

# Womb Tongues: Translating the Cellular Memory of Late Discovery Adoptee Pre-verbal Trauma Through Creative Inquiry

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## Personal Provenance & Praxis

My last memory of my mother as I slipped out was the skirt of her labia across my head. I can smell her still. Feel her hot and pulsing against my brain. Feel her crippling last goodbye.

She was 35. I was the fourth baby she relinquished. After the birth my mother was told I was dead. I was society's bastard. Silenced. Buried. From that moment on unspoken. Unseen. Unknown. Sinful. Dangerous. Abject. Liminal.

Society needed to purge my mother's sin and the product of her sin. She needed to be cleansed and punished, the baby 'eliminated', sanitised (but not forgiven) and her personally indigenous child psychologically and socially 'aborted' and reassigned.

So, I was adopted. And not told for five decades. It was too shameful for even *me* to know.

But, of course, my body knew. It had been there. Throughout the long decades of silence and secrecy, of what was meant to be a socio-political, morally constructed and protective (one may ask of whom?) abduction, my body, as the participating organism, groaned and ached in psychosomatic protest against overwhelming environmental forces. It messaged me (and anyone who may have been interested) in a language that, because of its pre-verbal inception and encasement, is not easily or willingly understood – the language of embodied trauma, its lexicon and grammar experienced as nausea, physical and psychological pain, agoraphobia, panic attacks, pernicious shame, internalised anger, depression, generalised anxiety

including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), self-harm and self-hatred, and the formation of a socially acceptable false self (Brodzinsky et al, 1992, 1998; Herman, 1992; Lifton, 1977, 1994, 2002; Verrier, 1993, 1997, 2003). My body had been imprinted with a psychological death, with a feeling of unreality experienced as dissociation (detachment and depersonalisation), disembodiment, and existential elision (all particular features of PTSD). I fell into a socio-cultural and psychological abyss, frozen at birth at the bottom of a parturitive void – in the sterile petri dish of the dominant discourse – from where I was unable to form a sense of being.

Psychologist Nancy Verrier (1993, p. 6), in her ground breaking books *The primal wound* and *The adopted child grows up: Coming home to self* (2003, p. 21), argues that being born, for the relinquished child, is like a death (even without, as in my case, the delivery room proclamation). Extending and specifying Donald Winnicott's (1960, 1974, p. 93) theories, Verrier (1993, p. 29) explains that the baby learns to have a stable and anchored 'I' because it learns to be 'I' through its symbiosis with the mother. They are one. Fused. If the mother is taken away, the baby struggles to have a centre, to feel human at all: It cannot know the self as a whole and is left with an incurable primal wound. This primal wound is incurable because nothing can replace the symbiotic bond between a baby and mother and often manifests, psychologically and physically – in other words, in the body – as a chronic and palpable pain in the space where the mother once was and the child should have been (Verrier, 1993, pp. 42-43). In this way, I was left longing for the only one who could translate me into being and – let's not be too precious about it – keep me breathing. For when a mother (within the imperative and debilitating context of a society's morals and expectations) abandons her baby, a place of death congeals at the heart of the adoptee creating a ghost creature, a non-human, an alien, the invisible being (how do you describe a void?). Nothing can replace the specificity of that particular bond (creator and created) and its capacity to safely, without psychopathology, create a continuous sense of 'I' – a core feeling of identity – that is crucial to wellbeing. My body still stubbornly wants *my* mother's psychic, spiritual, physical (embodied) translation. It is hard wired to want it. As Christopher Bollas (1987, p. 14) puts it, mother is "a recurrent experience of being...a process of transformation" and represents an existential rather than conscious experience of becoming.

Without the embodiment of the mother, the task of being born becomes dependent upon the success of now translating the traumatised body of the baby in the form of, as I call it, 'womb tongues'. Womb tongues is a term I

