WHEN ABORTION DELIVERS VOICE

by

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This hermeneutical study speaks and remembers - as in the Spanish *recordar*, to pass back through the heart - the qualitative experience of my abortion, and attempts to reveal the shifting nature of what it has come to mean. Rather than assert a certain moral, political, or legal stance, this work concerns itself with voicing what is ambiguous and discordant. It searches for what is often lost between the highly charged and oppositional poles of the pro-choice and pro-life debate.

Through the heuristic and organic practice of narrative inquiry, this work explores writing as a way of coming to know, and delves into writing self, rather than writing *about* self. It enacts van Manen’s notion of writing as self-making or forming (1998), and Cixous’ notion of getting to know things by letting ourselves be known by them (1991). The work’s fragmentary and poetic texts emerged from an intensive two-year period of reading, writing, and conversation immediately following my abortion, and from a series of collaborative working interviews with my partner, an abortion counsellor, and a friend. Though primarily autobiographical, the text embodies many layered voices, as well as poetry’s ability to speak the ineffable. At its root, this lived-inquiry enters the complexity of my abortion, and follows the movement toward voice my writing delivered.
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There have been many hands encouraging me and gracing this work along its way, each of them a midwife expressing faith in what I could not yet see. Among them I would especially like to acknowledge:

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-This thesis is dedicated to life.
let us begin in a place of poetry.

...to feel beneath our surfaces, to speak the unspoken, unrecorded words that spell our lives.

(Dunlop, 2002, p.15)

Writing: first I am touched, caressed, wounded; then I try to discover the secret of this touch to extend it, celebrate it, and transform it into another caress.

(Cixous, 1991, p.45)

A revolutionary poem is written out of one individual’s confrontation with her/his own longings (including all that s/he is expected to deny) in the belief that its readers or hearers (in the old, unending sense of the people) deserve an art as complex, as open to contradictions as themselves.

(Rich, 1993, p.241)

Poet’s make things, but they don’t make poetry; poetry is present to begin with; it is there, and poets answer it if they can. The poem is the trace of the poet’s joining in knowing...knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being... Its one and only use in this world is to honor the gods, the dead, and other nonhumans and humans – to honor being, in other words – by allowing others to join in that knowing as well.

(Lilburn (Ed.), 1995, p.55)
This is thinking turned inside out, ropy twist of what’s called the gut; umbilical cord that joins now to later, tunnels food for a future that waits to be born...

(Pick, 2003. p.23)

Imagine: a trail made of moments rather than minutes, wild bits of time which resist elapsing according to a schedule. Pauses. Each one bell-shaped, into which you step as an applicant for the position of tongue.

(Lilburn (Ed.), 1995, p.27)

This is the story my writing delivered. It writes the death of my abortion, and the birth that was found there. You may notice an echo within you as you read. Let that humming resound, let it be the way you listen.
For the first half of the trip we followed one river, twenty-five days of rolling barrens, the wild arctic tundra unfolding around us, the confluence ahead, floating, a myth, like all that we’d ever ever wanted - once we got there the rest would be easy. Early each morning we’d ride those waters, forward, forward, the sun beating down, horizon as clear as the rest of our lives, ahead, forward, flies in our faces, across the great lakes where wind forced us back, forward, for twenty-five days we paddled with it ahead, like the dream of real love.

... 

(selection from Confluence by Pick, 2003, p.101)
the body breathes
Clarity dissolves as I sit myself down and begin to write. The act of putting words on paper changes things, commits me in a way I have not been committed before. Old fears emerge like anxious children gathering around my skirt and making noise.

I proceed slowly and without clear answers, knowing only that this is the story that has delivered me to the page, the story that has shaped and formed me and which I am now drawn to shape and form into words. I am guided by the momentum behind the story, by the force of it wanting to be told.

In some distant way I understand that this story will speak for me, and of me, and is me speaking. This story is about writing as a way of coming to know, is propelled by a kind of faith in what will be unleashed beneath the words.
You’ll take a map, of course, and keep it
open in front of you on the dashboard,
though it won’t help. Oh, it’ll give mileages,
boundary lines, names, that sort of thing,
but there are places yet
where names are powerless
and what you are entering
is like the silence words get lost in
after they’ve been spoken....

(Wallace, 1985, p.20)
starting to tell

i want to tell you
it has been five months since my abortion
but already language fails me

my abortion did not happen five months ago
it simply began
what was delivered in me, remains

something else grows now in the child’s place
the space it opened, still within me

nurture life in another or life in thyself
two lives
each in need of harbouring
choose

i want to pierce this bloated moment
exhume its drowning limbs

lingering unveils its offering

words emerge
and judy tells me she will never think of abortion
the same way again

my mouth having formed itself
around forbidden words
(Beautiful, enlivening, sacred)
dislodges the corpse
fills rotting cavities with air

lets the body breathe
If to record is to love the world, let this be an entry.

(Borson in Pick, 2003, p.5)
Matthew and I are standing at the yellow stovetop in my new basement suite. I feel the weight of his hip leaning into mine and yet somehow, feel him pulling simultaneously away. In my hands is the blood and tissue that has dropped from my womb, proof of our induced miscarriage, the quiet remains of the life that for seven weeks has grown and divided in the walls of my uterus, preparing for its life, and forever changing mine. A friend advised me to use a colander to catch whatever came out, so all night long when I woke from sleep, I carried to the bathroom and back again this white handled, metal mesh colander, suspended in an empty tofu bucket. I wanted to buy a special colander for this occasion, imagined a red clay one but discovered there is not always enough time when you are having an abortion to do everything the way you would like. Until now this ordinary colander has served to strain water from spaghetti noodles and steam kale, but in the dim of this morning’s early hour, it has become the most unimaginable chalice. I have placed it on the stovetop under the bright overhead cooking light where Matthew and I can better examine its contents.

There is less blood in the bucket than I imagined there would be, no liquid swirling about. I find pieces of me instead, dark red tissue laying perfectly still. There is also one round fleshy disk; pink and smooth, the size of a toonie though thicker like meat, a placenta briefly begun. Silence is the only conversation between us.
The same friend who recommended the colander, suggested we look through the expelled tissue for the
greyish white embryo, no bigger than a single grain of rice she said. She urged us to search for and hold it,
to witness our choice in this most palpable way, to give it a proper burial, and to complete for ourselves the
letting go. It is our intention to do so, but on this particular morning there is another purpose motivating
my fingers through the stringy red tissue at the bottom of the bucket, the collapsed walls of my uterus that
would otherwise have nourished and sustained the child so recently within me, had we chosen differently.

We returned from the doctor’s office three days ago, with two doses of misoprostol pills. My arm having
already received while I was there a yellow injection of methotrexate to end embryonic cell development, I
was instructed to take the pills at home last night to induce the miscarriage that would expel the foetal
remains from my womb. We were told that if the first dose did not unleash the same amount of blood that
I experience during a normal menstrual period, then I should take the second dose of pills. I do not want to
expose my body to a second dose of these toxins unnecessarily, but it is not clear to us what constitutes
enough blood.

That is why we are here; or at least what we tell each other about why we are leaning into the stove light,
looking through my miscarried tissue for traces of our foetus. Raising it in my hands, I am surprised by
what it looks like. It stays together and hangs flat like small drapes from my fingertips, so much like the
uterine lining that it was. I cannot see anything that resembles the single grain of rice my friend described, and see no place in the thin wall where it could be concealed. Then I hear myself say, as if from some other place, *unless.*

I have between my left thumb and index finger, a small clot of blood suspended within the red membrane. As I roll it tenderly between my fingers, it splits gently open and slides out a small, whitish grey form, about the size of a single grain of rice. Awe descends upon us. This tiny bud of a being has affected such change in my body and in our lives over the past seven weeks. Not a day has gone by without feeling its tug upon us. But now, laying flat and exposed on my finger tip, it seems so suddenly vulnerable, so in need of my care.

We continue to gaze in silent wonderment at this whitish-grey form before us. It is the size we were told to expect but is coated in a reddish mucus film. It is curved vaguely inward like the crescent moon, and is slightly hunched around an even smaller translucent sack. In the faint arch of the grain, I see a row of tiny white spots. With the foetus still perched surreally on my finger, I walk over to my desk and find the magazine I have been reading. It is still open to the article that documents embryonic growth with enlarged foetal photographs. I carry the magazine back to the stove light where Matthew and I attempt to compare the magnitude of what lies lifeless between us, to the images splayed across its glossy pages.
I want to crack open this seemingly small moment in time. I want to examine, reveal, and name it, not just for myself but for others too, to make an offering, to change what is possible for women to hear. I want to be still here and uncover something, to whisper out of this hiding.
Abortion. Combination of *ab*, Latin prefix meaning “away” or “off” and *origo*, Latin root meaning “origin” or “source” – point or place of beginning.

(Soros, 1998, p.24)
I love that Badelt’s story exists, that his living through abortion is so openly revealed. I like how he moves back and forth through time, telling his story in the convoluted, circular truth of experience, and how he manages to capture the awkward moments that so many couples share; the joy you feel but don’t admit when the blue line appears on the pregnancy test, the vacuous space between you in the waiting room, sitting across the table from each other afterwards talking about the weather. I appreciate his ability to put words to this alien and clumsy experience, and his articulation makes me wonder why I have not been able to yet. I have been preparing to write my own abortion story for five months. I keep waiting to have something more to say, something other than the story itself, a conclusion or insight to share. But after reading Badelt’s piece, I wonder if simply sharing my story might be enough. Badelt did not offer any answers, did not reach any tidy places, he simply recounted his experience. A raconteur. I suppose it means being strong enough to withstand whatever judgment comes your way. Sure enough of yourself to let the story out, to tell it like it is. But how do I begin, and where? How do I get back to that place of trusting myself that I stumbled upon when I was pregnant? Badelt sounded unsteady at times, almost apologetic. I want to tell a story of being sure. I want to say that an abortion can be a strong and beautiful thing, that it does not need to be laced with regret and wondering, that it can be a bold coming of age, an honouring of oneself. I want to treat it like the passage that it is, give it a language, a space, a way. Though sometimes I wonder how much my choice was ruled by my fear of not being good enough yet, of trusting the path before me, I am sure that choosing myself was precisely what I was being called to do.
To begin with death. But which one? Who has died? Who has killed? Who can tell?...

An abortion is a decision, a division, a split. It is the possibility of doing life and death at the same time. It means that a part of me does not exist but remains, a cinder, a burnt trace beside my current life, lining my writing with what will never be there.

(Soros, 1998, p.4)
The single most pervasive result of my abortion has been my willingness and commitment to seize my life. The recognition that in order to welcome a child into this world, I need to birth the life I want first, so that next time there will be a space hollowed out within me in which the next child can be received.

The shock of experiencing my body as ready to hold and bear life startled me into recognizing that my turn to parent had arrived, gracefully indifferent to my own sense of readiness. That the time had come for me to step out of my safe clock of maidenhood, to recognize that I have somehow reached the age where others are now looking to me for direction, calling me to step up to the circle and take my place within it, to occupy my life.

I recognize that putting the needs of another before your own needs is a necessary part of parenting and that much love can grow from that seed, but it was not how I wanted to begin. Not the first lesson I wanted to teach the child growing within me. Not the blanket I wanted it to be received in. So I set out to construct my life, to make of myself good soil so that the next child to rise up through me, can be better nourished.
A woman who aborts may perhaps feel the need...to learn to weave ideas together and turn them into a fabric that all can use, to shape solid containers for otherwise fugitive contents that threaten to flow away in rivulets; the need to create a cultural reality. The reason for having an abortion is often the desire...the need to ready oneself for a professional activity. It is far too facile to reduce all of this to the notion of an egoistic pursuit of the satisfactions of a career: behind it may stand a goddess who is urging a woman towards the forms of life for which she stands.

(Zoja, 1997, p.68)
The house is quiet. The early summer evening’s muted light is filtering through the bamboo blind drawn
down over the writing room window. There is a soft and golden peace all around me. I am here at the
computer again, more easily this time because there is already a file to open, a space begun, something I
need only add to, instead of create. I can feel the motion of what I have embarked upon within me. There
is a steady roll to it like tides on the ocean. It has a momentum of its own which makes me feel less alone,
as if I were on a journey with someone else, knowing if I get too tired to carry the pack they will be here
beside me to carry it awhile. The grace of knowing it is not all up to me. A line from one of my old
poems comes suddenly to mind, moving in time with the universe. Is this what it feels like when your
outside world is in tune with your inner world? There is a word I used to say I wanted to find in my life. I
think it starts with a ‘c’. Whatever that word is, I can feel myself finding it; coming together, convergence,
communion. Not sure yet. It will come.
...Dissect any secret and remove its bone. There is a femur in silence. Resolve, the long leg of the unspoken beginning to walk....

(Goyette, 2004, p.111)
beyond the tongue
apophasis: The word is formed from “apo” – “from, away from, asunder” – and “phasis” – “to speak, report.” “Mention of something we feign to deny” (Klein’s Comprehensive Etymology). It is address, in negative theology, appropriate to what is beyond what the tongue can manage, an asserting of names, a removing of names. It may have the rhythm of praise.

(Lilburn, 1999, p.99)
wanting vocabulary

mostly it was red. deep

cavernous, summer-shadow red

a red betrayed by language;

unspoken

a red

more flesh than ruby, heavier than scarlet

and glistening with a wetness that ochre
cannot pronounce

crimson begins to articulate the viscous red of
uterine walls keeping shape, like drapes from my finger tips;
an unconjugated womb
a gleaming corset unlaced

shift of grammarless flesh in hand
reveals a clot of darker red, an interrupted nest
still nestled in the folds
a cocoon well-woven in the dark

rolled tenderly

ever so tenderly between thumb and forefinger
a single grain of rice emerges;
grey and glistening and curled just so
around a blood-laced sack
of deflated organs
tiny buds of marrow
in a crescent shaped row
where spine
was unexpressed
The original meaning of the word *taboo* was "sacred"…

(Northrup, 1998, p.112)
When I went home to visit my family this summer, I did not manage to tell anyone about my abortion. It made me sad to feel myself so much apart from them, to discover how much goes on in their daily lives that I do not know about; the breakdown in my brother’s marriage, my other brother’s young friend dying of cancer, my sister’s friend about to, all of which reminded me of how little they know about my life. I found myself suddenly weeping as I rested alone in the hammock on my last day at the cottage with them, listening to the echoed sounds of everyone else laughing and talking together at the edge of the lake, as I swung back and forth alone. I took such pleasure in hearing them confide their lives in me as we paddled the canoe together, or drove from town to town. But not until this very moment, months later now and back in my own apartment, hands busy on the keys, eyes looking out the window, seeing the September wind ignite the leaves on the cherry blossom tree, the clip of blue sky, the movement of green through the glass, never before did it occur to me how much my family was missing, by not hearing me confide in them. But the timing never seemed right, and telling did not seem as pressing as it once did. I did not feel the need to announce it as I used to, to shatter my own as well as the collective silence on the experience. I still remember how much I wanted to tell my grade seven students on my first day back to work. I wanted to normalize it, to give them the chance to hear someone responsible, someone educated and professional, someone in a position of importance in their lives admitting their experience, de-stigmatizing it, making a space for any of them to fall into and be held by in the future, should they one day find themselves facing an unwanted pregnancy. Why did even the thought of doing so, feel so inappropriate?
The study of silence has long engrossed me. The matrix of a poet’s work consists not only of what is there to be absorbed and worked on, but also of what is missing desaparecido, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable. It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way – certainly for women and other marginalized subjects and for disempowered and colonized peoples generally, but ultimately for all who practice any art at its deeper levels. The impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence.

