

**Catching life, holding death: A shuttering and assembling of the self
through motherhood.**

Emily Stevens

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Abstract

I wanted to address personal experience, of two traumatic births, one a miscarriage, the other the birth of my younger daughter, followed by postnatal depression. What I did not expect was how writing this dissertation would influence and alter my painting practice. As a result, the shift within my studio practice has been incorporated within this writing; practice has assimilated writing and painting into one. Also, what I thought I would write about (depression and identity) became overwhelmed by what I was not expecting to write about (grief).

A paratactic writing style reflects the subject matter, of a fragile and interrupted state of mind, and a transitional state of being. There is an investigation of motherhood, memory, and the dubious questioning of what is “truth”. An element of repetition weaves through the writing, echoing the brain stuck on a loop, repetitive thoughts and feelings, and also repetition as a form of therapy. It was important and instinctive to me that this writing be visceral, a language of the body, and the context within which I cite myself is of art and literature by women I admire. Confusion, conflict, contradiction: these elements foment into some sort of recognition and acceptance of the complexity and continual shape-shifting inherent within identity and life itself.

Writing this dissertation has been cathartic, moving, and revealing, for me. I have revelled in the selfishness of this act, and I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to do so.

Key words:

Maternal, postnatal depression, grief, miscarriage, mother

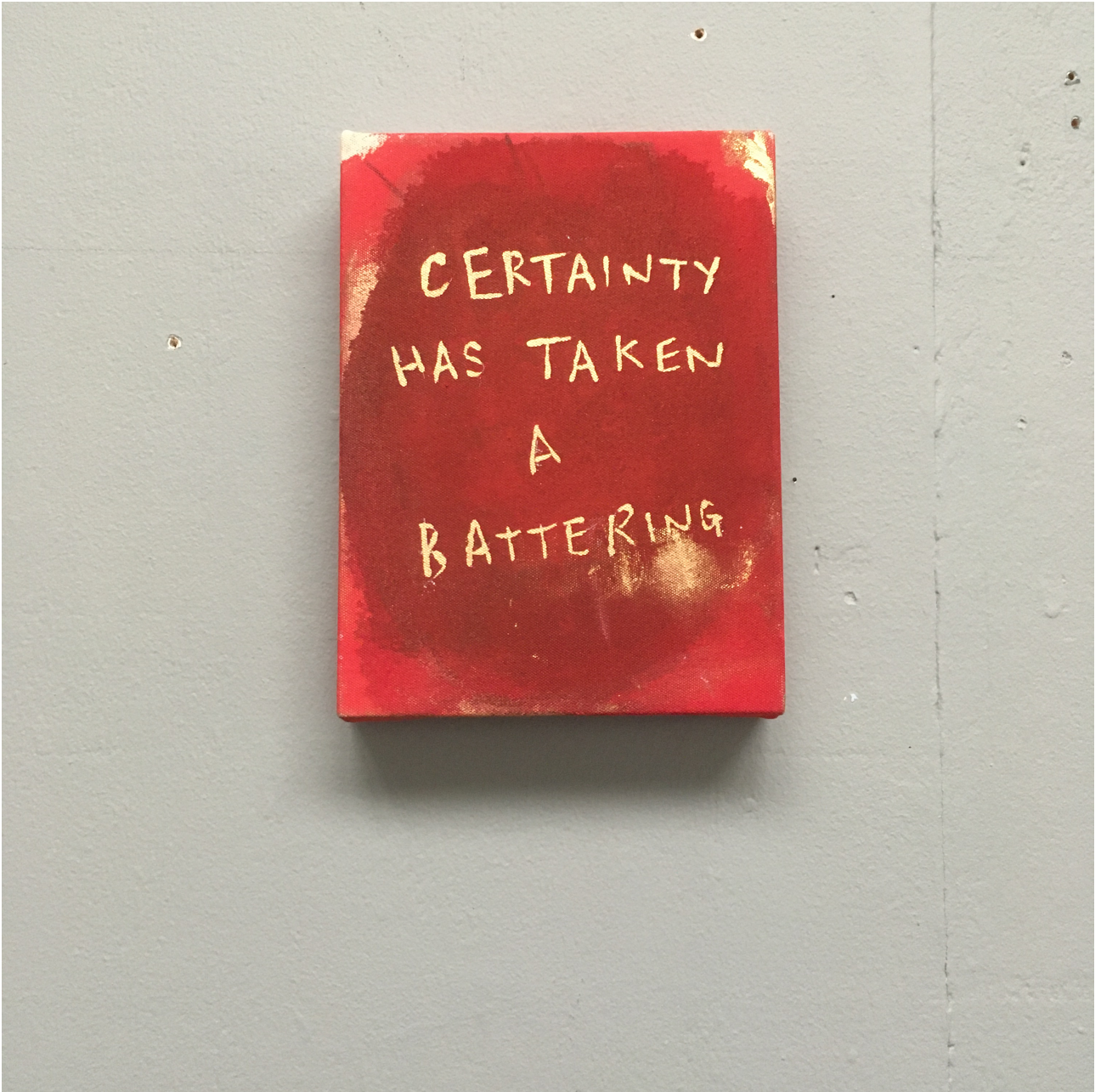


Illustration: painting by the author/artist, 2021

'Shuttered', meaning, as an adjective: not operating.

"Shutter", meaning, as a noun:

(1) each of a pair of hinged panels inside or outside a window that can be closed for security or privacy or to keep out the light. "He threw open the shutters to let in air and light".

(2) in photography, a device that opens and closes to expose the film in a camera.¹

The definition for the physical object shutters is given here as something closed, and yet the example offered is of the same being *opened*. Shutters as eyelids, shutters as means of keeping the world out, or letting it in. The implication of these definitions is that this process (of reveal, privacy) is voluntary. I am interested in the *involuntary*. A shuttered self; a cry for a sense of peace.

At the beginning of this undertaking we were encouraged by tutors to "use the dissertation to unpick something that you're grappling with'. I didn't really choose a theme to write about - the subject has imposed itself upon me and rather demanded that I write about it. It is terrifying and compelling in one. In mirroring the writing, my art practice is shifting; sometimes enthralling, often sickening me. I continue. Now I have started I must see it through.

I carry you with me wherever I go. You are a presence. I remember the shape of your head, your eyes dark under fused lids. The warmth of your still body in the palm of my left hand.

There is an empty gap in me where there should be memory. There is an unfilled space on my bookshelf where I'd expect my diary to be. There is a blankness in my face in photos of me holding my new baby and elder daughter, my eyes cast down, never connecting with the viewer. Mother of daughters. How many daughters. Is it two? Was it three? Maybe even four? That time long ago when you lay curled up in pain on a bench at the Science Museum, would that make it four? How many more? Pink for girls. Patches of amnesia like pink paint spilling into my brain.²

As I write this I cry.

Guilt, shame, and back again.