use to describe the body's attempt, since birth, to 'speak' (pre-disclosure) the relinquishment/adoption trauma, in my case, through psychopathologies, psychosomatic illness, the non-religious use of glossolalia, and visual art. All of these have been my body's unconscious experience and expression. Once I found out about my relinquishment, the translation of these unconscious embodied texts into a collection of poetry 'Womb Tongues' (Coull, 2007) and a literary novel/memoir 'The Womb Artist' (Coull, 2014) became a conscious, autoethnographical practice and performance, experientially informed and creatively driven through a feminist, post structuralist, and psychoanalytic praxis. This praxis encompasses a close, reflexive reading and envisioning of my inter-textual and intra-textual (Saorsa, 2011, p. 9) pre- and post-disclosure creative work born in the crucible of Late Discovery Adoptee psychopathology, life experience, and academic inquiry, as the private butts up against the communal in its potential personal and political extrapolation into the wider adoption population and society at large. As Marilyn Metta (2010, p. 29) writes, "To place women at the centre of scholarly texts, critical analysis and knowledge-making is a highly political act that challenges histories that have long erased women and subjugated their experiences". Adoption trauma is 'born' out of society's Judeo-Christian sense of shame and sin surrounding women's sexuality, the dominant discourse damning women (and their offspring) into the abyss of legal, emotional, and (for Late Discovery Adoptees especially) psychological non-existence. Indeed, my research is intended as a revenant mouthpiece for other Late Discovery Adoptees and donor-assisted offspring. I want it to promote discussion in the psychological and psychoanalytic fields, and as Helen Riley (2012, pp. 12, 195) advocates regarding late discovery offspring, to promote more research within the social sciences and the bio-medical field (pp. 7, 66-68, 207). In addition, I want research in these areas to encourage legislators to better understand what the 'best interests of the child' are in terms of late discovery of origins and the complexity of adoption/conception practices available today.

The aim of this paper is to summarise and explain how I have sought – through creative inquiry – to translate and decode the traumatic and somatic response to my relinquishment/adoption experience; to form a text that expresses what the baby in a pre-verbal state, and the adult in an unconscious state, has not been able to comprehend for five decades; to allow the recontextualisation of my self into myself and society, this time, with cognisant and reparative knowledge; to dig up the buried body; breathe life into the baby and harbouring adult; procure the birth (and life)

that was stolen from me; and, as Cathy Caruth (1996) suggests, “reclaim” and “witness” the marginalised, silenced, and abject self, ghosted by societal and cultural fears and taboos. As a constructed body, written upon and invented legally, socially, and psychologically, I am, in Hélène Cixous’ (1976/1994, p. 84) words, “un-forgetting”, “un-silencing” and “unearthing” my ‘self’: I am re-writing, re-inventing and, under public scrutiny, legitimising myself. I am a site of inquiry, discovery, extrapolation, and becoming (Metta, 2013, p. 492; Poulus, 2013, p. 475), a body with “all the explanatory power” of the mind (Grosz 1994, p. vii): sentient, aware, sane, and sensually, organically articulate.

If creative autoethnographic research is still finding its academic legitimacy (Grierson, 2009, p. 18), then this line of inquiry suits perfectly my own experience and story as society’s bastard. I am (and have been), as Elizabeth Grierson (p. 17) writes, “generative and performative”, the artist and the art work, activist and witness, restorer and therapist to the self that was lost, and to the society that, in fear and judgement, lost/buried me. Indeed, I need to decipher the Rosetta Stone of the body’s experience that – like an ancient archaeological site – has buried in its ruins knowledges in hieroglyphic form, waiting for the time when consciousness might interpret the psychosomatic and creative signs into a rich and multi-faceted primer for my soul. I need to see Julia Kristeva’s (1974/1983, 1975/1983) semiotic and symbolic, or Jung’s (1927/1969, 1934/1969, 1939/1969, 1951/1969) conscious and unconscious, or the body and text as equal parts of the same multitudinous being. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1960/1964, cited in Kirby, 2011, p. 119) has written with regards to what Vicky Kirby describes a phenomenological “global embrace”, I need to speak about my embodied experience as a biopsy/diagnosis/cure/resurrection, not just of myself, but as a microcosm of (or an atom in) the “flesh of the world”.

### **Blood and Breath: The Molecular Deep**

So, here I am, still being born: my mother’s labia folding back, stretching across my head. I am bloodied and out of her, in certainty of her. She will lift me over her belly and onto her breast. I will suckle. Flourish. Endure. Because she is the Rosetta Stone of all my existence, of all that I will be. She is Everything. My God. The Creatrix.

But she is gone.

Nowhere to be found.

