



# TEXT

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***Writing against the abyss: An exergue***

Abstract:

“Archive”, from the Greek word *arkheion*, signals a place of commencement and commandment (Derrida, 1995a). Dig deep enough into the etymology of “archive” and there is water (Crowcroft, 2022). This creative-critical essay takes a speculative approach to understanding my late mother’s literary archives, which are locked in storage overseas. Derrida would say that as guardian of the archive, my purpose is curation. This essay serves as an *exergue* to that exercise, by setting the stage and establishing a prearchival lexicon through citation (Derrida, 1995a). Through writing memory, speculation and theory, scaffolded by narrative threads of bodies and loss, this essay languages the relationship between mother and daughter and archive. It adopts the form of a braided essay (Miller, 2013; Miller & Paola, 2004; Walker, 2017) titrating between narrative threads and critical theory to “see what is displaced” (Eades, 2015, p. 31), allowing for fragmentation that reflects broken bodies in a broken world (Walker, 2017), abjection (Kristeva, 1982) and ugliness (Ellis, 2018), the formation of cellular writing or *écriture cellulaire* (an extension of Eades’s *écriture matière*), and *prepositioning* trauma (Rendle-Short, 2021). Hope becomes a matter of survival, of writing around, against and through, in wave after wave, in order to leave no space for the abyss (Cixous, 1991).

Biographical note:

Jenny Hedley is a PhD student at RMIT University whose writing appears in *Archer Magazine*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Diagram*, *Overland Literary Journal*, *TEXT*, *Westerly Magazine*, and the anthologies *Admissions* and *Verge*. Her current research involves experimental interventions with her mother’s material literary archives. Parallel to this research, she is completing a creative-critical memoir, *My Archive Fever*, which takes a speculative approach to the (not yet accessed) archives and is funded by Creative Victoria. She lives on unceded Boon Wurrung land with her son.

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*Écriture matière*, corporeal writing, creative writing, archive, *exergue*

## **I. languaging the (archival) body: an etymological unfolding, in waves**

\\A\\ *broken bodies* \\A\\

The tide is washing in. S(u)n wants to shortcut the eighth day of our hike by rock-hopping along the coast. I'll indulge him till it's no longer safe. After a ten-kilometre morning walk plus another kay scrambling over boulders and dodging waves, we sight the sandy beach that could halve our distance to the car. And a cliff face that could lead to our deaths. One misstep equals a ten metre fall onto rocks smashed by fretful waves into the salty abyss.

"We can make it," he says. "C'mon, let's just try."

I think for a moment then say, "I don't want to die today."

We retreat.

On the final boulder leading back to the main track I slip a mere half metre from the ground, face first onto the sand, twenty-kilo pack and seventy-kilo body heaving onto my wrist as I hear or maybe just feel it crack.

Quick! Up from prone, away from oncoming surf, don't faint, lay on this rock shelf here it will be safe.

"Listen carefully to every word I say."

Instruct child to retrieve compression bandage from pack. Alcohol swabs, Band-Aids.

"I'm injured and can't take care of you properly." Words robotic. "We need to hike out. Twenty-two kays more."

"What about the emergency beacon?"

"It's not life or death."

Tears flow. His, not mine. Witness to Mother's frailty.

The last time, but not the first time, my left wrist was fractured it was twisted beyond breakpoint by a fiancé. (Not the one I married, divorced.) Then, I cried. This time: my error. Survival mode, no time for self-pity.

Later, as we trek along the coastline, this time a sanctioned, alternative route to our journey according to the Great Ocean Walk guidebook, we each use a pole for balance, probing slipperiness and stability before each tentative step as the sun dips below the horizon. Okayness comes in waves – it's never a destination. "But endless rapture awaits whoever trusts the sea. For as she rises and falls, so one's rapture swells and sinks" (Irigaray, 1991, p. 13).

“We want to live!” my son pleads, again and again, to the rocks, the ocean, whose incoming tide threatens our path to safety.

“I want to live!” my mother yelled thirty-nine years earlier as she, my baby brother and I spun out across five lanes of highway in a small Toyota in Christmas Eve rains, narrowly missing the centre divider. Rain on oil-slicked asphalt lit up by oncoming headlights appeared to my child self as sliced olives soaked in rainbow brine.

Now I connect Mother’s will to live to my own survival, to her sun-coloured hair that skipped a generation to shine on the head of a grandchild she’d never meet.

“We want to live!” I echo through time, as ten kilometres becomes thirty-four.

Thirty-four kilometres.

Thirty-four. Mother’s age the first time she was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal cancer. The year was 1987.

### | *écriture féminine* |

French theorist and poststructuralist Hélène Cixous put forth *écriture féminine*, or women’s writing, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), arguing that women must write their bodies into texts as protest against patriarchy. I imagine *écriture féminine* was there for my mother when her own mother told her to play nice, even after she spotted red flags on her honeymoon. That she felt seen when Cixous (1991) wrote:

They grab you by the breasts, they pluck your *derrière*, they stuff you in a pot, they sauté you with sperm, they grab you by the beak, they stick you in a house, they fatten you up on conjugal oil, they shut you up in your cage. And now, lay. (p. 27)

Mother. Stories. Her throat cancer: a silenced scream.

“If we don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story” (Irigaray, 1980, p. 76). Without a language of the body, we might find ourselves split from corporeality, incapable of authentic gesture. Or we might, like my mother, locate the betrayal of self – her subservience to patriarchy – within the broken body. Opposed to patriarchal ideologies, and especially to the idea of what is in a woman’s so-called nature, *écriture féminine* acknowledges how identities are configured within social, political and economic structures set rigidly within historico-cultural limits, and seeks to subvert binary logic in order to transform sociocultural structures.