(Rich, 2001, p.151)
From 1998 to 2002 more than a hundred thousand women experienced abortion each year in Canada (Statistics Canada). Their personal narratives however are scarce in the educational and psychological literatures. This absence not only denies people who have lived through abortion the chance to make meaning of their experiences through writing about it, but also denies the people who are contemplating abortion, access to a collection of personal narratives in which to find guidance and recognition.
At that point I knew only that I'd spent most of my life baffled and in pain over events and feelings
that, I was just beginning to sense, weren't peculiar to me. But because they existed in the realm of
the linguistically impermissible, I hadn't been able to speak them aloud and, in sharing them with
others, ease their weight. I thought that, by writing them down and making them public, I could
undermine their power to constrict my life and the lives of any others whose voices had been
choked off by social taboos.

(Mairs, 1990, p. 60)
Matthew Day One:

I need to write a poem, or at least something to go into this avoided thing. You see, we had an abortion, and it wasn't the first time, not for me, and if you think I felt good about it you're wrong, totally wrong. She found some strength in it. Amazing woman. Walks out with pride and contentment on her face, talking about the new connection she's found with herself, her womanhood. Not me. Manhood, for whatever it's worth, doesn't win in these circumstances. For the second time in my life, I've impregnated a woman. That makes me fecund, able, sturdy, potent, a true male animal...but I really wanted this child.

I wanted this child because I love this woman.
I wanted this child because I'm ready and I've been ready.
I wanted this child because I saw her and me in it.
I wanted this child because it would bring some meaning into my life.
I wanted this child because I love adventure, because I have dreams of a home.
I wanted this child because I'm tired of this life alone, bachelor, uncommitted.
I wanted this child because I felt excited about it, about her and me.

All the wrong reasons, it turns out. I presented my case, she reasoned hers and still we didn't know... We didn't have the child. Simple to say that right now. We agonized over it. I never gave up hope but began to
see the wisdom of our choice one day on a bus while traveling to planned parenthood for consultation... It was all so logical, complete and rational. It made us consider where we were at as a couple. Were we ready to have children, so soon in our relationship? Probably not, not on a practical level. I preferred to fantasize, think positively, dream of the possibilities.
But the dead people persist in the minds of the living. There have been very few human societies in which the dead are thought to vanish completely once they are dead. Sometimes there’s a taboo against mentioning them openly, but this doesn’t mean they’re gone: the absence from conversation of a known quantity is a very strong presence, as the Victorians realized about sex.

(Atwood, 2002, p.158)
Impregnate, calculate. Conception determined in the strangely formulaic way that medicine insists on. Defining the beginning of each woman's pregnancy as the *First Day Of Her Last Period*, despite the biological, near impossibility of her being fertile then. Medicine trusts measurements, believes in the warm red physical proof of bloods, over your clear memory of when you made love. Prefers the abstract quantification, rather than hear your own vivid testimony. Messy stories. Unreliable. No one asks. No one seems interested in knowing that that time felt different; thick, soaking and complete. No room on their forms to reveal the story of our lives, this child was already telling. No space to relay that we had just come back from a time away on an isolated island, in winter. No chance to explain that we were considering breaking up, that he would not even kiss me the first few days we were there, how much time we spent in silence, how much we were questioning. That it was the darkness of the night skies in which we could finally see all the stars, and the sound of surf rocking through our days that mended our relationship, the broken propane heater in our thin-walled cabin requiring us to resolve the distances between us. Their calculations were wrong. Our baby was not conceived two weeks earlier when we were not speaking to each other, she came to us the day after we returned from the island. I remember because it was New Year's day. After stumbling through an awkward dinner of him meeting my friends for the first time, we settled-in together for our first sleep back in my warm bed. We woke up slowly and late, lingering there for hours, adoring each other. It was our second time making love that day, how uninhibited and connected we felt, a brand new feeling between us. Had they asked, I would I have told them.
Unfortunately, very often the card does not get sent, the question does not get asked, and the listening does not happen. Instead, parents confront silence and discomfort from the world around them, learning quickly that they should not grieve, but if they must, they should do it alone and in silence.

(Malacrida, 1998, p.71)
the gate left ajar

my brother calls
midday and long distance from behind locked doors at work
our habit of polite conversation fills the void of time and distance between us
until the scratch in his voice draws me near, unfamiliar territory of truth
between us now

he scales the confession of joy found outside his marriage
scrambles to discover the hollow at the root
of his private office
two cars
big house
pretty wife
gap children

he sends me poetry now by mail, and uses the word heart

he tells me about a late night at their cottage, alone on the deck
noticing lightness in the night sky, moves to the edge of water
away from the sheltering dark of trees, finds beauty there
stands alone under the white fullness of moon, and weeps

tells me words thick again with tears, of an early suburban morning
standing at the precipice between house and porch (air conditioning
and unconditioned air) watching as a chickadee lands gently
then dies at his feet

that was me he says, that was me dying

grateful for his trust i sense an eager utterance rise in my throat
notice the precipice quivering on my own tongue

strained pause as i consider what i cannot yet confide
of the child that has died in me
Depression, I have recently come to believe, is a complex story that hasn’t yet been told.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.18)
Much of my desire to tell is motivated by wanting to heal the difference within me, the imbalance between my inner and outer worlds. It feels like such a deception to go so normally on with daily activities when so much within me has changed. I want congruence, want that word I have been searching for; balance, homeostasis, convergence. I want to bridge the gap between what I am living privately, and what publicly I say.
...it has always been true that poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation.

(Rich, 2001, p.111)
I need to give birth, to make manifest in some way the change that has begun growing in me. I need to create a vessel into which I can speak what was not born out physically. I need to complete the process that has already begun, articulate what I feel shifting and forming within me still. This inward story needs to emerge; voice as birth canal now, words a kind of newborn flesh. Being pregnant even temporarily opened me, extended my boundaries of self. It is vital I complete the birth lest it fester and rot in me. I need to lay myself down, let this new life squeeze through the split at my centre, these pages; my offered birthing ground.
The act of naming is the great and solemn consolation of ...[hu]man kind.

(Canetti in Atwood, 2002, p.xiii)
The day is hot. Looking at the clean grey concrete beneath our feet hurts my eyes, before our paint and sheets and crowds interrupt the glare of the sun.

People are already gathering, watching, wondering what is about to unfold. The clothesline is effective. People seem curious and intrigued. It declares something, invites bystanders, bus riders, and busy shoppers to look a little longer at what seemed an ordinary street corner only a few moments ago.

Our sign invites women to write or paint why they support a woman’s right to choose abortion on pieces of fabric, which they can then hang on the public clothesline we have erected. I have barely arrived when a flustered woman accompanied by four young children approaches me and offers that she would be caring for seven children if it were not for her right to choose abortion, adding that she would also still be trapped in an abusive relationship.
I see two women looking and pointing at the quickly filling clothesline. They tell me that a woman in their country can be sent to jail for having an abortion, and can be ordered to pay a fine to her husband’s family for the offspring they feel her choice has cost them. I am shocked at this blatant denial of a woman’s right to choose. They say it is not fair for the child to have to suffer. I don’t admit how the question pinches at my heart. In my panic, I ask about rape. They agree that in that case, abortion should be permitted.

There is a woman whose teenage daughter passed by our demonstration on the bus earlier in the day with her young friend. Seeing the clothesline, she knew her mom would be thrilled to participate so she called her on her cell phone and told her to come down.

We hear thanks from both men and women throughout the day. Tired of the weekly anti-choice demonstration that organizes itself on this same street corner, many people are
relieved and grateful to finally see and hear another side represented. The only complaint we hear is from an enthusiastic senior citizen who insists that our demonstration should be even bigger.

All day long, and in many ways, people are taking action with words.

What strikes me the most, is seeing so many bodies paused in thought, hovering in a kneeling, sitting or bending stance, paintbrushes, markers or spray cans suspended in mid-air, struggling to find the words, each woman taking time to consider what she is about to write. I hear many speak of how difficult it is to summarise their feelings on such a complex issue into a single and succinct expression. Despite the challenge and effort of it, the clothesline fills quickly. We soon need to hang more line, and begin pinning sheets on both its sides. Within just a few hours, there are over a hundred responses dangling in the heat, and
five different languages represented. The day is pregnant with voice.

When the line is down again at the end of the day, it makes me sad to see people walk right by each other where only a few minutes before there was a ripe and vibrant discourse happening. The space looks hollow somehow, and lonely. Only a single splash of blue paint remains on the sidewalk. There is nothing left anymore that invites people to stop and think, try to articulate their point of view, talk to strangers, read and wonder about, take home to their dinner table conversations. Nothing urging them to decide where they stand.

Leaning my sun stroke body against a wall, I suddenly see how easy it is to make community. You just need to give people something to talk about, show yourself and let them be shown in return. All we did was start the conversation and we were so richly rewarded. All we really did was
create a space into which women could speak, created the absent container. It feels like the taproot of how great change happens. Create a space for neighbours to talk to one another. Let the silence be heard.
Words are a balm pressing into my life, reaching to where the flesh is torn.
...who will be the throat of these hours
...if not I,
if not you?

(Rukeyser in Dunlop, 2002, p.1)
The foetus dreams it is
a black hole
cut into the tinny blue.

It dreams someone
cuts off its foot for a dime,
someone splits its tongue
so it can say a word. It dreams
it sits on its mother's hip
while she lies sleeping. In the dawn
it flies away
with her black,
and dreaming eyes.

(Crozier, 1985, p.24)
between certainties
Feminine discourse is not the language of opposites but a babel of eroticism, attachment, and empathy.

(Mairs, 1994, p.42)
I just finished reading the ‘zine’ that initiated this work. An anthology of abortion stories, the call for submissions asking for women’s words, offering me a space to speak into, the confirmation I needed that I was not alone. The editor and I met over lemonade and ginger snap cookies, met in public places and talked without lowering our voices. I told her some of my stories, and heard some of hers, the listening allowing each of us to discover what it was we needed to say. Production was delayed for a while so I handed her my poems and artwork and waited anxiously, having decided after some hesitation to sign my submissions, a teacher in the city, allowing myself to be associated with my words.

Yesterday, a whole season later, I found the ‘zine’ displayed on the shelves of an independent newspaper and magazine store. When I finished reading it this morning, I rolled over on my back, watched a determined spider crawl across the ceiling, tucked one hand behind my head and counted on the other hand how old our baby would be, if we had not aborted. The last line of the ‘zine’ humming though me; “but as your due date comes rushing towards you, you might feel sad again, like a relentless gentle mourning you can’t shake off, even though you’re happy, even though you can touch a friend’s pregnant belly and smile.” (Gabriela, 2003, p.51). Fingers tapping against my rib-cage; thumb, forefinger, middle, fourth, and pinky, then back to thumb again. March, April, May, June, July, August, the baby would be eight months old by now. I would be enormous. I would have been uncomfortable on the flight I just took back home. Would I even have gone? Would Matthew and I have seen Mars reflected in the night-lake water,
this summer? Our relationship is so much stronger now that it was before, like a basket being woven he proposed yesterday. It has a solid bottom now, the upright reeds are strong, but the lateral pieces are still being woven in. It is not yet, not even now six months later, solid enough to hold a child. What would our basket be like if instead of talking and listening and learning to trust each other, we had spent the past two trimesters worrying about money, and gathering baby supplies, and always the question emerges; would I still be writing?

I bolt out of bed craving my keyboard, already hearing the words I will write in my head. Wanting to feel warm and held somehow, I slip on my favourite jeans and help myself to Matthew’s green flannel shirt. In the bathroom I catch my reflection in the mirror and notice myself liking that I am still this shape, instead of swollen from pregnancy. In the kitchen I prepare a hasty breakfast and notice myself eating exceptionally quickly. I wonder what it is I am trying to feed. I pick up a peach, notice its stem, how it seems already to be separating from the fruit. Somehow it inspires me to split it open instead of biting into it as I usually would. It heaves easily in two, and I am startled by the foetus I find inside. I try to make sense of the metaphor I feel, but cannot yet articulate. It is perfect flesh peeled open. There is something being born here, split open and coming forth. Something about the sun passing through the window, time tracked by light, an opportunity missed.
...she learned that the word *care* has its roots in the gothic word *Kara*, meaning “lament.” The

“Basic meaning of care,” then, ...is “to grieve, to experience sorrow to cry out with.”

(Nouwen in DeSalvo, 2000, p.54)

...By engaging in lament, we care for ourselves. For not to express grief is to put ourselves at risk for isolation, for illness.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.54)
Spilt Milk

My womb rises up
and through me
commanding my attention
Her voice, an unvoice
speaking in utterances of flesh and hollows
stirrings from the underside of knowing

I listen the way an animal hide stretched tight across a drum
listens to the rhythm pounded on its back

Come down here with me, she says
there is a dark red world you need to know

This cavern is empty now
and wailing

Feel it sagging like young trees
under the weight of coastal snow

A crimson moulting
on the inside
an iceberg shedding itself
into the ocean

Necessary
languid
and wanting

An ancestry
undone
...The last big push and with a plume of blood it's out-
grey white stripes, perfect miniature design, like a toy-
the calf

sinks. She noses it up...
But it sinks
like a bullet...
through the cloudy water.

The vets say nature
has to take its course.
They leave the dead calf in the tank with the mother
so she can fully grieve.