This writing is a work that will come to explore the depths of dislocation within my postnatal mind, through a jagged sifting-through of memories, paintings, drawings, literature, conversations between artists, and the process of time, to try and make sense of it all.

¹ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/shuttered> (accessed 23rd January 2021)

² Credit due to Joyce Carol Oates for appropriation of this phrase, from her novel *Black Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p.10

“A new loss will reignite an old loss - your body remembers. Sometimes those shadows come and hit us in the face when we least expect it”.³ Psychotherapist Julia Samuel believes that pain is the agent of change, whether that pain is caused by grief, or more mundane losses. Grief is a response to loss or change. Loss and change are inherent to life itself, and this instability needs to be accepted and accommodated in our lives. Our current global pandemic is a good example of this. Yet what if we lose sense of ourselves entirely, into a form of groundlessness. What happens to the self when the brain is telling lies? If it is through the senses that one perceives the world, that “reality takes form”⁴, then how do we account for a brain that is telling us otherwise?

In her essay ‘In Free Fall’, artist and writer Hito Steyerl explores a sense of groundlessness that characterises contemporary political and philosophical thought, whereby conventional perspectives are shattered, balance is disrupted, and we fall, with no ground to land on. Steyerl argues that the state of free fall is sensorily akin to a feeling of floating,

Falling is relational—if there is nothing to fall toward, you may not even be aware that you’re falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you’ll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them. Whole societies around you may be falling just as you are. And it may actually feel like perfect stasis as if history and time have ended and you can’t even remember that time ever moved forward.⁵

20th March 2020

Cold sinuses, head. Shards of glass: transparency. Deep breaths, attempting to regulate. No ebb and flow today - slack tide. More buoyancy. I could feel it holding me up.⁶

Arms reaching out and over, plunging in, pulling back. Head down, breathe out, look forwards. Bubbles straining off fingers that disappear into the murk. Roll, head to side, gasping breath in, a completely different view - sky, clarity, light. Sky above, sea below, and I am in the middle. Body as horizon line. I keep coming back to ashes to ashes, dust to dust, I don’t know why.⁷

³ Julia Samuel interview with Rangan Chatterjee on *Feel Better, Live More* #123 *The Power of Pain with Julia Samuel*. Podcast, available via iTunes (accessed 16th September 2020)

⁴ Babette Rothschild. *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p.39

⁵ Hito Steyerl, ‘In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective’, *The Wretched of the Screen* (E-flux journal: Sternberg Press, 2012), p.13

⁶ sea diary entry. The sea diary is a small notebook I keep in my swimming bag. Often I emerge from a sea swim with words that I am clamouring to record. I swim all year round and my fingers get so cold and cramped that writing becomes painful and quite illegible.

⁷ personal diary entry, March 23rd 2020

Words written at the start of the pandemic read so much more clearly now.

The tricky thing is, when we are physically ill, we have the sense of mind to know we are ill and to seek help (usually). When you are unwell of mind, you doubt your own sanity, and the shame, and the paranoia, can refuse all reason that help is what you do need. What I needed.

13th October 2020. Tuesday. Studio.

I am drawing (and cutting out) little babies. A dolly from a drawing, the girls' doll. Making me feel weird. Uncomfortable. It feels like an abandoned baby. I don't want to (draw it) and yet I do. Cutting feels like an act of barbarity. So life-like and yet lifeless. It is reminding me of loss, of my loss. Awkward, painful. Feelings I want to get away from generally. Is this something I should explore in my work? Or just leave it, to one side. I am drawn to the image.

I buried you in our garden.

She came into the world fast, waking me up from fitful mini sleeps between contractions. I was annoyed that I could not get back to sleep after this last one. Irritation turned into disbelief: oh no, she's coming, right now. I could feel her moving down. Head first, into my knickers. Holding, holding; half of her outside, half inside, a transitory moment in which it felt like time had paused and she was deciding whether to change her mind. I reached down and tried to feel for the umbilical cord. Something I'd read online whilst pregnant had told me to check to see if the cord was wrapped around the baby's neck. I didn't have a clue what it was I was feeling for but my finger pushed into something squishy. Suspicion that it was her eye. No time to try again. A build up of intensity... the last expulsion, and we half-caught her slimy warm body as she popped out of me. No noise, apart from the smallest sounds of a tiny windpipe trying to function. There was no midwife here to slap your footsoles. Oh no, those midwives had up and left two hours prior, telling me that she was not on her way, not yet. Fear opened up in me like a ladder in a pair of cheap tights. Supporting her precious torso in my left hand I smacked her back repeatedly with my right. "Breathe, breathe, BREATHE!!!" I pleaded to my baby. Panic was mounting within me. "SHE'S NOT BREATHING," I cried out. The last scream before hope was abandoned.⁸ My husband, holding his mobile, crouched down next to me. By now there was a midwife on speaker phone, my saviour:

"She's ok, I can hear her, she's clearing her lungs."

"SHE'S PURPLE!", was my desperate uncomprehending response.

"That's normal, It's ok, it's ok. Put her to your breast and wrap yourselves up in towels."

⁸ the last scream is a voice that cries out inaudibly from one end of the world to the other and sets the scene for an exploration of breakdown and catastrophic experiences in psychoanalytic theory, specifically the writings on Winnicott and Bion, as discussed by Ofra Eshel, in 'The Vanished Last Scream: Winnicott and Bion' *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 88 (1) (2019) pp111-140 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00332828.2019.1558876> (accessed 27th October 2020)

Tues, 30th March 2021

The sea slows time. My body suspended in limbo.⁹

“Patches of amnesia like white paint spilling into her brain” is how the narrator of Black Water describes the moment when her car is about to plunge off-road into water. The protagonist is in astonishment and disbelief at the possibility of death.¹⁰ In this case, her own. In my case, the death of my baby.

Several times in her life Kelly Kelleher had experienced accidents of a similar abrupt and confusing nature and each time she had been rendered incapable of screaming and each time from the first instant of realizing herself out of control, the fate of her physical body out of the control of her brain, she had had no coherent perception of what in fact was happening.

For at such moments time accelerates. Near the point of impact, time accelerates to the speed of light.¹¹

There was blood, so much blood, and just before, a ‘pop’ from inside me as my waters broke. I stood up from the sofa and felt the rush of water, was it water? Down my thighs, soaking my trousers. Hopping to the bathroom holding between my legs, “something had fallen out of me. What had just fallen out of me??” I pulled my sodden knickers down gently, trying to contain what was within them. It was my baby. Still. Lifeless. Still warm. I held her in the palm of my hand and wept, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I repeated over and over. My heart had just fallen out of my body along with my baby.

I’m so sorry.

I buried you in our garden.

Guilt, shame, pain, and back again.

Departure is written into existence yet this was too soon.