*Écriture féminine* rejects the phallogocentrism that elevates certain voices to the detriment of others. Human bodies adopt the “social order as their productive nucleus”, so when we rewrite this social order, our cells might express themselves in entirely new ways (Grosz, 1994, p. xi).

Thus a woman writing her body invents what Cixous (1976) calls, a “*new insurgent writing*”, allowing her to mend her mind-body rupture and “forge for herself the antilogos weapon” that shatters her oppression as she asserts her voice and claims a stake “in every symbolic system, in every political process” (p. 880). If Mother was afraid of open rebellion, writing paved an alternate path to freedom, a panacea to patriarchal silencing. Corporeal writing like this, with its word-body gestures, is a way of writing against the unknowable, of acknowledging desire. It invents ways of existing in spite of the past (because of the past), defying silencing and patriarchal law: “Because always the Law of Do Not Speak” (Eades, 2015, p. 38).

Before Mother died, she entrusted to me boxes of journals and file folders filled with writing, which I could not face at the time. I wonder: will I discover within these annals a record of insurgency which belies the roles she felt compelled to play? Although her voice was muted twice by cancer and incalculable times by men, these private archival records might form a political statement to supersede her voicelessness. Since her words remain inaccessible due to geographic constraints, my recourse is to write into and through the archive’s absence, exploring my relationship to it through theory, building a vocabulary that will assist me in a future time of archival unboxing.

*Mother*, “I am singing your memory so that you do not fall into some abyss of forgetfulness” (Irigaray, 1991, p. 3).

### ~~*barrelling down the line*~~

Mother said I could swim before I could walk – it’s possible that I wrote this text before I could talk – and named me Jennifer, a Cornish variation of the Welsh name Jennifer, meaning “white wave”. As a surfer, when I think of white waves, I think of the foamy explosion as it crests, reaches its soaring peak, and barrels down the line with a previously hidden force after travelling thousands of kilometres over unbroken ocean. The swell of ocean energy, tugged at by moon and wind and tide, trips on reef or sandbar near shore and pitches forward with tumultuous force, insistent in its hammering. After one last boisterous folding in upon itself – like the word *mer-mer* doubling over – the wave explodes into a thickly blended soup of air and sea and microscopic cellular life.

### | *prepositional thinking* |

Australian author and academic Francesca Rendle-Short (2020) offers prepositional thinking as a syntax of creativity “where the relations between are key, the within, the of, and abouts” (p. 2). I adopt prepositional thinking as a way to titrate around, through and against trauma without ever being consumed by the chasm. I come upon sites of trauma hesitantly at first, prepositioning wounds by getting “near, around, into, [or] across it” (p. 91), looking for a way to transcend pain, to bridge language and body, to reorient myself after trauma-induced dissociation. If I apply craft with precision the wounds will not suspect my purpose, will not have time to escape before I commit them to the page. Prepositional thinking is a choreography of language: I write beneath, beside and beyond theory, standing on its clauses, cartwheeling on its subordinates and tumbling beneath its phrases. I can preposition a “wound, the abject,

the painful” (p. 91), framing the relationship between daughter and mother or daughter and archive. The methodology of this relational approach suits the prepositional aboutness of this *exergue* – this triangulation of Mother, self and S(u)n – where trauma is biologically archived and generationally re-enacted.

~~*the milky taste of ink*~~

The moment S(u)n was born I relinquished my former identity, crossed the threshold into motherhood, donned the mask of mother. Love hormones raged, cementing our bond. “And in the wake of the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! ... The milky taste of ink!” (Cixous, 1991, p. 31). It was, I suppose, the same for my mother. I came into the world like a squall, a tempestuous storm of shit and piss and tears who came crashing on the shores of a rocky-road marriage. The need for self-expression arrived as the milk let down. Only ink could contain a lactating parent’s sequestered desires, the parallel life her other self might still be living, the complexity of being depended upon for survival.

| *trauma and temporality* |

Trauma’s undercurrent feeds my relationship to my mother’s archive. I angle through decades like a time traveller, tessellating between memory and critical theory, propelled from one scene to the next. Nobel Prize-winning author Annie Ernaux (2020) relates this fragmented stop-start storytelling to “a game of Red Light, Green Light” where we catch the players in frozen pose without knowing what came before (p. 46). These fragmented jump-cuts arise out of traumatic memory, distorting any natural progression of time. With traumatic memory, linearity distends to carnivalesque proportions: now is sometimes then and before is sometimes not at all. Trauma is time outside of time, time suspended, time lost. In *A Girl’s Story* (2020), Ernaux oscillates between present and past to deconstruct sexual trauma and the “depraved appetite” for food and men which came after (p. 104). Like Ernaux I practised an “infernal alternation between purity and defilement” (p. 105), handing myself off between partners two and three at a time, indulging in extreme gluttony followed by stomach-busting, purging regret. I was the dejected embodiment of Julia Kristeva’s (1982) *abject*: one who has strayed so far from cultural norms as to find herself banished, anchored in perversion.

~~*ground swell*~~

I lust after waves that could deliver an unforgettable ride or fatal blow. I flirt with size beyond my capacity, beckoning to be swallowed whole. Engulfed. I give into the spin cycle, the white-out. “For the one essential quality of a wave is that it moves; anything that ... stops its motion dooms it to dissolution or death” (Carson, 2018, p. 114).