(Pearson, 2001, p.49)
Despite the heavy rain, we went to the woods. Knowing it was the only place generous enough to hold our friendship and all that has remained unsaid between us during these busy times. On our way there, I noticed my body slumping in the seat, how the words coming out of my mouth did not feel like my own. I told her how tired I have felt lately. Realized as I spoke that what drains me is my own stubborn belief in a single answer to every question, that I deplete my own energy by believing in, and looking for the right thing to do.

The rest of our day affirmed my earlier insight. The wooded path kept getting wetter and wetter, and as soon as we had crossed one overflowing creek, we came upon another, and the alternative trail we chose, thinking that the trees there would shelter us from the rain, was just as wet as the first, and sometimes she lead and other times I followed, and sometimes the path was washed completely away.

Our conversation continued in the same circuitous way as the trail, and as we talked I realized that since the abortion, I have set up a hard line in my mind about following my heart. I have labeled listening to my body right, and anything my mind conjures wrong. I have equated inward listening to trusting myself the way I did this winter. I have been holding the abortion up as a kind of standard in my life, so that now if I consider any choice that makes me even the slightest bit
anxious, I feel I am not listening to my body’s wisdom. I have set it up in my mind that if I do not listen to myself now as I did for the abortion, then I am doing the wrong thing. I cannot have been wrong then, so that must be how I should decide now. I have created an absolute. Because I was advised to be absolutely sure, I convinced myself that I was. I have been telling myself that that was the right way to choose, and I must therefore continue making choices in that way in order to continue being right. I have tired myself by not allowing the ambiguity.

We spent much of the rest of the day in the rain and woods talking about ambiguity, how so many of us do not know how to be with it, how we crave and are satisfied by definition, clarity, certainty and conviction instead. There is little space in our modern world for uncertainty, unknowing or oscillation, especially with a contested and controversial issue like abortion. People after all make their sentiments known by throwing bricks through living room windows at night, men lurking patiently in the bushes of a doctor’s home waiting for him to sit down in his reading chair, before pulling the trigger. There is bullet-proof glass between the woman asking for an abortion and the women offering it to her. Even at the clothesline demonstration, people’s words seemed parroted to me. The same old political slogans dragged out in artificial, necessary and protective certainty;

*My freedom. My right. My body. My choice.* Suspiciously tidy. No room for ambiguity or
conflicting conversations within oneself when legislation is at stake. The message must be absolutely clear. Demonstrate solidarity, conviction, insistence.

Remember the struggle to find the words, to be real in that most exposed place. Consider the stances all around you that day; heads in hands, bodies hunched over cloths on the ground, markers and paint brushes suspended in hands, pausing, deliberating. Those were the women who had experienced abortion, the women for whom slogans were too simple, too spotless. Their words were complicated by the reality of living with their choice. Women who knew (privately) they live with both conviction and lament. Women like me, at once grateful for the Banff writing experience my abortion delivered, celebrating in my time there a symbolic birth of self through words, while mourning the physical birth I would have given through my legs at that time had I chosen differently. Something else was indeed being born in me while I was at Banff, but I must also remember the panic I felt when I discovered my breasts suddenly swollen again.

Today in the woods I realized that the certainty that was necessary at the time of the abortion, no longer serves me. I remembered Marjorie, engaged in unearthing her twenty-five year old abortion memories, wondering whether I would feel the same clarity about my choice in ten years. It is important for me to remember her scepticism about my conviction. That is why it is important to
share this story. I want other women to hear about the ambiguities. I want to create a space where
the disarray of lived experience can emerge, where the stories that get told are not absolute or clear.
I want this work to be an invitation to step out of the polar certainties and into the undefined places
between them.

Suddenly I am remembering the clothesline project meetings where the talk turned to the rights of
men in the abortion decision. For women who had never aborted, keeping men out seemed
empowering, but for me, having experienced an abortion, it felt like more pressure. Their
insistence made me feel like I should have been able to make the choice on my own, like I was not
being a good feminist by inviting Matthew into the conversation. I remember trying that. I
remember how hard it was to be alone with the responsibility of choosing a life, how freeing it was
to finally fall apart in his arms, and let him in. It is only now that I am safely away from our
choice, ten months away in fact, that I can slowly begin to contemplate the possibility of something
more.
As far as I'm concerned, my text is flawed not when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own. I keep my tale as wide open as I can.

(Maris, 1994, p.74)
beginning again

i was sure for a while
a nine month while to be exact
exactness measured by the degree to which you are willing
to accept certainty

sure as i had been advised to be

*don't let this decision happen to you*
she said, *be absolutely sure*

so for nine months i watched my belly swell
then flatten
in the ancient crimson way that women's bodies know
to take in the moon's rhythm of fullness
coming round to dark
then again

each month when my bloods returned
relief renewed my vows to my uninhabited self
as i remained sure of my joy
at the red returning

it has been ten months now
since i chose (or was i chosen)
to have methotrexate injected, yellow anti-canceragen
into my arm and to place, three days later
three crumbling white tablets of misoprostol into my vagina
to contract and expel the life growing then
within my womb

only now
far enough away from my choice
am i beginning, is it safe to see, that sure
is only one side of knowing
When you are waiting, watching to see a flower open, a leaf unfurl, or attending the slow folding down of a dear, dear one who seems so much better today, the waiting is painstaking. This long blossoming, or extinguishing of a beloved face feels endless; each small movement gauged, exaggerated, compared or denied, but one thing is sure - the plant will open, your dear one will die, it is only a question of when, and of many acts of loving vigilance.

Absence is different. You can’t watch over an absence. Care for it, help it on its journey, love it. You can only watch life flow around both hope and dread, softening edges, eroding grain by grain all expectation, awaiting the merciful time, which may never come, when one can say, [s]he is gone.

...And still there is no funeral, no emptying of grief; no shaking droplets from the trees, followed by the steaming up of loss, gentle respiration of memory. Grief-in-waiting is a tap left dripping, the unstaunched hope, drop by drop, perhaps, [s]he might, what if, it could. Friends can only do so much. Those who are experienced, unembarrassed by grief, know not to dispense bromides, wear long faces or chat with plastered grins. They behave like good dance partners. Life goes on. That’s the way it is. You do not forget, neither do you dwell; be there, that is all. Stop with the casseroles and too frequent phone calls after a while, but do not disappear. Be there.

(MacDonald, 2003, p.599)
Matthew Day two:

"I think I’m pregnant," she’d said. I thought gleeful thoughts. I thought father, family thoughts. These thoughts, I kept to myself because the correct reaction, it seemed, was to be concerned and worried. This time I was ready though. This was finally going to happen, maybe, if I crossed my fingers and pulled the right end of the wishbone.

Hope lasted and lasted. Most of the time it was just mine, on my own, sheltered and protected from the question I had, the look on her face, the talk of termination, that awful, gruesome, hopeless word: abortion. I screened it out, bubbled in my delight, shared this possibility with my closest friend who turned a worried eye toward me then shouted for joy, nearly equal to mine, when he saw the happiness in my face... A cautious, but pleasant grin from my good friend as his hand struck out to meet mine, shake it, slap me on the back, the good man that I was, the men that we were.

Fathers. We both wanted it. He’d missed it, for now. I was on the threshold of having it. I had to admit that my girlfriend was not convinced but with my toes crossed and my tongue twisted, it seemed that maybe there was a glimmer of hope...
She was lying on the bathroom floor; her blonde hair, 
Fanned out, had turned scarlet.

The tiles were pink-grouted, slick with blood.

She managed to tell me to clean up the mess, hissing 
From the litter as the paramedics lifter her out.

My aunt rushed over and found me in the claw-footed bathtub, 
Holding the towel, rocking back and forth.

Jesus Christ! She yelled, seizing it, and slapping my face.

On the remaining white tiles, a trailing red stain, 
A baby with a severed umbilicus.

A girl, still mewing – she marked the towel in a shape I have looked for 
High and low since she went missing.

(Crosbie, 2003, p.72)
I want to get it down about how the experience is not over all at once. How a woman can go on carrying her abortion within her, even after the blood dries up. There are months and milestones she counts, the quiet calendars that women keep; my belly would be huge by now, I would be giving birth this month, celebrating its first birthday soon. I want to say it clearly about the women whose tears were still fresh after twenty-five years. They said they had dealt with it, announced that it was clearly the right choice for them at the time, that they had been well supported. But as soon as they began telling their stories, their tear-coated words revealed another text, long harboured.
Years and years after a woman has delivered a child, she continues to carry vestiges of that child in her body. I’m talking about tangible vestiges now, not memories. Stray cells from a growing fetus circulate through a woman’s body during pregnancy, possibly as a way for the fetus to communicate with the mother’s immune system and forestall its ejection from the body as the foreign object it is. The fetal-maternal cell dialogue was thought to be a short-lived one, lasting only as long as the pregnancy. Recently, though, scientists have found fetal cells surviving in the maternal bloodstream decades after the women have given birth to their children. The cells didn’t die; they didn’t get washed away. They persisted, and may have divided a few times in the interim. They’re fetal cells, which means they’ve got a lot of life built into them. A mother, then, is forever a cellular chimera, a blend of the body she was born with and of all the bodies she has borne.

(Angier, 2000, p.349)
How do women who are mothers for only a short time, embody and give meaning to their passage into motherhood? What shifts occur, whether subtle or overt, in women who are temporarily pregnant, and how does their stilted experience of motherhood live on in them?
searching for soil

the world stares back at me different than before

spring chestnut husk burst open and fallen too soon
lays stranded on the sidewalk
rough bark of spores still attempting protection
tender insides exposed
silken yellow leeching into new-shoot green;

where life was to come.

freestone peach lays split in summer
two perfect halves on grandmother's antique plate
fleshy dawn leaking streams of rust away from its perched pit
one stray drop of juice entangled in velvet hairs
echoes the ripeness of passing light;

too reverent to eat.

and in this cooling season
of mulled pears and gardens longing to rest

(the month you would have been born in)

a single strand of hair clings to the bathroom mirror
curled just so at the top
splintered moon cupping the earth below
elongated where the spine would be
tiny feet curled in at the bottom;

so much harder now
just to wipe it away.
I have seen that the pain of an abortion frequently persists. Time does not heal it. I repeat: the pain, not the sense of guilt. I think that the ability to continue to feel a pain which is neither remorse nor a sense of guilt is a sign of the achievement of a transformation; of the fact, specifically, that a woman has succeeded in making room for other modes of feminine identity that outflank and lie beyond motherhood. When I speak of motherhood, I refer to a figure that protects, consoles and instinctively endeavours to hold pain at a distance...

(Zoja, 1997, p.107)
Pro-life declares abortion is wrong, while pro-choice declares its right. Both are certain voices, adamant in their knowing. This work concerns itself instead with the liminal voices, the voices between the poles. The ambiguous and disjointed voices of women and men articulating the experience of abortion as they lived it, the unsteady voices that are often lost between the certainties.
...Work
your way through the tear field and you
will thin right down and see.
Nothing else can be read in this way; you must
read, read – work the shovel: go through
the tears, pry under them, the garden under the stone.

(Lilburn, 2003, p.75)
uttering birth
Like the princess in the glass coffin. Open the lid, remove the apple from her mouth, release the
word into air. Watch it reunite with its companions, form clusters of meaning.

(MacDonald, 2003, p.612)
This is how I want to write. Eloquent. Poetic. Chaotic. I want to move beyond the conventions of grammar and language, have the work emerge from, and reach deeper into an unknowing place within me. I want my work to be resonant and evocative, and for it to slip beneath the obvious meaning on the page. Writing as Jardine says, that is born of flesh, bones and breath, and can bring us back there. Amazing that title from his book: *Speaking with a Boneless tongue*. Let it be muscular, contorted, and wet. Let it mingle with the digestive acids of real. Let yourself fall like this into the ancient embrace of a language you feel, before you understand.
I didn’t now that if you want to write, you must follow your desire to write. And that your writing will help you unravel the knots in your heart. I didn’t know that you could write simply to take care of yourself, even if you have no desire to publish your work. I didn’t know that if you want to become a writer, eventually you’ll learn through writing – and only through writing – all you need to know about you’re craft. And that while you’re learning, you’re engaging in soul-satisfying, deeply nurturing labor. I didn’t know that if you want to write and don’t because you don’t feel worthy enough or able enough, not writing will eventually begin to erase who you are.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.31)
The sun is pouring in through the window today, clear and restless. A welcome respite from this season of wet. I have spent the afternoon leaning into borrowed words; Caroline Ellis, Nancy Mairs, Helene Cixous. What interminably delicious thrill to be offered words through which to know myself. To find in their expressions a piece of me perched there, waiting. To recognize a part of me I can only know in reflection, the sudden glint in the mirror that catches you, breathless as you walk past. Cixous’s birthing of words, birthing of self through words, is an especially beautiful resonance. I taste this knowing, before knowing it. Like the hint of metal in my mouth that reveals somewhere, I am bleeding. The pain is always secondary.

This writing, this coming to writing is me being born, but not yet. I must wait. All things need to gestate, a time to linger alone in the dark before being born. A vulnerable time of muffled solitude where the sudden soft caress of palm, can change the temperature of your world. Just wait. Learn patience from here. My life this season has been a series of relentless contractions. Each one slow and deep, both within and without of my control, settling myself into the body’s nearly forgotten knowing instead. This pulling and seizing and contorted musculature is preparing to bear life. I am learning to be still, to have faith in the next contraction. The movement is already underway, propelled by its own patient force, insistent and unstoppable like a snake swallowing its rodent prey, like the in-coming tide or night descending.
Head droops now, eyes become heavy. And my throat is hurting again. I have noticed lately that it flares up in a distinctively red, swollen and sick way whenever I step into my voice. I know this story will be about voice, is already about voice. About my voice; how it comes out and why it remains silent. About voicing and the difference it can make to hear someone else's voice in the dark.

My writing since the beginning has been laced with the delicate cloth of confession. Hand stitched and fragile. An art we are losing. Getting public about what is silenced into private. Don't speak. It is getting harder to speak. I am on a forest trail in winter. There are people down the lane warning me. I am running away from what they are saying, I don't want to be silenced. My whole body wants rest. Why is this so hard?

Remember in grade two, standing eye-level at the kitchen table, seeing your mother struggle to write that note to your teacher. Learning already then, how words on a page can reveal you, shatter your pretensions of good enough. In public school when my best friend moved away, she returned my letters corrected in red pen. Years later in high school, fifty percent was taken off of a term long project, because words were not spelled correctly.
The South American Metaco... women interrupt their first pregnancy for the purpose of facilitating
the next. This practice has nothing to do with ‘not wanting to have a baby’. Abortion, quite to the
contrary, plays a role in the service of motherhood; an abortion is seen as a necessary preparation
for the birth of a subsequent child. The aborted foetus and the future child do not stand in
contradiction to one another; the aborted foetus is a precondition for the future child’s existence.