My body, facing death, locks into survival mode. My ancient sympathetic (fight or flight) nervous system, the one that functions beneath thought, is activated. In my cerebellum, primal bodily functions automatically fire off. Cortisol is secreted by the endocrine glands (the pituitary and adrenal). My blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, chemicals and neurotransmitters race around trying to figure out what to do (Howard & Crandall, 2007). I am Oedipus on the mountainside, waiting to die. Fully formed at birth, the now frenzied amygdala forces me to experience my terrifying emotional responses to imminent death intensely without the ability to cool, organise, or understand them (De Kloet, Joels, & Holsboer, 2005, p. 469; Meyer, 2012, p. 248; Rostene et al., 1995, p. 352). I am, and will remain, hyperaroused and hypervigilant and, therefore, deeply imprinted (Herman, 1992, p. 39; van der Kolk, 1988, 1994, 2002). The hippocampus, the organ that might pacify the amygdala (by moving the experience into long term memory and lowering the need for such hypervigilance) cannot transfer the information because the amygdala, in the face of death, refuses to give up control (Howard & Crandall, 2007; LeDoux, 1996; Sherwood, 2010, p. 67). With this threat to my life, I become stuck in an ever-present now. As Ralf Meyer (2012, p. 246) points out, neurons bind together in response to stressors (emotional, cultural, and cognitive) and “memorise their connections”. Indeed, the 50 trillion cells in my body are encoding and storing unspeakable knowledges (Lipton, 2005, p. 38; Pert, 1997, p. 72). If, as Thomas Fuchs (2012, p. 17) says, “The most indelible impression in body memory is caused by trauma, then it is these cellular/embodied memories, rather than those explicitly autobiographical, that will be remembered and passed on to future generations of cells.

My body is now a coiled spring of strategies, a compendium of terrible history and apprehensions. In the infinitely complex and rhizomic molecular landscape of the body, intelligences are transferred, memorised, and acted upon. Up ahead, I will experience ‘intrusion’ (re-enactments of the event) and ‘constriction’ (where the psyche is frozen and dissociated), psychic fragmentation, repetitive high-jacking of memory into image without context, and a heightened reality/unreality (Herman, 1992, pp. 16-50). Indeed, Caruth (1996, p. 8) points out that trauma has two structural components – the actual event and the ongoing experience of that event’s psychological re-occurrence and consequential effects. Caruth also argues that the incomprehensibility of the trauma provokes the wound’s “psychic extension” beyond the initial event into the “mute repetition of suffering”

(p.116). In other words, our (traumatised) bodies will continue, not just to remember, but to enact the past without conscious awareness (Fuchs, 2012, p. 17; Jelinek, Randjbar, Seifert, Kellner, & Moritz, 2009). The 'unthought known', a term Bollas (1987) uses to describe those memories formed in the womb and in the first years of life before language (Ham & Kilmo, 2000, pp. 143-144), are corporeal knowledges that cannot yet be thought: the 'shadow' of the primal object (mother). What I cannot think I act out, I perform as it is mediated through the environment, acting on me (and I upon it) through psychosomatic illness but also through my relationships with others and myself. So, in the face of death, my body is locked in a battle of survival: neurotransmitters, chemicals, hormones, muscles, cells, blood and tissue, sinew and soul swirling and emitting and frantically firing to prevent annihilation.

All because I can't find my mother.

I can't smell her.

I can't hear her.

I can't find my 'milk'.

I cannot recognise myself in this universe without her.

I am dying in every way that is meaningful and, as a baby, I do not have privileged information that someone else will provide milk and that, though my spirit and heart will be broken in a thousand different and silent ways, my body will not die. As I have no language I can't tell anyone around me that I really need my mother to survive. They do not know how to read my body's language. My embodiment, to those looking on orchestrating the trauma, is of no consequence. I do not seem exceptional. Not even relinquished. Just deviant. In need of normalisation. Something else can be written on my body to change it. Here, sign this. Seal these records. Make it illegal to contact your 'birth' mother. Make it shameful to 'know'. My body, to these people calling the shots, planning my life, deciding my fate, is an idiot that must be 'force fed' their version of reality (the resonances here with marginalised groups – the disaffected, disowned, disabled, suppressed, owned, and racially, religiously and sexually persecuted are palpable). My newly born body is abject and liminal. The abject here is not just a psychoanalytic term to describe psychic machinations (Kristeva, 1974/1983, 1975/1983) but an embodied act,

experienced by my organs, cells and tissue. Or as Susan Bordo (1997, p. 2-5) argues, the body is more than a text, it is of itself, organ and muscle, vein and corpuscle. Yes. It is here, waving and shouting and kicking up a fuss. It is here, feeling sick and folded in pain. It is here, frightened to leave the house, to speak, to seem apparent in any way. It is here, scratching the flesh off, writing a text in blood. It is here where neurotransmitters misfire, unable to fill the void, to make a path. It is here, writing these words. Painting this picture. It is here, thinking beneath and within the script. Screaming from my mother's aperture for its own mouth.