In big swells the foam at the surface is so thick one can scarcely breathe. It’s not the weight so much as the volume of the frothy soup: an avalanche of bubbles. Held under too long and my surfboard tombstones; only its nose breaks the surface: a buoyant fiberglass headstone dragged down by leashed body.

I climb the cord to breach the surface.

Swim for the light.

Paddle for your life.

There's another breaker on the horizon.

| *abject, ugly writing* |

My narrative collage or discontinuous narrative threading contributes to a literature of abjection: one where the narrator finds her identity unbearable, where the tissue between subject and object dissolves (Kristeva, 1982). It is an “ugly” sort of writing, which Melody Ellis (2018) defines as writing that vacillates between “so-called intolerable thoughts, needs, desires, feelings and observations” (p. 293). “To ugly” is to deliberately write into discomfort and anxiety and self-reproach (p. 296). In this abjected “ugly-ing” (p. 296) of words, my material wavers and collapses and risks failure; it resists “capitalist narratives of growth and success” (p. 299) and exhibits an “anti-authoritarian ethics [that] occurs at the level of structure” (duPlessis, 1992, p. 265).

As I draft a new identity, unsure of the boundaries between self and mother and child, my abjection lays waste to the precarious “narrative web” of continuity: this story appears in “flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, and cuts” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 141). My words come in waves, rising and falling without crescendo or resolution. “This is not a condition of ‘not choosing,’ since choice exists always in what to represent and in the rhythms of presentation” (duPlessis, 1992, p. 263). My thoughts trail off, they overwhelm; wait awhile and I might *choose* to circle back from tangential deep dives. “The point is that this effort at meaning is vertiginous, and at no point arrives at a position of stability” (Rylance, 1992, p. 113). My mental health unstable, my mind neuroatypical – why should my writing differ? One mustn’t demand that trauma resolve; one can only respond to the way it reverberates across a lifetime, ricocheting between abyssal and surface depths. It matters how much light reflects through waters, what direction the winds, what pull the tides. In writing my own dejection, my fingers writhe across the keyboard, telling a story of resistance that my body then could not. It is only through this abject start-stop, jump-cut form that I can tell my story at all.

~~*the abyssal zone*~~

“Mom, do you know how to spell ‘dead’?”

“How?”

“D-A-D.”

“That’s ‘dad.’”

“Why are you laughing?”

“It’s D-E-A-D.”

“Oh. I thought ‘dad’ was ‘dead.’”

Cixous (1991) describes the madness of living life at the mercy of finite temporality; how when you wonder *What even is the point?* it’s as if death is trying to comprehend life. But death cannot. Trying to contemplate life while being seduced by suicide is like staring into the void and hoping it will spare you the responsibility of decision. Jump/don’t.

Since age twelve my obsessive-compulsive disorder has delivered a steady stream of special interests, rituals and compulsions. I’ve slipped in and out of depression and anxiety, coping with overwhelm by distancing myself from reality, dissociating even. When I wanted out, I combined pills, poisons and gas ovens to take me to that abyssal edge. I know now that being alive requires avoiding situations where the “diabolical question” of *why?* might “arise, like a tombstone” (Cixous, 1991, p. 5), so when my s(u)n asks, week after week, “What am I even meant to be?” and “Why am I here?” I’m terrified: of the vacuum of unknowing, being a body bound to time and space in a limitless universe, knowing that death is inevitable and choosing to continue.

I tell my s(u)n that he is my son and my sun, and still he asks, “But what even am I?”

#### | *braided, broken essays: pacing the facts* |

In this literary *exergue* I’m pacing the development of my relationship to my mother’s archive alongside creative storytelling alongside literary theory, relying not only on *eisegesis* – a parallel narrative or “counter-archive” to a text (Rendle-Short, 2010, p. 4) – to create meaning, but also relationality. Narrative and theoretical strands build meaning through repetition and refrain, arriving in wave after wave. Through braiding I tessellate in and out of abject hatred of self long enough to reconstruct a new identity out of disembodied parts. The lyric essay, which might use braiding as method, is a hybrid form that “requires an allegiance to intuition” rather than faithfulness to a traditional narrative structure (Miller & Paola, 2004, p. 107). Nicole Walker (2017) describes the braided essay as representing brokenness: “a broken self and a broken world” (para. 23). Braiding permits weaving “in and out of different realities – not so much manipulating the facts as pacing them” (Walker, 2017).

The Latin root of pace is *pax*, which means “with peace”. By pacing the facts as I inscribe a prearchival lexicon, I am neither denying nor minimising trauma but rather taking stock of all that has transpired in order to create, through self-determination, a narrative of reconciliation between split selves. A rhythm forms between threads, creating a forward marching motion between divergent realities. I look for where my experiences of being a child rub up against the present, where I am mother to my own child and mother to myself. I titrate, measure and adjust between then and now, the possible and the impossible, attempting to unravel and transcend the subjectivity of history.

Brenda Miller (2013) says that braiding offers a “kind of armor [sic] when venturing into dangerous or risky material” (p. 106), where the strength of the material comes not from a direct gaze, but rather “peripheral vision” (p. 107). I approach memories obliquely and then let my attention slide: through such sustained un-focus I situate certain experiences through a less prescriptive lens. I do not seek to absolve my dejection through writing – such an untethering petrifies me. I want to make peace (*pax*) with my self-imposed societal banishment, my alienation, to cease reviling the individual fragments in order to appreciate the faulty, reconstructed self. As I thread together a warp and weft, there are “layers upon layers of ‘textuality,’ multiple stratifications” that indicate the fabric of the text (Caputo, 1997, p. 88). “Text”, from the Latin *texere*, meaning to “weave together” or “intertwine”. I put facts in their place, measuring and counting them as I braid, relying on time and space and titration as protection against overwhelm.