(Zoja, 1997, p.12)
In her remarkable book *Abortion; loss and renewal in the search for identity* Eva Pattis Zoja introduces me to the Jungian concept of abortion as initiation. She describes how in Western culture, becoming mother is one of the only remaining rituals that publicly marks a woman’s transition into adulthood. She postulates that an abortion can be a symbolic saying no, a refusal, a turning away from this narrowly defined maternal construct that traditionally puts the needs of others before the needs of self, thus allowing the woman another entry into adulthood.

This morning I was thinking about how my abortion was a symbolic killing of an old part of myself, the dependant and restricted child self that I have been wanting to grow away from, but I still don’t feel grown up, and continue to fear revealing myself. The abortion affected much change in me and my life, but sometimes I worry that I am still the same person I was before the abortion. I worry that the stalling and hesitations I experience around writing this story mean that my abortion failed to delivery me into adulthood. That I took another life to try to mark my own passage into womanhood, to try in essence to become woman, but that I failed because I am still struggling to assert and believe in my own voice, my adult woman self.

Then I remember that I am writing, however slowly, and questioning my relationship, and steadily building the life I want to invite a child into. All I have to do is remember myself laying on my bed
the night before my abortion began, attempting to utter a foreign and fumbled goodbye to the then live baby in my belly, trying to prepare it for the abrupt expulsion it was about to experience, and suddenly I am awash in the promise I made to myself and to it, that its life would not be wasted, that I would take this experience and learn from it.

Take this bread and eat it, it has been given up for you.

It occurs to me now that maybe growing up does not happen all at once. That maybe this abortive experience can remind me that I am perpetually in the midst of being born. Every time I call that image of myself on the bed to mind I am bolstered, like a warrior remembering his first kill, reminded that I can and must fulfill the responsibilities that became incumbent upon me when I made that choice, when I chose to nurture, care for, and support my own life instead of the child’s. The abortion did not erect a clear line that I must cross once and for all. Rather it set a new tide line that I will continue to cross and fall back from, cross and fall back from, until one day through the seasons, another line will be drawn, and only then will I see myself firmly past the first.
But you can’t get to any of these truths by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don’t have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go in to. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in – then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.

(Lamont, 1995, p.201)
come closer.

i want to tell you a story. a story of telling, and being told.

it is a not often spoken story, but lingers patiently here, uttering itself through the body’s language of flesh and hollows. more felt than heard, more known than seen. you may notice an echo within you as you read, a kind of remembering. let that humming resound. let it be the way you listen.

this story is about listening.
this story is about learning to tell.

but this story keeps growing. like a baby in its womb, cells keep dividing into more and more stories, as i become more and more people, gathering more and more voices, and it is no longer clear where the story begins.

can a story begin with not telling?

all those years ago on grandfather’s turquoise couch, young summer thighs itching against its cool polyester weave, moth ball pants undone beside me, giggling at his forgetfulness and age until his hand began guiding
mine. my confusion, pulling away, the porch door slamming behind me, the wooden swing, the silence of sun spilled against grey and peeling paint beneath my feet, mosquito screens rusted and loose at their stapled edges.

what language is there for this?

a voice finds me one night in my dream’s kitchen, wide open mouth finally uttering the sound of horror, gutteral wail erupting, rising, breaking for once through the barrier of larynx, crossing lips into the fragile air, warning sleeping parents of the sinister hand before me, black gloved on the steps, reaching for our door.

that night in the dream i moved, fearful and flush toward him, faced the awful face through the glass, turned the bolt safe, before he got in. red raw when I woke up in my morning’s throat.

where does language begin?

on the edge of a foreign lake, discordant among savannah hills, lonely cactus, dust and bone dry. two girls sleep under nylon’s thin dome, unfortunate blue and purple beacon among the vastness and clay. wakened suddenly by glass bottles clanging, many men’s voices stumbling, vulgarity translates clear through their dazed diction, the threat audible, disorienting, too near. faces blanche, limbs immobilize, ears ignite like eyes
in headlights, absorb the shock of being hunted. tension teeters breathless until, from somewhere, a voice says no. i lean in to listen, eager as it grows to a shout, louder still with each taunt. no, you can not come in. no, we do not want to suck your cock. no. no. no. until the force of the words rattle my bones, startle me awake. the voice i find, is my own. finally tunnelling a passage through lungs and throat, clenched teeth, years of silence constricted in flesh. the utterance emerges now fierce and determined, echoes across shallow lake, wakes distant neighbours, sends drunk men away, keeps us safe, declares our bodies our own. makes me wonder

why language so often begins with no?

this story, close up, is about delivering voice.
...A man and woman lie in their own whiteness, the brief balsam of the flesh.

...Soon the man and woman will make a space for me between them.

*Sweet Jesus*, he cries, and I'm the one who answers.

Smaller than a barley'pearl, I curl inside her longing.
It is my voice singing when she comes.

(Crozier, 1999, p.12)
Winter ends

These first words prepare to catch what comes
These words, the midwives gathering cloth, cool buckets of water
patient hands at rest in their knowing

These words grow steadier now, more driven
These words a pulse echoing through with every (these words) breathe

These nascent words contract, give way, a longing to ache into
syllables to wetten the marrow between (these words) legs

Insistent and eager, these words strain to emerge
through flesh and widening darkness

These words crown now
dark bulb still bloodied, glide through
muscular, contorted, and wet

These words unfurl, slippery and grey
screaming into the silence, announcing presence
Tender hands by my side, inside, mine

These knotted words unwound
silver glint of metal sharp against tender flesh, still warm
severs what was once bound
Old nourishment will scab then drop away

These words breathe free now
tiny lungs flutter and fill
attuning to air

These words
an afterbirth of words delivered
deliver me
Build then the ship of death, for you must take
The longest journey, to oblivion.
And die the death, the long and painful death
That lies between the old self and the new...

(Lawrence in Atwood, 2002, p.152)
There is an open field ahead of me I have been saying. I imagined that I would run and dance through its spaciousness, merge with the swaying grasses, tall, yellowed and set free by the warming sun. Instead I find myself laying down, back to the earth, and sinking. A kind of returning. This field will always be here, has always been here. This laying down carried within me. I have only to choose it. Write everyday. No waiting for this to be done, or some other impossibility to align. Write now. Write. Come back to this rich, fertile, darkness. Its warm here and alive. The same conditions for dying and being born.
...Little fern, little flame, I know you,
I know
what you do to a life.
Spreading till you fill up all the space,
till you suck up all the air in the room.

Start so small, an idea, a so-called life,
then you capsize the one
who carries you.

Forgive me if you misunderstood,
if we seduced you
onto our chaotic shore.

Listen,
sac of my gestation,
immaculate and mistimed,
you took the wrong turn
into the cul-de-sac of my body
and I will turn you back...

(Pearson, 2001, p.91)
Matthew Day three:

I was there to be there, and to support and stay quiet and to listen. In the end, I was there to watch the yellow ink pour into her arm, watch the plunger go in, and see the poison enter her body which would have been nothing if I didn’t know what it meant and what it meant was the death of this child that she was carrying, and if I am to be honest and admit it, it was the killing of this child, even though there were only a few cells and though when we saw it after the placenta had been aborted and the carcass of the embryo too, you could see little white lines along its back which would have been her spine and you could imagine where the arms might appear, and how the head would grow and the eyes would begin to appear, and months later how the heart would be beating loud and the little thing would come out as a living baby with bright blue eyes and dark hair and a pointed nose like her nose and my nose. All of that was there and all of it ebbed away the moment the yellow poison was set loose from the syringe, and entered her body and announced the death of this child. And, at the time, all of this was there though I was present to her, and to how she might be feeling then and later in a few days once she took the pills to miscarry the child and I wanted to be there because we had made the decision together and we had been careless together and become pregnant together and it was more than my responsibility that kept me there. There was a desire to be there for her, the mother, so in the moment I was not so aware of my grief and my sorrow except in that very moment when the liquid began to be injected into her and everything stopped..., to me, it was the end.
What I don't know and don't understand is what was taken and where it all went. The physical is easy because it is flesh and blood that you can put your fingers into but the rest, the spirit, the soul, the connection to earth and to the heavens are unknown to me except, perhaps, in the sadness and the disappointment that I felt. And I think that that is what is always there for me when a child is around or a child disappears or a child dies... It is the feeling of life that is and life that was and life that has been taken away. So, what I feel right now is a beating sorrow in my chest that feels like a reminder of the very moment in that small, dark room when we put an end to our child's life and watched her disappear, slowly fade, and die and be gone from us forever.
If you write as a woman, ...you write to give the body its Books... Not to fill in the abyss, but to love yourself right to the bottom of your abysses. To know, not to avoid. Not to surmount; to explore, dive down, visit. There, where you write, everything grows, your body unfurls, your skin recounts its hitherto silent legends.

(Cixous, 1991, p.42)
An abortion is not over when the blood dries up and the ache in your belly goes away. An abortion is deeper than that, broader and older. An abortion can be anything you want it to be, mine was a birth, these words, the rivered marrow.
remembered battlefield
The first anniversary is only fourteen days away now and my body is definitely remembering.
What to do? Where to turn? How to proceed? Is there a self-identity for the writer that combines responsibility with artistic integrity? If there is, what might it be? Ask the age we live in, and it might reply – the witness.

(Atwood, 2002, p.117)
only now, seventeen years later, is he able to experience the shock

memories of blood and gasoline cloud his vision
the weight of dead bodies upon him

broken and cold at eight thousand feet, the dream of an unborn child
keeps him alive, is warmed by the ambition of love

young geologist's first day on the job, saves his fingers
and toes by willing his heart to beat more slowly

as day bleeds into night, he hears the muffled roar
of helicopter blades approach, then retreat

fills the silence that follows with prayer

feels the birds and trees and sky bearing witness
lending their heartbeats to his

we found each other in the park this morning
each of us walking against memory in the crisp winter sun

our listening a canvas for each other's excavated grief

he admits he is tempted sometimes by what dying
could usher in, wants the pain in his mended places to end

but feels his life is a debt he owes
letting loose the weight of the word in me
his bones have been put back together now
has an eight year old son and the wife he kept warm for

shows me the trail of scars that have healed
on his bare criss-crossed scalp

but this year’s storms fill him with remembering
snow-filled sight of mountains resurrect buried nightmares

the deeper cartography of scars is patient
but will eventually always demand to be mapped

the tide in his eyes speaks his longing
and nods in recognition at mine
When everything in us stops & the sound of the rain
is the sound of lost names, the freighters moving up the false
water, everything discharging here at the edge of the known
world, all the names told in her voice, the drowned girl who
calls, throat filled with no language, her call more wound
than silence, when everything in us is married
to that lost cry, to damage.

(Spalding, 1999, p.57)
Matthew and I trying to speak; February 14th, first anniversary.

- Time runs out and there’s nothing we can do.

Time moves within us, and is ours.

- Assertions. But I cannot, for the life of me, hold to having control over outcome and endings.

The fighting stance inhabits me, and I resist. This end, I’ve wanted. This time, its true, I’ve cared for.

- I know it yet what I would have chosen or envisioned is not what occurs and, should I be discontented then and miss all that is here?

Yes I know. It’s the accusation I hurl at myself always and forever – how dare you not be here, how dare you miss what’s here. Fuck! This totally doesn’t wok for me. The page, the lines, the short passages, all your style. This feels like an argument on paper. Feels like a dog chasing its tail. My head hurts, I’ll write as long as I want. See my letters grow? Bigger, more frantic, mad? I want to let go, I do. Climb out of this rut, this pout. The trouble for me is, that I want a piece. I want an outcome I can use, for others, for others to read. This wandering feels like too much of a compromise I don’t trust yet.

- An outcome? To me that's crazy. I've never in my truth wanted to know the answer to anything. I'm not doing this for other people. I'm doing it for you, me, and the child, that's all.
Gradations of rock, fossilized, hardened, compacted, grey stone, layer upon layer of aged life, petrified, held. Drilling through takes time, patience, faith.

-It seems that there is never an ideal time or a perfect readiness. I have opinions. You have opinions. We choose. We go on. The continents shift a tiny bit. Certainty is an absolute mystery to me but, there is a gut feeling and sometimes I listen to it.

That's nice, what you said about the continents shifting a tiny bit. Thinking of others is not wrong. I won't accuse myself. It can be, as you once said, a generosity with words. What is it, you think you're doing, for me, for the baby, and you? What is this?

-I don't really understand your questions. What I'm doing is being inside of this space, letting the intentions emerge rather than distinguishing them and aiming for them. This is not an easy voice.

I keep feeling accused by your words. I'm in my head. I'm talking to you, being in this moment, this distortion. When, I wonder, will we address what we're here for? The loss and longing. Elation. Unspoken fears, resentment. The blood. The river. The dying. How do we begin to re-enter that space?

-So, without defences... I chose, a year ago and it felt like the right choice, but I still wonder. We sit in our lives that are fine and lovely and I can't imagine what it would be like had we chosen otherwise, but I do wonder about it. It just seems that one can never be ready and be always ready. That's why
I cannot say, with certainty that we chose correctly or incorrectly. We just did our best to choose with care and with love.

I wonder where that baby is sometimes. Is it still here with us? I don’t feel it. I don’t feel its presence anymore and that makes me cry. I wonder has it been born into the world already, through someone else? Will it come to us again? Was it we that chose, or it?

-I was thinking about my mother, alone without her companion my father, and I figure that she didn’t reckon she’d be alone so early. Maybe the clock ticks differently for every soul and that one that we had so briefly was short-lived. It’s never the ‘right’ time for people to pass on. I don’t know where she is, this baby of ours and I don’t know if she’ll come again. And I miss both her and my father but that’s just the way it is.

Tears come so easily now, and I want to be with them. To feel them glide slowly down my cheek, along my nose in time to this music, this lullaby that’s holding us. I feel the salt drying on my skin and it tickles. That’s what I miss about being pregnant, feeling everything. I remember the grace I felt inhabit me. The almost immediate slowing down, and the space that made inside. I remember saying it felt like I had discovered the trap door to my ancestry. Sounds cliché now. Sounds borrowed. But that’s what it was. That’s the gift the baby brought.

-Something beyond the self. It’s a reminder or a revelation that other ways and other worlds exist.

