The Menstrual Imaginary

and

The Butcher’s Daughter

A Thesis Presented By

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Submitted in Total Fulfilment of the Requirements of

the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(By Creative Work and Dissertation)

The School of Culture and Communication

The University of Melbourne

August 2016

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Abstract

A number of important writers and artists focus on the once taboo subject of menstruation in their work, drawing attention to the topic of women’s bleeding and the female cycle. A *menstrual imaginary* is a latent poetic source of inspiration in women writers and artists, an imaginary domain outside of language, which is drawn on through symbolism, particularly through references to blood, to eruptions of blood, and women’s cycles, as well as all procreative functions. Whilst, Julia Kristeva theorises menstruation on the side of the abject, my work alternatively seeks to rescue women’s menstruation from the patriarchal abject. Moreover, I draw on the writings of Hélène Cixous who argues for the importance of a voice of ‘milk and blood,’ although it is mostly at a subterranean level that we can find evidence for a menstrual narrative running through her work. I use Cixous as a springboard for exploring the concept of a feminine writing in *red ink*, in direct contrast to her ‘white ink,’ as well as consider the domain of woman’s ‘volcanic unconscious,’ in relation to the creation of a menstrual imaginary. Furthermore, I read important classical texts such as the stories of *Persephone and Demeter, Medusa, Oedipus and the Sphinx*, and the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, against-the-grain for a menstrual imaginary. I also survey a number of poets and writers who explicitly adopt menstrual imagery and blood to depict a menstrual imaginary. Finally, I write my own menstrual imaginary in the form of a poetry manuscript.
Declaration

This is to certify that the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other materials used. The theoretical component is 46,291 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of abstract, tables, and bibliography. The thesis includes a creative component comprised of 85 original poems, which totals 102 pages of poetry, and is equivalent to 40,000 words of prose. There are also nineteen reproductions of original artworks by various artists in the appendices.

Natalie Rose Dyer
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband and children for their love and support. Our lives together are what I cherish most of all.

I would like to thank Kevin Brophy for his excellent supervision. He is an extremely gifted poet, as well as a great source of intelligence. I have been most privileged to learn under him.

I would like to thank Barbara Creed for her excellent skill and knowledge. She is an esteemed feminist writer under whose instruction I have been privileged to learn.

I would like to thank the Great Mother Goddess, who also appears as God in this thesis, and who inspired this work.
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**Introduction**

The blood jet is poetry, there is no stopping it (Plath, 1990, p. 83).

Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds, Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois – this small number of significant women have written poetry and created artistic works about their relationship to the menstrual cycle, yet this important theme in women’s writing and art has largely been neglected. The relationship of the menstrual cycle to female subjectivity and creativity is rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated. Globally, there is still a negative taboo placed on women’s reproductive bodies and their menstrual cycle that is colloquially referred to as ‘a curse,’ and which manifests through negative attitudes towards women’s cycle as a time of potential female instability and neurosis. Menstruation is persistently treated as a potential ‘illness’ in patriarchal cultures and has come to signify heightened abject bodily fluids and potential dangers associated with women’s threatening and uncontrollable animal ‘nature.’¹ In this thesis, I will argue that it is the female poet and/or artist’s periodic journey into the transformative abyss to face her reproductive self and indeed her own animalism, which ultimately allows her to access a rich imaginary, and which she may choose to draw on in the recording of her own personal narrative at the level of the symbolic, and for the purpose of bringing about self-renewal. I set out to encourage women artists and poets to undertake this journey to explore their creativity so that this aspect of women’s experience is more widely and more explicitly recognised and celebrated.

A small number of important writers, filmmakers and artists already focus on the subject of menstruation in their work, drawing attention to the topic of women’s bleeding and the female cycle. And yet, whilst several theorists have sought to identify menstrual imagery and motifs in cultural texts, none have identified these cultural texts as contributing to the formation of what I have termed a ‘menstrual imaginary.’ A menstrual imaginary offers a source of inspiration to women writers

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1 Women and nature are frequently conflated in patriarchal culture. They are often treated as the dominated and submissive other of culture in theoretical discourse. ‘The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used. Whether created as ideological icons to justify and preserve the superiority of men or captured as servants to provide for and comfort, the connection women and animals share is present in both theory and practice’ (Gruen, 1993, p. 61).
and artists, an imaginary domain, which is drawn on through symbolism, particularly through references to blood, to eruptions of blood, and to women’s cycles, as well as to their procreative functions. I will read various significant cultural texts for evidence of a menstrual imaginary, including texts that have not previously been identified as menstrual texts. Firstly, however, I will briefly discuss the history of the menstrual taboo, particularly as it pertains to negative images of women as monsters, witches, and hysterics.

**Menstruation: Mana and Magic**

Traditional patriarchal cultures have historically sought to control women’s bodies, leading to damaging outcomes for women in all cultures. A woman’s monthly flow seems to embody a series of dichotomies: culture and nature, inside and outside, order and disorder, morality and immorality, the pure and the impure. In this sense, menstruation signifies a fault line in civilisation; it represents heightened abject waste that traces the very limits of the symbolic, the speaking being, to primal repression and the realm of the animal, all of which have historically been considered a threat to the dominant masculine order.² Thus, women have frequently been silenced on the subject of their intimate relationship to their menstrual cycle.

In *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (1976), Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth argue that it is the status of menstruation as magical, feminine and tabooed that has historically made it a fearful substance to be sanctioned against in many traditional cultures. They argue that menstruating bodies have been labelled potentially dangerous and contagious, and aligned with a spiritual substance called ‘mana’ in various traditional cultures. Menstruation is treated as a potential ‘curse’ from which men must be protected.

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² It is outside the scope of this thesis to present a detailed study of the way that menstrual taboos have historically played out and discriminated against women in various cultures of the world, as well as in some atypical cases offered women respite from work by giving them a space in which to be alone, reflect, meditate, and undertake creative activities. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth give a thorough account of the menstrual taboo in *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* and so does Karen Houppart in her more contemporary text *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*. Buckley and Gottlieb give an alternative reading of the menstrual taboo and particularly menstrual seclusion for female empowerment in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. 
If the dangerous menstruating woman is removed to a place where she can neither see nor be seen by the tribe, they will be assured of freedom from her mana as long as she is so secluded (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, pp. 8-9).

It is mana that is bound to menstrual flow that is most feared by men in various traditional cultures. In fact, across many cultures of the world menstrual blood is considered to be a pollutant and a marker of feminine otherness. It is for this reason that women have frequently been physically segregated in menstrual huts during menstruation.

In his text, *A General theory of Magic* (1902), French anthropologist, Marcel Mauss argued that because of women’s role as reproducer of the species they occupy a ‘special’ space in relation to magic. They have the ability to access ‘special powers’ and experience moments of ‘great intensity.’

They [women] are everywhere recognised as being more prone to magic than men, not so much because of their physical characteristics, but because of the social attitudes these characteristics provoke. The critical periods of their life cycle lead to bemusement and apprehension, which place them in a special position. And it is precisely at periods such as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth that a woman’s attributes reach their greatest intensity. It is usually at such times that women are supposed to provide subjects or act as agents for magical action. Old women are witches; virgins are valuable auxiliaries; menstrual blood and other like products are common specifics. Moreover, it is true that women are particularly disposed to hysteria, and their nervous crisis makes them susceptible to superhuman forces, which endow them with special powers. However, even outside these critical periods, which occupy a not insignificant part of their life, women are the butt of superstitious and jural and religious taboos, which clearly mark them off as a separate class in society (Mauss, 2001, p. 35).

In patriarchal societies the superstitious association of menstruation with magic and mana transforms it into a ritual practice performed by the witch or sorceress, which can be further related to the hysteric, and both have historically been identified as a threat to religious life.

French theorist Catherine Clément explores the link between hysteria and sorcery in Western patriarchy in her essay ‘The Guilty One’ (1986), revealing that the sorceress speaks through the hysteric:

One must go through the audience of writers, psychiatrists, and judges to reconstitute the mythical stage on which women played their ambiguous role. The last figure, the hysteric, resumes and
assumes the memories of the others: that was Michelet’s hypothesis in *The Sorceress*; it was Freud’s in *Studies on Hysteria*. Both thought that the repressed past survives in woman; woman, more than anyone else, is dedicated to reminiscence. The sorceress, who in the end is able to dream Nature and therefore conceive it, incarnates the re-inscription of the traces of paganism that triumphant Christianity repressed. The hysteric, whose body is transformed into a theatre of forgotten scenes, relives the past. Bearing witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering (Clément, 1986, p. 5).

Clément argues that the hysteric exemplifies how women’s bodies have been taken over, contained, controlled, and labelled disorderly through the once dominant discourse of Christianity in the Western world. Moreover, the hysteric is associated with the sorceress because her repressed memory lives on through the hysteric’s so-called disorders, which is also potentially a non-pathological ‘wild zone’ that delineates women’s ‘blood magic,’ and which Western patriarchal cultures have opted to safeguard against. This ‘wild zone’ of female fertility alluded to by Mauss and identified by Clément could also be interpreted as a zone of creativity.

**The Hysteric, the Sorceress, and the Menstruating Woman**

Alongside the hysteric and the sorceress, the menstruating woman represents a threat to patriarchal cultures of the West because of her proximity to the ‘natural world.’ She is perceived as disorderly, dangerous, even horrific to society and culture. It is women’s collective bleeding that potentially threatens masculine power structures, and yet dually offers women power through the commonality of menstrual experience, as anthropologists Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb point out in their text on traditional cultures *Blood Magic; The Anthropology of Menstruation* (1988):

Menstrual blood is seen as polluting when it symbolically encodes an underlying social-structural ambiguity regarding women and things female. On the one hand a society may have consciously developed an ideology of male superiority but, on the other, it may also permit women access to at least some kinds of power, thereby in a sense undermining its own ideology of male dominance. The common fact of menstruation among all women challenges the social order of a male-dominated society and defines and bounds a female subgroup within the society, thereby creating a new separate and dangerous order (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988, p.28-29).

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3 Blood magic is a term that Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb use to describe a sphere of femininity to do with ritual separation, taboo, and menstruation in their text *Blood Magic; The Anthropology of Menstruation*. 
The menstruating woman has been considered to be both an hysterical and a sorceress, and, in fact, the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud recognised the connection between hysteria and sorcery. He read the famous *Malleus Maleficarum (Witches’ Hammer)* for evidence of the connection between hysteria and witchcraft, or female sorcery. Clément explains:

At the time that he was passionately tending hysterics, Freud was interested in sorcery and spoke at length to fellow physician, and colleague Wilhelm Fliess about it. The year eighteen ninety seven is distinctive because of the parallel that Freud makes between what he finds in the *Malleus Maleficarum (The Witches’ Hammer*, a manual for inquisitors) and what he sees in the women he is treating (Clément, 1986, p. 12).

Yet, he viewed this connection through a double male bias, that is, through the subjectivity of a male-centred view, as well as through the subjectivity of a physician, who could only consider hysteria as a symptom, which required catharsis through the ‘talking cure.’

The concept of menstruation as a disorder in Western patriarchal cultures runs parallel with some beliefs about menstruation in traditional cultures. Clément cites French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in relation to Amerindian mythic patterns:

‘Women’s periods, their uncontrolled flow, too close to nature and therefore threatening,’ are the stabilizing element through which runs the split between nature and culture: simultaneously the rule and the unruly (règle/règles). A natural and dangerous order, always open to the possibility of lasting, turning into a cataclysm; hence, perceived by culture, by men who take on its value, as disorder … (Lévi-Strauss cited in Clément and Clément, 1986, pp. 28-29).

Clément suggests that by remembering the sorceress, seeking her mythological trace, a feminine imaginary can be drawn out of the past, which is connected with the very root of reproductive difference, against the ascribing of women’s animalistic procreative bodies as monstrous and disorderly. Clément rethinks woman’s body as a self-regulating, potentially life-giving source, which periodically connects with the natural world. It is in these terms that a periodic female power associated with the natural world and the sorceress can be drawn on and articulated by women.