12th November 2020

The sea is a galaxy. Blobs of seaweed my companion stars. The sea has lungs. I flow, move with the bellows. My toes grip the pebbles. Sudden weight of my body as I stand up at the shore. I made it.¹²

⁹ sea diary entry

¹⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *ibid*, p.10

¹¹ *ibid*, p.10

¹² sea diary entry.

There are numerous recorded instances of Pacific Island navigators finding their way under overcast skies, often at night, just from the feel of the ocean's waves under the boat. In one instance the navigator was reported to have relied not so much on a gut feel, but by sensing the motion of the ocean in his testicles.¹³

I don't have any testicles (wistfully I sometimes wonder what that experience might be like. Would I spend hours gently tickling them?) but I can identify with the belief that our bodies can tune into the feel of a sea, and that we can learn to 'read' water, as the title of this book suggests. In the womb we are surrounded by fluid, we bob about in our own personal sea, until we get bigger and space becomes cramped, and we no longer bob yet are suspended, supported and protected by our amniotic bubble. When waters break our world suddenly and irreversibly expands.

I wonder, could you hear the gentle cracking of my bones?¹⁴

Wednesday 3rd March, 2021

Misty, timeless sea. Horizon blanked out. Soft thud of wave. A sound-proofed world. Windless float tank. My safety net.¹⁵

On being a painter, the artist Chantal Joffe said, "when you're young you're circling your subject or circling the truth you want to get to."¹⁶ Me: "I DON'T WANT TO CIRCLE MY SUBJECT. I WANT TO BE IMMERSSED IN IT."¹⁷ Weeks later I start writing this dissertation and with it my painting practice takes an abrupt about turn.

I just want this to be *good* writing, I want this to be *punk* writing: "If you can write about it in a punk way you can write about anything, because it will grip people."¹⁸ On words and whether they are good enough, "It is idle to fault a net for having holes."¹⁹ In a reverie of

¹³ Tristan Gooley, *How to Read Water* (London: Sceptre, 2016) p.159 (N.B. I didn't make that surname up!)

¹⁴ With reference to words by Carol Mavor, *A Magpie and an Envelope* (Milan: Juxta Press, 2021) p.6 ("I can hear the faint branch-cracking sounds of my mother's bones")

¹⁵ Sea diary entry

¹⁶ Chantal Joffe in conversation with Ben Luke, *A Brush With...Chantal Joffe*, 19th August 2020. Podcast, available via iTunes.

¹⁷ studio diary, 20th September 2020

¹⁸ Viv Albertine, *Only Artists: Eimear McBride and Viv Albertine* 22nd Nov 2017 BBC Radio 4. Podcast, available via iTunes.

¹⁹ Maggie Nelson, *Maggie Nelson and Olivia Laing: The Argonauts*, May 31st, 2016. London Review Bookshop YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-Yxhc2nNxo> (accessed 18th December 2020)

serenity, “writing comes like the wind.”²⁰ We also have painting, I know that, except I cannot seem to start.

Tuesday 03. Nov. Studio 10am.

Overwhelm with painting the painful parts. Something I feel I have to do. I want to do. I also want to avoid it. Yet I can't seem to paint anything else. It all feels shallow. Address the painful. Where do I start? I don't know where to start? It's all so overwhelming. Start with that. Overwhelm. I'd rather paint nothing. Just stare at a blank canvas. Need to add MYSELF to Ethics list.²¹

I wonder what makes writing ‘good’, as with art. Is there some universal bar that has been set, or is it always going to be subjective. I think of Tracy Emin’s work, so raw and honest and personal that it makes me feel more awake every time I think of her, creating, expelling. Her words loop around my mind as I work: “Paint the *thing*, instead of painting about the thing.”²² I believe that this is what Hélène Cixous meant when she wrote about Picasso’s work, “I don’t want to draw the idea, I don’t want to write being, I want what happens in the Woman Ironing, I want the nerve, I want the Revelation of the broken Woman Ironing.”²³ Cixous talks of the emotion, the ‘electric current’ that passes between the viewer and the drawing. It is one’s own mortality that is impressed upon us by the drawing. “Because as a result of drawing her with my eyes, I felt: it’s death that is passing through the Woman Ironing, our mortality in person.”²⁴ Emin’s paintings are about mortality, about sex, and desire, orgasm (the little death), and birth. There is a sense that she is painting on the brink of existence, and somehow she manages to grasp that thin film between life and death, between her fingertips, as one might peel the skin off a cold custard.

Late last year, I had the strangest experience, of seeing a drawing, and bursting into tears. The had never happened to me before (indeed, that lack sometimes led me to wonder if I was a *proper* artist, not being driven to tears by art on a regular basis. A tutor reassures me, no.). Examining the work by this artist with whom I have instantly fallen in love, I can see that she’s not painting about death, as I first assumed; she’s drawing grief. The two are very different. Grief is for the living. These drawings are imbued with life.

I am trying to paint the *thing*. It is painful. I am trying to paint experience, I am trying to paint mortality, although to write that seems rather grandiose as I sit on the pebbly beach in my hometown with the occasional dog sniffing my bum. I sit on the beach and draw.

²⁰ Marguerite Duras, as quoted by Deborah Levy, *The Cost of Living* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), p.187

²¹ personal studio diary

²² Tracy Emin. *Royal Academy of Arts: Tracy Emin and David Dawson in Conversation*, 14th February 2020. Podcast, available via *iTunes*

²³ Hélène Cixous, ‘Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner’s taking off’ in, Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.25-26

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.26

Page upon page of harsh lines, words and thick black marks rain down on my figuration. Punishing me. I leave the beach when my fingers become cramped with cold and I am drained. Back in the studio I take the drawings out and repeat the process, mono printing in black oil paint. It is messy and fulfilling. I am a stage removed this time, less raw. Privacy, repetition, therapy.²⁵

I buried you in the communal garden of our block of flats. What *would* the neighbours be thinking?

Motherhood, for me, has often felt like a second language. It has been learnt and earnt and hard won. I watched another mother talk to her baby at mum and baby group, ‘aha! *That* is how you’re supposed to do it!’ A revelation. I copied her. It fit. Just as ‘mother tongue’ is a synonym for the word language itself, the language of creativity and the language of motherhood are deeply connected - ideas are ‘conceived’, projects are ‘borne’ or ‘given birth to’, and paintings are proprietorially described as ‘babies’ or ‘children’ by some. Marlene Dumas describes the complexities of creation so perfectly to my mind:

*To create an artwork (to make an image of) and to give birth (to another human being) have essentially nothing to do with one another. Yet this is no reason to stop loving metaphors or avoiding the unrelated. But the poetry that results from mixing different kinds of language, disappears into sloppy thinking, when we imagine that these differences can ever be solved harmoniously; or even worse, when we forget that these realities we are mixing are of a beautiful and often cruel indifference towards each other.*²⁶

The artist Celia Paul also highlights this conflict both between motherhood and creativity, as well as the contradictions inherent within each individually: “Every important creative act has this duality: of giving everything and then of letting go, so that the creative work can have a life of its own.”²⁷ Paul highlights this as one of the main challenges and sources of angst within her life and practice, after the birth of her son.