So this is the overriding corporeality of my existence. I develop forms of psychopathology (including PTSD) through my relinquishment and subsequent adoption. But because adoption until the 1980s is not seen as a breeding ground for pathology, my difficulties go unnoticed. I do not look different (I am white Anglo-Saxon), I am not gay/lesbian/trans-sexual, I am not physically or mentally disabled, I am not – cunningly disguised in my adoptive family – noticeable as a 'bastard child'. I am a girl but that's no problem: there are plenty of culturally misogynistic and diminishing scripts to take care of that disadvantage. Then, at an age when I would understand, no one tells me I am adopted. My body remains imprisoned beneath the scripted normality without the ability to think truthfully about myself (surely a generic feminist statement, if there ever was one). However, the organism underneath the script cannot keep quiet. It speaks in non-linguistic ways. But because it is a language that no one understands (they don't even know they need to), it goes unheeded, not only by those around, but by *me* because I don't consciously know that the script is not true. I am in Plato's cave, staring at the shadows on the blank wall, thinking that this is life, this is reality, while outside, my body, frantic in its unspeakable intelligence, remains my immutable philosopher, truthsayer, and guardian. It is not a wandering 'idiot'. It is not other to what, in a patriarchal society, has been privileged. The body is my heroine. Not only at birth did it protect me when I was facing death (albeit with strategies that will not in adulthood be easily managed), it now advocates for me when no one else will. It forms guerrilla attacks against the script to free me. It uses debilitating and disturbing techniques to unsettle the occupant in the cave, to force me (and others) to see the real world, yes, just through the aperture, just through the folds in my mothers' labia, just between the two lips touching, informing, bringing together, kissing me alive, to where, yes, there is relief from the unreality of dissociation.

My body is an activist for freedom.

It is indigenous to the occupation.

It is, as a site of repression (and annihilation), an organ for liberation.

For 42 years my body remained ingenious (and still does). Before I was able to piece together a memory of my life through 25 years of therapy (twelve without the conscious knowledge of the adoption) my body had to vent, supplicate, manage, basically 'stay alive' (because, as mentioned above, PTSD means that the trauma is ever-present). I used to think, after I found out (because it was only then I *could* think about myself clearly), that inside my body there lived another person, a ghost-like entity, a revenant Beloved (Morrison, 1987) to my adult Sethe, a recalcitrant child, an maleficent presence, trying to hurt me, bring me down, make my life miserable because 'she' was miserable. It felt like she wanted me to suffer, for someone to pay (and I was the only one she had control over). She was angry. She made me claw at myself, scream, cry and rock like a baby. She made me foetal on my bed, in the dark, in the universal 'red-room' of *her* heart. I had to become the mother and father, the midwife and nurse, the doctor and judge, the whole of society and take notice of this child. Listen to her. Grieve with her. Accept and encourage her anger. Validate her pain. Speak the truth. Come out. Embrace her in the way that none of the 'others' in my life had done. My body, having completed its work, now embraced the other of myself. I let the abject teach me about perspective. I let the liminal map the less obvious universe, the darkly rich and fertile psychic underground. I let the outskirts of my psyche give me room to expand my consciousness, not just with regards to myself and adoption, but on the human condition in general, for what is true of the relinquished is true for all human beings: that we are all scripted, marginalised, audited, and managed (in a Foucauldian sense) and we all must find a way to own our personal provenance. I have stood outside the cave and seen the shadows within and let my body teach me what is real. As a Late Discovery Adoptee, my body is a specific cultural artefact that needs to be examined, that begs – indeed forces – universal extrapolation. As Lipton (2005) says, taking us right back to the first life forms on this planet, inside the cell is everything you need to know about the organism. Cells are intelligent, adaptive, regenerative, and communal, organised and efficient, and they are encoded with who we are. I am using an atom of my existence to re-create the whole. My body is a working cell in your story, too, in the feminist community, in the making of knowledges, in the embodiment and translation of lived memory.