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4 Whilst Freud’s view was radical compared to those of his colleague, Charcot, his ‘talking cure’ still sought to pathologise both women and men, whilst also helping many patients who had experienced childhood traumas.
themselves, against the pathologising of women. In fact, it is this precarious positioning of the sorceress on the nature/culture divide, dually the space of hysteria, a ‘wild zone,’ that French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous has called ‘a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage,’ which is of particular interest (Cixous cited in Gilbert’s introduction to ‘The Newly Born Woman,’ 1986, p. ix). It is this ‘voice of milk and blood’ that Western patriarchal cultures have sought to silence.

**The Female Curse**

In accordance with the notion of women as imbued with magic or mana during menstruation, women in the West have been ritually separated from religious life because they are perceived to be a threat to patriarchal culture. Authors Delaney, Lupton and Toth consider the historical treatment of menstruations as a curse revealing that in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity there is evidence of discrimination against menstruating women because of their negative status as polluted. *The Koran* states:

> They will also question thee as to the courses of women. SAY: They are a pollution. Separate yourselves therefore from women and approach them not, until they be cleansed. But when they are cleansed, go unto them as God hath ordained you (The Koran cited in Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1976, p. 15).

In the Jewish and Christian religions Delaney, Lupton, and Toth reveal the menstrual taboo playing out in relation to defilement, pollution, and sickness. The *Book of Isaiah* (30:22) states:

> Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold; thou shalt cast them away as a menstrual cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence (Book of Isaiah cited in Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1976, p. 33).

The words of *Leviticus* 15: 26 speak most clearly of the horrors of menstruating women and what they must do to erase the stain:

> When a woman has a discharge of blood, and blood flows from her body, this uncleanliness of her monthly periods shall last for seven days.

> Anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening.

> Any bed she lies on in this state will be unclean; any seat she sits on will be unclean …

> … If a man sleeps with her, he will be affected by the uncleanliness of her monthly periods. He shall be unclean for seven days … (Leviticus, 1970, pp. 123-124).
Women are considered unclean, carnal, and polluting. Women must be controlled and sanctioned. These taboos have been largely abolished in Christian culture, but not entirely in Orthodox Jewish culture.

In an Orthodox Jewish practice known as niddah women are still required to abstain from sex during menstruation, as well as seven days after the period has ended, at which time women are expected to take a ritual bath to cleanse themselves. In Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body (2006), Jane M. Ussher points out that:

The positioning of the menstruating woman as niddah, and the ritualised cleansing after her bleeding has stopped, most clearly positions menstruation, and by association menstruating women as unclean. The role of separation most clearly positions the fecund body as contaminated and despoiled, needing to be physically separated by man, for fear of pollution (Ussher, 2006, p. 10).

And yet, the practice of Jewish menstrual laws have gone through marked changes from biblical times to modern times. Certainly, there have been movements by women within Judaism to challenge the Rabbinical interpretations of niddah to less stringent observations of niddah in the home. However, the sanctions and cleansing rituals still persist in altered forms across various Jewish religious practices. In the text Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law (1999), Tirzah Meacham states that:

The laws have been responsible for a high level of body awareness among Jewish women, albeit not necessarily in a positive sense. The biblical laws themselves may have limited women’s sexual expression by legislating against coitus during menstruation, which in some women is a peak time of sexual desire (Meacham, 1999, p. 36).

Certainly, the continual observation of niddah shows us a specific site of religiosity in which the menstrual taboo is still enforced and menstruation is still treated as a periodic curse. In fact, the menstrual taboo extends beyond religious practice and into contemporary popular culture, which can be detected in film, as I will now discuss.

The Monstrous Feminine

In The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (1993), feminist writer Barbara Creed argues that in the horror film when a woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her menstrual, mothering and reproductive
functions. The monstrous-feminine in the horror film is depicted in various forms of ‘the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire, and the possessed woman’ (Creed, 1993, p. 7). In her discussion of the eponymous heroine Carrie, she analyses the representation of the pubescent girl as a ‘menstrual monster’ (Creed, 1993, p. 78). Creed sees the horror film as representing a return of the repressed whereby woman as menstrual monster offers a terrified audience a perverse pleasure in being able to identify with an abject, but powerful female avenger. In Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body, Ussher draws on Creed’s theory that throughout history and across cultures woman has been treated as a threat to the society of men on account of her reproductive body, which is thought to be potentially monstrous. Ussher thinks that a cultural ambivalence directed toward the reproductive woman’s body makes her both a source of fascination and terror:

Central to this positioning of the female body as monstrous or beneficent is ambivalence associated with the power and danger perceived to be inherent in women’s fecund flesh, her seeping, leaking, bleeding womb standing as a site of pollution and source of dread (Ussher, 2006, p. 1).

Ussher discusses representations of the dangers of the menstruating body with regards to this ambivalence in cultural texts. She discusses the female body as a source of surveillance and policing with regards to the construction of the female reproductive body as monstrous.

In her influential book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), feminist theorist Judith Butler radically critiques the construction and regulation of gender identity in relation to sex, arguing that gender is produced, regulated and controlled culturally through institutions like ‘phallocentrism’ and ‘compulsory heterosexuality,’ that is, separate to sex. She argues that it is through repetition that phallocentrism enforces gender norms and women learn to perform their subjectivity. That is, they become a constituted subject within Western epistemological frameworks of power, which I have identified through the term patriarchy:

The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an ‘I,’ rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, operate through repetition. Indeed, when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not determined by the rules through
which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects (Butler, 1990, p. 145).

In these terms, we might think of menstruation as a sexual process that is dialectically re-produced, regulated and controlled through gender rules and norms in Western patriarchy, that is, by women themselves, as well as by men. Women repeatedly hear a series of negative cultural attitudes expressed towards menstruation and other procreative functions, which no doubt impacts on how they experience their menstrual cycle.

**Menstrual Activism and the Menstrual Future**

Radical feminist scholar Chris Bobel’s research in her text *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010), argues that the menstrual taboo still exerts power in society today. She points out that most contemporary research on menstruation is centred around social sciences and humanities, and focuses on examining ‘cultural attitudes’ to the menstrual cycle, as well as analysing media representations of menstruation, and feminine hygiene products. Bobel finds that there hasn’t been a study so far of the ‘strategic efforts young women and girls use to challenge the culture of menstruation’ (Bobel, 2010, p. 7). She states that:

Typically, a young woman’s first period is marked not with celebration, but with a quick furtive talk about supplies (read: pads, tampons, and maybe Midol). Acceptable menstrual discourse (if that phrase is not oxymoronic) is limited to complaints about cramps, jokes about mood swings, and, increasingly, the appeal of continuous oral contraception to suppress menstruation. With FDA approval of Seasonale in 2003 and the more recent approval of Lybrel during Spring 2007, the menstrual cycle has become an especially hot topic. On April 20, 2007, *The New York Times* ran a front-page article titled ‘Pill That Eliminates the Period Gets Mixed Reviews.’ The article stimulated a wave of media attention, including blog entries, a CBS news segment, a position statement issued by the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, and an angry article in the magazine *Reason* that accused feminist critics of menstrual suppression of being elitist who wish to deny women an option they desire (Bobel, 2010, p.7).

Bobel goes on to point out that what is not addressed in popular culture is ‘Why, exactly, do nearly all women hate their periods more than other bodily processes?’ (Bobel, 2010, p. 7) Bobel finds statistical evidence to back up her claim. ‘A 2003 study found that one third of women surveyed indicated that they would eliminate
their periods permanently if they could’ (Bobel, 2010, p. 7). Bobel’s assertion that many women hate their periods is important. It is perhaps partially because of the persistent existence of a negative taboo on menstruation that manifests through negative cultural attitudes toward menstruation, which explains why many women reject their periods. As I have shown in this introduction, menstruation has historically been considered a problematic process related to the witch or sorceress and the hysterical. In fact, it seems that the dominant meaning of menstruation in Western culture has come to be associated with the notion of potential feminine disorder, and/or illness, and premenstrual syndromes, relating to the idea of woman-as-monster, which brings about the desire in women to eradicate menstruation altogether with a contraceptive pill. As I have suggested, however, it is possible to reinterpret this ‘wild zone’ as a source of unacknowledged creativity.

The Essentialist Debate

There has been a long patriarchal history of aligning women with the ‘natural world’ and the animal in order to determine women biologically and reduce them exclusively to the role of reproducer of the species, particularly in order to represent women as other. As ecofeminist Erin O’Loughlin warns in Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature (1993):

… overemphasis on women's biological connectedness to nature and woman/female as a singular symbolic category can leave out the many important differences among women and the many ways women's various oppressions are related to the domination of nature (O’Loughlin, 1993, p. 146).

Not withstanding the obvious and varied differences among women that should be celebrated, menstruation strongly links all women, and further associates them with the animal and the natural world in ways that can be deemed to be positive, rather than reductive, and can be shown to be an important and powerful source of creativity in women. Anne Walker points out in The Menstrual Cycle (1997) that:

For many writers, it is the bloodiness of menstruation which links it with ‘nature’ rather than ‘culture’. Nature is seen to be uncivilised, governed by biological impulses and ‘red in tooth and claw’. Humans can overcome this through intellectualisation. However, it is harder for women to separate themselves from their biological selves in the same way that men can because of their repeated blood loss (Walker, 1997, p. 11).
As Walker argues, blood is a powerful and meaningful symbol for humans and the perception of menstruation is that of blood loss, when in actual fact menstruation is far more than that; it is partially broken down uterine lining, mucus from the vagina, other fluids, and some blood (Walker, 1997, p. 11). Yet, it is this concentrated notion of blood loss that resonates in patriarchal Western societies and has frequently been interpreted negatively as inferring a female wound. Women’s menstrual cycle signifies Clément’s split between nature and culture thought to bring about disorder, and no doubt potentially wily animal disturbance, which patriarchal cultures have sought to defend against, and keep under control. Of course, it is important that women identify damaging discourses in Western culture that have constructed gender to represent women as ‘other,’ to control them by denigrating their sexual difference. It is, in fact, crucial that women poets and artists ‘fight back’ by telling their own stories, by depicting their own menstrual imaginaries as the ‘good blood,’ which is also often marked by pain and discomfort, but which frequently brings with it a flood of creativity. Furthermore, encouraging women to tell their stories in relation to their cyclical flow can become a means of bringing about catharsis from the negative cultural story of female sexual difference that seems to proliferate globally.

In my view, women should not be deterred from aligning their bodies with the procreative bodies of non-human animals with whom they have much in common, specifically in relation to the creation of new life. Rather, women can take charge of the discourse that is produced in relation to their reproductive bodies. When a woman menstruates she evacuates her blood and other fluids from her vagina, like a tiny birth. When she gives birth, if she chooses to, she experiences the extreme opening of her uterus, surrendering her blood, piss, and shit, alongside other fluids and fleshes, in the bringing forth of a life. When a woman mothers, if she chooses to, she opens up the borders of her body to give milk, to encounter a baby’s mouth, skin, to take in the smell of her newborn, to clean up its urine, shit, vomit and all of the fluids of so-called defilement. These human procreative functions shape the human animal and are related to those of many non-human animals, such as the mammal who nurses her young with milk from special glands, and in some cases even has a placenta which feeds her offspring during pregnancy. To argue that woman’s role as the creator of new life aligns her with the animal world is not to collapse women and animal together. Rather it is to encourage and affirm that the human is also a species of
animal – a fact that civilisation has attempted to deny in order to assert its difference from and power over nature. For many women the acts of reproduction and birth are central to her very being and for some a source of creative power.