There is the language of painting and the language of growing another human inside your body. Cells communicating with one another, division, growth; chemical messengers. The placenta is an entirely new organ, created rapidly by the mother’s body, primarily in the first few months of pregnancy. Once the placenta is complete it should support the baby’s growth and survival for the remainder of pregnancy, via the umbilical cord.

Your placenta took days to exit my body. It came out in chunks, like pieces of liver. I was so

²⁵ In conversation with Deborah Wye, Louise Bourgeois talked about the privacy afforded by the small amount of space that printmaking takes up, and the repetitive and therefore therapeutic nature of the act of creating prints. Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, (London: Violette Editions, 2000), pp123-4.

²⁶ Marlene Dumas, (edited by Leontine Coelewijn, Helen Sainsbury and Theodora Vischer) *The Image as Burden*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), p.54

²⁷ Celia Paul, *Self-Portrait*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2019), p.5

alarmed and it was so painful, I called 111 to seek help. I don't remember receiving any. I texted a friend who is a midwife. She told me to take some codeine. I did; it felt like I'd downed a bottle of red wine; sweet relief.

Miscarriage has been frequently overlooked in the field of psychological research.²⁸ *Why* it has been overlooked is even less examined. I suspect it is in part due to the stigma, and the fact that it is something that happens to the bodies of women (as opposed to men). Research that has been undertaken reveals specific and unique aspects of grief after miscarriage: "high levels of guilt, the loss of part of the self and a large impact upon personal identity."²⁹

In the studio I cannot bear anyone to look at my work. It is a shared space and I am open to passers-by, other artists, who do not know or care about where I drag this work from at present. I hang up a large sheet, a hospital curtain, to separate my given area from the main walk-through. Laying canvas on the floor, I lie on it and cry, and I draw around my body as I take myself back to the time you were both born. Catching life, holding death. This is the "cruel indifference" that Dumas speaks of.

Sunday 8th November 2020, at home, eve, so tired

Disembodied: how my painting looks (and feels). This is the word that comes to mind when I look at my work, but I don't know if it's the right word. It's strange, as I felt that I was really being inside my body, or maybe not?? When making it. I was trying to put myself inside my body (my body during PND), and it ends up looking disembodied. This is weird. Unsettling. I'm not sure what this means. It's not what I thought it would be.³⁰

Within a recent show, the artist Chantal Joffe included a narrative series entitled *Pictures of What I Did Not See*, a group of drawings recollecting lost memories of an illness and subsequent care for her by her daughter Esme.³¹ Joffe recounted, "I have to find a way to be able to remember it, otherwise it's, the kind of, repressing the memory of it is going to

²⁸ Annette Kersting, & Birgit Wagner, 'Complicated grief after perinatal loss'

Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience, 14 (2) (2012 Jun), pp.187–194.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3384447/>

(accessed 13th October 2020); also, Mary Frost & John T Condon, 'The psychological sequelae of miscarriage: a critical review of the literature', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 30 (1996), pp54-62

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.831.5905&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
(accessed 13th October 2020)

²⁹ Frost & Condon, *ibid*, p.54

³⁰ studio diary

³¹ Chantal Joffe, *For Esme - With Love and Squalor*. Bristol Arnolfini, 10th November 2020 - 31st December 2020, also online: <https://arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/rising-arts-agency-chantal-joffe/>
(accessed 5th January 2021)

haunt me forever and if, maybe just maybe, if I can draw it I can find a way through it.”³² Joffe drew in a cathartic frenzy, after which she immediately went to view the work of another artist, Charlotte Salomon, whose show *Life or Theatre* was a darkly illustrated history of the reignited life events of women in her own family. Joffe’s connection to this work was apparent:

*“she was literally saving herself through the drawing. She was literally hanging onto life and avoiding history (familial suicide), by exorcising her own story. (...) So I sort of stumbled round this show. I also, during the making of those drawings I thought, well if art isn’t somehow engaging you to that degree, there isn’t much point in making it, if you’re not burning to make it and its not making you feel more alive and more glad to be alive”*³³

The writer Olivia Laing describes paint as “a device for stopping time”³⁴ Conversely, artist Marlene Dumas is quoted as saying: “Painting doesn’t freeze time. It circulates and recycles time like a wheel that turns.”³⁵ For me, paint breathes life into time. After wishing myself dead, I am so fucking glad to be alive. I just want my paintings to vibrate with life, too. Thinking of Sandra Blow’s *Vivace*. I wanted to immerse myself in that painting when I first saw it, at the Tate St Ives. I wanted to become that painting. Trying to paint like she did; chucking watered-down paint at swathes of canvas on the floor, I use the force and momentum from my entire body to cover the canvas. It felt so good. Catharsis. Disappointment when I realised I was never going to be Sandra Blow.

The impact of motherhood on a female artist’s career is undeniable, and it is certainly made more difficult for female artists to combine motherhood and success (recognition and money).³⁶ The following quote from Emin is often given to feed this theory: “There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men.”³⁷ Yet however much Emin may be speaking a version of the truth (and it is relevant to point out the frequent contradictions in her recorded speech), this does not mean there is not also an opposing truth, and a huge array of differences in-between. There are plenty of brilliant female artists with children - Louise Bourgeois, Jenny Saville, Barbara Hepworth (mother of four, including triplets), to name just a few. Not only have these women excelled as artists, they have also been able to use their experiences of motherhood within their work

³²Chantal Joffe, *Chantal Joffe in Conversation with Professor Dorothy Price*, 28th October 2020, <https://arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/art-in-the-city-chantal-joffe-dorothy-price/> (accessed 29th November 2020)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Olivia Laing. *Funny Weather* (London: Picador, 2020), p.173

³⁵ Marlene Dumas, p.70

³⁶ Hettie Judah, ‘Full, Messy and Beautiful’, *Representation of Female Artists in Britain During 2019*, (London: Freelands Foundation, 2019), <https://freelandsfoundation.imgix.net/documents/Representation-of-female-artists-2019-Clickable.pdf>, (accessed 12th February 2021).pp.14-19

³⁷ Kate McMillan, “Introduction: Mapping Five Years of Inequality in the Visual Arts in Britain”. *Representation of Female Artists in Britain During 2019*, (London: Freelands Foundation, 2019), <https://freelandsfoundation.imgix.net/documents/Representation-of-female-artists-2019-Clickable.pdf>, (accessed 12th February 2021), p.9

to powerful effect. The painter Jenny Saville, well established in her success before she had children, has talked about the experience of motherhood ‘almost like a BC/AD moment’ in her work. Her encounter with the voices of doubters, those who questioned her capacity to continue to work at the high level she had previously attained, merely seemed to strengthen the opposing feelings she had at the time. Her work became led by her instinct, her interactions with her children and the experience of seeing them grow and enact creativity themselves. “I didn’t want to refuse any of that and I felt like I had this very insider view of something very human, incredibly human.”³⁸

I search for female painters who reference postnatal (postpartum) depression, or PND. I find none. I know I have not looked hard enough. There are writers, however. Poetry and literature are where I find some comfort.