## Glossolalia: Libations & Lubrications

Before I found out that I had been relinquished, when I was sexually aroused or at the point of orgasm – Irigaray's 'lips' stimulated and fat with blood, juiced up for speaking – I would often speak in tongues. This is not an uncommon phenomenon (Wade, 1996, 1998, 2004) but the first time it occurred it was frightening because I did not know what was happening. It felt like I was going mad – as Chamberlain (1990, p. 180) suggests, "What looks like insanity [is] in fact a memory". The emotional intensity of these experiences was overwhelming, overflowing long after into the post coital and followed by uncontrollable sobbing. At the time I did not know that it was related to the repressed embodied knowledges of my birth trauma. Pre-disclosure, it remained undiagnosed even in therapy and put down to a mysterious sadness and grief that could not (yet) be accounted for. Now, I can understand this glossolalia more fully (but not entirely) as, perhaps, an expression of Kristeva's idea of the semiotic in its "madness, holiness, and poetry" (1976, p. 64) or Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) linking of eroticism to feminine power and repressed and unacknowledged or disallowed affect, or Mary Sonntag's observation that "blood sings, vaginas speak, and feelings move out from behind shadows – they whisper, they cry, and they scream" (2006, p. 330-331). These experiences, despite their exhausting emotional consequences (or perhaps because of them), started to feel more real, deep, and connective than anything going on in the world at large or within myself. With the grammar and syntax and structure of language compromised in meaning and execution, the glossolalia became a point of acute and pre-verbal release. As Jenny Wade points out, "altered states...do not create the experiences they induce, rather they *activate* or *amplify* the deep unconscious and make its contents available for conscious processing" because the altered state "replicates the pre-natal state in some way" (1998, pp. 134-135). It was as if my implicit memory had found a way to speak, as if each cell, without a voice box, gurgled or percussively groaned and mouthed, to make meaning in a crossover between animalistic and human sounds, between the Semiotic and Symbolic, the unconscious and conscious as an organic communication that welled up from the 'molecular deep' into a chorus of affective supplication. Post-disclosure, I can now see my body not only as a site of trauma but also as a site of linguistic restitution where Kristeva's semiotic is tentatively cradled in the arms of the symbolic, where the subterranean chora – with its dichotomous centre of primal creation and destruction (Smith, 1996, p. 93) breaks through into the over-world of narration through a flood, a tsunami of feeling. The chora is at once the life-giving fluid of the amniotic and also

'death water' (Yaeger, 2002, p. 38). The seemingly nonsensical language is a bridge between the body's intelligence (the unthought known) and the overlaid and scripted world of the symbolic, where language creates us and holds us accountable to psycho- socio-political forces and, in this, keeps us blind and as mute as a plant or an animal or a pre-verbal body.



Figure 1. Coull, K. (2007). Foetal glossolalia. In *Womb tongues: a collection of poetry*. (Unpublished Honours Thesis). Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley, Australia.