~~*mother sea*~~

“Mum, I wish you were a mermaid so I could be like Aquaman.”  
 I am the reverse image of Ariel, gazing at the sea, wishing for fins.  
 I can’t breathe on surface; the air is too heavy.  
 Lungs crushed by weight of expectations. (Whose?)  
 Sense of self slippery as sandstone.  
 I am coastal swamp, murky with sediment.  
 Mother ocean, filled with Mother’s ashes. (Rachel Carson’s term: mother sea.)  
 Fat drops leak down cheeks, unbidden,  
 soak onto clothed breasts like clouded milk tears.  
 Like water seeking its lowest point,  
 these literary rivulets have a way of taking me to mine.

| *archive* || *exergue* || *living archive* |

*Arkhe* signals “first place”. The Greek word *arkheion*, or archive, indicates a place of commencement and commandment (Derrida, 1995a). I seek to revisit this place of beginnings – my mother’s archives – to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and to write for myself a future of hope. Used as noun, “archive” plays on archive “as idea, as institution, accumulations of physical or virtual objects, profession, process, service” (Hamilton et al., 2002, p. 7). Philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) says that “archive” is less about accumulated historical documents than the discursive systems which group together recordings “in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities” (p. 129). I take this to mean that certain ideas shine more brightly when coalesced with other time-place events, structured outside temporal linearity and rising above the amorphous mass of records. This ordering of historical documents is a process of ebb and flow, where the relations between archivist and archive, between Mother, self and S(u)n, help shape the meaning of what came before and determine a future of what is to come. I look for patterns, compulsions, repetitions. What emerges from the archive, in fragments which become clearer

with greater passage of time, is a “multiplicity of statements” that might “be dealt with and manipulated” (p. 130).

In this *exergue* I’m languaging the relationality between my body and Mother’s archival body to construct a retaining wall of knowledge. While “*exergue*” is defined as the place of inscription on the reverse of a coin, French philosopher and deconstructionist Jacques Derrida (1995a) repurposes the word: meaning, to “set the stage” and establish a prearchival lexicon through citation (p. 12). “*Exergue*” originates from the Latin word *exergum*, derived from the Greek *ex* – meaning “outside” – and *ergon* – meaning “work”. I am *exergue-ing* or writing outside of the storage-bound archive to establish a new set of relations with and between self, Mother and S(u)n as living archive, tracing mother, memory and archive back to primordial waters. In the crafting of this reverse inscription, I am setting the stage for a future archival unboxing, writing towards hope.

When I began studying creative writing five years ago, I hoped to co-author a memoir with and through my mother’s literary archives. I didn’t realise then that this archival intervention might be a lifelong project of fathomless depths. As I write speculatively into this archival space, I discover that I am already archival. I am *living archive*, well of memory, river filled with word-tears. My body is infused with cellular memory that creates a connective tissue between Mother and me. As living archive – a culmination of biologic and historic processes – we are co-creators: my story is Mother’s story, her story is my story. I carry memory as *mer-mer* (D’Agata, 2008; Dunne, 1988; Rendle-Short, 2012): thought traces pulse through my body, which my mother’s body wrote into mine. My veins flow with the blood of Mother, of ocean, for “each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost the same proportions as in sea water” (Carson, 2018, p. 13). This ocean-blood water: a conduit to archival inheritance.

I am genealogical memoir in the flesh.

| *mother* || *memory* || *mer-mer* |

“My mother’s voice is a lullaby in my cells. When I am still, my body feels her breathing” (Williams, 2012, part II). Writer-ecologist Terry Tempest Williams describes a liminal corporeal state of “sea cells evolving to a consciousness” that pulls her upright (part III), and I’m reminded of mother as ocean, mother as archive, ocean as archive. Dig deep enough into the etymology of “archive” and there is water: “The root comes out at the ocean, or rather the cosmic ocean – a yawning elemental chaos from which all supposedly emerged” (Crowcroft, 2022, p. 71). Memory, like archive, also traces back to water. The root of “memory”, *(s)mer-*, means “to mourn”. Only by doubling over does *mer-mer* become “memory” (Dunne, 1988). “*Mer-mer*” in French is “sea-to-sea”.

The root *(s)mer-* evokes deep-time waters crashing upon the shores of calamity, smoothing rough surfaces like soothing balm (Caicco, 1998). Like these elemental waters – at its simplest form “memory” becomes *mr*, or “head-waters” – evoking the primordial rhythms of music and

dance, composing and recomposing, giving birth to poetry, prayer and healing” (p. 185) – I return again and again to the mother wound, site of premature loss. Mourning and remembering and archiving arrive in waves, whose height and fetch are affected by the instability of my moods. The salt of my tears worries at harsh edges like sand to stone. What is left from this cosmic ocean but a memory, an archive, a *mer-mer* that flows alongside what came before?

In Plato’s *Timaeus* (1997), the eponymous character names this cosmic ocean – this “abyss between the sensible and the intelligible, between being and nothingness” (Derrida, 1995b, p. 104) – *khôra*. A gaping chasm from which “all things come to be and appear and out of which they again vanish” (Krása, 2021, p. 141). Kristeva (1984) takes issue with the ambiguity of Plato’s *khôra*, it’s amorphous and contradictory nature – “Is the receptacle a ‘thing’ or a mode of language?” (p. 239) – and posits the maternal body as the “ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*” (p. 27). *Chora*: maternal vessel (Kristeva, 1982). Ocean: archive: mother.