Since I cannot create a child, or at least haven’t succeeded in giving birth to a child, this recognition
that there is a world beyond me and my wishes translates into seeing it better in others. It seems futile to wish for something I have not, and better to find joy in what is here. Maybe that’s the soul of the child right there.

For me it’s the opposite, in a way. I’ve always been too aware of the world beyond me, gave myself over to it, got lost in my smallness relative to the world. For me, the baby is here, or rather the memory of the child, no, my obligation to the child, the debt I owe for its life, is to recognize mine. To see my smallness relative to all things, yet to urge towards fullness, bigness, a blossoming. For me, the baby’s coming has delivered me to myself, ever more aware of the world beyond me and yet, at the same time, more committed to the world within me, than ever before.

-It may be the same thing what you and I are saying. By being committed to myself I mean recognizing the goodness in myself and trying to see it in others. That’s a gift, a great gift. There is no baby that we can tangibly hold now so maybe we’ve had an opportunity to realize the essence of child through not having a child. Next time, if it occurs, perhaps we’ll look upon a new child as something much greater than the physical being that it is, feel it as the piece of the universe that it is.

Maybe because there is no ‘tangible’ baby to hold, we’ve learned to hold ourselves instead. I’m tired now. Wondering if you’d join me down here, in this quiet space, to sleep for the night? It feels like what we’ve started, could carry on through the night, without our waking to interfere. To carry the conversation onto another realm. Maybe there will be room for the baby, in dreams.
Desire's work, I was slid under things and
saw the dusky words engraved on their belowsides.

Aflag of names blows inside the tongue; ... let the hidden, shy, terrifying things
lift you in their long red beak.

(Lilburn, 2003, p.37)
I am picked and scoured. Toe and finger nails clipped, face and teeth scrubbed, examined pores and the growth on my vaginal lip, picked bits of dry skin off my nose, scratched away the wart on the bottom of my foot, disinfected ears from my new Hoppi earrings, gifts from Matthew to honour the day he said; silver women holding babies, keepers of the stories. I have spent at least half an hour scouring my body, picking away at surfaces, the places and pockets where infection gathers, shedding what is overgrown, a way of coping. I also cleaned the kitchen, put the dishes away, folded the guest bed where we slept last night surrounded by the ritual objects I set out, hoping for a visit in my dreams. Gathered the unused art supplies I laid out last evening, messy reminders of what we did not do. I left the alter objects out in their respective directions around the room though; a candle and hand etched mirror on the salvaged garden stand in the South, shells and moon water on the window ledge in the West, stones and dried stems resting on top of the picture frame in the North, and a glass butterfly with the etched words *magical occurrence* on the steamer trunk in the East. This remembering is not over. I want the objects to hold a space for me a little longer. I want to live a while yet in this remembering, hope it will usher itself into my days, seep through my toes like mud. It was too much to fit into a day, crazy to expect a whole year of shifting and growing to squeeze into the time frame of a day. Let this be the week of remembering, the month to honour in. Let us dwell a while in the questions. Let us not ask them all at once. Not expect answers today.
I did not know to expect this. We were both so explosive when we tried talking last night, so crazy, so instantly mad. I should have known, could have suspected earlier there was something more going on. The ferociousness of our instantaneous anger reveals its source. We must both have been bothered, affected in ways that were too fresh to see, by this anniversary we are immersed in. I had no preparation. No idea that this coming around, would re-assert all the tensions and difficulties that we were navigating at this time last year. It is as if we have been catapulted back to who we were then, what our relationship was, and was not. He; instantly defensive, edgy, intolerant, deaf. Me; protective, stubborn, a bull dragging her foot, explosive. I knew even as I answered him, that I was not speaking what I wanted to say, but was swept along, taken in by the force of my own anger, my aggressive stance. I could almost feel myself willing him to hit me, arrogant, pushy, daring him to do battle. We spent yesterday buying a piece of art called The Battlefield 7, instead of committing the day to the ritual I had planned. It certainly feels like we are on a battlefield, but I wonder whose war it is we are waging. Feels like something else working through me, something old, unresolved, creeping up through my throat and hurling itself at him. Arrows of words, aimed to hurt.

All I could do was walk away. Disengage. This was not how I wanted to proceed. All I know, all I can offer is that this is bigger than us. This is not us.
So how do you mourn an unborn person? What do you say to a child you never knew? We buy a plant, an aloe vera, from a nursery down the street. We re-pot the plant and place a plastic kinder egg in the bottom, and inside the egg we stuff notes. The notes are eulogies, or maybe confessions. I don’t know what else to say, other than sorry. This wasn’t meant to be. We live in a small one-bedroom apartment. We have school to finish and jobs to start and debts to pay. The timing was wrong. We weren’t ready. There are too many unjustifiable reasons, reasons that fall short of explaining why one fate can determine another, why this wasn’t meant to be. I don’t know what else to say.

(Badelt, 2003, p.33)
Everything sets me off these days; the little girl reading to her mom on the bus, the beautiful roundness of a pregnant belly peeking out at me from the shower stall at the pool, even a TV character’s closing lines about being indebted to the soldiers who were killed in the efforts to save him. I have been feeling the loss now more than ever, except I don’t think loss is the right word. The TV lines remind me of the debt I feel I owe, the obligation I have imposed on my life to make up somehow for the loss of the baby’s life, Zoe’s life. An impossible promise because one life can never atone for another. No matter what I do or achieve, how much I write or open to love, I will always wonder what she would have brought instead. Perhaps it is too soon for understanding. All I really know is that today as I swam, I found myself calculating whether I would qualify for maternity benefits should I become pregnant again. And tonight when I glimpsed the dark patch of my period returning in my underwear, I noticed a flash of disappointment within me. Can I trust these urges, or are they a way of making her life count? Everyday something reminds me of the abortion, the baby, the possibility of trying again. I wonder what this sensitivity is, and how long it will last.
It's been years now and still
she hasn't finished
with grief's long gestation.
Her body fooled but not fooled
by the phantoms it carries, the ghosts
that live in the mother-fat…

(Pearson, 2001, p.98)
Language may be imagined as a series of acts, both generous and generative, which do not mourn absence but affirm presence: word as glance, as sigh, as caress.

(Mairs, 1994, p.84)
Words demand my supplications. I am an initiate, a new monk shuffling down the quiet corridor, hands folded inward to the round flesh at my middle, the place where light gathers. For me writing is a listening practice, a stepping away, an unknowing. It is receiving what comes, a communion with what is offered. This listening requires an attentiveness, a stilling. The practice of writing cultivates that stillness, the habit of seeing with the whole heart; the old man lost and alone in his chair at the coffee shop, fresh buds emerging on the vine along the concrete wall at school, the jittering sway of the twelve remaining leaves on the cherry blossom tree outside my window, crisp and brown, hanging like bats, wings gathered, still and oblong, unfallen. I cannot remember anymore where I was going before getting lost in the brown leaves. That is the listening, the unknowing, trusting that I am being lead, going where the words want to go, forgetting base camp, the trail, the way home.

Writing is a kind of worship, a quiet attending, the way the old hunched man walks up the hill everyday beneath my desk, one slow and twisted step at a time, both of us sharply aware of each strained gesture. I am grateful to witness his effort, am relieved somehow like a prayer ending, when he finally reaches the top. The longed-for grace of losing myself as he does, in the lifting and shifting of keys, my pen and palm shuffling along, up then down across the page. Seeing words emerge like colour from a child’s crayon, her hand running back and forth, back and forth, the fluid motion spilling pigment as if liquid, as if pouring out
from some ineffable place. Back at my desk, I gaze spellbound as the words tumble themselves forth, asserting there is something larger, mysterious, sacred dwelling within me. This awareness makes me want to take care, to treat myself softly and with kindness, as if there were a sleeping Jesus in the walls of my ribcage, an expectant Mary in my throat.

There is a current flowing eternally within us all. Writing enters me into that flow. It is through the words that I know the flow lives in me, hovers always near, here. Falling in is the practice, is where humility and reverence come from, the monk bending down. The act of writing which seems so often about self is simultaneously about selflessness, about forgetting or forgoing self, about subsuming self to another, experiencing self as servant, as humble clay, the soil though which something else is expressed. We are all, each of us, wombs we must ready, the dark fertile soil in which a seed is waiting to be born.

There is suddenly a stream of clear light in the sky ahead of me, a brightness through which to see. Something is happening, a shift unfolding, a pelvis widening. I feel the force of it prying me open, feel the weight shifting, the cavity emptying. This writing is not about the abortion, is only vaguely about the abortion. The abortion is the impulse, the impetus for writing, the seed that brings me to the garden, but not the thing I plant. In order for anything to grow I must let go of what propelled me toward the rich soil in the first place, the palm that has been closed around those precious seeds, protecting, holding for so long, must
slowly unfurl itself, expose the tender kernels, thank them, then blow them gently away, place her faith instead in the summer breeze.

This story is about coming to writing, it contemplates the imagery of abortion to tell another story, to tell what the abortion brought me to, to say what was born through it. It is bigger than me, a current I am stepping into, disappearing to find myself, where birth is a death, and death a birth. Two seemingly different things coming together, converging like two rivers. Their waters collide expectant, but there is only a mingling, a becoming one. The current drives on, unaltered, but stronger. Bowing to the prayer of words, to the humility of craft, the divinity of admitting myself a beginner, I am an initiate, a new monk shuffling down the quiet corridor, hands folded inward to the round flesh at my middle, the place where light gathers. I am bowing down now, can feel the curve in my back, smell the dampness of earth as I settle nearer to it, aware suddenly of the back of my neck, stretched long and unfolded like an offering, a dignified death, the grace of hair falling away.
There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there...
We know what it is for,
We who have used it...
I go down.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
And the treasures that prevail...

...the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth

(Rich in Atwood, 2002, p.177)
storied hum

words echo through me
resound in these canyons of flesh
like thirsty lizards scuttling along
dry river beds

each hurried step a loosened phrase
unleashing the tender memory of wet
deep beneath sun-bleached sand

i feel it seep
slow and determined
like sediment obliging gravity
through dust and remembering
a sure and steady returning
to quench shriveled cactus root

straightening my spiked spine above
into crimson bloom
We are the accumulation of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. So changing our stories..., can change our personal history, can change us. Through writing, we revisit our past and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believed happened, to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths. It isn’t that we use our writing to deny what we’ve experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspective.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.11)
My writing room holds me. Warm red walls all around, an enclosed and intimate space, all mine. Attunes me to a steady, distant droning I cannot see but understand I live within. Like a child in its womb; warm and walled in her mother's red heart drum.

It is my writing that is giving birth to me, not me giving birth to words. The difference is perhaps subtle, but significant nonetheless. I have been imagining my body semi prone, legs open, face twisted in contractions, words spilling out from between wide legs. But now I see the positions are reversed. It is the words that are squatted close to earth, faces stern and focused, able, spilling me from between their legs. Wrinkled and still folded I emerge, hands and feet still tucked in the curve of womb, wet body still bound to the cord but ready to breath my own air, to feel the knot being wound, the scab forming then loosening, shedding itself back to earth, a gentler separation.

I suckle on the offered milk, cradled in the worded mother's breast. Honouring my smallness next to the fountain from which all words come, a drop adrift in the ocean, a monk bowing down.
It [my body] speaks, and I am what is uttered.

(Cixous, 1991, p.45)
The foetus dreams it is a man.
It dreams it is a woman.
It dreams it is half
and half.
It dreams it is unhappy.
It dreams two pains: one
will not stop after the foetus
squeezes from the vise,
the tight tunnel.

It wants to be
a thing with wings
that says one word
over and over.

(Crozier, 1985, p.25)
a kind of belonging
After a sun drenched winter walk this morning, I made my way to the back of the house to where the garden rests, to stretch my body, to hold myself in the perfect suspension of downward earth root and upward sky flight, the intersection of here and now. My awareness suddenly drawn from that stillness to the decomposed leaves littering the garden, leaves that fell from the trees around us in fall, leaves we gathered and spread over the dormant beds of earth to keep the cats away in winter. Now a cold season past, the leaves are turning ghostlike, the brown of their death eaten away by time, rain and light, exposing their fragile skeletons, threadbare, delicate and intact. The architecture of each leaf revealed under the deterioration of its covering, of what we have known as leaf. All that remains now are bones, the marrowed frame, the once invisible.

I bend intuitively, unknowingly over the dark brown earth to gather these ghosts in my hands. There is the vague sense of preservation in my careful gestures. I imagine our fetus, last year's almost child, wrapped in one of these latticed leaves, appropriately fine, fragile, and passing. I am suddenly filled with gratitude for these leaves, for how they reveal what was, how they mark the sway of time, the changing seasons, call me back to the garden, remind me of another time ahead, for planting.
As I hover over the earth making my careful selections, I am amazed to discover some leeks still growing determinedly near the kale. I had forgotten about them, not paid them any attention since last fall, four cold months ago and yet they have grown. There is something to that, their resilience, their determination to thrive and grow into the world, reminding me of what I interrupted, of what was growing then within me, and yet I am relived, amazed, comforted. The leeks are alive despite me, growing on through the seasons as they should, like me growing on.

The leaves that draw me most are the ones that are still in the process of decomposing, bits of their earlier leaf still clinging in spots to the skeleton, a patchy reminder of what used to be, a measure of movement, of change affecting itself, of life. As I gaze at their delicate frames gathered in my open palm, I feel a peace settle in me, a kind of acceptance or belonging, the endless rhythm of life and death carrying on.
...the way Carolyn takes my hand in the middle of a walk, laughing, as if it were nothing, this gentleness we learn from what we can't heal.

(Wallace, 1985, p.77)
I emptied my menstrual keeper in the sink this morning as I usually do, pausing to notice how full the first cup always is, its blood seeming still thick and warm enough to keep things alive in. As I prepared to admire the temporary red pattern it forms every month on the porcelain, I was startled by a thick and unexpected clump sliding off the edge of the cup, slipping quickly along the wet basin and down the drain, making me jump instantly into panicked action. What if that was another baby I thought to myself. Instinctively threading my fingers into the drain, I tried retrieving the red mass I could see suspended on the hair catch, but my fingers were too thick. Reaching impulsively for the tweezers instead, I began clumsily excavating a few pinches of the clump, promptly squishing them against the cold, white surface, expecting in my franticness to discover another foetus nestled there.