**Thesis Structure**

In chapter one, it is my intention to explore precursor texts to my theory of the menstrual imaginary. I will read Claude Dagmar Daly’s essay ‘The Menstrual Complex in Literature’ (1935), in which he looks for ‘the menstrual complex’ in various literary works. A former patient of Freud’s, Daly suggests that menstrual imagery is ‘everywhere,’ even whilst he ultimately depicts a phallic account of the menstruating mother, most fully realised for him in the mythological Indian deity of Kali. He alerts us to the need to read cultural texts closely for the maternal figure who menstruates, as well as highlights menstruation as a significant event in the sexual development of humans that is linked with creativity. I will draw on Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove’s thesis in their popular text *The Wise Wound; Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978), in which they argue that menstruation taps a hitherto under-utilised source of women’s creative abilities. Shuttle and Redgrove point out that there is a primal imaginary world connected with the menstrual cycle, related to the animal, and potentially the shamanic, which can be taken up by women, although its history has largely been forgotten, or indeed repressed. It is this lost history of female periodicity that they call on women to connect with and explore, in order to bring about a creative catharsis free from the damaging cultural story of menstruation in Western patriarchal societies. They also perform a cultural analysis of menstrual imagery and themes in film, which I will discuss. I will read French theorist Luce Irigaray’s text *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), for ‘an economy of fluids’ as it relates to writing, although Irigaray herself does not signpost a theoretics of menstruation. Finally, I will read writer Mary Jane Lupton’s analysis in *Menstruation and Psychoanalysis* (1993) of the libido as a metaphor for menstruation, as well as her important idea of menstruation as ‘the good blood,’ which she links with female creativity.

In chapter two, I will read French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous’s essays ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975), and ‘Coming to Writing’ (1976), and uncover a submerged menstrual imaginary in her writing. Even whilst Cixous herself doesn’t
theorise a feminine imaginary, others have detected one at work in her writing. She focuses on the aesthetic motif of ‘white ink’ in relation to the procreative female body. She celebrates ‘white ink’ as a source of nourishment and maternal goodness, signifying the mother’s milk, in relation to her own unfolding narrative, and writing practice. However, there is a submerged ‘red ink’ operating just under the surface of her writing on which I draw. I will also discuss what French/American artist Louise Bourgeois has referred to as a ‘volcanic unconscious’ and argue that women can potentially access an eruptive red ink from the volcanic unconscious on a periodic basis.

In chapter three, I will read French theorist Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (1982), taking it as a key cultural text for theorising the menstrual imaginary in relation to the female poet and her creative writing practice. Kristeva calls for a confrontation by the poet with the abject (the abyss, the maternal body, and the realm of the animal), in order to bring about creative catharsis and renewal of the self. Kristeva, however, predominantly has in mind a male poet, and/or writer. What of the female poet? What happens when she embarks on a journey into her own procreative animal self? I argue that when a female poet confronts the abject through her writing practice she encounters the outermost limit of her subjectivity, outside of the patriarchal sacred. Moreover, the female poet can overcome the horror associated with the abject and instead encounter the positive power of her own animalistic procreative body, specifically with regards to her menstrual cycle, and thus bring about a new source of creativity, which brings about personal renewal.

In chapter four, I will explore the heroine’s journey in relation to the transformative abyss that the poet and/or artist takes, and which is present in three important classic narratives in myth, legend, and fairy tale. I will focus on the stories of *Persephone and Demeter*, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. I will develop an against-the-grain reading of these classical stories to show how they reference the maternal figure in relation to the female cycle, blood, and a feminine imaginary, all of which contributes to my theory of a menstrual imaginary.

In the final chapter, I will draw upon the many references to women’s blood, the menstrual cycle and the procreative female body in the work of contemporary women

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5 Feminist theorist Toril Moi argues in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), that Cixous’s idea of a feminine imaginary is politically naïve, thus identifying that Cixous sets out to construct a feminine imaginary, albeit one that Moi finds problematic.
artists and writers, in order to demonstrate further the existence of a menstrual imaginary in cultural texts. I will explore the writings of a range of mostly female poets such as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Lucille Clifton, as well as the artistic works of Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois, and Frida Kahlo.

Finally, in the creative component of this thesis *The Butcher's Daughter*, I will chart my own menstrual imaginary in poetry. I will document my personal journey through a good or transformative abyss, adopting the roles of daughter, witch, mother, shape-shifter and human animal to convey my experience. As such, I will explore my own animalistic procreative body. In the bridging statement I outline in greater detail the connection between the dissertation and the creative component of this thesis.
Chapter One

Precursors to a Menstrual Imaginary

Menstruation helps us to understand what it means to take on the symbolic economy and become human through incorporating, and/or seeking to understand our animalism, our debt both to nature and culture. It is therefore the animalistic aspect of menstruation that has a story to tell, an important text to deliver about what it is to be woman, to have a cycle, to periodically re-join with the natural world, touching on the imaginary border of the transformative abyss in order to renew the self, and perpetually return to culture and to convey one’s selfhood. Yet, menstruation occupies a kind of death-space of knowledge in the West, detectable only as a symptom, as recognised in the phenomenon of the premenstrual syndrome. The negative cultural story in the West on menstruation states that ‘the reproductive body is an abject monstrosity that needs careful regulation and control, and is the root of feminine evil’ (Ussher, 2006, p. 17). In fact, many women have taken on board the negative cultural story of menstruation in Western society, whereby they perform their menstruation in accordance with acceptable gender normative behaviour models for women. It therefore makes sense that an increasing number of women no longer wish to menstruate and reject their menstruation, preferring instead to take cycle-stopping pills. This, in itself, causes problems for women because they miss out on experiencing the creative catharsis and self-renewal that is possible at this time of the month, and which can lead to the depiction of a woman’s cyclical experience in various modes of artistic representation. In this chapter, I will survey precursors to my theory of a menstrual imaginary.

The Menstrual Secret

In The Menstrual Cycle, Anne Walker points out that menstruation is not a particularly ‘rare’ or ‘unusual’ occurrence, and yet it seems to be largely ‘private’ and ‘hidden’ in Western cultures such as the U.S.A, Britain, and Australia. ‘As a result we know little about women’s experiences of menstruation, what it feels like to menstruate or to be a menstruating woman, either now or in previous times’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). Walker states that menstruation was rarely referred to in women’s diaries and correspondence in the nineteenth century, which was the main source of
documenting women’s lives. ‘It seems that there is either nothing to say about menstruation – or an absence of words in which to say it’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). It is possible that menstrual references were edited out of women’s diaries. But most likely, Walker argues, ‘Menstruation was literally unmentionable because there were no words in the man-made language which could be used to describe the experience politely’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). Walker suggests that, ‘This silence remains a feature of modern life’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). In fact, according to Walker, the only discourse in which menstrual opinions and ideas flourish is in medical literature. Walker comments, ‘Unless these girls have period pain, or difficulties obtaining sanitary towels, they have nothing to say’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). Walker is therefore concerned that females have nothing to say about the ‘phenomenology of menstruation’ (Walker, 1997, p. 2). Unless menstruation is ‘painful, traumatic or messy’ there are no words to describe the experience of menstruation (Walker, 1997, p. 2). Moreover, there is simply not a discourse that documents the first menstruation as anything other than a potentially horrific and confusing event of ‘inexplicable bleeding’ (Walker, 1997, p. 3). Furthermore, when menstruation is spoken of it is often pejoratively. Northern American expressions, for example, range from calling menstruation ‘the curse’ or ‘wrong time of the month,’ to emphasising the regularity of the period by simply referring to it as the ‘period,’ to focusing on it as a time non-sexual availability, to identifying it as ‘women’s friend’ (Walker, 1997, p. 3).

Anne Frank’s documentation of menstruation in The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition (1995), suggests a hidden meaning of menstrual experience that is rare. In fact, Frank’s commentary on her menstruation is very important because whilst she highlights the fact of menstruation as painful, uncomfortable, and messy, she also refers to a sense of something ‘secret,’ something hidden about her menstruation, which is positive, and significant to women’s experience. She writes:

I think that what’s happening to me is so wonderful, and I don’t just mean the changes taking place on the outside of my body, but also those on the inside. I never discuss myself or any of these things with others, which is why I have to talk about them to myself. Whenever I get my period (and that’s only been three times), I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, discomfort and mess, I’m carrying around a sweet secret. So even though it’s a nuisance, in a certain way I’m always looking forward to the time when I’ll feel that secret within me once again (Frank, 1995, p.161).
Frank’s feeling that her menstruation is a ‘sweet secret’ that she welcomes, despite her discomfort with the actual passing of menstrual flow, might be because her menstruation represents for her a desire to mature, or to become a woman. But, it might also mean something else. Perhaps the occurrence of Frank’s menstruation alerted her to the notion that the 1970s feminists sought to explore, that there is something to ‘feel’ or to ‘talk about’ with regards to ‘menstrual consciousness.’ This could mean that there is an awakening of an animal procreative power, or a spiritual, psychic, imaginary process, which is central to menstruation, and/or the menstrual cycle as a whole.

The feminist position taken by Lara Owen, in *Her Blood is Gold: Reclaiming the Power of Menstruation* (1993), is that menstruation is an animalistic or primal flow that links all women and gives rise to creative and psychical abilities:

> Periods … are wild and basic, raw and instinctual, a bloody and eternal aspect of the female – and no amount of ‘civilization’ will change that. My period is a monthly occurrence in my life that I have in common with all women who have ever lived. Women living in caves twenty thousand years ago, priestesses in palaces in ancient Egypt, seers in temples in Sumeria, all bled with the moon. The first woman who made fire might well have had her period at the time…If menstruation is a highly creative time for women psychically and spiritually, who knows what gifts humankind has been brought by women during their menses (Owen cited in Walker, 1997, p. 5).

The idea of menstruation as a gift that bestows creativity and even psychical abilities, which is related to human animalism, is important. Moreover, for Owen menstruation is likened to a mystical, ritual, or religious experience. In fact, Owen’s work highlights the fact that menstruation reminds men of our close links with the animal that our culture wishes to deny, and which is a major reason for the lingering taboo on women’s menstruation. But, whilst menstruation is often a regular occurrence that is different for every woman, and which can be anything from a phenomenon marked by pain, discomfort, and excessive flow, to a spiritual experience, it is this ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ aspect of menstruation that is worth exploring. As Walker points out, in fact, ‘It is not this unspoken routine which has made menstruation, and later the menstrual cycle, interesting throughout the centuries, but an extreme and perhaps imaginary experience’ (Walker, 1997, p. 10). So, what is this ‘imaginary experience’ connected with menstruation?
The Menstrual Complex

Claude Dagmar Daly (1884-1950) was the first to read for menstrual themes in cultural texts. He was a former patient of Freud’s and theorised ‘the menstrual complex in literature’ in several essays. In his work he primarily seeks to account for the primal mother who menstruates. Whilst Daly configures the menstruating mother in relation to Freud’s Oedipus Complex, he is critical of Freud’s ‘neglect’ of the Mother Goddess in his theoretical writings. By way of addressing Freud’s neglect, Daly theorises the castrated menstruating mother in ‘the menstrual complex’ as the ‘kernel’ of the Oedipus complex. Lupton discusses Daly’s depiction of the menstruating mother in his first essay ‘Hindu-Mythologie and Kastrationskomplex’ (1927). She suggests, “In her awesome aggressiveness, the menstruation mother is a modification of the _vagina dentate_, the vagina with teeth, while in her ‘otherness’ she anticipates what Julia Kristeva has called the ‘abject’ – the undesired, the defiled” (Lupton, 1993, p. 111). Daly’s castrated menstruating mother is therefore considered a threat to patriarchy because she wields a mythological phallus (sword) and repulses male desire. Moreover, in some men’s minds she has the power to castrate men, which terrifies them.

Daly viewed the Hindu goddess Kali as imbued with menstrual meaning even if historians have failed to make a connection between Kali and menstrual blood. Certainly, Kali’s association with time, fertility, death and the Mother Goddess seem to link her to the menstrual cycle. In fact, she is the embodiment of Shakti or feminine energy. Moreover, she is strong and active with the power to fight, and perhaps even to castrate men. Lupton suggests a possible reason as to why Kali is not linked with menstruation:

> It is probably that Kali’s menstrual properties were repressed in traditional Hindu cosmology and in so many contemporary texts for the same reasons that menstruation has been repressed almost universally – out of fear or disgust for women’s bleeding. The austere taboos against menstruation in Indian culture would support this hypothesis (Lupton, 1993, p. 112).