## II. why we write: a reverse striptease

### | *abjection as fetishistic defence* |

When I was fourteen I read a *Redbook* article my mother had written about the lead-up to her divorce, when she and my dad were recruited into a cult (Wallace, 1994). I read how all the women were made to dress up in lingerie and heels and were subsequently humiliated by the pack of men who jeered and catcalled as their wives were made to dance. I re-created this dehumanising trauma – a spectacle of corporeal overexposure – in my own life many times. I am only connecting my erstwhile exhibitionism to my mother’s unresolved sexual trauma – which I read about in 1994 – which she experienced in 1983 – as I write this now in 2022. When symptoms of neurosis are separated from their cause, “aberrant in form and anomalous in time”, they elude reason and explanation (Van Zyl, 2002, p. 55). Writing allows me to contextualise my compulsions, the ways I purposefully exposed myself to danger, and in this pairing of symptom with cause, as I move from unknowing to knowing, I’m no longer held captive by my own unawareness.

This is what writing does: through juxtaposition or interleaving of narrative strands I might decipher how x happened because of a + c, which also led to z.

My words are a form of reverse striptease: here I cast aside the stilettos and choose for myself a new set of garments.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey (2013) describes how a woman might resist the patriarchal imposition against feminist taboos by adopting for her sexual persona “*an armour of fetishistic defence*” (p. 17). I believed I was exercising a 1990s aesthetic girl power when I fashioned and then commodified myself according to fetishistic extremes. (Here Mulvey would note: “The more the fetish exhibits itself, the more the presence of a traumatic past event is signified” [p. xxvii].) In this masquerade of concealment and deflection I had defied my habitual response of propriety and shame, mistaking fetishistic abjection for freedom. Looking back, I see a tragic caricature of a pin-up, a disembodied simulacrum of a Marilyn-type figure. This is what drives

me to the page: the need to deconstruct my past self, to dismantle trauma in order to create an identity I can live with, whoever that might be. I write myself anew on this palimpsest wherein faint traces of my former self might still be deciphered.

~~*sunny-dolphin-magic days*~~

I stand at the water's edge with my feet in the sand: a threshold space between ocean and land, the known and unknown. Williams (2012) likens the mother-daughter relationship to an edge – where the Pacific Ocean collides with the shore – a subversive, transitional place fraught with danger or limitlessness. She recalls daily visits to a beach near Capistrano with her mother and I think of Salt Creek, where my own mother would take me to play in the sand and, much later, teach me to surf.

And it is here, I must have fallen in love with water, recognising its power and sublimity, where I learned to trust that what I love can kill me, knock me down, and threaten to drown me with its unexpected wave (Williams, 2012, part IV).

I hear water too. It is all around me. I hear laughter echoing in the amphitheatric tunnel beneath the car park. A tunnel graffitied with sand lodged in Zog's Sex Wax and tagged with spray paint; a tunnel which leads to a point break that either glistens in the blinding Southern California sun or lays shrouded in coastal fog.

Hello, hello, hello...

Echo, echo, echo...

Memories of mother and water are inextricable. When I think of Mother, I smell the saltwater winds and feel the wax under my nails, the grit of sand in my hair. I recall boards stacked on family cars, side by side, two and three boards deep.

Every wave I catch contains multitudes: of mother, memory, archive, water.

| **écriture cellulaire** |

Between Mother and me language always was and always will be there. Even when she couldn't speak, after each surgery. Even as her journals remain an ocean away Mother's words course through me like a cellular impression, a form of limbic storytelling. I feel her words in my flesh. Her archival body programs my corporeality, much as her genetic code imprinted upon me in utero, like a watermark (Irigaray, 1991). The archival expression of my DNA contains "a narrative of our prehistory and evolutionary past" (Soodyall et al., 2022, p. 180). Kristeva (1984) describes a semiotics of genetic programming: how "semiotic articulations are transmitted through the biological code or physiological 'memory'" (p. 29). Language flows through me like blood and sinew and ink: mine, my mother's, my s(u)n's. "Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text" (Cixous, 1991, p. 52). My mother's language writes itself into my nucleated cells. I am "WORD FLESH" (Eades, 2015, p. 36; Kristeva,

1985, p. 134): “not only made *by* language, but made *of* language” (Butler, 1997, p. 3). Even in death my mother breathes life into text, reanimating my body, these hands which write. It’s as if this project was determined before I’d ever put ink to paper.

So: what if my archival compulsion is cellular, pre-coded, genetically determined? What if it is also spectral, spiritual, beyond conceptualisation? What if I permit Mother to speak through me by way of material and non-material connective tissue?

I wonder if I might call this writing with its cellular, biologic and etheric impulses a form of cellular writing, or *écriture cellulaire*.

~~a partnership in all things unsaid~~

Mother and I wrote two screenplays in the early aughties. One was an adaptation of a novel written by a friend of hers, a psychic who claimed the gift of inner sight. With her slight frame, blonde pixie cut and Midwestern drawl, Shirley professed a brave and expansive way of living, preaching universal love and energetic alignment while applying scarcity and lack to her own inner circle.

“Shirley says it’s nothing serious,” Mother would say, when I’d urge her to biopsy the growing lump on her neck.

By then Mother had had two decades reprieve from her original death sentence. She’d beat stage-four cancer when I was seven, around the time of a custody battle. The surgeon cut her open from ear to collarbone, removed the tumour and sewed her up; many months passed before she could speak. In her final letter to me she wrote:

As I was nearing my student teaching, I found out I was ill. 34 years old – you & David so young – but my doctor was a wizard and after a year, I was healed and began teaching. (For more than a few months, you had to be my voice – you were so responsible!)