It was only then that I began to consider what I had done. The franticness, the tweezers, the madness of the scene; a not pregnant woman reaching into the drain to save her unformed baby. The impossibility of finding a foetus in menstrual blood had not yet occurred to me, nor did the ridiculousness of believing I might be able to save whatever I found. I laughed at myself then, while recognizing that the experience shook something loose in me about the importance of having held our baby, our would-be baby on my finger-tip last February; quiet and curled just so, glistening but gone, of knowing beyond doubt its size.
As I stood there transfixed under the stove light, I was simply grateful to be familiar and at ease enough with my own bloods to look through the tissue at the bottom of the bucket, to make possible that most unimaginable moment of seeing the foetus slide gently out of its nest. I remember the distinct feeling that something had been returned to me in that moment, though I did not yet know what it was. Today I realized that having my hands and eyes so literally in the matter gives me a confidence to speak from, the freedom of not being tormented by nightmares and wonderings, the comfort of knowing the abortion was not something done to me but rather something I did for myself, the privilege of walking past the anti-choice signs and knowing with conviction that the images displayed there are grossly exaggerated.

I can be certain for example that the baby’s hands I aborted, looked nothing like the chicken feet I saw severed and piled with dozens of others at the butcher shop last week. I could stare at their pale flesh, goose-bumped and stiff, four fingers each with refined nail, raw severed bone protruding from where the body would once have been. The sight brought me to tears and yet I did not need to flee. I could linger with the stillness and accusation those severed parts uttered, face my own fear and sadness knowing that our baby had nothing that resembled hands, did not have fingers yet, or a skin we could identify. She had budding bones, we saw them curving a line of white spots under the magnifying glass, a dotted path, her would-be spine. She was on her way to something but we interrupted her course, the course of her life. Curriculum vitae. Curriculum.
Oh if only we could visit them at the hour of their death – not to intervene, because that is impossible, but simply to witness. To love them as they leave, not seek to make their suffering invisible. All they ask is that we picture it. *Watch me.*

(MacDonald, 2003, p.655)
Matthew Day four; What is not being said? What voice would you like to have?

The man’s voice, my voice, having experienced two abortions needs to be heard. I was unconscious in the first and, as in the second, still supported my partner fully. But, did I support her fully if my conviction was not there? If we’d shared the same opinion, I suppose I would have felt heard, at least minimally. It would be either a yes or a no. And, in honesty, I’m not likely to have ventured into questioning what I truly felt, on my own. But, it seems that if a man is to be respectful, then ultimately pregnancy and abortion are a woman’s issue. Had I been asked, I would have liked to say that it does affect me, equally. There is no denying that my body does not change because of pregnancy however, I am in it just as much as she is. When we give up a child, if a couple loses a child or, when they choose to keep it, both parents are involved. That is parenting. The experience is shared. To say that the man has little role to play in it essentially supports the old, patriarchal assumptions about men, that is that they are irresponsible, absent and incapable of knowing, feeling and helping a child to grow. By continuing to deny men a voice, the roles are maintained. It’s as though there is an assumption that men could pick up and go whenever they choose, but why would we in the long run, any more than a woman would abandon her children? To deny us a voice in the situation implies that we have no role in nurturing, that we don’t necessarily care for our children and our families. That is not true, at all, and to think that way is to perpetuate a stereotype that is destructive for all.
I would like to be heard. I would like to know that my opinion was equally important, that the decision to terminate a pregnancy was not made exclusively because of the mother's wishes, but because the father of the child also did not want the child. And, if he did want the child when the mother did not, that this would be considered to be equally important. If we are not invited to be responsible in our choices, what would motivate us to be so, apart from our own integrity. If we were called to participate in the situation, to speak, to carry, to feed and nurture and support the pregnancy or the termination of it, we would be given the moral responsibility needed to make a good choice for ourselves, for the mother, for the baby and for the community. Instead, we are not asked and in the greater picture, it seems as though we are seen as oppressors if we oppose the woman's wishes. What about our wishes and our desires and our dreams and our readiness? If a woman wants an equal partner then that partner should have an equal voice. ... being a man ... carries its burden and its responsibility and it too has its wishes and its needs.
The idea or sensation that an abortion is a fact of special importance — a 'great event' — seems to be the only one endowed with the power to affect our actions: it is the one conviction that truly contributes to avoiding the repetition of abortions.

(Zoja, 1997, p.25)
The cherry blossom tree outside my window is about to explode in confettied bloom. The new leaves I see on its branches look at first glance brown, but there is something more hopeful about them than the crinkled leaves of fall, a soft pink glow emanates from within them today, hinting at things yet to come. The tip of each long-fingered branch is berried with pink bead clusters preparing to burst into rose and white petals, crowning the avenues for a few short weeks, before raining the most delicate petal-rain onto the sidewalks below. I am struck by how different this pink is from the fleshed pink I have been trying to articulate, the placenta pink I placed in the bottom of the tofu bucket last year. It was heavy and still. It spoke of awe, mourning and letting go but that was more than a long year past already. Today’s pink is cheery, it suits the Easter-green grass on the ground, and yellow daffodil dresses shooting up through the earth. Today’s pink is playful and sways gently in the warm breeze. It reminds me of carnivals, cotton candy and childhood delights. It is the excited pink I feel inside, the eager possibility of another season unfolding.
it becomes you
This story does not presume an abortion is over once the blood dries up. It aims to see abortion in
and over time, in the course of a life, courrir - to run, curriculum. As Celeste Snowber has said,
not so much about the movement of running, but about the stillness that comes from rhythm, the
not-paradox of inward calm from outward mobility, as in walking, as in life from death.
Curriculum in the sense that this work runs the course of a life, reveals the growth that emerges
over time, the unsteady movement, the lesson that must be entered and reentered, what must be
continually examined. Writing as the rhythm to come back to like a beach visited through
childhood, something known over time, like the old potter recognizing the swallows that return
each year to the nest he built for them. I feel myself standing at the edge of an ocean where the tide
is washing up on shore. Pant legs rolled up, bare toes wiggling in the sand as I wait for the next
wave to reach me. Not leaving after the first, remaining there, waiting to feel it again and again,
relive its nuances, feel the shape of the sand shifting beneath me. Stillness from movement. This
story is not about entering a phenomenon once, then leaving it for another. It is about dwelling,
about standing still in order to feel the motion under foot. It is about re-entering the experience to
know it differently, to know how the sun casts a different shadow on the thing at different times of
the day and through the year. This story aims not just to tell abortion, but to stay with it, to come to
know it again and again through time and shadows, and the shifting seasons of me.
I knew I wanted to... show what the ever-changing process of reflecting upon our lives entails, how coming into knowledge about who we are and why we have become who we are is a messy, ongoing, shape-shifting process... I wanted to contribute an account of how I used reading and writing to heal myself and how others might do this too. I knew nothing of this until I wrote it down.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.116)
Thinking about the third *Killing Us Softly* film I saw last week, remembering how the images shocked me, how scared Kim and I were to walk home that night, and the conversation that Angel and I shared afterwards about how the film instilled fear in us. She was so annoyed that the documentaries are still being produced. She asked provoking questions about how it helps, and urged me to consider how those images construct the world we live in. She asserted it is our responsibility as educators and artists to produce alternative images, images that elicit positive change, images that model something to move toward. She was bold in her assertion that we each have the power to create our own realities through the thoughts we hold, and I will never forget the dramatic story she shared to illustrate her point, about a woman halting her own rape. When I noticed myself re-telling the story to another friend a few days later, I recognized how a positive story gets around, how it digs into us, how we carry and spread it like wildflowers in the wind. It reminded me what an important contribution my own story could make. How it might help the people who read it to feel less alone, how the words might be a companion, someone walking along side them in the same fenced field. How the work might hold a space for them, model permission, invite them to explore and make meaning of their own experience. How it might offer an alternative to the stories they have heard hushed around their lives, model a way of proceeding through abortion. How it might enable them to see that theirs was also a birth, empowering as well as ambiguous, a divined opportunity, a chance to become.
Abortion here, is not to be taken at all literally; it is the metaphor of an act of destruction which the woman has to direct, again metaphorically, against her own regressive behaviour, her dependence, her infantile expectation that others will solve her problems, and that all she has to do is follow the paths others have laid down before her. She needed to take possession of the energies typical of Artemis; to learn to be active, and to exercise a faculty for separating, cutting and abandoning things; to acquire an attitude free of infantile needs.

(Zoja, 1997, p.100)
...the many scenes of eating in Ulysses foreground the relationship between food and language, and between digestive processes and mourning.

Erin Soros

in the dream i am eating a baby sandwich, its tiny arms and legs jutted out and flailing from between two slices of white bread

i am sister somehow to stone, enormous and grey with the air of mythology about me, fingers the size of tree trunks erupting from the earth of palm

raising the sandwich to the compassionate cavern of my mouth, i am charmed by the baby’s unnecessary fear

coo there there my child

deb
dian

these two bites are what must be done, my ingestion a tender act of love
And writing permits us to use our writing as a form of public testimony in a way that the private act of therapy doesn’t.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.41)
I have been thinking about the red canoe dream I had before the abortion. Its speed on the river, carving itself tilted onto shore, its belly filling with earth, the farmer's head emerging though the gathered dirt, announcing that everything was going to be all right. The images tease and unsettle me now, tempt me to understand the meaning that eluded me then, but I hesitate. I don't want to discover that the dream might have been telling me something other than what I chose to do. I don't want to challenge the part of me that believes the abortion was divinely delivered, an opportunity to take hold of myself, to learn trust, to come to voice, to be born. That part of me wants to be sure, wants to affirm that after all this time, I am still sure. To announce that abortion can be a profound and rooting experience, that it can open you and help you become. But there is another part of me that knows the pendulum will never stop swinging. I began this writing journey believing that it might lead me to a clear and certain place, a kind of arriving. But I feel something else settling into me now, something older perhaps, less schooled. Or maybe I am settling into it. I have come to accept that for the rest of my life I will continue to shift my understanding of why I aborted, and what my choice delivered. The deceptively singular choice will grow on in me, shifting and forming and receding through the seasons, as I do. Somehow the choice inhabits me, like something swallowed that is absorbed in your blood and being over time, and becomes you. Like the scars our skin wears and the body's memory of what came before.
...Now I don't know. Now, I think maybe you never get over anything, you just find a way of carrying it as gently as possible.

(Wallace, 1990, p.13)
For weeks I have been wondering whether this work is about telling abortion, or about coming to writing through telling abortion. In our conversation yesterday Angel offered that what I am exploring is a process, a way of proceeding through abortion. She helped me recognize that this work is not about one or the other, but both simultaneously. Abortion and coming to writing, contained within each other like a child and its mother’s womb, inseparable. And yet as I write that last word, I recognize the falseness of the bound metaphor. Mother and child are separable, that is the point of this story.

Maybe the ambition of an unbreakable bond between mother and child is a falsehood, the trap that so many women are aborting. I do not want to participate in this notion of inseparability, the cultural discourse that tells women they will love their children through sleeplessness and temper tantrums. That when they become mothers they will find in themselves an endless well of patience and forgiveness, that they will somehow be able to give all of themselves, all of the time, without resentment. That this burden will fulfill them, be their honour and greatest accomplishment, that they will forgo their lives willingly, never begrudgingly, or ungracefully. I can feel the metaphor swirling about my ankles now, slinking up close and threatening to entangle, wrapping itself around my life and pulling tight. I want my work to negate this legacy. Want the abortion and writing to exist apart from each other, linked but autonomous. The mother and child do separate after all, their cord is eventually cut.
...there are many... women who feel an impelling need to distance themselves from an ancient, devouring, all-powerful maternal archetype, and who thus indirectly seek the extreme initiation that lies in killing, which is to say in abortion. When a woman takes such a step without hiding from herself, or indeed from others, and if she refuses to treat it as a simple question of choosing the lesser of two evils, but rather – and as consciously as possible – as a great and difficult event, it may possibly reveal an initiatory quality. In the ‘no’ to a child, one may also hear a ‘yes’ to oneself.

(Zoja, 1997, p.139)
beyond intelligibility
I was pregnant with history, with ghosts, yet I never told the women who haunted me. I kept it secret from them, or at least I did not tell the one remaining alive. To make my choice...I needed to distinguish my history from my mother's and grandmother's, separate what I desired from what I felt compelled by them – or by their ghosts – to do.

(Soros, 1998, p.10)
In the first few weeks of my pregnancy, when I knew that I would not keep the child, I felt delightfully invaded by a profound and easy sense of calm. I was pleased to discover that my body could create and carry a child, and proud to find myself attending to my body’s needs before the needs of others; eating well, sleeping enough, and simplifying life. It felt as though I had unhinged a trap door to a previously unknown ancestry of wisdom within me, a long line of women whose collective knowledge was now suddenly available to me, though it had been there all along. Daily choices became suddenly clear and easy to make. I was filled with a kind of seeing I had not experienced before, as if what was truly important raised itself up and out of the clutter of days, revealing itself to me like a castle carved from the taken-away sand.

But I had not yet learned to trust that calm. Given that I detected my pregnancy early I chose to consider all the options before me. The trouble was that after; digesting the available literature, listening to the few women’s stories on hand, several trips to the library, many evenings of research, multiple clinic visits and counselling appointments, a series of long conversations with Matthew and each of my closest friends, debating politics, considering my faith, envisioning single parenthood, and innumerable attempts to determine the state of our relationship, no clear option rose up to greet me. Instead, all I could discern were globs of trampled sand, the amorphous remains of a beach-castle once the tide has rushed in.
Nothing seemed clear anymore. The calm that inhabited me earlier was replaced with confusion and doubt. When I began considering that I might keep the child I became anxious, stopped sleeping well, and could not concentrate. I knew more but was certain of less, and time was running out. The procedure that seemed the most respectful and least invasive could only be performed up to the seventh week of pregnancy. I needed to decide quickly.

Then one day I realized my search for a logical answer had led me astray from myself, and what my body knew. I had set the point of reference outside myself, begun valuing other people's experiences and opinions more than my own, was attempting to map a future I could not predict. Given that I had already tried everything I knew how to do in order to decide and there was still no clear answer before me, I determined to place my faith in my body instead, to abide by the choice that instilled the most calm in me, to trust the clarity of no and the anxiety of yes, without needing to know why. That is when my decision to abort finally became clear, when I accepted that my own body could guide me, that my body had in fact been guiding me all along.
You have only what your own body tells you and only your own experience from which to make judgments. You may have misunderstood; you may be wrong. Teach me, is what you should say, and, I am listening. Approach the world as a child seeing it for the first time. Remember wonder. In a word: humility. Then things come to you as they did not when you thought you knew.