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6 It is important to point out that several of Daly’s essays are very hard to obtain in English translation. I will have to refer to Mary Jane Lupton’s reading (in _Menstruation and Psychoanalysis_) of Daly’s essay titled _Hindu-Mythologie and Kastrationskomplex_ (1927), in the well know psychoanalytical journal _Imago_. However, I have read the translation of Daly’s essay _The Menstruation Complex in Literature_ and am able to quote directly from the source text.
Lupton points out that due to lack of interest in Daly’s menstrual complex and his proposition of Kali as a castrated menstruating mother, his theory disappeared. Of course, Daly depicts the menstruating mother in negative terms. But, to his credit he does manage to identify Kali as a menstrual Goddess who is linked with feminine divine energy, albeit a destructive power. Furthermore, he seeks to critique Freud’s neglect of the Mother Goddess, even though he reads her in disparaging terms.

In his later essay, ‘The Menstrual Complex in Literature’ (1935), Daly attempts to substantiate his theory of a menstruation complex as the nucleus of the Oedipus complex in the work of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe. Daly looks for evidence of ‘the vaginal bleeding of the mother as the nucleus of the incest barrier’ in these literary works (Daly, 1935, p. 307). He finds the fullest representation of the menstruating mother, male fear of castration, and incestuous desire in the poem titled ‘Une Martyre,’ taken from Baudelaire’s collection ‘Fleurs du Mal.’ Here Baudelaire describes the decapitated female martyr:

… In a warm room, that like a hot-house stifles
With dangerous and fatal breath, where lie
Pale flowers in crystal tombs, exquisite trifles,
Exhaling their last sigh —

A headless corpse, cascading in a flood
Hot, living blood, that soaks, with crimson stain
A pillow slaked and sated with blood
As any field with rain.

Like those pale visions which the gloom aborts
Which fix us in a still, hypnotic stare,
The bead, tricked out with gems of sorts,
In its huge mass of hair, …

(Baudelaire, 1952, pp. 149-151)

Daly compares the decapitation of the female protagonist’s head to female genital castration in accordance with Freudian theory, which is a negative interpretation of female sexual difference. Daly reads the ‘flood’ of ‘living blood’ as horrific menstrual blood emanating from a wound of female castration. The decapitated head is referred to as a flower in the poem, which Daly reads as a reference to the menstruating
vagina. As Lupton points out, Daly’s main interest in reading both Baudelaire and Poe’s work is to draw out the authors unfolding sexualities in their writings, specifically in relation to the castrated menstruating mother, that is, over and above any real interest in interpreting menstruation as it relates to female sexuality. Daly also finds menstrual symbols in Poe’s work – ‘the black cat, the bleeding eye, the Red Death, the red-lit casement’ – that are of interest (Lupton, 1993, p. 113). However, again he reads these symbols in relation to Poe’s Oedipal sexuality and theorises the menstruating mother as a ‘destructive’ force, rather than as capable of bringing forth ‘nurturance and renewal’ (Lupton, 1993, p.116). Daly portrays a castrated mother, who periodically menstruates from an horrific wound, in his writing. Still, the fact that he identifies the existence of a menstruating mother at all, as well as menstrual imagery and motifs in literary works is important. It is the first attempt, of which I am aware, to do so.

Daly alerts us to the maternal menstruating mother in relation to male sexual development and subjectivity formation, which he calls a ‘menstrual complex,’ and which he reads in literature. It is unfortunate that Daly’s ‘menstrual complex’ depicts menstruation and the maternal influence in such negative terms, which is not sympathetic to women’s experience. And yet, Daly’s ‘menstrual complex’ does connect menstruation and the mother to literary texts, and therefore to the poetic imagination, albeit solely to a male poet’s imagination. Whilst menstruation wasn’t widely theorised by feminist in relation to women’s experience and particularly to a feminine imaginary process until the 1970s, it was clearly identified and explored by women writers.

The Menstrual Cycle and a Primary Imagistic Process

In their book *The Wise Wound; Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978), Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove argue that menstruation in Western culture is fraught by a taboo, which is discursively produced through a series of negative attitudes to the menstrual cycle, and which can be internalised by women periodically, and manifest as premenstrual syndromes, potentially leading to depressive illness. They use the term ‘taboo’ in reference to a negative cultural attitude toward menstruation, rather than in relation to the ritual practice of menstrual prohibitions. The authors call for a counter-weight to the negative attitudes to women’s menstruation in the form of recognition of a rising creativity in women cyclically.
Shuttle and Redgrove argue that what is required to combat the negative attitudes to women’s cycle is an increase in awareness of menstruation through investigation into this aspect of femininity. They hint at a deeper meaning to the negative attention directed toward menstruation. They think that there is something confronting and/or scary about menstruation that makes many women loath to investigate the meaning of their menstruation. The neglected character of menstruation, akin to the lack of interest in natural childbirth, drives their enquiry into what the passing of blood on a monthly basis means for a woman.

Shuttle and Redgrove find that menstruation is not a ‘curse,’ but rather a gift, which brings with it its own set of difficulties, insofar as this aspect of women’s so called ‘nature’ is disapproved of culturally, and is sometimes accompanied by ‘pain and distress’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 22). Certainly Shuttle and Redgrove make a valid point when they argue that it is the ‘bad effects’ of the menstrual cycle that have been focused on in Western culture (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 27). Moreover, they assert that there are benefits and knowledge to be gained through embracing the ‘structure’ of the menstrual rhythm. The detachment from this internal embodied structure in women leads to women being locked out of an aspect of feminine experience that is vital. Shuttle and Redgrove consider that this may lead to suffering, the inference being that women might be more disposed to depression if they don’t attune to their menstrual cycle.

Shuttle and Redgrove argue that culturally the ovulation side of the menstrual cycle has all the glory, that is, since it was discovered in the nineteenth century, whilst the menstrual side of the cycle is often considered the dark problematic aspect. And yet, they argue that women may enjoy a heightened ‘sensitivity’ because of their menstrual cycle:

This is confirmed in Seymour Fisher’s well-documented book *Body Consciousness*. He says that women are on average much more aware of their bodies than men are, but that by the stereotypes of our society ‘the woman’s greater sensitivity to body cues is given a negative significance’. She is not allowed to know what she knows, even though ‘She keeps tuning in on her body to a greater extent’ than men do. She relates more flexibly to her body than men do, and she probably has these advantages because of her menstrual cycle, ‘That is, she repeatedly experiences rather profound changes in the feel of her body as her menstrual cycle waxes and wanes … there is no comparable set of experiences for the male.’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p.110).
It is true that women experience a regular evacuation of fluids related to fertility and the production of human life that can facilitate a strong awareness of the body. However, it is also true that some men experience an equally strong but different awareness of the body. Moreover, Shuttle and Redgrove suggest that menstruation facilitates erotic experience, given that there is a definite upsurge in sexual energy around the time of paramenstruum (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, pp. 82-83).

Many researchers have shown that there is a rise in sexuality during the course of the menstrual cycle … Others have found that the chief rise is during the paramenstruum, or at the opposite end of the cycle, with an increase of desire immediately before, during, or immediately after the bleeding (Redgrove and Shuttle, 2005, p. 84).

British physician Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) studied human sexuality and considered the premenstrual peak a time for erotic experience with particular emphasis on ‘auto-erotic experience and erotic dreams’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p.84). Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) studied human sexuality also, and found ‘the period of maximum sexual arousal near the time of menstruation’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 85). Kinsey therefore concurred with Ellis’s findings that women are more likely to masturbate near their period when sexual desire is at its highest. Furthermore, Jung stated that a ‘sexual heat’ occurs with the onset of the period. According to Shuttle and Redgrove this libidinal surge corresponds to a sense in most women that another threshold within them is stirring, below the level of consciousness, in league with their heightening creativity, and quite possibly alongside other undesirable thoughts, and physical pains.

Shuttle and Redgrove consider menstruation in relation to the awakening of shamanic powers, as if a deep resource stirs within women at this time. They discuss the arrival of animal spirits in dreaming at the time of menstruation, which can be critiqued as a first-world third-world interpretation of the shamanic, even whilst it might be an important part of female experience. They consider themes of a monthly descent, as well as a male figure, who may offer spiritual guidance at this time. This figure relates to the Jungian concept of the ‘animus.’ Moreover, they advise that by using the Jungian ‘active imagination’ technique to gain access to one’s deep instinctual voice, a profound connection with one’s feminine rhythm can be achieved. Consequently, menstruation might become an important time to connect psychologically with one’s ‘deeper self’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 121). They argue for the need to acknowledge the animal aspect of one’s self through writing and art, which may have
been repressed. Furthermore, this awakening to an erotic, animalistic and psychical aspect of the menstrual cycle that brings about greater creativity is related to the moon phases. In fact, a woman can synchronise her menstruation with the lunar cycle (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 149). Owen advises in Her Blood is Gold (2008) that:

Native Americans call menstruation the moon-time, and traditionally, menstruating women went to a moon-lodge to rest and meditate. In most cultures throughout the world the moon has been associated with women, most obviously because the average length of the menstrual cycle is 29.5 days, which is exactly the length of time that the moon takes to orbit the earth … The relationship between the full moon and ovulation was known in ancient cultures. Women of the Native American Yurok tribe of Northern California prayed to the full moon when they suffered from menstrual irregularity. It is probable that sitting out under the full moon triggered ovulation, and returned their cycles to normal. In her book Lunaception, Louise Lacey describes how ovulation is triggered by exposure to light at night … Ovulation is the signal for the release of the hormones that stimulate the build-up of the endometrium, the lining of the womb. The endometrium is shed fourteen days after ovulation; out of the whole menstrual cycle, this time period of bleeding fourteen days after ovulation is the most regular and widely experienced by women everywhere. This means that if a full moon triggers ovulation, then women will bleed fourteen days later, on the new moon (Owen, 2015, pp. 22-23).

Many traditional cultures have sought to align their menstrual cycle with the moon cycle, and the moon has long been connected with menstruation.

Shuttle and Redgrove put forward the idea that the first shamans were women and suggest that a heightened state of ‘menstrual sensitivity’ during menstruation engenders prophetic abilities, and oracular powers (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 147). There is something very significant in the notion that women have access to an imaginary process and creativity in relation to their menstrual cycle. Shuttle and Redgrove point out that, ‘The psyche will in good conditions take up whatever competent language is presented to it…There is yet hardly offered a competent language for the feminine psyche to speak of its menstruation’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 164). Certainly, there seems to be a need for women to be able to voice their menstrual cycle as a valuable and important aspect of femininity, in order to shape a more full and positive sense of female subjectivity in Western culture.

Shuttle and Redgrove state that ‘… a woman may find the symbolic language that can develop her nature’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 165). This ‘symbolic’ language is related to storytelling, poetry, and the realm of the imagination. By developing woman’s ‘nature,’ I suggest that Shuttle and Redgrove are referring to the positive
development of a woman’s subjectivity. Indeed, this idea of the menstruating woman gathering her energies to pursue a lineage of her femininity, a psychic trajectory, which she embodies, and is articulated through a symbolic form, is extremely valuable to women. Her menstrual discharge gives access to a primary process connected with ‘– the vivid, concrete, imagistic, prelogical thought process shared by dreams and poetry that must no longer be neglected’ (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 216). Moreover, Shuttle and Redgrove state that a ‘flood of poetry’ arrives at the time of menstruation (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p.190). It is important to point out that creativity is a complex and nebulous phenomenon, which can also be tied to menstruation. In seeking to theorise a link between menstruation and creativity I do not intend to set up a new ideal of femininity. Rather, I am attempting to build up a concept of feminine creativity that sits comfortably next to many others concepts of feminine creativity, such as that of pregnant women, transgender women, contraceptive pill taking women, menopausal women, and so on.

The ‘flipside’ of this access to a ‘primary’ ‘imagistic’ process associated with dreams and poetry is madness and hysteria according to Shuttle and Redgrove. They argue that paramenstruum, or premenstrual stress, commonly known as PMS, affects many women, pointing out that it is statistically the most common problem that women are likely to consult their doctors about (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 45). Shuttle and Redgrove seem to be suggesting that due to a reluctance in women to explore this primary imagistic process cyclically, which would give them access to a source of creativity, and self-expression, women potentially destabilise their mental health, and specifically increase the potential of experiencing PMS.