The Yellow Wallpaper, a short story written in 1892 by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I first read this years ago as a student of English Literature; the text carefully annotated in pencil, my 20-year old handwriting seemingly prophetic, “analogy between wallpaper design and madness - no logic? To either?”³⁹ My initial interest focused on the narrator needing to break free from patriarchy (aka the wallpaper) - madness is her only freedom. Apart from suicide. This time however, I read, devour it, in a whirl of almost-elation. I ‘understand’, just as the author understands me. The brain as a prison, that sense of being cut off from oneself and at once subsumed by an obsessively damaging sense of self/selves.

Within *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator’s fixation with decoding the confusing “optic horror’ of this wallpaper ‘with delirium tremens’⁴⁰, morphs into a weaving of herself within and behind the pattern of the paper itself, and an eventual triumphant obliteration of sanity when she declares to her husband at the end, “I’ve got out at last (...). And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back.”⁴¹ He promptly faints.

Monday 22nd March 2021

*Sea calm and mildly deadly. Heart racing on entry. Cold shock.
Horizon padded out. Cloud layer with a tear in it, blue bruise.*⁴²

Perhaps the sea would’ve been my yellow wallpaper. It has only ever felt like a refuge, albeit at times a terrifying one, yet the better of two evils. The place where I thought about taking my own life (along with my baby’s). The space where I put myself daily to wean myself off (and replace) the medication I was on postnatally. The sea as a cure all - for life and death. My mind was certainly my yellow wallpaper, but it never promised the relief

³⁸ Jenny Saville, in conversation with Ben Luke, *A brush with... Jenny Saville*, 12th August 2020,. Podcast, available via iTunes.

³⁹ own notes

⁴⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (New York, Feminist Press, 1977), p.20

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.36

⁴² sea diary entry

and freedom that the sea offered, instead, it was my own private prison. The writer Catherine Cho's words ring so true with me, as I listen to her talking about the confines of her own brain during postpartum psychosis, "anything triggers a memory, it triggers a moment, it triggers a moment in your imagination so you can no longer be sure what is real and what is not real."⁴³

I felt like she hated me. I believed that she hated me. I was told to drown us all.

22nd Nov 2020

*Often I am frightened of the sea. It felt teeming with life today.
Opaque as mud.⁴⁴*

A blank page in my sketchbook, except for a few words:

B: Can you draw C(..) today?

Me: Why can't I draw you, darling?

B: Because I don't want you to.

I had been drawing my daughters every day at breakfast for the prior ten months. This was the first time that I received clear instruction not to. I feel a sweep of pain in my chest. Why do you have to take it so personally? She's only six.

SHAME: I am ashamed, scared, I feel vulnerable. I don't want to give my daughters the wrong idea, I don't want them to misunderstand. I am trying to ask for their forgiveness. I am trying to prove my love for them. The Love that should feel solid and unwavering, "Mother's love", the love that has been tainted with shame and self-disgust. I draw them obsessively. I paint them obsessively. I am trying to show this love that I have which is so fierce and unlike any other. It is the best kind of love, the infatuation of wanting to imbibe them, yet also the most intense. Raw.

I buried you in a silver box.

"Go to bed" said the midwives. "This baby isn't coming anytime soon." She is, I thought, loudly, in my head. "She is" I whispered. I had no energy to say it any louder. My resources were being used up. By my body and my mind, focused on the mammoth task of delivering my child. This one was still alive, as far as I knew: as far as I could imagine.

"Oh, I got a baby. Found it on a doorstep in a box."

"In a box?"

"That's right. A big brown box with little holes in it."

⁴³ Catherine Cho in conversation with Katherine May, *Catherine Cho on postpartum psychosis*, 22nd June 2020. Podcast, available via iTunes.

⁴⁴ sea diary entry

“A big BROWN box with little HOLES in it?”⁴⁵

“Go home,’ said the A&E doctor, “‘It’s probably nothing.” How can it be nothing, I thought. How can blood mean nothing?

I went home, and waited, as the contractions began and the pain and fear intensified.

“Boxes hold secrets”⁴⁶

Boxes as a place to hold stories, as a personal narrative and metaphor, is how the artist Maggie O’Brien makes sense of one part of her practice. Old tins and cigarette boxes house faded film star portraits and ephemera that speak of decay and disruption, containment and grief. In one box I see a miniature dancing girl, missing limbs, bound tightly to a piece of rusting metal; opposite, a black and white image of child star Shirley Temple obscured by a piece of black lace. O’Brien’s boxes are fluid, things go in and out; navigation of the self. “Boxes hold secrets. They are passed down through generations. Making a story. Narrative (...) invites us to look into them and find our own resonances.”⁴⁷ O’Brien’s boxes seem to me to be a form of what writer Samuel Beckett terms “involuntary memory”; they allow for a reading of her story in a way that invites an exchange, a sense of openness.⁴⁸ Talking of the work of Proust, Beckett denies the adequacy of dull “monochrome” voluntary memory in favour of the involuntary:

“Involuntary memory is explosive, an immediate, total and delicious deflagration. It restores, not merely the past object, but ..more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal – the real” ⁴⁹

“Is this fact or is this fiction? History memory. Invention. Brain. How can I trust my brain Anymore. Anymore”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Janet and Allan Ahlberg, *Burglar Bill*, (London: Puffin Books, 2015)

⁴⁶ Maggie O’Brien, in personal conversation at Newlyn Art School, November 2020

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Samuel Beckett, ‘Proust’ in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, (London: John Calder, 1999)

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.7

⁵⁰ personal diary entry, March 2019

“Memories are killing.”⁵¹ A tutor expounds on Beckett writing on Proust, and I feel a pang. Sensory experiences propel memory; a thing over which we lack control. The smallest thing can kick it off; a smell: “Rosemary was the herb for remembrance, but all I wanted to do was forget... the solitary sprig in front of me was a bullet to the past.”⁵²

Tuesday 30th June 2020

The sea today: VIOLENT.

Shoulder dislocation from the might of the water.