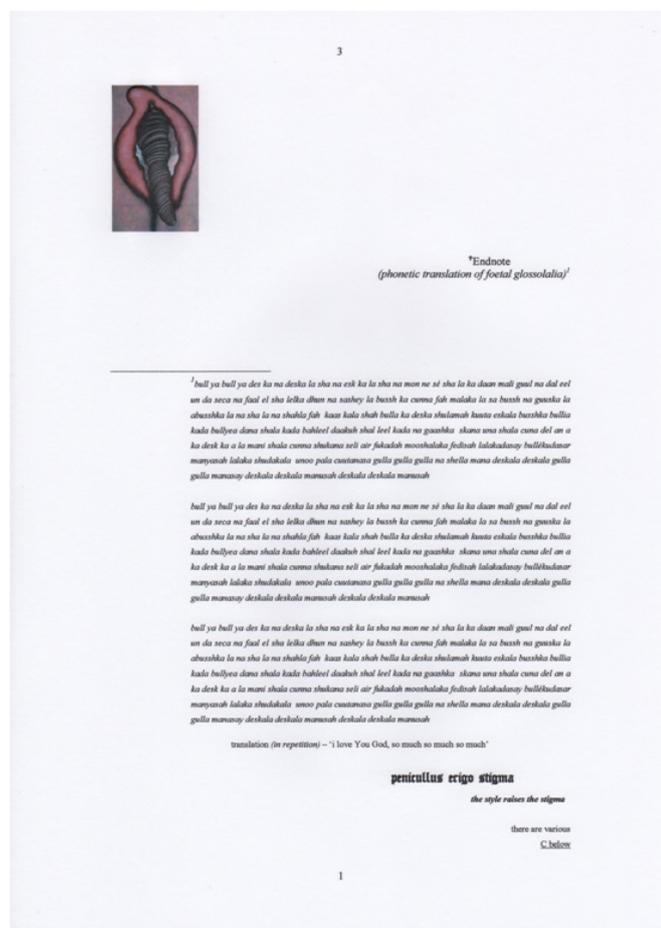


Figure 2. Coull, K. (2007). Endnote. In *Womb tongues: a collection of poetry*. (Unpublished Honours Thesis). Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley, Australia.

After disclosure, I began to understand what the tongues were saying. It is an empathic language. Emotional. Bursting with desire. It seemed like a 'half-way house' from the semiotic into the symbolic, from the body into words, and I felt compelled to try to express this artistically. The preface to my Honours poetry collection 'Womb Tongues' (Figure 1) consists of a poem overlaying differing tongues in phonetic translation, followed by a further translation (Figure 2) without the overlay and last, one aching and immutable plea in the form of a single sentence (followed by a Latin encoding and cryptic play on the letter 'C' and the amniotic chora as 'below') that finally interprets the entire experience of the glossolalia from the body onto paper into recognisable language. (The use of the word 'God' refers to the mother). It funnels the relinquishment trauma into an intense and single pointed distillation of longing. Featured above the translation of tongues in Figure 2 is one of the 'clairvoyant' artworks I painted before I found out I was adopted (Coull, 2014a, 2014b). It is included in the poem as another version of the body finding ways to speak, to express its

knowledges, to create a text outside of the organic, from the unconscious into consciousness, from the semiotic into the symbolic.

The glossolalia itself is purely semiotic, choric, inchoate. The translation, while one can readily understand it, falls flat as literature, as poetry. It is childlike. Simple. Half an hour of intense repetition of the ‘womb tongues’ seems much more insistent and compelling and yet the reductive translation to one naive sentence holds the true pathos – but only in juxtaposition against the ‘tongues’. As Charles Simic (1985, p. 5) says, “Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite mimic the experience behind them.” The silence surrounding a Late Discovery Adoptee is an absence – of explicit knowledge, of mother, of self, of language. In deciphering traumatic cellular memory, I am dealing with the pre-verbal, primal sounds that arc across creation into our mouths, rendering the self back to a point of pain and passion, the pitch and tone and scale, cadence and coda all at once echoing what in our absence is also our completion if we could only capture it. Glossolalia, then, perhaps illustrates Kristeva’s “fire of tongues”, as Anna Smith suggests – and in reference to the chora – the “simultaneous destruction and renewal of language and its subject” (1996, p. 92), the “flooding of the text” which is also the body, the “soundsense, songsound, bloodsong” (Cixous, 1977/1999, p. 58).

The fact that my first attempt at re-embodiment of my relinquishment/adoption trauma pre-disclosure was through glossolalia and visual art, is recognisable (albeit anecdotal and qualitative) evidence, not only that the body is sentient in itself, but of its primal desire and need to unlock the language of the body through the murmuring throat and mute hand. My body, dry-retching for decades in unexpressed affect, was a site of trauma’s creative endeavour before I became conscious of my adoptive status, from the very first intake of the newborn’s empty breath.

### **The Style Raises the Stigma: From Poetry to Prose**

After ‘Womb Tongues’, I wrote a novel – ‘The Womb Artist’ – because I wanted to flesh out and make more accessible what I had encrypted in the poetry collection. ‘The Womb Artist’, though autobiographical, is in the form of a literary novel (a veiled memoir), following in the tradition of Sylvia Plath (1963) in *The Bell Jar*, Winterson (1985) in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Janet Frame (1957) in *Owls Do Cry*. Writing trauma as the unspeakable event (Caruth, 1995, p. 152) poses problems that these authors overcame through the thin veneer of fiction (although Plath did not