In her text Feminine Psychology (1967), second-wave Freudian psychologist Karen Horney was the first to connect menstruation to a psychological process, at the level of cultural discourse at least, which she calls ‘premenstrual tensions.’ She argued that ‘disturbance’ occurs during menstruation and more frequently in the days before menstruation. This ‘disturbance’ can be characterised by ‘varying degrees of tension,’ which can range from ‘listlessness,’ to ‘feelings of self-depreciation,’ to ‘pronounced feelings of oppression,’ to ‘being severely depressed.’ Moreover, these feelings are experienced in addition to a general state of ‘irritability’ and ‘anxiousness.’ Furthermore, Horney states that it is her impression that these experiences can be classified on the side of ‘normal,’ since PMS symptoms frequently occur in healthy women, and therefore don’t infer ‘pathological process’ (Horney, 1967, pp. 99-100).
She adds that these experiences frequently ‘recede at the onset of the bleeding’ and are accompanied by feelings of relief.

In *The Menstrual Cycle*, Anne Walker seeks to address the concerns of women over the ‘medicalisation’ and ‘psychologising’ of women’s menstruation with regards to the phenomenon of PMS, which might be more problematic than helpful.

One of the features of the twentieth-century scientific and popular literature has been an increasing discussion of PMS and a diminishing discussion of menstruation itself, which contrasts particularly with the nineteenth century literature. PMS then becomes particularly important. It is a means by which unacceptable behaviour can be attributed to reproductive functions without the necessity of even mentioning menstruation (Walker, 1997, p. 179).

Certainly, PMS seems to be a scapegoat for Western patriarchy to attribute neurotic conditions to women on account of their reproductive status. So, why have we chosen to describe PMS as a menstrual illness in the twentieth century? Who benefits from this discourse of potential monthly menstrual illness? And has it changed in the twenty-first century?

Walker ultimately finds that PMS is a political construct, a powerful ‘story’ about women’s menstrual experience, and their pain, with particular emphasis on their animalism, since at this time women are depicted as coming closer to the border of the ‘proper,’ stable, ordered, and civilised woman. Walker refers to the writing of Cecil Helman in his book *Body Myths*, in which he compares the premenstrual woman to the werewolf.

In both cases, too, this occurs rhythmically, the werewolf and the premenstrual woman both under control of the moon. He argues that the werewolf myth is an image of male menstruation – under the influence of the moon, the man’s hairy ‘animality’ breaks out and he wreaks violent and (always) bloody havoc, only to return to humanity in the morning’ (Walker, 1997, p. 170).

The PMS woman’s inner animal is periodically powerfully unleashed, but of course without any control on part of the woman. Rather, she is at the whim of her potentially violent procreative body. Instead, it is patriarchal society who must warn culture of woman’s inherent animalism and her periodic loss of control, her wolf-like metamorphosis, so as to protect others, and maintain societal order. The theme of woman’s transformation is explored in a relatively recent film by John Fawcett in ‘Ginger Snaps’ (2000), which clearly links this change to werewolf-ism, but in relation to a sympathetic heroine.
Walker compares the PMS phenomenon of the twentieth century to the hysteria phenomenon of the nineteenth century. It is an astute observation on Walker’s part and points to the fact that women’s voices are actually missing from the debate:

It (PMS) has been defined at a time when women have become a ‘problem’ in the same way that hysteria became an issue during the nineteenth century wave of feminism (Walker, 1997, p. 171).

In patriarchal cultures of the West, these apparent shifts in female consciousness can only be interpreted medically, as well as negatively, and with regards to that old Freudian threat of the periodically wounded woman, who is potentially neurotic, destabilised, and closer to her animal impulses, and the possibility of dangerous regressions. Walker points out that the PMS discourse of the twentieth century has been a means by which patriarchy again attempts to identify unacceptable female behaviour and connect it to women’s reproductive functions (Walker, 1997, p. 179). And yet, as Walker points out, many women do experience PMS regularly. What is needed then is to change the story about what menstruation means at the level of culture. As I have already pointed out in The Wise Wound, Shuttle and Redgrove seek to redefine menstruation as providing access to a primary imagistic process connected with dreams and poetry, and with shamanism, in order to offer an alternative view of the menstrual cycle, which is useful to women, and potentially brings about creative catharsis.

Shuttle and Redgrove are also among the earliest to read for menstrual themes in the horror film. They call horror films the ‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales for our time,’ and argue they offer our culture a means of letting the blood flow (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, p. 225). Shuttle and Redgrove read William Friedkin’s film, ‘The Exorcist’ (1973), for menstrual themes and argue that the girl protagonist of the film, Regan, is in fact coming upon her first menstruation, which is accompanied by a shamanic experience. And yet, in the film her first menstrual period is depicted as an horrific episode of menstrual monstrousness, possession, and a descent into madness. They argue that this is because there is no social context for the positive unfolding of menstrual experience in accordance with the shamanic in our culture.

Regan was certainly trying to communicate deep feelings through her drawings of the winged energy of the lion – perhaps she was feeling the ‘winged pains’ of the period coming – and the sculptured bird-demons, before the full shamanic dramatization of the ‘possession’ burst out. Miriam Van Waters surveying many peoples’ customs tells us that at first period girls are
wedded to supernatural beings, that the ‘women who are to be shamans assume their religious and medical functions at puberty’, that is when they acquire the conversation of ‘special deities, or guardian spirits’, and that she has such extreme power at this time that is she dreams certain disasters, the tribe puts her to death by fire. The Mohave girls are told that whatever they do at this time has significance for their futures, just as Jung said was the case for his European patients (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005, pp. 234-5).

Shuttle and Redgrove suggest that Regan is connecting with her animal power and an ancient source of femininity, which is vital to the subsequent unfolding of her subjectivity, but which is interpreted as illness by the family and the church in the film, and exorcised accordingly.

They also refer to Brian De Palma’s film, ‘Carrie’ (1976), in which the newly menstruating protagonist in the film develops telekinetic powers that she unleashes on the community in which she lives. In a crucial scene at the high school ball she is drenched in a bucket of blood by a practical joker. In fact, Carrie’s powers are both powerful and destructive and mark her out as similarly going through a potentially shamanic transformation. Creeds suggests in The Monstrous Feminine that:

In the horror genre, however menstrual blood is constructed as a source of abjection: its powers are so great it can transform woman into any one of a number of fearful creatures: possessed child, killer and vengeful witch. Yet the film [Carrie] presents contradictory messages: on the one hand it deploys ancient blood taboos and misogynistic myths; on the other, it invites sympathy for Carrie as a victim of these prejudices (Creed, 1993, p. 83).

‘Carrie’ depicts both the reality of prejudices against menstruation so prevalent in Western patriarchal cultures, like America, in which the film is set, but also links menstruation with an awakening of psychical powers in young girls.

Shuttle and Redgrove therefore contribute the significant idea that cyclically women potentially gain access to a ‘primary’ and ‘imagistic’ process associated with their libidinal energy, and also connected with the dream world, and with poetry. They point out that this primary imagistic process is connected with themes of monthly descent associated with the animal, which can be accessed through the Jungian active imagination technique, and articulated in symbolic form. As such, menstruation potentially gives rise to ‘a flood of poetry’ and is connected with shamanic experience that can bring about a deeper connection with the self. Although they do not explore the idea of a menstrual imaginary as a cultural site or zone that women poets and artists consciously draw upon, their analysis of a connection between menstruation,
the imaginary, and creativity, at an unconscious level, establishes an important basis for my own theory.

Towards a Philosophy of Flow

In her text *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Luce Irigaray critiques Freudian theory, arguing that the female sex organ is devalued and thought to be devoid of beneficent meaning in psychoanalysis. To characterise women’s sexuality with reference to her own sex then is a revolutionary act.

How can we accept the idea that woman's sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus by her longing for, jealousy of, and demand for, the male organ? Does this mean that woman's sexual evolution can never be characterized with reference to the female sex itself? All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own "specificity" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 69).

Irigaray enquires into what the specificity of the female sex might be with respect to writing. It seems to me that if we try to comprehend a feminine discourse in relation to the vagina and its functions, then we are asserting the centrality and importance of blood flow to human existence. Indeed, we might ponder how it is possible to consider a psychic economy of the vagina and not take in the specifics of the menstrual cycle.

Irigaray argues that women can transgress the ‘ruling symbolic,’ by which she means the dominant phallocentric ideology, by insisting on attesting to a ‘physical reality’ in their writing process that takes in ‘the characteristic features of nature’ (Irigaray, 1985, p. 107). But, Irigaray asks – how can women write their own ‘nature’ when that convoluted concept has already been taken over by a masculine ideology historically used to determine women biologically, and make them other? This phallocentric ‘logic’ has sought to account for women purely on the basis of her fluid ‘nature’ in such damaging terms, that it perhaps seems to be theoretical suicide to try to re-identify women with Irigaray’s ‘economy of fluids,’ and specifically their menstrual cycle (Irigaray, 1985, p. 109). In fact, Irigaray advises that a woman’s fluid nature excludes her from man’s ‘logic.’ So then, woman’s fluid ‘nature’ is her point of resistance to the ruling symbolic: her real fluids are what need to be elaborated. However, Irigaray resists ‘naming’ the real fluids, which in my view must centrally include menstrual blood.
What is left uninterpreted in the economy of fluids – the resistances brought to bear upon solids, for example – is in the end given over to God. Overlooking the properties of *real* fluids – internal frictions, pressures, movements, and so on, that is, *their specific dynamics* – leads to giving the real back to God … (Irigaray, 1985, p. 109).

In her playful and highly theoretical writing, Irigaray alerts us to the idea that something has been excluded in the patriarchal ‘psychic economy [that] is organized around the phallus,’ which is the *real* properties of fluids, or their economy, and which belong to women and God (Irigaray, 1985, p.110). She tells us, ‘And yet that woman-thing speaks,’ but *not* in terms of subjection, rather in terms of her *fluids*, which escapes the systematisation of meaning and culture (Irigaray, 1985, p.111).

Irigaray argues that being able to hear women speak requires a certain kind of listening: a resistance to patriarchal voices that proliferate so called ‘proper’ meanings in culture. The character of a woman’s voice is in the flow, and in the overflow. It goes unheard by the culture of men whose ears are clogged with *meaning*.

Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. *Blurring*. And she is not listened to, unless proper meaning (meaning of the proper is lost). Whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the ‘subject.’ Which the subject then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow (Irigaray, 1985, p.112).

Irigaray thinks that a woman’s voice can be heard, when listened to properly, as acoustic waves of fluids bearing an alternative meaning that challenges the precepts of meaning. ‘Milk, luminous flow, acoustic waves, … not to mention the gases inhaled, emitted, variously perfumed, of urine, saliva, blood, even plasma, and so on’ (Irigaray, 1985, p. 113). Irigaray’s metaphor of ‘an economy of fluids’ signifies female bodily fluids, including menstrual blood (although she does not name it as such), which are vital sources of women’s creativity and writing.

Irigaray contributes the important idea of an ‘economy of fluids' founded on a reclaiming of the female sex organ and its processes as they relate to psychic economy, and writing. The metaphorical concept of speaking or indeed writing in terms of these very *real* fluids against the ‘ruling symbolic,’ or what has been referred to as a patriarchal authority, brings about an important source of women’s creativity.
Mary Jane Lupton draws inspiration from Irigaray in *Menstruation and Psychoanalysis*, in which she seeks to rescue menstruation from its tabooed status as ‘bad blood,’ and instead theorises menstruation as ‘good blood.’ She considers that menstrual blood is the first nourishment that we receive as foetuses in the womb. She points out that, ‘The breast, that sanctified symbol of female perfection in psychoanalysis and art, is in effect a displacement of oral gratification from the red-womb to the milk-white breast’ (Lupton, 1993, p.83). According to Melanie Klein, the infant identifies with the gratified breast that it takes as the maternal ‘good object,’ but what if menstrual blood is imbued with the first, as well as the ongoing, ‘life-giving-capacity?’ Lupton therefore suggests that ‘… the primal ‘good’ object of nourishment and life is the womb, an endometrial paradise where all foetal desires are gratified and no one goes thirsty’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 84). Lupton describes the womb as woman’s ‘kitchen pot’ and source of good through which women renew themselves on a monthly basis, and in accordance with the moon (Lupton, 1993, p. 84).