*Strangulation by seaweed as it wraps itself around my neck.*⁵³

I think of a poem I love by Stevie Smith and listen to her talking about the inspiration behind it. Her voice is a delight to listen to, drawing out her vowels with a regal solemnity, she pronounces ‘drowning’ as if it the word itself were ten feet high:

*I read about a man getting drowned once. His friends thought he was waving to them from the sea, but really he was drowning. This often happens in swimming baths or at the sea side. And then I thought, that in a way, it is true of life, too, that a lot of people pretend, out of bravery really, that they are very jolly and ordinary sort of chaps, but really they do not feel at all at home in the world, or able to make friends easily, so then they joke a lot and laugh and people think they’re quite alright and jolly nice too. But sometimes a brave pretence breaks down, and then, like the poor man in this poem, they are lost.*⁵⁴

*Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.*

*Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.*

*Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning*⁵⁵

⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled*, as quoted in seminar with tutor John Strutton, 17th March 2021

⁵² Levy, p.92

⁵³ sea diary entry

⁵⁴ Stevie Smith, “Stevie Smith discusses and recites ‘Not Waving But Drowning’, voice recording, uploaded 7th September 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKHWEWOrL9s> (accessed 23rd March 2021)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Never wave, when you are drowning, never wave. Hold your hand above the water, hold it still, and wait.⁵⁶

I wish I'd named my daughter Stevie.

I am standing by the water's edge with my younger daughter strapped to my chest and my eldest running around on the pebbles. The voice is loud that day, my voice. 'Walk in. Walk into it. Do it. Now. It's so easy. You can disappear. You will be free.' I wanted that voice to carry me so badly; it was such a temptation. The thought of being free. Free from the never-ending cacophony of voices, my voice, telling me I was a bad mother, you are a bad mum. You're fucking useless why can't you stop her from crying why is she crying again what did you do this for why did you have them they need a proper mother who can protect them and look after them properly you can't even change your own clothes look at you such a state you're fucking useless why cant you stop her from crying oh god why are they crying again and the screaming why cant I just have some peace all I want is some peace why dont you just hold her head under the water it will stop the screaming the incessant noise just DO IT HOLD IT DOWN AND NO you cant even get that right look at the fear in her eyes she's scared of her own mother youre so fucking useless

I didn't have the energy or the courage to kill myself.

"You're so fucking useless." (Me)

"I love you." (Her)

She started talking to me when she was a few weeks old, saying 'I love you,' 'you're my mummy'. I told L, the woman who led the mother and baby group that felt like my last thread to reality: 'she talks to me'. L just smiled, knowingly, like she completely understood what I meant. I am guessing now that this was psychosis, hallucinations, or just sheer exhaustion from lack of sleep. No-one has ever diagnosed this and I never mentioned it again, until now. It happened several times - I would hear my tiny daughter speak to me and tell me how much she loved me. A little surprised, I might look at her, and her face would answer me; "you and me, forever".

9th October 2020

Reflecting during swim. C was speaking to me. I still find it hard to say, "I thought C was speaking to me." I still want to believe that we had that divine connection. That is how I would describe it. Logically, I know it to be untrue. The last bit of this grip of the illness that maybe I need to shift. Or one piece that I need to examine.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ common belief on the coast where I live; unsure how effective it is.

⁵⁷ personal diary entry

I don't know where those voices have gone, yet I hesitate to say my "real" voice is back now, for I still believe all those voices to be within me, all those transgressions and points of view. Less of a dichotomy than a menagerie. The novelist Elif Shafak talks about her own bickering "hareem within," her "Choir of Discordant Voices," six miniature figures that constantly pervade her brain with their opinions and dictats.⁵⁸ Shafak had learnt to live with these voices until her transition into motherhood, which precipitated the arrival of a djinn, "Lord Poton." This anthropomorphis of her postpartum depression quashed all the usual voices of the hareem, and tortured the writer with his malign rule. Her recovery, and his dismissal, only seems to occur when she recognises that she actually called for him, in response to the uncertainty of becoming a mother, "I couldn't bear the plurality inside of me. Motherhood requires oneness, steadiness and completeness, while I was split into six voices, if not more. I cracked under the pressure."⁵⁹

I suspect we are not the only ones who live with these multiplicity of voices and opinions. I know we are not. Artist Maggi Hambling confirms this for me with the words, "we all have voices inside us, telling us all kinds of rot most of the time."⁶⁰

In her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit relates the pleasure that Virginia Woolf takes in getting lost, in the sense of discarding her identity, "a passionate desire, even an urgent need, to become no one and anyone, to shake off the shackles that remind you who you are, who others think you are."⁶¹ Woolf's embracing of uncertainty feels like the antithesis of the transition into motherhood experienced by so many; it feels like shooting for the stars.

"A Pair of Scissors." "I am a print of you." The writer Carol Mavor introduces me to the pair of scissors, portrait of mother and child, seen in the Tate Modern. "The mother's sharp blades are wide open, like the mouth of a big bird, her handles spread wide—like thighs. The baby pair of scissors dangle between the mother's scissor-legs by a little umbilical cord. A short leash."⁶²

When I imagined drowning myself I never thought that she wouldn't be there with me; she was still part of me, after all.

12th March 2021. I am finishing off this dissertation and receive a text message from a midwife friend that jolts me back to pain. Having given her a copy of my medical notes from the birth of my youngest daughter years ago, we had never discussed what her

⁵⁸ Elif Shafak, *Black Milk; On Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within* (New York: Viking, 2011) p24

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.256

⁶⁰ Hambling, as before

⁶¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp.23-24

⁶² Mavor, p.37

thoughts were, until this: “Reading through them. You are right. Consent for VE but not for sweep and was not discussed. You should not have been left. Probably in the rest and be thankful stage. They should have quietly waited. You were 4cm, central, contracting 3:10. Her head was low at the spines. They didn’t listen. Sorry is this raw to hear. But hopefully validates something for you.”

It could have been avoided. Could it have been avoided?

I buried you in a silver box padded with loo roll.

I’m so sorry my darling. Love wasn’t enough to set you going like a fat gold watch.⁶³

I buried you in the communal garden of our block of flats. Having no idea what to do with a dead baby (?foetus) I put you in small box made from silver card, padded with toilet paper. You lay in state in our bathroom for two days, until I had the strength and the idea to take you outside and place you in the ground. A month later a solitary red tulip sprang from the spot where you were buried. I am incredibly superstitious about red tulips now.

Until 24 weeks gestation, there is no legal acknowledgement of baby/foetus and therefore there are no naming rights, no birth or death certificates, no funeral. I ponder the line between 23 weeks and 6 days, and less, and 24 weeks. The difference between existence (in the eyes of others), and relative nothingness. Babies have survived birth at 21 weeks. I ask myself where on earth the 24 week stipulation came from.

I wonder if there were curtains twitching whilst I buried you. The neighbours curious as to what little seedling I was planting, perhaps. It was the slip for this story. I say ‘story’ yet I am acutely aware of the implications of this word. Is this fact or is this fiction? History, memory, invention; the boundaries blur between them. Brain. How can I trust my brain. Anymore. Anymore? After what it did to itself.

At the time of writing this sentence (Wednesday the 6th January 2021), my painting is shifting along with the subject of my writing, along with the focus of my thoughts. There is a painful haze that lingers, a muddiness within, yet I feel that elements are beginning to come into focus, as my hand might reveal itself before my face underwater, within the green-brown opacity of the sea. I am drawing my baby, as I remember her. A last memory of her physicality and proof that she existed. I realise I am drawing and painting (and writing) as a means of repair. Care (and I mean care as an act of love, yet also a tiresome burden, and all things between and inside out). Repair.

