writing, as Mahood shows: “And then there is the story that took a grip on my father’s life and the life of my family, that *continues* to retell itself through my own life, *full of loose ends and unfinished business*” (14). Diski admits: “I wanted to be unavailable and in that place [depression] without the pain. *I still want it*” (227); at various points throughout the narrative, Mantel confesses: “I was (*and am*) unsure about how I am related to my old self, or to myself from year to year” (Mantel 221); “I *am* haunted by the ghosts of my own sense impressions, which re-emerge when I try to write, and shiver between the lines” (Mantel 23). Gordon describes the continuing repercussions of her father’s loss:

It’s strange, and undoubtedly due to him, that something I can only call lostness is such an important feature of my life. Perhaps because I had

to be complicit in the loss of all my things after my father died. I lose many, many important things. When I discover I have lost things, *I am* covered with a cold bath of shame. No moisture in fact sluices my skin, but the sensation of damp cold oozing from inside my body, like the disgusting eructation of a mollusc, is no less real for not being physically actual. My throat *fills* with nausea. (32)

Perhaps Mahood speaks for all of these women when she says, “I belong to an age whose experience is one of displacement and . . . loss. The thing lost will *continue* to haunt me” (Mahood 257) (my italics in all).

Another literary manifestation of this “open and evolving” aspect of grief lies in the use of ambiguous endings, or the absence of intrusive agendas insisting on the (im)possibility of recovery. These texts refuse the “neat endings” that Diski talks about in *Stranger on a Train*: “the rounded closure that rings so true and so false, the harmonious conclusion that makes sense of the beginning and of all that happened in-between” (Diski, *Stranger* 2). This is the type of closure found in texts like Lauren Slater’s, who has actually occupied both ends of the recovery spectrum, but always seems to have a clear message and agenda that “makes sense” of her experience for the reader: “Mental health doesn’t mean making the pains go away. I don’t believe they ever go away. . . . I have not healed so much as learned to sit still and wait while pain does its dancing work, trying not to panic or twist in ways that make the blades tear deeper, finally infecting the wound” (“Three Spheres” 17). However, memoirs of textured recovery deliberately avoid this type of closure and is perhaps one of the best examples that distinguishes them from other narratives of loss.

Part of this lack of closure has to do with the way in which these texts juxtapose healing insights with despair, thus avoiding any clear agenda or message as

to the “meaning” of loss. New wave theorists have argued that mourning has a “range of affects” (Hagman 18), and there are numerous examples of this in memoirs of textured recovery. In *Tiger’s Eye*, “the theme of new life consistently surfaces” (Siegel 159); her metaphor of the tiger is one she draws strength from: it “emancipated me from the terror or shrivelling death by the beauty and the completeness of his natural being” (21). In Mahood’s narrative, after her cathartic episode with the Aboriginal women, she pauses to marvel at a “carpet made of light” (247) and finds that “the crouching hummocks of the Pedestal Hills” can contain or “hold” her grief (254); Diski comes to the realisation that despite her traumatic past, “no bones are broken” (167); standing by her parents’ grave, Barrington sheds “uncomplicated tears” (172); having disinterred her father’s body, Gordon feels “happy and at peace” (273); and Mantel, at the end of her narrative, is no longer afraid of ghosts: “Not I: not here: not now” (250). In *Stranger on a Train*, Diski reminds us of a common need for closure: “we look for completion like we look for the definitive note at the end of a symphony. . . . The last page, the final strains of a chord, the curtain falling on the echo of a closing speech, living happily ever after” (Diski 2). However, a striking feature of memoirs of textured recovery is that they resist this type of ending and instead writers deliberately choose not to end with these healing insights.

While on the surface, *Tiger’s Eye* might seem to conform to compensatory paradigms, her epilogue reveals that this is far from the case, and we are left, in the end, with a metaphor of complex recovery as a kind of erratic dance: the “slow, lurching waltz of recovery, step forward, step sideways, step together, step” (282). Any healing insights within the texts are at the same time closely bound up with feelings of disappointment and anti-climax: Diski says “I left Paramount Court feeling

a little disappointed, though I had found exactly what I remembered. I had revisited; but only the memory of my past, not the past itself. The past was gone, though the bricks and mortar remained” (89). Mahood ends on a note of defeat. She insists that her journey has yielded no answers, that “There is no sense of victory. Only an emptiness, a lacuna in the soul, sucking into itself the scraps and fragments of a human life. Mine or his? It doesn’t matter” (265). The end of *Circling* echoes this despair: “If I had been able to speak like this to my mother. . . . Would it have changed anything? . . . It doesn’t matter. . . . My love prevented nothing. Not one thing” (Gordon 226-227); and Gordon insists writing can “never be anything but a failed attempt” (x). Mantel ends up with no answer to “where am I trying to get to,” with “the light [still] so uncertain,” it’s “dawn or dusk,” (252), hope or hopelessness in equal measure; and Diski with a non-committal “Mmm” in which she “thinks” her experience has left her feeling marginally better (240). Most importantly, because the writers of these memoirs do not have an agenda, they do not impose views of loss, but instead stand out from other narratives of loss that follow a “recovery arc” by leaving a space open to the reader’s interpretation, a space which illustrates recovery as a layered and textured process.