The doctors called her survival a miracle. Although I struggled with shyness, I took pride in being Mother’s disembodied voice. Her *voix cellulaire*. As I channelled her voice, interpreting her grunts and gutturals for others, she returned from the dead. Through speech, I had come to *be* her. This was how Mother and I began our partnership in language and in all things unsaid.

| *écriture matière* |

Like Australian transqueer academic Quinn Eades (2015), who extended *écriture féminine* into *écriture matière*, I am taking liberties with *écritures*. When Eades was writing his autotheoretical memoir *All the Beginnings*, he bid “*au revoir* to *écriture féminine*” and called for all bodies, not just women’s bodies, to write their materiality into the text through *écriture matière* (writing matter) (p. 25). Even as he did so, he was aware that *écriture féminine* was never intended to be adopted solely by people with uteri. In 1975 Cixous and Catherine Clément wrote that it’s impossible to know what might become of sexual difference when we

are “caught up in a web of age-old cultural determinations” trapping us in “an ideological theatre” (1975/1996, p. 83). Even then *écriture féminine* was wary of binary opposition and easy categorisation. In the same way, it could be argued that *écriture matière* was never intended to adhere to a material/non-material binary.

“This body is hologram, prism, a proliferation of material meaning”, Eades (2015) writes (p. 15), as he invites us to imagine a “proliferation of *écritures*” which “spawns all bodies” (p. 25). I imagine a spawning of archival bodies, spectral bodies, inherited bodies. Bodies which exist in a state of promise. Bodies linked by genetics, by cellular pre-programming and also bodies which are, rather, linked by molecules of emotion (Pert, 2010). Eades’s (2015) *écriture matière* is an opening out from places narrowed by what he would call “Law” that tells us how to (not) speak and how to (not) act; it’s a literature of resistance, “a text that speaks to theory, a text that shudders when theory speaks back” (p. 30).

Eades (2015) imagined a limitless, non-hierarchal, underground root system of *écritures*:

écriture féminine  
                     écriture transgenre  
                                     écriture masculine  
                                                     écriture noire  
                                     écriture queer  
                     écriture difference ... (p. 25)

I answer his call by germinating my own field of *écritures*, subterranean extensions of his rhizomic tangle of non-hierarchal roots. I sow *écriture cellulaire*, a seedling of cellular promise that might become something else entirely. The *écriture cellulaire* I practice is parental, a site of pure potentiality from which anything might be birthed. I venture a substratum of this cellular, material and non-material writerly impulse which speaks through me – this spectral reaching back in time to breathe life into my mother’s archival body – *écriture chora*: writing the parental vessel.

\\V\\V\\ death of the author //V\\V\\

*Shirley says this. Shirley says that.* Mother couldn’t trust what her own body and the golf ball-sized lump on her neck was saying. Even when she learned to speak again her silenced words lodged in her throat, never found air. While putting her faith in Shirley’s divinations, Mother’s tumour metastasised; the cancer progressed to end-stage then lights out.

I blamed Shirley for Mother’s death.

I blamed Father.

I blamed my grandmother, her nitpicking.

The hair dyes applied fortnightly.

The flip Motorola clutched between chin and collarbone.

The lead paint on the walls of the schools where she taught.

The oncologist.

The radiologist.

Patriarchy.

God.

For ten years after she died, I couldn't write. Writing was the thing we did together, in so much as Mother's unrealised dreams became my dreams. My identity was in some ways – in the ways that children mimic their mothers – a continuation of hers but more broken, with psychiatric illness where she'd had none. I could not know then that writing would be my salvation, an umbilical cord beyond the grave, "a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss" (Cixous, 1991, p. 3).

~~*solar radiance*~~

Mother was the sun that lit my solar system and after her light extinguished, I was without gravitational pull to prevent aimless wobble. In losing my mother, I had lost my identity and wandered into a haze-filled room of trick mirrors and disco balls.

Eight years, one month and one day later my son, very much like my mother in appearance and temperament, became the central s(u)n of my galaxy, holding together my universe. He mobilised me from unhealthy stasis into necessary action: by saving him from domestic violence I would likewise save myself.

I hadn't known how unsteady my world until I gave birth to a star.

"So here is your sun in his universe of forces, rays, and signs of different intensities. Giving new meaning to every living thing" (Irigaray, 1991, p. 65).

### **III. flesh and blood: an (un)doing**

\\/\// *trauma as inheritance* \/\//

I come undone the week of my s(u)n's sixth birthday. S(u)n who wishes he could crawl down my throat and into my belly where I might exist as protective membrane between inside and outside. A place of safety, respite from broken toys, playground brawls, night terrors and learning to read. I'm so big – two fridges high, he says – and he so small.

“I don’t know much more than you,” I say, but I am the first “bearer of the soul-image” (Jung, 2003, p. 97), the projection of his unconscious, and he believes I’m as extraordinary as Captain Marvel, as capable of preventing harm.

“Be my queen,” he says.

“Very well, loyal subject,” I say, adopting the voice of the Red Queen before she lops off everyone’s heads.

As mother I am the place where my s(u)n’s survival needs and his “first mimetic yearnings” converge (Kristeva, 1982, p. 32); I’m the signifiable and desirable first object that creates in him a subject. Before I became object there were pre-objects – “poles of attraction of a demand for air, food and motion” (p. 32). Outside of mother-as-object he clings to transitional object: lights out and I’m replaced with a fleece blanket – S(u)n’s “original not-me possession” (Winnicott, 2003, p. 207) – that swaddled him in infancy, to whom he chatters and genders as male. However, unlike gentle Woolly I am the one S(u)n mimics, my sponge who does as I do and not as I say.