(Butala, 1994, p.129)
Unhinged

I am pregnant

I know this without knowing how I know

Recognition is a tide rising in me
It swells beneath sinew and syntax
and wakes me in the morning

The way a tower knows its bells

I know because the love we made that day was so beautiful

Mental calculations come later
crude and clumsy, always secondary

The way a drill can go on excavating an empty well;

my period is three days late
I was mid-cycle then

Knowing is the subtle difference
between speculation and explanation

Centuries of forgetting, the silences of burnt flesh
propel me to the drugstore;

a small child in oversized boots
scurrying to catch up, to confirm
what is already known
Its vector and velocity is desire leaning into the unknowable individuality of things; poetry is the artifact of this desire. Around everything is an epidermis of narrative, ... by which the world is rendered intelligible. Poetry's fundamental appetite is ecstatic; its curiosity yearns beyond this barrier of intelligibility to know the withinness of things. The knowledge poetry seeks is the most intimate, the names it aspires to utter those which its subjects, the deer, dogwood, new moon, would intone if they stood to sing. Poetry is consciousness dreaming of domicile at the core of the foreign world, the mind deeply homesick and scheming return, the tongue contorting itself toward uttering what such a return might be like. It is mind remembering the old world of the Garden, what it was there to be rarefied, translucent flesh, flesh so fine in was intelligence; being as self-consciousnesss; an emanation of reaching eros like stones, petals, fronds, but thinking, thought like a plume or rack of light. The lit tip of what is, life adorned with the plumage of awareness, mind as display, flesh spreading an invisible tail and strutting in the soft humid place of beginning: poetry remembers.

(Lilburn, 1999, p.6)
Maybe knowing is the wrong verb entirely. Maybe what is meant by understanding is encountering, being in connection with, a communion with things.
When the last change is made I will sit by the blank paper, listening.

(Pick, 2003, p.32)
broad bloodline
For Mother's Day I took a friend who has single-handedly raised a now eighteen year old son, to the beach for a picnic. As we reclined against a driftwood log together she asked; *how is the day for you?* The sound of my fingers trailing gently through the loose sand, my most honest reply.
...Scar tissue develops when damage heals. Healing, however, does not mean a return to the original state. A scar signifies that a transformation has taken place...Scars are evidence of pain and vulnerability, but also of the capacity to go on...Scars have the power to bind together what has come apart....Scar tissue is lasting evidence of a past hurt, yet it also signifies healing and renewal. Marks of vulnerability are also proof of strength and resilience. And loss of innocence is traded for wisdom and experience. Scar tissue is all of these things at once, indelibly adding to who we are.

(Okerlund, 2005, p.5)
trying to write just now about the river, the day we set Zoe free, back to the mystery, the place from
whence she came. the rain, the folding, the silence between us. running along-side the tumbling
coffin like anxious children, like the parents that we were, witnessing our child’s first ride. tears
because i cannot find the words to express all that happened there. then i remember the poem rose
sent last year, about her and carl burying their own embryo, their saying goodbye. i want her to
show me the way, to have been here before me. i look through my so many files, papers i have
gathered, order i have tried to impose as if insisting that something clear, tangible, and certain
would emerge from this. something to make my choice worth while, to justify and pay my debt, but
i cannot find what i am looking for. all these months, nearly a year and a half already, i have felt it
here with me, tucked away but retrievable. now that i am in need, i cannot find it. i panic that this
link, this only voice is suddenly absent from me, as if the chord that binds us were weakening.
eventually i discover that what i have been looking for has been in my hands the whole time. i
slump into a chair and blanket her words around me, lingering in the honour and reverence she
carves out for me, her way of preceding through the experience with faith, tenderness, and tears.
her words are a bloodline, at once holding and ushering me into a broad and nearly forgotten
knowing, a tender hand in mine, gazing into the vastness of what we once were, and what we still,
as women, can be. her words reach deep into me, find the places that never left, what i carry with
me always and still. welcome me into this hushed circle, this world of mothers for-a-while.
Here we find ourselves at the heart of that historical and cultural contradiction which often crushes women. On the one hand there is the weight of a deeply rooted and ingrained teaching which has almost become second nature for women [motherhood]. On the other hand there is the vague and uncertain perception of the power that was once linked to their reproductive body. In some subterranean fold, in some area that is more obscure and difficult to reach through reason, the distant recollection of that one ancient, triumphant power might still be silently lurking.

(Maraine, 2000, p.12)
Matthew Day five:

-Speaking about the story of the abortion opened it up and allowed me to address it at last.

-It seems that in writing about it, telling about it and re-visiting it, the story is not so raw and so hurt and so disturbed and buried. Now I can feel it in my body.

-I have been the father of this aborted child.
Memory. Mixed and multifarious, folding itself down, down, for the journey. Story is memory rendered portable. Your memory, or many like yours. Unfold it like a tent. It can shelter a world.

(MacDonald, 2003, p.707)
The foetus dreams
wind fills its skin-bag,
lifts it out and up

an ocular o

round and clear
as a bubble blown
from a child's ring.

The earth shrinks
to a speck of dust
under a new-formed nail.
Stars like fireflies
catch in its fine
black hair.

(Crozier, 1985, p.22)
words breaking
I want to reveal the messy conditions of this work’s stuttered birth. The short sharp bursts that have been this act of creation, the grunts and readjustments it has required, the fallacy of one smooth, sustained gesture. I want to expose the lulls, the times when nothing happens and nothing can be done to soothe the pain, the necessary patience of dilation, the staggered contractions, and gentle breathing between. There are moments that take my breath completely away; the shock and sudden gush of words breaking, an other’s asserted presence, the humility of learning to succumb. Splaying myself open to this force tearing through me, the screaming and loosing patience, pushing at the boundaries of what I know myself to be. And I have not been alone, this too must be said. There have been many hands encouraging me along the way, unknotting my muscled back, expressing faith in what I could not yet see, positioning themselves to hold well what will come.

When the work is finally birthed, when the hands in the room can at long last hold the nurtured mystery, we will gaze deeply into it and see for the first time its full form. And though we will be filled with a kind of recognition, an affirmation of what we felt emerging all along, there will also be separation. We will stand apart even as we hold it in our arms, and see what more it has become. In time it will run free, stumble and fall, make its mark, while we stand humbly by and watch the delivered life carry itself on.
We are not born all at once, but my bits. The body first, and the spirit later... Our mothers are raked with the pains of our physical birth; we ourselves suffer the longer pains of our spiritual growth.

(Antin in Wells, 1997, p.viii)
Anne noticed yesterday that the focus of my work has shifted from abortion to birth, without she added, the crucial stage of pregnancy. Her observation concerned me until I realized that the time I have already spent writing, has been my pregnancy. I have nurtured this work a long while already, and now I want it to emerge. I am tired of carrying this storied weight, the strain it exerts on my back, and how it limits my mobility. No longer content to feel its shifts and kicks, I want to meet this creature nestled within me, to see its formed face, hold it separate in my arms, and share it with the people gathered round. I want to get on with the rest of my life, to be less occupied with this one precious thing. I want to be in the world with what I have created and help it grow into itself, as I continue to grow at its side. But these assertions make me panic, force me to realize there is work yet to be done. There are bags and bags of gathered words piled in corners. I need to go through them still and decide what fits, what to give away. Sorting feels suddenly urgent.
...one cannot talk about abortion without talking about motherhood. They are linked to each other like two Siamese twins: one facing the sun, the other in the shadow of the same heavenly body orbiting in the female universe.

(Maraine, 2000, p.10)
You need to plan a Blessing Way for yourself. Gather friends, family and supporters on a ribboned afternoon to mark this passage you are entering, this passage you have already entered. Unwrap their gifts of words celebrating you and the voice you are carrying, this offering you will soon deliver. Believe them when they tell you you are ready, you have always been ready. Let their words be the thing that showers you. Trust them when they say you will get through the difficult times, that you will draw on the resources within you, the resource you already are. Receive their faith in you, then stand boldly before them and affirm the capacity you hold within, to tell.
I don’t “begin” by “writing”: I don’t write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. …I go where the “fundamental language” is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things, acts, and beings translate themselves… I enter into myself with my eyes closed, and you can read it. This reading is performed here, by the being-who-wants-to-be-born, by an urge, something that wants at all costs to come out, to be exhaled, a music in my throat that wants to resound, a need of the flesh then, that seizes my trachea, a force that contracts the muscles of my womb and stretches my diaphragm as if I were going to give birth through my throat…

(Cixous, 1991, p.52)
Step up, and into the circle. Know your own strength, your deep capacity to feel, the swampy birthplace of all creation, she said. Writing is what everything in your life is conspiring toward. Practice believing people who tell you they like what you have written, that you inspire them, that your story matters. Work with these contractions. Find some marrow to lever yourself against, push with your newly formed heel. Form yourself into a sliding position, then squeeze your way through the darkness toward the opening light. Untwist yourself from the cord that has given you life, but now threatens to entangle. The time has come for you to breathe on your own, to feel your tiny lungs flutter and fill, attuning to air. Suckle at the cold you find there. It is yours.
brought forth
Last week I told Kathy and Teresa my story about finding the embryo. It was our last day of summer school, and after our classrooms were finally cleaned we decided to celebrate by going out for dinner at a nearby restaurant. We had been talking for hours already. I offered it because they had each shown such trust and vulnerability, sharing hard stories about their respective sister’s drug addictions, the confusion they live with about how to be supportive toward them. Kathy’s sister told her that she miscarried triplets and found the foetuses. Given her sister’s history of deception and exaggeration, Kathy wanted to know if we thought it was possible to find such small corpses. Teresa offered a definitive, and unhesitant no. I stayed quiet. Found myself rubbing a piece of melted cheese in circles on the table with the tip of my umbrella straw. Lost in its looping trail of grease, I wondered whether to share my story, take the familiar risk with these new friends. Just as Kathy was about to close the subject, satisfied that her sister must have been either delusional or lying, I began to speak.

I told them about the procedure I chose for my abortion, the yellow shot in the arm, the pills a few days later. Emphasised how I was able to choose the time and place, who to surround myself with, perform whatever ceremony I needed. I told them about my long phone call with Rose, how she advised me to catch the foetus, how mild the pain was, how I woke up needing to pee but forgot the strainer.
I described hearing the heavy plop in the toilet, the strange knowing I was filled with. Rolling up my cuff, plunging my arm in the cold clear water, rescuing the mass of blood and tissue there. How unlike anything else this was, how I let Matthew sleep, how strange it was to place what I found in an empty tofu bucket, and go back to bed. I explained how in the morning Matthew and I were not sure if I had bled enough, not certain if the miscarriage had been successful, the way we struggled with those words, how I wanted to avoid taking more medication, how I began looking through the pile of glistening flesh to see what we could find. I did not describe the uterine lining or how it dangled, but I told them about the clot I found. Told them, emphasizing the word gently, how I rolled it between my fingers, how the clot split quietly open, the single grain of rice that emerged, the silence between us.

Suddenly aware of the story’s intensity, I tried lightning the mood by telling them about our visit to the Planned Parenthood clinic. How we got lost in the hospital and ended up temporarily in the wrong waiting room, the TIME magazine we felt so lucky to find there with its photographs documenting foetal development. I told them about the pamphlet we found stapled inside, made sure to warn them about the clinics that pretend to offer support but shame women for what they are considering, send them home with adoption papers and a teddy bear instead. I laughed at myself then, at how the educator is always present in me, but I also
recognized at the same time how educational this story is, how my life is the lesson here, how my impulse to tell is rooted in a deep-seated desire to help others learn.

Taking cues from Kathy and Teresa’s still rapt attention, I continued the story of our foetus on my fingertip that early Valentine’s Day morning. Described my amazement at how such a tiny thing could have affected so much change in me, the irony of the thought as it laid curled within the swirls of my fingerprint, its limp shape etching itself forever onto mine. Finally I told them about the magnifying glass we borrowed, the river of white spinal spots we glimpsed.

When I was done, Teresa confided in us that she too has had an abortion, two abortions in fact. I was honoured by her trust, but the presence of her story did not surprise me. I have become accustomed to this echo, discovering that wherever I tell this story there is almost always another that rises to greet it.

Kathy asked each of us then, if we had ever felt any stigma for the choices we made. Teresa told us about the staged graveyard in the empty lots next to the clinic she attended for her procedures. In a time before buffer laws, the lawns she needed to walk past were riddled with accusations of murderer, tiny graves for all the babies that died there. I answered with my own shock about the
bullet-proof glass separating me from the receptionist at the clinic I went to, so offensive to have to
slide my health card through the tiny ticket-vendor slot above the counter. How the door to the
procedure and counselling rooms was a solid hunk of steel without handle, a dungeon of a door that
could only be opened from the inside. As I write, I am suddenly aware of how vulnerable I was in
that waiting room. Anyone could have entered, there were no safety measures in place to protect
the men and women waiting in those stiff-backed chairs for their names to be called, no bullet-
proof glass to protect us from unwanted visitors.

I become suddenly aware then, that throughout my long and detailed story Kathy and Teresa’s
faces remained fixed, their listening bodies leaning evermore into my offered words. That is when
it occurred to me that this story is always met with the same rapt attention. I never intend to
occupy as much time telling it as I do, but once begun the story seems to take hold of both me, and
my listeners. The words flow as if propelled by some other force, and listeners still to receive them
as if the story were quenching some long parched thing.
If we allow ourselves to spend sufficient time writing, we eventually find the right details, discover the appropriate phrase, and so our searching ends. We symbolically resolve the searching and the yearning stages of the mourning process into a "finding and having" stage- a symbolic resolution. In this way, we recover the person or the self we’ve lost.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.56)
Lingering in our September garden just now, surprised to find green beans still lengthening on their
stocks. Gathering them in my cupped palms is a tender caring. Returning to the garden that bore
so many hopes for Matthew and I earlier in spring, when talk of marriage and babies was what we
were turning with the soil. Such a disappointment later in summer, to watch ourselves grow
neglectful; seldom weeding, only discovering the zucchini, a plump strawberry or two once they
were fully grown. By the time we noticed the dill pickles, eggplant and kale, they were already
dead or consumed by aphids. I felt such shame uprooting those plants. Each limp stem an infested
reminder of our not taking care, of letting something else between us die. Our un-harvested garden,
the clotted after-earth of abortion.

Today felt like a chance to make amends. Humbled and grateful that the earth would be so
generous toward us still, that those plants would offer such elegant and firm green beans this late in
the season, that they let go of their stocks so easily when I tugged. And then to discover a patch of
green onion bulbs, their white fullness bursting up through the ground where only a few months
ago, small white worms infested their roots. Hope in our forgotten garden.