Memoirs of textured recovery certainly exist within a continuum of other grief memoirs, many of which also offer a complex view of grief. Rather than define a completely distinct sub-genre, perhaps what this project has done best is to illuminate new understandings of loss and recovery in contemporary memoir through the multi-layered lenses of new wave theories of grief. My chosen texts do show, however, a distinct trend or movement away from heroic paradigms. They are better read as a reaction against this dominant recovery paradigm, especially because they help to repair some of the damage that has been done by it. I also feel that it is necessary to

make a distinction and group them into a category such as “memoirs of textured recovery” especially because there does not seem to be any convenient way to refer to these texts, and indeed Nancy Miller, in her keynote speech at IABA’s 7<sup>th</sup> conference, questioned whether anything against the “recovery arc” was being written at all. It seems, therefore, that such a project is both timely and necessary in raising awareness about texts which consciously resist “recovery” in the conventional sense. Memoirs of textured recovery offer a kind of healing, but a healing that does not exclude and is not damaging to those who have not “triumphed over adversity.” Yet neither is theirs the consolation of those who refuse to be consoled, of those for whom grief never ends. The community they offer is without the predefined borders of a loss that has been overcome or a loss that refuses to soften its iron grip. And within this third space lies their originality and their strength.

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My project has written against theories that hope to define memoir solely in terms of how the genre “wants to teach us about living through and overcoming adversity [and] can demonstrate how honesty can guide us toward transformation, stability, and empowerment” (Ellerby xx) by showing how, in memoirs of textured recovery, this is not always a clear-cut process and that there is a danger in ignoring how such paradigms isolate those who do not necessarily “overcome.” The main limitation of this project has been in the number of memoirs analysed. From a methodological point of view, I purposely chose to do an in-depth study of a few texts in order to better support the kind of complex, layered analysis needed to highlight a space of textured recovery. But this has led me to more questions, such as, how many memoirs currently write of this space? Now that I have done the detailed groundwork



in theorising such a space, I think such a study would benefit from a broad sweep of grief memoirs to see how frequently this view of recovery emerges, as well as to determine whether this signals a move away from paradigms that solely emphasise healing. I know that there are other narratives of loss that highlight the complexity of recovery, yet my guess is that they are not as frequently occurring as the dominant healing paradigms (which are written by the hundreds) because my initial research into 40 memoirs yielded only a handful (and Nancy Miller, in her keynote speech, “My Body. My Biography. Against Recovery,” given at IABA Conference “Lifewriting and Intimate Publics,” questioned whether any were being written at all). My feeling is that this handful is indicative of a new trend in narratives of loss which writes against traditional, heroic paradigms—a hypothesis which I’ve since found to be supported by recent scholars of lifewriting, such as Couser, Hawkins, and Buss. The damage done by these dominant paradigms, and argued by Stacey over a decade ago, is perhaps becoming more and more apparent now, which makes scholarly inquiry into the subject only more of an imperative. I also feel that the research need not only be confined to memoirs by women (though it is important to establish how experiences of loss are gendered, particularly for women, for reasons I have already outlined). It would be interesting to apply this theory of textured recovery to memoirs by men and to find out how recovery is depicted within narratives of loss of similar subjects.

The “in-between” space that I attempt to define has also been facilitated by recent developments in autopathography, or chronic illness narratives that are increasingly about “conditions that one tends neither to recover from nor die from” (Hawkins, “Writing About” 124). Buss also points out how “our cultural interest in illness narratives [has] change[d] from a desire for narratives of acute illness cured to

an interest in chronic illnesses tolerated” (“Authorizing” 42). Nancy Miller asks, “What does the narrative arc without redemption look like?” and insists that “no one is publishing against the arc” (“My Body”). I hope I have shown that memoirs of textured recovery are indeed writing against this arc, and I would guess that this trend is only likely to grow. The social network created by memoirs of textured recovery is key for creating the “discussion of mournings” to which Leader refers, and to which I would add, the “discussion of *complicated* mournings.” However, almost fifteen years after scholars have written of the compensatory paradigms of the genre, I believe the current “recovery arc” has reached the point where it actually hinders social connectivity through memoir because of its failure to take into account the lives of ordinary individuals who find themselves excluded from narratives of triumph over adversity, or who find themselves unable to find the meaning which will comfort. As the nonfiction audience becomes more and more frustrated with these kinds of consolatory promises, other narrative paradigms will be increasingly called for to more accurately reflect the complex, ambiguous, many-layered experience of loss.

The “shapes of grief” (Mahood 254) are indeed many and varied. I deliberately chose texts that “resist consolation and subvert a literary genre whose function is therapeutic” (Rae 14). Memoirs of textured recovery—whose emphasis is not on overcoming but experiencing—satisfy new demands for complex understandings of loss. They avoid, above all else, “reducing the writing of a life to a predetermined arc” (Miller, “My Body”). Janet Mason Ellerby’s metaphor poignantly illustrates the importance of speaking the truth of loss within a social context: “The memoir is, then, emblematic of a larger social practice: casting off the albatross of silence. And so, the memoirist’s attempt at authenticity is hollow without audience” (Ellerby 74). I hope

this project contributes to a new culture of mourning, adding to “the star-illuminated landscape” (Mahood 254) of Jones’s “weeping constellation” (147).

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