When menstrual blood, defiled and tabooed since prehistory, is recognized for its primary functions of nurturance and renewal, it must be seen as *good* blood, what Jung alluded to as ‘creative mana.’ To slight this good blood and overvalue the breast is both to marginalize the menstrual process within the maternal function and to forget, as many psychoanalytical feminists have, that uterine feeding precedes the act of conception, pregnancy, parturition, and suckling. This continual omission of menstrual blood in psychoanalytical discourse is a denial of interiority, an abjection of women’s inner space; it is also a rejection of menstruation as a significant difference (Lupton, 1993, p. 84).

It is important to clarify Lupton’s use of the term ‘creative mana,’ as it seems to offer a rich and potent terminology to link menstruation with creativity. In fact, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung argues that in traditional cultures the phallus, not to be confused with the penis, is the ritualistic symbol divested with the power of healing and fertility, which means ‘creative mana’ (Jung, 20015, p. 22). It is not surprising that Jung doesn’t associate menstruation with mana, given that he omits a detailed analysis of its meaning in his work. However, Mauss in his text, *A General Theory of Magic*, connects women’s reproductive functions with mana, which is thought to have the quality of fluidity, power, and essence. He states that the invisible force of mana is
associated with menstruation and invested with magical power, which further links it with taboo. Lupton’s attempt to connect the concept of ‘creative mana’ to good blood flow and the primal womb seems highly plausible. We know that in matriarchal societies the womb was the ritualistic symbol imbued with fertility and power. For example, Shiela Kitzinger writes in *Rediscovering Birth* (2000), that in Maori culture women’s bodies are still considered sacred and are revered through the practice of *tapu*. Women’s genitals are carved above the entrance of each *Marae* to teach the Maori people that the womb is the source of all life, that is, in preference to the phallus (Kitzinger, 2000, p. 150). For the Maori a positive concept of taboo is ritually practiced, which celebrates female reproductive power. In these terms ‘mana’ can be linked to good blood and creativity.

Lupton powerfully backs up her idea of menstruation as ‘good blood’ with reference to the work of Irigaray who discusses the bond between mother and child as the ‘primal womb, our first nourishing earth, first waters, first envelopes, where the child was whole, the mother whole through the mediation of her blood’ (Irigaray quoted by Lupton, 1993, p. 85). Moreover, Lupton notes that in *The Trauma of Birth* (1952), Otto Rank reads fairy tales for ‘plentiful wombs’ that give nourishment through flesh and blood. He views menstruation as continuing the womb’s existence, knowledge of which has been repressed along with the birth trauma (Lupton, 1993, p. 85). Lupton therefore seeks to account for menstruation as a powerful and creative event in women’s lives, which has been hidden and tabooed.

Lupton calls for a theory of menstruation that reconceptualises women’s blood as good, life giving, and a source of creativity:

In a responsive world-view, the values of replenishment and renewal embodied in the menstrual process could perhaps reshape the future. ‘Creative waste,’ designer Christine Frederick’s term for the streamlined disposability of kitchen products, seems an appropriate way to say *menstruation*. ‘Creative waste’: the phrase recapitulates the ambivalence toward women’s blood … ranging from Carl Jung’s ‘creative mana’ to Otto Fenichel’s ‘first pollution.’ I use it to affirm the menstrual powers, in a world where the spinning planets and flowing sea are threatened with extinction, and the female values implicit in menstruation are in mourning (Lupton, 1993, p. 205).

However, whilst Lupton calls for this theory of creative waste, she doesn’t explore a
theory of menstruation in any further detail. She does look for menstrual imagery in psychoanalysis. She finds menstruation is most frequently depicted as ‘bad blood’ of female pathological otherness, rather than the ‘good blood’ of female creativity and wellness. Lupton continues, somewhat controversially, to argue that Freud’s libido is potentially a hidden metaphor in psychoanalysis that can be linked with ‘good blood,’ creativity and mana, or ‘creative mana.’

Lupton advises that it is necessary to read psychoanalytical texts and others on several levels for what is actually said about menstruation, what is hinted at, what is symbolically represented, and what is left out of the text altogether (Lupton, 1993, p.3). She finds that for Freud menstruation, alongside the figure of the mother, is seemingly ignored, and/or largely passed over in his theory of psychoanalysis. Menstruation is only mentioned in Freud’s work in association with ‘the horror of blood’ according to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1990):

About what Freud once, in an early paper called ‘menstrual excitation’ and about what menstruation means in the lives of young females, he did not comment (except to note the common ‘horror of blood’ in ‘On the Sexual Theories of Children’ and ‘The Taboo of Virginity’ (Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, 1990, p. 23).

Additionally, in his text, _Totem and Taboo_ (1938), Freud makes only a passing reference to menstruation, commenting that it is ‘dangerous, infected, powerful’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 93). Freud therefore does not appear to explore the meaning of menstruation in psychoanalysis at any great length. However, whilst Freud apparently showed only a ‘slight interest’ in the menstrual cycle, that is, with regards to psychic development in his patients, ‘… his colleague, Wilhelm Fliess, on the other hand, was committed to a concept of ‘periodicity,’ a system of inescapable rhythms in both men and women that Fliess tabulated on the basis of a twenty-eight-day menstrual cycle’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 17). Fliess was a nose, ear, and throat specialist from Berlin, author of seventeen publications, none of which are available in English translation. In his preface to ‘The Nose and the Female Sex Organs’ (1897), Fliess linked the complex relationship between ‘the nose, the female sex organs, and the menstrual process’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 19). Fliess believed in the existence of a ‘periodic pattern’ in men and women, whereby the female interval was set at twenty-eight days, and the male interval was set at twenty-three days, and related to his ideas on bisexuality.
Moreover, Freud became interested, to some extent in Fliess’s idea of periodicity, even whilst he apparently didn’t incorporate it into his theory of psychoanalysis.\(^7\)

On the surface Freud’s writing may not appear to relate to Lupton’s idea of menstruation as good blood connected with creativity. However, Lupton points out that Freud’s libido is a metaphor for menstruation and is an active creative drive in women, which can potentially be a positive phenomenon. Lupton suggests that the metaphor of the libido in psychoanalysis is a symbolic reference to menstruation, whereby metaphor is part of the elaborate ‘psychoanalytical system of symbolization,’ which articulates repressed bodily functions (Lupton, 1993, p. 60). Lupton argues that Freud makes several references to a ‘menstrual economics’ whilst working on his libido theory. In a 1986 letter to Fliess, he said, ‘At times of menstruation and of other sexual processes the body produces an increased number of these substances and therefore of these stimuli’ (Freud, 1954, pp.144-145). Lupton interprets this libidinal drive as generating ‘a language of build up and discharge, of damming and facilitation, whereby menstruation becomes a hidden metaphor in Freud’s libidinal theory’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 74). Freud wrote in a letter dated 17 December 1896 of the libido as a ‘28-day anxiety substance,’ which draws obvious connections with Fliess’s theory of periodicity, and infers a connection with a female cycle, albeit in negative terms. However, in the development of his libido theory Freud apparently dispensed with the notion of periodicity.

Lupton concludes that, ‘Like menstruation, libido signifies build up, break-through, energy, discharge, flow, overflow, a ‘28-day anxiety substance,’ language employed by Freud and his colleagues to describe both menstruation and the libido’ (Lupton, 1993, p. 76). And Lupton further comments: ‘In its analogies to overflow, deflection, streams, discharge, and flooding, the libido appears to imitate the dynamics of the menstrual process …’ (Lupton, 1993, pp. 76-77). Even still, in ‘Transformation of Puberty,’ a section of his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Freud insisted that the libido is always active and masculine whether it occurs in men or women. Freud defines the libido as a psychical energy that relates to ‘sexual excitations’ and underlies ‘mental processes’ (Freud, 1962, p. 83). Freud states that

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7 It is outside the scope of this thesis to investigate Fliess’s theory of periodicity as he did not relate the menstrual cycle to creativity, and it is therefore not relevant to my theory of a menstrual imaginary.
‘…libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespective of whether its object is a man or a woman’ (Freud, 1962, p. 85). Jung by contrast relates the libido to ‘psychic instinctual force in general,’ that is, he does not seek to gender the concept, which Freud critiques as incorrect, and a watering down of the libidinal concept (Freud, 1962, p. 84). Perhaps then, Jung’s notion of the libido as not fixed in gender lends itself more freely to Lupton’s view that the libido is a metaphor for menstruation. In this sense, men would also experience some form of libidinal energy on a periodic basis, which doesn’t seem altogether unlikely, though it is not a subject of enquiry for this thesis. According to Lupton, the libido can be interpreted as a metaphor for menstruation that brings about a periodic creative drive in women, and which has the potential to bring about good flow. As such, if women have been socially prevented from making their voices heard under patriarchy then Lupton argues Freud’s libido theory offers a basis for theorising creativity as having a biological basis.

Lupton contributes the important concept of ‘good blood.’ She points out that menstrual blood is the first nourishment received by the foetus in the womb and is therefore a source of life, and nourishment. In these terms cyclically women can think about their wombs in far more positive terms, that is, as a source of nourishment, through which they can renew themselves, and bring about new life from within themselves. Moreover, Lupton links the good blood with ‘creative mana’ that connects menstruation with a sacred and powerful cyclical experience associated with creativity. Furthermore, Lupton makes a convincing argument that Freud’s libido concept is a metaphor for the cyclical creative drive women experience in relation to menstruation.

These precursor writers who are sympathetic to menstruation, even rewriting its negative history, do not propose a menstrual imaginary. In the 1920s and 1930s, Daly identified the existence of a ‘menstrual complex’ and a menstruating mother in literature, and considered Kali to be a menstrual Goddess. And yet, he could only configure the menstruating mother in terrifying terms, as well as relative to male sexuality, whilst he was the first to detect menstrual imagery, and themes in literature. Later, in the 1970s, Shuttle and Redgrove argued that the gifts of menstruation are central to women’s experience. They pointed out that a ‘primary’ and ‘imagistic’ process connected with ‘prelogical thought,’ and further connected with the dream
realm and poetry, allows for the expression of a symbolic language by women periodically. Shuttle and Redgrove further suggested that a psychical process of descent into an animalistic imaginary otherworld has occurred historically in traditional shamanic cultures, as well as in antiquity, for the purpose of divination, and is connected with the menstrual cycle. Irigaray theorised ‘an economy of fluids,’ in the 1970s, as an important source of women’s writing, although she did not identify this as explicitly menstrual. Nonetheless, she alerted our attention to the possibility of a psychic economy of menstruation, connected to creativity, and particularly to writing. Influenced by Irigaray, Lupton more recently theorised ‘good blood’ as a source of female nourishment and used Jung’s term ‘creative mana’ to describe the creative waste that women cyclically experience, which is connected with self-renewal. Moreover, she linked menstruation to Freud’s libido concept and argued that the libido is potentially a metaphor for a periodic creative drive present in women.

In the following chapters, I will look at the writings of two other major precursors to a menstrual imaginary. Whilst, Cixous proposes a feminine writing in ‘white ink,’ I will find a related concept of ‘red ink’ to be present in her work, though submerged. Although Cixous alerts us to the existence of ‘a voice of milk and blood,’ it is the bloody aspect that seems to be neglected in her own writing. Moreover, I consider Kristeva’s theory of abject things and states in relation to the male poet and his writing practice, and alternatively consider the female poet’s writing practice, which occurs in relation to abject things and states, particularly menstrual blood. Furthermore, I suggest that women may not deem this process of writing the abject as quite so horrific in character, but rather as life affirming. Whilst these precursors identify menstrual significance, concepts, and links with creativity, none actually seek to outline specifically a detailed theory around women’s menstruation and creativity. If we gather these writers and their ideas together into an overarching concept of a menstrual imaginary it will hopefully lead to a better understanding of women’s creative process and work, as well as a richer understanding of what menstruation means to women.