I am painting blood, a loss. I show it to fellow students during a group crit and get the response from one, “I’ve never had a baby, or a miscarriage, but that looks like an

⁶³ taken from poem *Morning Song* by Sylvia Plath; “Love set you going like a fat gold watch”. Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.156

exaggeration to me.” In reply, I exclaim, “It’s not an exaggeration, it’s an understatement!” I’m so frustrated I want to retreat, and cry. This is not the only time. The other person who called me “brave”, for talking about postnatal depression and “not having that maternal instinct.” That’s not what happened, not what I’m trying to say, I thought, with frustration and sadness and some desperation. I love my babies, directly and without compromise. What I fear is not being good enough, not being *enough*, for them. I am struggling with being misunderstood, misappropriated, of having my words, my art, my meaning, twisted. I dread this. And yet I am beginning to realise that it is out of our control, as artists. My job is to create the work (perhaps with true intention and blind faith) and put it out there. And that is where any control I have ends. I cannot lay claim to an absolute truth. The viewer brings all their own experiences, and ignorance, their own sense or non sense, and takes whatever they want in return. I need to stop pontificating about them taking my soul.

I am a cannibal mother. So in love with my children that often I want to eat them. Devour their soft warm limbs and chubby cheeks, their sweet-smelling hair. I inhale their warmth and absorb their kisses. I find affirmation in the perfectly described sensation of being turned “inside out” by the pleasure and exquisite pain of maternal joy, that “shatters the carapace of motherhood.”⁶⁴ Conversely, the artist Louise Bourgeois eats her children (via her drawings) when they annoy her: “When the children exasperate me, I turn into a—cannibal? No, it’s just that children are too demanding.”⁶⁵ I sense Bourgeois’ slight shame at having said this, her reluctance to admit this strength of feeling when she follows quickly with the words, “there are a lot of drawings that I should never have shown. My friends the dealers found them. There are a lot of things I should have weeded out.”⁶⁶ Mothers are not expected, not allowed, to have these feelings about their children. It is another stick we can use to beat ourselves with, especially when we cannot cope or when we are unwell. I am a bad mother, I am a terrible mother.

In her book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, the writer Jacqueline Rose protests at societal expectations that new mothers keep any feelings of despair to themselves, behind closed doors: “Perhaps what goes by the name of ‘postnatal depression’ is a way of registering griefs past, present and to come, an affront to the ideal not least because of the unbearable weight of historical memory and/or prescience it carries.”⁶⁷

A book that I have been trying to ignore is seeking me out again, from the bookshelf in my messy sitting room. The floor covered in toys, dirty princess dresses and ripped bits of tissue. I ignore the mess and huddle up with the book. Reading, I feel like I have found the perfect articulation of my current thoughts:

“Birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman’s understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her (me: what about mothers that did not birth

⁶⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2018), p200

⁶⁵ Bourgeois, as before, p.294

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.295

⁶⁷ Rose, as before, p185

their children?), and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them. To discover this is to feel that your life has become irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snares in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle.”⁶⁸

I am slightly depressed by the assertion that I will forever be fighting and losing, but not as much as I was when I first read this book. Immediately after the birth of my youngest, Cusk’s words were too much; too raw. But now, I devour them. I find her funny and illuminating. I am out of the danger zone. I’m looking on from the other side, the other side of the bars. I’m on the outside. *And you can’t put me back.*

I feel a shift in my understanding - is this why I draw my daughters so incessantly? Is this why I cannot wait to escape to my studio yet I miss them the minute I am not with them? Is this why I paint them while I am at work - to maintain my connection to them?

Friday 5th Feb 2020

*Rose petals in the sea. Magenta. Purple pink. Calm. Icy swim in rose petals.
I think of collective grief.*

Losing a baby is a solitary mourning... “Thus she grieves privately, making the grief more difficult to resolve.”⁶⁹

Four years after the birth of the baby that I never got to see breathe, I give myself time to consider it: “I cry, facing the sea, thinking about it. Memories that feel raw, at times. I thought I was depressed, unsure that it was, in fact, grief. Grief doesn’t go away, does it. It just lessens its vice-like grip, and it evolves, into something softer, perhaps. More peaceful, on the whole.”⁷⁰ A year on from writing this entry, I still feel unsure if I am allowed to call it grief; it does not feel deserved, there exists a hierarchy of grief of which I wish to be respectful. Yet still my heart aches.

“The loss of an infant through stillbirth, miscarriage or neonatal death is recognised as a traumatic life event.”⁷¹ “Although parents have not built up a relationship with their infant, grief after pregnancy loss does not differ significantly in intensity from other loss scenarios.”⁷² Well, that explains it then.

⁶⁸ Rachel Cusk, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), p.7

⁶⁹ Frost & Condon, as before, p.57

⁷⁰ personal diary entry, March 2020

⁷¹ Kersting and Wagner, as before, p187

⁷² *Ibid*, p.188

9th March 2020

I paint and draw obsessively like a person possessed. I am slowly coming to realise that I cannot control the paint; it controls me. I cannot tell my hand what to draw; it draws what I imagine I am sensing with my fingertips, with my whole body. The softness and shape of my younger daughter's unkempt hair. The sharp searching (inquisitive) gaze of my elder.⁷³

Dumas asks of herself, "Why do I draw? To remember or to forget?"⁷⁴ Drawing, holds me there, the physical sensation of marking ink on paper, observing intently as I feel with my pencil, my daughter eating her rice crispies. I often draw my elder daughter more because the younger does not sit still. I draw to remember. I draw to drown out.

Friday 26th Feb, 2020

See something in the water. Fear. Petals are there again! Little bruised kneecaps. One, a wavering arrow upturned, pointing me out to sea, horizon.⁷⁵

The day after you were born, I noticed a tender patch on my forehead, a lump turning into a bruise. Where on earth did that come from, I wondered; most of the collateral damage was nowhere near this site. Hours later I suddenly remember - pressing my head down onto the bathroom tap during contractions, hard relief onto cold metal; forcing a selective pain in order to detract from an unavoidable one.

"A bruise is a black and blue marking, an injury from the past. Sometimes we do not know what caused it."⁷⁶ "Everything that touches us, as elders, flowers—bruises—holds something of the past."⁷⁷ When the writer Carol Mavor watches her elderly father blossom with bruises, due to the fragility of his skin, she sees him "as stealing all of the past that he could hold onto."⁷⁸ Bruises are often blue. The whites of your eyes are blue. They are so pure as to be blue.