survive the telling). In 'Womb Tongues', I was able to use 'I' because in the poetry, it was disembodied from myself and, therefore, safe. The poetry removes the 'I' from *me*, allows for the protective absence of myself and the distance from the world. However, a memoir requires (usually) for the author/narrator to use the pronoun 'I' profusely and with a sturdy sense of self, time, and reality. Indeed, the difficulty for the adoptee in using the pronoun 'I' necessitates a diversion away from outright confession and into the realm of surrealism – an unrealistic style that mirrors the adoptee's sense of unreality providing, perhaps, a psychologically protective landscape in which to set the story. As Irigaray points out, women's sexuality can only be recovered "in secret, in hiding, with anxiety, and guilt" (1985, p. 30): this can be applied to the experience of the adoptee who feels that they can only 'recover' themselves in secrecy and shame. Foregrounding the 'self' (that is, in this case, saying 'I') is seen as a threatening act that may bring more rejection and a replay of the original trauma.

To deal with this issue, I split the narrative voice between the sparsely used overarching commentary of the narrator in italics and the third person representation of the protagonist (both versions of me), paralleling and highlighting the split between the relinquished and adopted selves. At the end of the novel the roles reverse. The fictionalised protagonist is now in italics and the narrator nakedly assumes the previously italicised 'I' of the memoir as a first person narration. Thus the writing of the novel unravelled an unexpected journey in terms of point of view. A certain sense of 'I' (albeit damaged and compromised by life's experiences) was salvaged, birthed, and privately embraced. If, as Gaylene Perry (2009, p. 35) suggests, the "act of writing as itself [is] a site of research", it may be that for me it is research that relives and re-embodies: a performative, memorial, therapeutic site in which 'I', as subject and object within and beyond the text, become, in method and outcome, a practice of reconciliation.

Finding voice and releasing it from the choric waters meant the use of techniques that automatically emerged as I wrote, as if the whole of my being was thrashing to the surface with a particular execution of style. The 'womb tongues', the guttural and oesophageal grief-laden percussions, the invisible and psychopathological passion plays deep within the abyssal landscape of experience, are all the desperate urgings of my body to translate a unique expression of language on the page. I intended the memoir to be a translation and extension of my 'womb tongue' poetry, but as I wrangled it from the short form into a long form, chronological, linear,

and historical text, it became clear that the fragmentation, heightened reality, magic realism, disembodied voice, and poetic language would not be compromised. Magic-realism or heightened reality, as Wendy Faris suggests, “makes the world appear strange” (2004, p. 13) or, as Cixous writes, evokes the “strangeness of forever being here and elsewhere” (1994, p. xv). For the relinquished, and as a Late Discovery Adoptee given the nature of the trauma and subsequent psychopathology of dissociation, making the world seem strange is a compulsive strategy. For example, I first wrote the birthing sequence as a space odyssey. It was a long and exhausting prose poem without pause that overwhelmed and wearied the reader as I took them on a journey through a disembodied vacuum (although it still feels right to me). As Verrier writes, “the mother’s disappearance is like falling through the universe, floating, floating through space with no grounding. There is no order, only chaos and confusion. That confusion is further reinforced by being placed in an alien place with strangers” (2003, p. 19). I changed this later to a more recognisable text with a hospital room, nurses, blood and soiled sheets but even so, it remains highly poetic, metaphoric, cryptic, and fragmented. It is a compromise, a mediation: as Sonntag (2006) asserts, to tell all in a clear and precise way would risk a surfacing of the trauma that might threaten continued survival. To avert this, as if to prove the point, the fragmentation, heightened realism, and poetic language simultaneously protect and confound (just as my amygdala did at birth). It gives distance. I need it because my feelings of unreality are palpable and difficult to overcome. I need it because I am still the baby paralysed with grief, terrified to make a sound in case the last fatal blow should come. So I make a mark on my body. I make a mark on the paper. I disrupt the language with the choric upswelling into the narrative. I break it. Mystify it. Fracture it. Heighten it. Disembody it. I dance around it. I ‘sing’ it instead of speak it, as Rilke so eloquently wrote in his poem, “The words of humans fill me with fear...It’s the singing of things/I’m longing to hear” (1899, cited in Panofer et al, 2012, p. 316); or as Cixous writes in assonant evocation, “Her art of living her abysses, of loving them, of making them sing, change, resounding the air with the rhythms of her earth tongues, regardless of the littoral and acoustic delimitations of their syllabysse” (1976/1994, p. 59).