“Get in fucking line,” he orders the kids on the playground, betraying my slip of the tongue.

“But I’m allowed to say those words,” he argues to playground supervisor.

When he couldn’t say his S’s, fork was dork.

I’m ducked.

### | *écriture chora* |

There are unmoving stretches of time, expanses of unwashed forever, when I’m incapable of focusing beyond “this mooing play-dough smeared cross-legged place” (Eades, 2015, p. 76). Times when my writing suffers, when all I am is *chora* – maternal vessel (Kristeva, 1982) – corporeal container for my child’s hopes, fears, daily requirements. Times when I merge with anonymity, which Cixous (1976) tells me I can do without annihilating myself because I am woman; I am giver. I re-create my life for the benefit of my child, and it feels like self-sacrifice but also: renewal. Cixous admonishes me to “Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood” (p. 889). My flesh seeks this page via text, where everything I compose has already been written. That is the thing about *chora*: an empty-full vessel offers a multiplicity of outcomes. As parental vessel I lose sight of myself, my own needs, desires. I am a site of pure potentiality: I might be drained or flooded. It’s hard to say. So I write to know myself, rubbing autobiography up against theory to “see what is displaced” (Eades, 2015, p. 31).

Writing is panacea against annihilation, ensures my body’s continuance. My corporeal figure determines its future through this text, this *écriture chora*. I write the parental vessel, against

the emptiness I sometimes feel, against the instinctual erasure of self for that which passes through me. My insides are on the outside: both flesh of my flesh and this flesh made text: this ink is made of tears. “This intersection of flesh, and organ, and space, and text: this is who I am” (Eades, 2015, p. 85). These are the bodies I write from: textual, digital, archival, cellular, maternal and corporeal. I’m a polyphonic chorus of intertextuality.

As parental vessel Kristeva (1982) would say my body is always Other, carrying traces of abjection. The birthing body – “a *chora*, a receptacle” (p. 14) – made abject through childbirth, expulsion of the nascent body. Abjection: the violent grief for that which has “always already been lost” (p. 15). I write through this grief, for where there is love there is terror of loss. One is always afraid to love because of this presupposed loss, but with a child there is only one choice: love. Love, against the abyss. Against all odds. Against obliteration. To look into the cosmic chasm “with an irrepressible burst of laughter” (Cixous, 1991, p. 41).

I was born; my mother wrote.

S(un) was born; I wrote.

This: *écriture chora*.

#### | *writing backwards* |

I returned to writing, to solitude, to resurrect a new self. Now that I’m stronger than what it is that I’m writing (Duras, 1987), I can re-member and re-inhabit the past. The autobiographical narrative impulse resembles psychoanalysis in that it enables consolidation of the self (Laubender, 2020), so I prescribe myself the word equivalent of a daily antidepressant through my writing practice, while rejecting the actual pills which brought on suicidal ideation. Although I’m susceptible to being engulfed by sadness (Modjeska, 2002), writing offers a way forward, backwards and beyond. Through temporising (Aciman, 2008; Modjeska, 2002), writing backwards as a way to move forward (Rendle-Short, 2020) and unlicensed writerly psychoanalysis (Laubender, 2020; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) I attempt to curate my healing and draft the persona I would most like to be. I reach through to the past to find answers, travelling back in time to advance forward beyond childhood trauma loops. I’m grasping at Mother’s earthly imprints and digital fragments as if these phantom tentacles might direct me to some future where I could become the person I never dared hope to be: more of an assertive version of her; a less damaged version of me.

“My voice repels death; my death; your death; my voice is my other. I write and you are not dead” (Cixous, 1991, p. 4). In writing, Mother draws nearer to me, breathing life through these words. In writing, I make meaning from trauma and discover resilience in its place. In writing, I exhale, step away from the edge.

Writing: “the only thing that populated my life and made it magic” (Duras, 1993, p. 3). The passion I’d laid waste to when I’d severed the literary micelles between Mother and me in the

time After. A hapless, hopeless rebellion against a tsunami of grief that would sweep me away, regardless. “Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you” (p. 7).

Writing, again, was where I’d begin.

– Minus embodied Mother.

+ Plus S(u)n.

A cellular revival.

*Mother, can you hear me?*

\\/\// **rupture** \\/\//

S(u)n simultaneously brings luminescence to my world and undoes me, brings me to my knees. A love-hate bifurcation persists in spite of being enamoured with him more than anyone else ever, including Mother. Back talk, deliberate acting out and assailing of boundaries, pushing against my need for order and control and calm, provoking that sweet spot where my general anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders meet.

“Do you love me?” he asks.

Underneath my smitten, head-over-heels adoration he senses a liminal mental stability. How do I convey that the illness that drives my moods is all me and not him?

“Do you even care?”

I have not reassured him enough.

For my s(u)n I dismantle anxiety and depression with cognitive behaviour therapy, mindfulness, meditation, exercise, routine, and experimental transcranial magnetic stimulation even, and this suppresses the most terrible effects. But when a small person who has never been apart from you for more than school hours, who is bright enough to know your every strength and weakness, who then tests these same weaknesses to gauge your ability to love unfailingly, who pushes and pokes incessantly and with the fiery and singular focus of red-headed fury, whose probing detects a weakness in the armour and exploits that very weakness until the entire mechanism begins to fail, how then might one act in care and good judgment instead of reacting with rage?