In my view, women can potentially benefit from pursuing a psychic trajectory that can be articulated symbolically towards the voicing of their menstrual cycle. It is my belief that the most valuable meaning of menstruation to women, besides the physical process of ending and commencing a new cycle, is access to a frequently under
utilised source of creativity. By undertaking to explore their menstrual imaginaries, women can add to an existing symbolic repository, which has been depicted by women in writing, and through a range of creative practices, as I will demonstrate in the final chapter. Moreover, recognition of the existence of a menstrual imaginary will act as a counterweight to the menstrual taboo, which still manifests globally through negative attitudes to the menstrual cycle, such as the view that menstruation is a symptom of potential menstrual/mental illness. It is therefore up to women to speak about just what this highly symbolic flow means to them, particularly in order to combat the negative culture of menstruation in patriarchal societies of the West. In my view, menstruation can be considered ‘good blood’ or good flow related to creativity and psychic life, which needs to be depicted in the ‘red ink’ of feminist creativity and activism.
Chapter Two

Hélène Cixous: A Voice of Milk and Blood

Becoming a Woman?

‘In me the word of blood, which will not cease before my end’ (Cixous, 1991, p.5).

In this chapter, I will focus on the writings of Hélène Cixous, particularly her essays ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975), and ‘Coming to Writing’ (1976), to seek evidence of a subsumed menstrual narrative. In my view, Cixous comes closest to a concept of a menstrual imaginary without actually theorising it, since she tends to focus on the aesthetic motif of ‘white ink’ in her work, which she discusses in close proximity to the procreative female body, and which she celebrates as a source of nourishment that is related to a vital feminine writing practice (Cixous 1994, p. 83). Whilst Cixous does draw our attention to the importance of a voice of ‘milk and blood,’ it is mostly at a subterranean level that we can find evidence for a menstrual narrative running through Cixous’s writing. At the level of the text, Cixous focuses on a feminine imaginary that women can draw on in relation to ‘white ink,’ or nourishing ink, associated with the mother’s milk. I will explore the concept of a feminine writing in red ink, with reference to Cixous’s ‘white ink,’ as well as considering what Louise Bourgeois has referred to as a ‘volcanic unconscious,’ in relation to the concept of a menstrual imaginary. I will argue that the idea of red ink offers a poetic source of inspiration for women artists and writers, which periodically erupts from the procreative woman’s body, and becomes a source of creativity associated with birth, death, rebirth, pain, pleasure, self-renewal, and the shattering of taboos. Blood surfaces in Cixous’s work, but does not fully emerge. At such times, Cixous seems to be writing in ghostly red ink. As such, Cixous is the first major writer to consider menstruation in relation to creativity, ahead of both Irigaray and Kristeva.

It might be worth briefly considering whether it is Cixous’s Jewish heritage that explains her reluctance consciously to explore red ink. Feminist theorist Jane Ussher gives an account of the orthodox Jewish practice of ‘niddah’ whereby women are deemed unclean during their menstruation and must be separated, contained, controlled, and follow a strict code of ritual law, which is enforced by the women themselves. However, as Ussher points out, not all orthodox Jewish women are
involved in such heavy policing of their bodies; many resist the meticulous cleansing and aversion to menstrual blood, instead using the time to reconnect with themselves, and revitalise. Cixous is not an orthodox Jewish woman and clearly it is her intention to work against such a policing of feminine subjectivity, through a self-exploration in poetic writing that unveils her sexual difference, and touches on women’s collective maternal experience. In fact, Cixous writes her own ‘coming to writing’ against patriarchy through appropriating a maternal ‘white ink’ that nourishes her voice, but which also crosses over at times in my view to become red ink, and to touch on a transformative, or ‘good abyss,’ as well as the realm of the animal. Cixous prefers to write in ‘white ink,’ rather than red ink. And yet, it is at a sub-textual level of her writing that a menstrual narrative can be detected and interpreted, in order to renew positively female identity culturally, against the patriarchal taboo on women’s sexual difference.

It is also significant that Cixous’s mother was a midwife and during her upbringing Cixous witnessed many women birthing, which must have impacted on her, and which we might conclude contributes to her apparent interest in a maternal figure in her work. Cixous’s writing establishes the right/rite/write of women to trace the symbolic to the very ‘limit of the speaking being,’ to ‘primal repression,’ and the maternal other, in forging a feminine imaginary (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 17-18). In these terms, Cixous’s writing serves as a possible template for women to chart their own life experience in ‘coming to write’ their feminine imaginaries, discovered by journeying into/through an abyss, which is transformative, and offers personal renewal. In fact, Cixous’s essay The Laugh of the Medusa, charts a woman poet’s journey into the ‘good abyss,’ which can also be thought of as an exploration of a volcanic unconscious, as I will discuss. Importantly, Cixous’s journey into the ‘good abyss’ differs from Kristeva’s journey into the abject, in so far as Cixous is centrally concerned with what this journey means for a woman. Kristeva’s concept of the

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8 Feminist theorist Jane M. Ussher reveals how some orthodox Jewish women have taken on the role of self-surveillance in order to contain and control their fecund bodies in the area of menstruation. Ussher draws on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance in order to explore the idea of ‘construction and regulation of femininity through fecundity’ that builds the feminine subject within normative structures of social power (J.M. Ussher, 2006, p.4). Women come to survey and police their own fecundity as an abject thing, a potentially horrific episode, which is mad, bad, or dangerous. Here Ussher engages with Michelle Foucault’s concept of ‘self-surveillance,’ in order to argue that women are continually engaged in a ‘self-policing’ of their own femininity.
abject focuses on the male poet’s journey, frequently into the darkness of a woman’s source, as I will discuss in the following chapter.

In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous describes her first menstruation. She says: ‘I got my period – as late as possible. I would so much have liked to take myself for a ‘woman’’ (Cixous, 1991, p. 27). Delaying menstruation was desirable to Cixous in order to stave off her entrance into ‘becoming a woman’ through the bodily act of menstruating, since becoming a woman also meant to her a domestic role, in which women were expected to reproduce, to ‘lay’ like a caged hen does (Cixous, 1991, p. 27). Cixous is speaking from her own personal subjectivity of being an Algerian exile, a Jew, and a woman, which she has referred to as a condition of being triply oppressed. She argues that she is more interested in becoming her ‘self’ than a woman. In a broader sense, Cixous is also speaking of the oppressive condition of becoming a woman, which she associates here with menarche, and which potentially inhibits the positive development of women’s selfhood in certain cultures. Yet, paradoxically becoming her self seems to be closely related to adopting a liberating feminine writing practice related to her body. Cixous’s ‘red ink’ then is perhaps exiled fluid, or indeed diasporic fluid, which threatens to return, to erupt, and haunts her writing. However, whilst I agree that we can establish a feminine imaginary in Cixous’s work, she herself does not explicitly relate it to women’s menstrual cycle, which is central to my argument.

A Feminine Imaginary

‘Coming to Writing’ can be considered Cixous’s climax of ‘écriture feminine’ in relation to her other theoretical writings between 1975-77, which have been grouped together as charting the development of ‘a woman-centred theoretical position,’ or a feminine writing, for which Cixous has largely been celebrated in the English speaking world, even though she is also a prolific writer of avant-garde fictions (Penrod, 1996, p. 24). In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ as with her other ‘écriture feminine’ texts, Cixous attempts to re-map women’s bodies against an identity based on ‘ethical, textual, and political difference’ as demarcated by the social framework, toward a re-thinking of sexual difference (Shiach, 1991, p. 2). Cixous rigorously

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9 Cixous’ father was a Pied-Noir Seraphic Jew, who died when she was young. Cixous has written that her father is a major influence in her writing, and no doubt his Jewish diasporic identity has partially shaped her sense of self.
questions the structures of sexual difference that forge subjectivity, and which only tolerate otherness when it is repressed in the production of a phallocentric discourse. She conducts this enquiry in her essay ‘Coming to Writing’ with particular reference to the female body that potentially menstruates, gestates, gives birth, lactates, and brings forth other fluids, positioned in phallocentric discourse along a fault line of nature and culture, which Cixous contests through her writing style itself. Even though ‘Coming to Writing’ was written a year after ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ I will focus on it first because it helps to establish the important concept of a ‘white ink,’ which is related to red ink, present on a subterranean level in Cixous’s writing.

In ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous achieves a feminine writing not just through the theoretical rigour of the text, but also through the nature of her writing technique. In her introduction to ‘Coming to Writing,’ feminist theorist Susan Rubin Suleiman points out that Cixous gives birth to a ‘free-flowing’ writing that can be connected with the automatic writing techniques employed by the surrealists. Cixous’s writing approaches a feminisation of an avant-garde that echoes the situationists, surrealists, and post-structuralist writings of French theorist, Jacques Derrida (Suleiman, 1991, p. x). Moreover, this ‘free-flowing’ approach to writing gives Cixous’s essay a manifesto-like tone. Of course, ‘Coming to Writing’ followed up what has been called Cixous’s ‘angry/essay/manifesto/poem’ ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (Suleiman, 1991, p. xvi). One has the sense that she is writing on the edge of a precipice in ‘Coming to Writing,’ returning from Medusa’s lair, which has been illuminated by a feminine writing. This is to say that Cixous skirts the edge of reason in ‘Coming to Writing;’ she explores the liminal zone most frequently occupied by the witch, or the sorceress, who is culturally split off from the hysteric, and indeed the menstruating woman.

Her exploration of the outer limits of woman’s body and its reproductive processes is significant, even whilst it is now an historised moment in women’s writing. Cixous is able to depict a sexual difference that is drawn through her own personal narrative, which is liberating, and has the effect of positively renewing female identity, and writing.

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10 Cixous takes post-structuralist theorist Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘logocentrism’ that refutes the claims to truth of the ‘historico-metaphysical epoch,’ which has informed language, and the sign, and adapts it to reveal how discourse has come into being through male symbolic economy.
Maybe I have written to see; to have what I never would have had; so that having would be the privilege not of the hand that takes and encloses, of the gullet, of the gut; but of the hand that points out, of fingers that see, that design, from the tips of the fingers that transcribe by the sweet dictates of vision. From the point of view of the soul’s eye: the eye of a woman’s soul. From the point of view of the Absolute, in the proper sense of the word: separation.

Writing to touch with letters, with lips, with breath, to caress with the tongue, to lick with the soul, to taste the blood of the beloved body, of life in its remoteness; to saturate the distance with desire; in order to keep it from reading you (Cixous, 1991, p. 4).

Here Cixous’s exploration of writing in order to see, to have, to touch, to bleed, and feel the world reveals how she seamlessly transitions between body and writing, in order to elaborate a woman’s experience, which has the effect of revitalising women’s writing.

In ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous identifies the maternal body as a significant point of engagement with the politics of sexual difference. She speculates that through birth women have a heightened relationship with their bodies. Cixous doesn’t attempt to align women’s body with nature, rather viewing women’s bodies as cultural markers that draw on the natural world. Her interest in the maternal body has come under critique for being essentialist, in the sense that her focus on the maternal body as a means of privileging women’s connection with her body, and the writing of her body, signifies ‘a return to the certainties of biology, and the ‘naturalness’ of motherhood’ (Shiach, 1991, p. 20). This critique suggests that Cixous is one step away from re-inscribing women’s anatomy as destiny.

In her 1985 text *Sexual/Textual Politics*, feminist theorist Toril Moi finds Cixous’s ideas on the feminine imaginary politically naïve. Moi argues that Cixous’s ‘feminine writing’ can be firmly placed within the confines of the ‘Lacanian Imaginary,’ particularly in the sense that ‘difference is abolished’ (Moi, 1985, p. 117). Moi points out that:

Such an emphasis on the Imaginary can explain why the writing woman enjoys such extraordinary freedom in Cixous’s universe. In the Imaginary mother and child are part of a fundamental unity: they are one. Protected by the all-powerful Good Mother, the writing woman can always and everywhere feel deeply secure and shielded from danger: nothing will ever harm her, distance and separation will never disable her (Moi, 1985, p. 117).