However, the writing of the memoir with its linear narrative and use of an exposed ‘I’ was dangerous. Writing my life felt like an autopsy, especially given my deathly status at birth. Like Cixous, I felt I emerged “wounded and enraged from a scene of confession” (1993, p. 42). Indeed, after I had finished the novel I fell into an extended reoccurrence of the birth trauma.

This was experienced over an eighteen month period when my body refused to co-operate with schedules, work, and needs. In fact, it threw me into a period of persistent and chronic mourning for a loss I thought I had already, for the most part, dealt with. It was as if my body, after all the words were written, collapsed under the weight of what it had carried around for over half a century. As if grief has a gravity that cannot be escaped. I seemed to find myself the perpetrator and victim of "the soft and mysterious violence of writing" Cixous (1993, p. 33). It seems the writing of my life as memoir, even though it is fictionalised (and yet, still improperly protective), released for me, not only the bodily responses but also the conscious living of them, re-experienced with full impact, my hippocampus working overtime to store and organise everything that the amygdala had petrified within every cell and only now with the help of language, could unpack safely. Indeed, Cixous may be correct when she says, "the only book worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us, makes us tremble, redden, bleed...I tear it from myself" (1993, p. 32).

Through the writing of a historical, chronological, and autobiographical literary novel I am, in a metaphoric genesis, re-creating the Late Discovery Adoptee experience, consciously placing myself on an existential precipice in hope of cellular, emotional, and psychological restoration. The writing itself (as a form of intrusion) is a necessary performance of the wound – in the fictionalisation, the intersection of pronouns, the highly poetic and metaphoric style and the crippling consequences – where the method (creative writing) and the embodied experience (adoption trauma) cradle, and are reflexive of, one another. Indeed, perhaps, in linguistic, metaphorical, and symbolic fashion (because the mother is gone and the baby lies in a Foucauldian grave), I need Luce Irigaray's (1985) two lips to touch again (after parting to lose me), the two lips to return, and meet, and speak me fully born from body into consciousness, and in this re-embody myself as 'real'.

## **Egress & Embrace**

I can smell my mother still. But now, as I slip out, I catch myself. Watch. Make notes. Make my heart into an ossuary. Swaddle, carry, multitask the babe. As a marginally researched Late Discovery Adoptee, I inscribe myself with metaphoric and poetic intensities into the adoption phylum, into feminist, academic, and social discourse. I face the constant fear of leaving the blank wall inside the 'cave' and all its shadows, and venture out into

the organics of my lived experience. After all these decades I have learnt to read the Rosetta Stone of my body and, like Orpheus, find my Eurydice amidst the wraiths of Hades. Grab her by the hand and bring her to the light. That, in the end, she has to stay – because I will always be compelled to look back – seems appropriate and reminiscent of Persephone's deal with Hades and her compromise to spend six months below and six months above, a deal that symbolises the need for the dark of fermentation – the quiet, silent, miracle of the spawn – in order to allow fertility. Yet, I must also leave Plato's cave, allow my mother's labia to caress me goodbye and into my 'self', let her speak me born as *her* daughter and no one else's, and let us both grieve my passing from her, never to be held. I have to leave her and I can now, now that I know what happened. With my 'Eurydice' seen and verified – my lost, imprisoned, rigour mortis self – I must convince anyone who is listening that my body is not an idiot, a bastard, or a second to the privileged intelligences of the mind. That my body, above all (and under all) *knew*. That it has knowledges that must be transcribed and communicated, held precious and life affirming, that are crucial to survival. I must free the semiotic, choric, abyssal self from its prison, into words. Voice it. Paint it. Write it. Use language to heal the body and undo the carnage of the cave. Take the mute organ of experience and translate it into thought, and words, theory, and art. So I can manage it. So you can understand it. So we may learn about the human/non human condition from it.

This is my research. My practice.

It has taught me to translate the 'womb tongues' – the psychological and somatic debris (signage strewn across a life) as the insistent knowledges of pre-verbal trauma, secrecy, shame, and grief. And so my method (poetry, painting, and prose as the choric cutting, scratching, etching, biting, scraping, and smearing of my 'dead self' as Other to my 'self') is sullied and at the same time enhanced by the sever, by the silence, the pause, fracture, elongation, condensation, by the abyss and the perpetual drowning in the ghostly amniotic ocean. As I gurgle, ooze paint, and write my incarcerated emotions free, I work against the death of fatal birthing to let my mother know I lived.

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