I feel a sadness now that wants to come forth, like the storm of tears that found me curled in a
dark corner of my apartment a few days after the abortion. I did not feel sad exactly, or
understand why I was crying. I just knew there was something that needed to make its way out. I want to call Matthew at work this instant and share the news as if it were our child’s first steps.

‘Honey, I found nine onion bulbs in the garden today, gathered two generous handfuls of green beans. I am going to care for them well, not let their lives, their coming, be wasted’.

I bathe them one by one then set them on the counter by the window, to dry in the sun. I intend to create the most perfect soup, an uncluttered broth in which to savour today’s salvaged flavours, stirring apology and forgiveness into each steeped spoonful. I want to do good by these vegetables, to make up somehow for forgetting about them, to make right all that I have not done, for letting the aphids multiply and having to uproot so much. The soup is an attempt to be reverent toward their offered lives, to make amends somehow with all our stilted gardens.

Yesterday as I walked, the hint of red leaking into September leaves overhead reminded me that our child would be nearly a year old by now. And I nearly wept for the interrupted sleeps we have missed. Aware that any parent who has actually experienced the sleeplessness would laugh at my nostalgia, but alone on the sidewalk without stroller to push, I could not help but consider how intimate, how precious those midnight feedings must be. The way a parent can forgive their child as soon as they see its tiny body wrapped in sleep, the way it needs you.
And though I have heard myself say recently that Matthew and I are only living a habit, a familiar comfort we have gotten used to, today as I worked in the garden I felt something else ripen in me. Seeing my hands in the dirt again, smelling its generosity, reacquainting myself with its possibilities, I felt I was unearthing what we used to have, what we once shared, Matthew and I, before the aphids and forgetting. But I am not sure if my sadness is for what once seemed possible and is no longer, or if it is for my forgetting, the way I did not care for the garden of us. Love I am beginning to see, is like the new Sweet Pea petals I find fluttering on the stems that were picked bare last week; the act of harvesting brings more forth.

Today in the garden I found myself wanting to talk to my far-away married friend as I did last year. Wanting to hear her advocate union, have her remind me of its value, the courage it takes, and what it can offer. Somehow I found the possibility of us again, in the dirt and beans and onion bulbs. While also wondering if any couple ever heals, or stays together after their abortion. Recognizing that we might simply remind each other too much of what we lost, of the wilted stem we gave away.
Ultimately, then, writing about difficulties enables us to discover the wholeness of things, the connectedness of human experience. We understand that our greatest shocks do not separate us from humankind. Instead, through expressing ourselves, we establish our connection with others and with the world.

(DeSalvo, 2000, p.43)
bloom
there was also
a single pink disk lying
at the bottom of the tofu bucket

a limp pink medallion
the colour of new skin
under a fallen scab

the size of two stacked coins

an orphaned mass
speckled white and swollen
like infection in the throat
but smooth
a thick lozenge of flesh
no longer feeding

the disk barely begun
droops heavy through my fingers
like silk in your hands

the soft-ball stage of warm candy

a pink
less sweet than cherry
less summer afternoon

an abbreviated organ, decidedly un-rosy
with halted bellows
...The dead go on talking with their long tongues and slow words...

...Handle with care,
the dead have always written with their invisible ink. _Fragile_.
Then they deliver us back to ourselves in slow blooming seasons.

(Goyette, 2004, p.82)
These stories we hold are precious things — lapis jewels in the fleshted palm of experience.
How is one to speak with the dead?"

...Remember, the dead
are hearing-impaired – she will need you
to choke through the clot in your throat,
speak up. Clearly. She’s busy....
we find ourselves off the trail
the air grey and heavy with rain
spruce and cedar droop, more lush
river swells beside us
the unrelenting thrash and surge of spring run-off
casts a shroud of silence ushering us
into this mossed landscape
of loss
we have come to mark the crash
of this flesh and stillness, to release ourselves of it
this life unbidden
we choose you river
to swallow our loss, to cast your un-accusing eyes upon us
you will not blame us, you will not understand either
but you know what to do
you know how to turn a glacier's seasonal drip
imperceptible on the mountain top, into a roar in the valley below
lend us your tongue
speak for us the language of letting go
can you smell the birch bark
the blood seeped in, the tentative love between us
see how tenderly our hands shape the photographs
into box and lid
all edges aligned, creases double bent
each fold a prayer
notice how delicately the box is lined
curled birch bark from end to end as if it were a scroll
lingering in this folded offering
these careful gestures speaking
what we yet cannot

witness our communion of printed words
sodden and laid bare against the grey of stone, then placed
quiet piece upon quiet peace
a shawl of poetry embalms the life released

setting the box loose
on silver slanted eddy
see it lace the surface of the water
a stuttered moment loosens the heart
before sinking into the froth and swirl

our feet keep pace
with the rush and tumble flow
escorting this flutter of a child as it spins
here then away in invisible currents
bobs swiftly into view then slips
unexpectedly back under

halts our breath each time
leaves us staring, strangely hopeful
for it to rise again
An abortion is an acceptance of death, an acceptance which demands opening myself to life – to the
death that gives it and the death that it gives. An abortion is the gift of life.

(Soros, 1998, p.27)
I feel an end rising in me, sense this guarded life grown enough now, to enter the world.
the blind bird sees
...I spoke to the thing wavering in my mouth,
...out of skin and into speaking, a
staining....

(Lilburn, 2003, p.33)
October rain is falling on the quiet streets beyond the windowpane. Matthew and I have been nestled together under the skylight, listening to the soft sounds land on the bubbled glass overhead. We made beautiful love this morning. The mood rising in each of us like two flowers growing steadily toward the same desired light. I have loved him so easily this week. Smiling when he enters a room I am in, unable to resist caressing the exposed flesh at the back of his neck.

Something has shifted since that day in the garden. Harvesting those onion bulbs and green beans, opened me. I suddenly find myself trusting that there is something here, something precious I am close to finding, something I both want and need. The joy of opening to another perhaps, or the communion of souls that life on earth is. I do not need to know, am simply content to receive this welcomed drink from the well.

I have been afraid that finishing this story would end our relationship. That the coming to self and voice this writing has delivered, would shatter the cramped space between us, make me intolerant of the shrinking we have grown accustomed to. But instead, writing has widened the space we share, propelled each of us toward larger and fuller versions of ourselves, strengthening our connection as we stretch together past the boundaries of what limited us before.
I can feel something being released in me. Can feel it ebb past my feet and loosen the sand, enabling me to settle a little deeper into this offered shore. It might be faith, a not-knowing that I trust, a ghost hovering gently near, in the night.

A year and a half ago I set out to crack open a space in the abortion dialogue, to create a container in which the mixed-up foggy mud of this lived experience could be heard. Instead, or perhaps simultaneously, I am the one being cracked open. The space that is widening, is within me. There was something in my way before, a voice nestled deep inside, occupying me, waiting to be born. Until it emerged, there was not enough room for anything else to grow alongside it. I needed to expel the thing first, to make room enough for this love in me. Writing not as birth, but as a tender exorcism; a careful gardener weeding her only soil.
Still, there are signs, there are visions of what woman’s writing might look like. Here’s one I particularly like, Helene Cixous’s description of “a feminine textual body” as always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we’ve learned to read books that basically pose the word “end”. But this one doesn’t finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void... A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over.

(Cixous in Mairs, 1994, p.85)
In the dream, instead of receiving the world's light, golden syrup poured into me from above, I was charged with holding it up. The fully-formed, shining sphere was balanced on my outstretched arms, the weight of it pressing on my chest, up-curled palms on either end holding it in its rightful place. A delightful responsibility; the world trusting me, believing that I would know what to do, and that I could, recognition of my growing capacity to hold.
And as I’ve said, writing is writing down, and what is written down is a score for voice, and what the voice most often does ... is tell... Something unfurls, something reveals itself. The crooked is made straight, or, the age being what it is, possibly more crooked; at any rate there’s a path... The voice moves through time, from one event to another, or from one perception to another, and things change.

(Atwood, 2002, p.158)
The dark time is nearly upon us. The air turning crisp, flowers lacking, and already the sound of fallen leaves under foot as I walk. It is time to turn the soil, say goodbye to what was, and was not in this waning season. Time to go inside, to hang orange slices in the kitchen window, disks of translucent light to guide us through the darkening. I must hurry and finish what I have begun. The dark will wrap itself around me, insist I become occupied with welcoming the night.

These last few weeks have been difficult. I realized late in the month that last year at this time, had we chosen differently, had I chosen differently, we would have been giving birth to our first child. I can almost feel her here, fingers paused over keys, circular motions of touch, hovering. Where is she I wonder. Matthew and I need to have a naming ceremony, need to lay her to rest for another season. Bury her in the garden to grow up through the earth, to be harvested in other ways. Move on and on the seasons say, yet always she remains, in the flesh.
...To come full circle
...is to return on this path,
where blooms are tended each day, with
neither gravestone nor urn to talk to
about the hole in me where the wind
whistles through, where I know
exactly what I'm missing.

(MacDonald, 2000, p.44)
ninety nine versions of reason on the wall

because we weren’t sure we loved each other
or rather i wasn’t sure i loved him

because a life suddenly there between us
seemed a terrible reason to stay together
an unfair beginning to us all

because after three weeks
when the doctor finally lent her official diagnosis to my knowing
i couldn’t, even then sitting quiet and creek-side that january day
welcome the body budding within mine
couldn’t address the nascent thing
for fear that my speaking would bind me
my acknowledgement, a promise of life

i thought about my mother
how unfulfilled and frustrated her life has seemed
of the insight i once heard -
*the largest determinant of a child’s ability to fulfill its dreams*
*is the degree to which its parents were able to fulfill their own*
because that man, that life fluttering between us then
was not yet my dream

i wanted to write
to ready this womb with words, widen the passage
say yes to myself before saying yes to another
because it seemed imperative to establish a practice first
a familiar rhythm to lull me through the long nights of feeding
a light in the dark field to draw me home

because in my dream the red canoe was beached and filled with earth
but all these speakable reasons are suspect
their very utterability questionable

the quieter truth was the calm i felt inhabiting me
when at first i knew we wouldn’t keep the child
a calm that all the appointments, pamphlets and talks eroded

what politics cannot encompass

the calm before reason, the only bearing i took from within
my own body of knowledge being mapped

because

you have learned to trust yourself she said
when i finished the story
In it [Hebert's poem], a dreaming child – a girl, “amazed, barely born” – goes down into a tomb, through an underground labyrinth, carrying her heart on her fist in the form of a blind falcon. Down there she finds the dead kings; she also find their stories, “a few patiently-wrought tragedies” which now appear as jewelled works of art. An exchange takes place – a vampiristic ritual in which the dead drink the living, and try to kill her. She shakes the dead away and frees herself; but as a result of whatever it is that has gone on, her heart – the blind bird – shows signs of being able to see.

(Hebert in Atwood, 2002, p.177)
Today is a mild November day, windless yet the fiery leaves of the cherry blossom tree outside my window are falling faster than I can count. I try to absorb, to take inspiration from the grace of their letting go; how willing they seem to fall, the way each leaf traces a different trajectory down to the earth. The ground and sidewalk below are enlivened by the gold, ember and auburn leaves curled in at their dying edges, a splintered sunset spilled on the concrete, the unrelenting gift of seasons. As more and more leaves drift and twirl themselves down to the sidewalk below, the tree’s branchy skeleton becomes more fully exposed. My gaze shifts from the yielding leaves to the tree’s grey and puckered limbs. Through their bareness I suddenly discover that over the summer, part of the wisteria bush that normally grows on the arbour beneath the tree, has attached itself and grown up along one of the cherry blossom’s low-lying branches. The determined and vibrant wisteria shoot is very much still alive and stands out against the now wintering tree. It has in fact furled up and around an entire lower section of the tree’s branches. I am transfixed by the sight, fascinated by the way the wisteria has braided itself onto the other, by the way the acquiescing leaves reveal it. I continue to stare, waiting for what I sense to come into clearer focus. Then all at once I see, as if my vision were suddenly capable of something more, that these twisted-together lives are reflecting back at me all I have come to know through the swaying seasons of this abortion journey; the unexpected flash of green to find, amid the dying.
This small, sturdy body has taken me to places I never imagined, places where Peter couldn’t follow. My soul has been driftwood in its sea. I’ve carried life in my womb, and I’ve carried death. I’ve given birth to both.

(Powning, 1991, p.7)
There is an amber glow in the room as I conclude, honey-yellow resin over the winged-moth of story.
and it comes to this

i want to spill your name, the single breath of you
on last summer’s hydrangea petals, their flame-blue
now skeletal and brown - the lacework of seasons
watch them crumble into dust under the inked weight of letters
wipe ashes of you from my fingers.

i have carried the tired weight of this remembering
for eight swaying seasons, pronounced the absence that is you
in all that waxes and wanes - what your coming delivered
driven to search your boxed remains in each craggy river
water’s instinct toward ocean too large to contain.

even the stubborn orchid petals, their still-white pointed
slipper promises, have fallen from the rugged valentine stem
rocked the wish bones - unbroken - on the sill as they tumbled
reveal layers of untouched silk beneath the tightest folds
always another skin is waiting.

i have dismantled the space, scattered spell of shrine
that has framed you, amazed at the dust i found there
smell of mould grown-in to lavender and stone. i want to
strip these tired images from the wall - this never-was that remains
let the bath water drain well around me tonight.
the garden calls me now, its eighteen soft-tipped
swords slicing up through the warming ground, fall prayers
printed on their papery bulbs – completion, communion, convergence
urge my attention away from what will never seem gone
grant me this season my love.

i want to carve a space around you, for me to breath
build a granite house where your spirit can rest, etch broad black
letters to resist memory’s gravity – zoe: jan. 1 to feb. 14, 2003
welcome the respite, the illusion of containment for a while
oblige this eagerness in my chisel.

i want to dig a hole, bundle your name thrice written
and that burnt wishbone (finally broken) in the laced remains
of last year’s cherry blossom leaves - delicate shadows will shawl your name
press the earth down tight and wipe the wind from my eye
splintered sunset to encircle the mound.
When we got to the confluence water
joined water. Both rivers glinted
like knives in our eyes and we couldn’t see
the end of the first for the new start
of the next. You in the stern,
you looked at the map
then squinted around at the landscape, the angle
of sky. Well, here we are, you said.
On the count of three we stood up in the boat
and held our oars over our heads. Their blades
dripped gold in the faltering light.
Then we sat down. We didn’t need
to turn ourselves, the current swung us
forward, around, this gone turning point,
thirty days left, we picked up
our paddles again.

(selection from Confluence by Pick, 2003, p.102)


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