I have a tutorial with my painting tutor. My work is criticised for being too illustrative, for trying to explain too much, and in doing so, failing as a piece of art. I finish it feeling deflated and misunderstood. A few days later I reread my notes of her words, "You've got to trust your viewer. They might not get exactly where you want them to go, or they might, but you need to give them the experience of trying to come up with the answer. That's what makes an artwork work." The realisation strikes me, again, I need to stop caring. I need to

⁷³ personal diary entry

⁷⁴ Dumas, as before, p.108

⁷⁵ sea diary entry

⁷⁶ Mavor, as before, p.13

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.19

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.20

embrace the ambiguities and hope that this is the start of a conversation.⁷⁹ Another tutor tells me that she doesn't 'give a shit' what anyone thinks of her work. How beautifully exuberant she sounds. How exultant, I think of her words, with envy.

I am hooked by this piece of writing by Rebecca Solnit that embraces and celebrates the act of liberating a work, be it a piece of art, literature, or thought, from the need to pin down, to quantify, to define. Solnit carries the words written by Virginia Woolf in her diary in 1915: "the future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think", and weaves them into her own vision of wilfully wandering into the unknown, in order to remain open to the possibilities of what we might learn from listening and caring. In life, as in art, we are irreducible; there is so much that we do not know, that we will never know:

"There is so much we don't know, and to write truthfully about a life, your own or your mother's, or a celebrated figure's, an event, a crisis, another culture is to engage repeatedly with those patches of darkness, those nights of history, those places of unknowing. They tell us that there are limits to knowledge, that there are essential mysteries, starting with the notion that we know just what someone thought or felt in the absence of exact information.

Often enough, we don't know such things even when it comes to ourselves".⁸⁰

This feels like a balm, reading this.

"We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try". Another affirmation, this time from author Maggie Nelson.⁸¹

"I never intended to make something that was homogeneous, I was after the contradictions."⁸² Artist Mary Kelly, who documented six years of motherhood in her monumental work *Post-Partum Document 1973-9*, found she was damned either way with critiques of her work as being too masculine and theoretical or too feminine and experiential. This seems to me to be a recurrent malaise; a fear of complexity or contradiction within thought and understanding.

"All things are in themselves contradictory. And it is this principle more than any other which expresses the truth, the very essence of things."⁸³

⁷⁹ Solnit discusses the suffocating desire of literary criticism to define and categorise a work, within her essay "Woolf's Darkness". She believes that great criticism allows a work to vibrate with meaning and eternally feed the imagination, which is, in itself, great art. Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me, And Other Essays* (London: Granta, 2014) pp. 100-101

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.88

⁸¹ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p.51

⁸² Mary Kelly interviewed by Mark Sheerin, *Artist's Statement: Mary Kelly on Post-Partum Document*, 7th March 2011, Culture 24 <https://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art349280> (accessed 28th February 2021)

⁸³ Hegel, as quoted by Dumas, as before, p.14

12th October 2020

*Sea like salty breast milk. Palest blue hue.*⁸⁴

“The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.”⁸⁵

Derek Jarman’s writing on blue and his dying of AIDS is so agonisingly beautiful:

*Blue protects white from innocence
Blue drags black with it
Blue is darkness made visible*⁸⁶

Blue is the colour of foremilk, the first breastmilk that has least fat. Blue is the colour of our dreams.⁸⁷ Blue is the colour of the veins on the back of my hand. Blue is the colour of the whites of your eyes - so pure they are blue.

Elif Shafak believes that words have a particular taste and shape.⁸⁸ To me, colours have the same. When I was at my lowest point, I could not see or sense colour. I wore the same clothes week after week; I must have reeked of stale breast milk yet I was oblivious to the smell or the appearance, I just didn’t have the energy. Now I feel colour with the intensity of a punch in the mouth; a fistful of blackberries like blood behind the eyes, coffee fills my throat with forest green, fingertips on jawbone a streak of fluorescent pink, my daughter’s soft breath on my cheek palest peach... Emotions come in colours with kaleidoscopic force; the dizzying sensation of spending time with my children is a chaotic melee of magenta, quinacridone rose, carmine, lemon yellow, azur blue, pthalo blue, quinacridone lilac merged with alizarin red, a dash of titanium white... titanium, Titanium, that song makes me cry, it reminds me of grief, of a time of intense happiness and then the sudden abrupt pain, the shearing off of my skin ... furiously I mix colours in my studio with olympic dedication.

⁸⁴ sea diary entry

⁸⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, p.35

⁸⁶ Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Color* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.144

⁸⁷ Kassia St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London: John Murray, 2018), p.179

⁸⁸ Elif Shafak, *Elif Shafak; writing through the eyes of women*, Royal Academy of Arts, 23rd May 2019. Available as podcast via iTunes.

“Grief is the thing with feathers.”⁸⁹ I have finally realised that I am grieving, not only for the baby I gave birth to that I never saw live, but also for the mother that I imagined I could have been had I not been unwell. And I grieve for all the times I cannot remember and do not want to remember, and for myself.

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers”⁹⁰ wrote Emily Dickinson in 1862. In Greek mythology, when Pandora (the first woman created by the gods) opened the box, she released all the evils of humanity from within. One thing remained inside: hope.

“Drawings are thought feathers, they are ideas that I seize in mid flight and put down on paper.”⁹¹ Hope is my thought feather. Hope is the *father* that cares for me. (Father, for me, as synonym for mother, as primary caregiver, as I want to give respect to all fathers that are mothers, or simply, themselves, acting out of love). Drawings are the hopes that sustain me, hopes for the future, ideas to interpret the past, and that which carries me.

“Don’t try and heal everything; just let it bleed a bit, ie. don’t try and finish everything”
Words spoken from an artist friend, given to her in advice from another artist.

When asked how she knows that a painting is finished, the artist Sandra Blow described the sensation as a “startling rightness”⁹² A dissertation and a painting could be compared: there is always more you could add, more that could be taken away, but it is up to the writer, the painter, to decide where to finish. The questions that I pondered at the start of this dissertation, that I yearned to have resolved, that I expected would be neatly answered and wrapped up, delivered in a small heft of paper at the end of this process, remain. Not as they were, but still, open-ended. They may never be answered, however much I try to draw, paint, or write my way through. But I am relieved, and comforted, to admit that I have more than enough answers within me. And so, I am not going to bother tying this dissertation up with a neat conclusion. It’s not that I can’t be *bothered*. I have tried and failed a dozen times. The reason is, that I am coming to realise that this is a work in progress, unfinished. As so, I accept it.

4th November 2020. Walking along the seafront to my studio, two large stretchers slung over my shoulders, like the sides of a crate.

“How are ya?” Asks the man with the harmonica who shelters next to the fish hut and appears to live on the beach.

“Alright,” I say.

“You’ve been freed!” He exclaims, referring to my cage walls, I’m guessing.

I laugh. Too right. I’ve been freed!

And you can’t put me back.

⁸⁹ Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (London, Faber and Faber, 2016)

⁹⁰ Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers”, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* Edited by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

⁹¹ Bourgeois, as before, p.293

⁹² Michael Bird, *Sandra Blow*, (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011), p.19

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