“Maybe you are stupid then.”

I hear words like Father’s erupt from my lips and wish I could swallow them back. Ugly letters strung into one spiteful sentence that might repercuss through decades, come back to haunt no matter how many times I swear them not to be true. I don’t want to be that person who extinguishes their child’s glow, but the words are out there, heavy like fog, and my arms gesticulate wildly, as I beg him to *just listen*, even as I am not listening, not in the least, and I am expanding with rage, growing in stature and smoke like a genie until my giant-sized waving palm slaps his tiny shoulder.

I am lightness and darkness roiled into one.

I am an iceberg in white-out conditions, innocuously dangerous.

I am the most despicable person in the world.

I've left no physical mark, but the memory won't fade. I don't know who it is that I'm fighting even: all the men, maybe? Certainly not this gentle, loving boy who stands before me, wrapping his arms around my legs to abort my fury. He's just a child refusing to eat his dinner, refusing to brush his teeth, refusing to go to bed.

I cannot see at the time that I've morphed into Mommy Monster, at war with my past, drowning in the pain of my own childhood and the not-choices that followed, trying not to perpetuate a cycle of abuse, and failing in this one awful, never-ending moment.

"I love you, Mum."

"I'm sorry," he says, even though I should be reconciling, apologising. Such psychic wounds as I've now inflicted, we carry with us: invisible baggage dragged through adolescence into adulthood and beyond. Even if we forget the sting of the physical, the barbed-wire words play on repeat, convincing us we're unworthy.

Mother, where was your darkness? How did you stay in the light?

\\// **betrayal** \\//

I record these words on this page – tentatively, haltingly – might someone steal away my heart, my s(u)n, for admitting failure? – committing my Monster to memory, warning against losing the keys to its cage. I write to preclude any delusion that I'm the opposite of the father. "Every book, like every writer, has a difficult, unavoidable passage. And one must consciously decide to leave this mistake in the book for it to remain a true book, not a lie" (Duras, 1993, p. 18).

Writing takes over, exposes one's humanity. Even if we had wanted to cover up our nakedness with adjectives, nouns and verbs, these literary fig leaves would not conceal our "failures and dodges, our vanities" (Modjeska, 2002, p. 195). Even when we think "we cover our tracks, we lay them out" whether through wishful thinking or denial (p. 195).

"Your body reveals yesterday in what it wants today" (Irigaray, 1980, p. 76).

Had we any secrets, our omissions would betray them.

\\// **malfunction** \\//

Art is by its very nature a transgressive act so one must accept being punished for their art: the more the art deviates from cultural norms the crueller the punishment (Oates, 2004). Rachel

Cusk, after writing *A Life's Work* (2008a), attributed the brutal violence of her reviewers, who publicly impugned on her capability as mother, to her producing “a book that had malfunctioned” (2008b). She dared remove rose-coloured glasses to acknowledge maternal ambivalence, the daily struggle. A sense of “inadequacy fuels the instinct for ceaseless invention” (Oates, 2004, p. 40–41). My words, like Cusk’s, are a form of self-flagellation; they pour forth from feelings of helplessness.

I write my pain, my body, my s(u)n. I ugly (Ellis, 2018). I shape inchoate thoughts into sentences and paragraphs and fragments, relying on juxtaposition, criticism and theory to make meaning out of glyphs. I write my transgressions, my despair, my fallibility. I open myself to judgment in deference to art. I write to define myself, to determine the borders of my body, the contours of my topography and how I situate myself in this world.

“I am my mother, but I’m not” (Williams, 2012, part XVII).

I am my father, but I’m not.

Witness my fall from grace.

~~*a child's mercy*~~

“I’m sorry I lost my temper with you,” I say, after S(u)n has been at school all day.

“What I said to you was not true,” I continue, kneeling down to meet his gaze. “I was angry and should not have said those things. It was not okay.”

He pats me on the head.

“It’s okay, Mama. I forgive you.”

Mother, is that you?

~~*baptism by sea*~~

Ocean saves me, recomposes me; “a memory of wind, of air, of seaweed” (Kristeva, 1985, p. 141). Ocean: mother: archive. I return to the womb, *chora*, this heaving parental vessel, let her wash over me, pummel me even, kneading my knots of tension, plying my muscles like dough. I offer her a rib, a toe; she breaks them. My body is hers.

I don’t begrudge the way she toys with me for she always leaves me refreshed, filled with desire. I initiate my s(u)n into this baptism by ocean, teaching him to surf by clinging to my back like a baby koala. “What connection between him and me? None, except this overflowing laughter where some soundful, subtle, fluid identity collapses or emerges, softly buoyed up by the waves” (Kristeva, 2019, p. 11).

S(u)n wraps his slender arms around my neck, mindful not to choke me, holds tight as I straddle my legs on either side of our soft-top surfboard. I teach him to read the ocean's swells, her directions and intervals, to notice whether the wind is offshore, cross or on.

Head down as we angle the board away from an oncoming peak and paddle paddle paddle; she's caught us – quick, hold on now – pop to my feet, steady, here we go.

We're on the subversive edge now, cresting along the ocean's surface, here in this nexus of pleasure, riding the maternal vessel. Neither in nor out, balanced between here and there, always in motion, subverting expectation, Baby Koala and me.

Mother begat daughter begat son. "Alone: she, I and he" (Kristeva, 1985, p. 142).

A triangulation of bodies, of connective tissue, of *chora*.

A transgenerational archive of cellular memory.

Mother, shall we go on?

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