Notwithstanding this apparent enclosure of Cixous’s imaginary womanhood, in which the mother is a mythical, even a biblical or spiritual being who is venerated, all
powerful, celebrated as a source of life, and who seeks to give birth to her writing practice repeatedly, it is still scintillating to read of an alternative view of maternity in which the procreative female body is celebrated, rather than denigrated.

In fact, what Moi refers to as Cixous’s ‘utopian vision of female creativity’ in ‘Coming to Writing,’ potentially offers an imaginary of a woman’s cyclical body as wild poetics, an infringement on the realm of the animal, through which we can relearn to see with woman-sense blood-words, symbols, and meanings that conveys a femininity with vitality, but which is not necessarily for everybody (Moi, 1985, p. 121). Cixous’s tactics are to overthrow poetically, to come at rational discourse armed with a woman’s multiple tongues, blood tongues:

> Writing is good: it’s what never ends. The simplest, most secure other circulates inside me. Like blood: there’s no lack of it. It can be impoverished. But you manufacture it and replenish it. In me is the word of blood, which will not cease before my end (Cixous, 1991, p. 4-5).

Moreover, Cixous’s writing of sexual economy invokes a life writing, against death. Cixous is able to give a voice to a female figure who menstruates, ovulates, potentially gestates and births, lactates, and makes love, and in so doing undermines patriarchal taboos on the female body, encouraging women to question patriarchal ideology. Certainly, Cixous privileges the mother’s voice, but it is from within a world in which the father’s voice has been privileged far too long, and as such Cixous’s writing seeks to redress the balance.

In my view, it is precisely because women’s sexed bodies are cultural bearers of meaning that have been taken over by institutions and various social registries, which brings about the need for women to write against their categorisation as reproductive other. Women do have a heightened relationship to their bodies through menstruating, gestating, birthing, ovulating, lactating, mothering and going through menopause. These experiences are all linked, are moments that women’s bodies infringe upon the natural world, the animalistic, and the abyss, all areas that threaten the male order of rationality, civilisation, and control. I refer to nature not in the sense of a culture/nature binary in which one occurs to the exclusion of the other, rather in the sense that women’s bodies are cultural markers, able to infringe upon a natural world as necessary counterpart of woman’s experience. When women *come to write* their enquiries on the margins, they actually transgress the borders of their body and explode old ideas regarding what constitutes a female subject in Western culture.
Furthermore, if their writing is sometimes characteristically emotional, or highly imaginative, or intuitive in style, then this can be seen to be the privileged right of women (and men) to choose to write this way, on account of their being whole human beings. It is reductive to exclude women from such writing on the basis of essentialism.

**White Ink or Milk Ink**

I wish to draw on Cixous’s idea of ‘white ink’ in order to propose a related, but different concept of red ink. ‘White ink’ is nourishing, mother’s milk, virginal even. Red ink is associated with blood, menstruation, wounds, death, and rebirth. Where Cixous focuses on ‘white ink’ as maternal, nourishing, a source of creation, I will focus on red ink as disruptive, explosive, and able to shatter taboos; this mode of writing is present in Cixous’s work at a subsumed level. It is my contention that there is power in the idea that every time a woman menstruates she rebirths her self, both with and against abjection. It is perhaps the fact that menstruation and the concept of a periodic red ink is associated with pain as well as pleasure that it is more difficult to explore, and yet its imaginary is also extremely important for women.

In a book of interviews conducted with Cixous titled *White Ink*, Christiane Makward asks Cixous about the development of her ‘feminine perspective’ in relation to writing, and particularly how it has evolved in relation to concepts of ‘the body, space, to natural cycles, to matter’ (Makward interviews Cixous in *White Ink*, 2008, p.66). Cixous responds that the feminine perspective extends from the body and it is in this sense that it should be explored, from the ‘functional’ to the ‘libidinal,’ and the ‘imaginary.’ She points out that:

> It is beyond doubt that femininity derives from the body, from the anatomical, the biological difference, from a whole system of drives which are radically different for women than for men. But none of this exists in a pure state: it is always, immediately ‘already spoken’, caught in representation, produced culturally. This does not prevent the libidinal economy of woman from functioning in a specific manner which modifies her rapport with reality (Cixous, 2008, p. 66).

Cixous discusses a new work that she was then writing at the time of the interview titled *La Noire Vole*, which she says is an exploration of femininity with regards to a woman’s body, with particular emphasis on ‘blood,’ ‘breast,’ ‘milk,’ as well as ‘a meditation on the relation between text and milk,’ and ‘between text and breath’
(Cixous, 2008, p. 66). She states that in her text there is a sense of charting a dark continent in white ink, in a state of continual birthing.

We can clearly find evidence in Cixous’s body of work as a whole for an imagined woman’s body that continually births, or rebirths itself in feminine ‘white ink’ through writing. And, it is possible to consider that in this following statement Cixous is potentially speaking about her entire oeuvre, and not just her work *La Noire Vole*. Here she elaborates on her idea of ‘white ink’ and the ‘dark continent’ of woman.

My text is written in white and black, in ‘milk’ and ‘night’, in fact, and not at all as Mallarmé said: one writes in black ink on white. No, one writes in white, it is in white ink, the white ink which is also the ink of the black woman: this text is called ‘La Noire vole’. For me it really does come through the Bible: ‘I am black but beautiful’. In Freud, I don’t think so. I think it is a metaphor which comes quite naturally, which belongs to a kind of pseudo-colonialist imagery (Cixous, 2008, p. 76).

So, for Cixous, it is a ‘white ink’ written by the metaphorical black woman, or so called ‘dark continent,’ the repressed of culture who returns, rises up, to speak her truth. To this end, it is Cixous’s project to invest in the ‘power of language’ as a symbolic force for rupturing women’s identity at the level of culture, through writing in ‘white ink,’ towards the possibility of writing ‘new, sustainable, forms of subjectivity’ (Shiach, 1991, p. 68). Cixous is interested in exploring a feminine writing practice in close proximity to the prohibited figure of the mother and particularly her ‘white ink’ on black skin, perhaps the body of the Black Goddess (Cixous, 1994, p. 83). In ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous dually explores what she calls a ‘blood tongue’ associated with the mother, through the narration of her own personal history, on a subterranean level. What is lost by not actually naming this red fluid is the idea of a menstrual imaginary, that is, a potential source of literary, poetic, and artistic images and motifs, which serve as a source, or well spring for women in their creative endeavours. Hence, there is the sense that a ghostly red ink haunts Cixous’s text, just under the surface, at the subterranean level. It is an unruly, eruptive, and animalistic voice, which cannot be contained. It is a menstrual voice.

**Ghostly Red Ink**

In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous theorises the mother’s fluids, specifically milk as nourishing her writing practice. She desires to give her fluids back to the mother through writing:
I was raised on the milk of words. Language nourished me...In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know, I don’t need to enter it, it surges from me, it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious. The language that women speak when no one is there to correct them (Cixous, 1991, p. 21).

Cixous refers to the motherly substance of honeyed milk in relation to her unconscious and her writing practice. In fact, Cixous’s writing of the woman’s body is filled with references to the repressed and is therefore somewhat implicated in Freudian theory. However, she is dually critiquing the psychoanalytical model of constructing human sexuality, insofar as she is seeking out a maternal entity that is poetic, brimming with fluids, located on an outermost limit of the unconscious, which explodes patriarchal discourse. However, whilst Cixous references the maternal ‘milk and honey’ that nourishes her writing practice, she doesn’t refer here to the red fluids that the mother discharges both during menstruation and at birth. A periodical red ink can be a powerful aesthetic motif for enquiring into some of the most intimate space of women’s experience. Certainly, the maternal figure is at the forefront of Cixous’s writing, and yet her menstrual fluids, or her blood, is passed over in favour of her milk.

Cixous’s own mother was a midwife. In her writing she draws on her experience of witnessing women birthing during her upbringing. She states that she has been privy to ‘the resources of femininity’ awakening, on display, awesome in their power (Cixous, 1991, p. 31). Cixous therefore likens birthing to ‘coming to writing’ and giving birth to a text in ‘white ink,’ or milk ink.

It was the woman at the peak of her flesh, her pleasure, her force at last delivered, manifest. Her secret. And if you could see yourself, how could you help loving yourself? She gives birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman. She has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! Confusion! What’s come over her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I’m brimming over! My breasts are overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I’m hungry, too. The milky taste of ink! (Cixous, 1991, p. 31)

The absence of any blood here is interesting, especially given her many references to blood in the proceeding text, such as ‘blood tongue,’ ‘blood rapport,’ ‘world of blood’ within, as well as ‘blood of the beloved body’ as I will go onto show (Cixous, 1991, p. 4). What of the voluminous血液s that are evacuated at birth, what of the menstrual-like fluids, containing not just bloods, but various other bodily fluids, which cascade from the mother’s body after the child is born? Cixous doesn’t mention
these bloods, even though they seem to be present as a subterranean source. In fact, these fluids are very related to menstrual discharge. If birthing a child is likened by Cixous to giving birth to a text whereby women draw on a maternal source, coming to the crux of their self, putting words on paper, extracting from their bodies an ink jet, at the peak of their flesh, then why couldn’t menstruation be related to writing? Certainly, menstrual fluids are a waste product of the body, but their evacuation from the body, their passing, just like the birthing of a child, results in new life, insight, desire, and love.

French theorist Georges Bataille (1897-1962) states in *Eroticism*, that St Augustine pointed out that the sexual channels of the body are also the sewers of the body, and in these terms are shameful, even obscene. “*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur,*” he said – “we are born between faeces and urine” (St Augustine cited by Bataille, 1990, pp. 57-58). What St Augustine doesn’t point out is that we are also born amidst the great gushing of blood at birth, reminiscent of the menstrual fluids, which women pass on a monthly basis. Menstruation, alongside other excreta, is a waste product of the human body. Yet, it is a function of reproduction – it is a life making fluid – even whilst it seems overwhelmingly to symbolise a bloody wound, a terrifying abyss opened up within women. Bataille speaks of a ‘void’ opening up within us in relation to this discourse of reproduction and death, a taboo space, into which eroticism feeds. According to Bataille the starting point of eroticism is ‘sexual reproductive activity’ that struggles forth during the course of a life, and which becomes independent of reproduction for a wider, and more exploratory field of human sensuality, especially in relation to death (Bataille, 1991, p. 11). The erotic gulf, the separation between beings, that which makes us discontinuous beings, is implied through reproduction, intimately linking our function as life making to our function as death absorbing through our eroticsims. Interestingly, Bataille seems to be theorising eroticism in relation to man as active desiring erotic subject in charge of the discourse of eroticism, in which women are cast as passive.

The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person … in the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive (Bataille, 1990, p.17).

But, what is needed is to think of women as active erotic subjects in relation to their reproductive status and their sexual cycle. It is this gulf between beings that has been
the main domain of man’s eroticism, which can be continually explored by women. Perhaps, menstruation opens up out of the erotic gulf between beings, implied through reproduction, and related to death, since menstruation means that a woman will not have a child. Menstruation brings about rebirth of the self on a cyclical basis and is the source of a powerful female creativity that can be harnessed through women’s writing in red ink. It features as a subterranean source of femininity, which remains submerged in Cixous’s work.

A Blood Tongue

In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous makes several references to blood in relation to the development of her creativity and writing practice. As I have already mentioned menstruation contains some blood, broken down uterine lining, mucus from the vagina, as well as other fluids. Yet, menstruation as blood loss is focused on in mythology, psychoanalysis, and medicine, becoming a powerful, and meaningful symbol to humans. Moreover, menstruation as blood loss implies a wound, a bloody vortex opening out of women on a monthly basis. It is the ‘bloodiness of menstruation’ that links it with nature, which is constructed as the binary opposite of culture (Walker, 1997, p. 11). Of course, women’s bodies have therefore been aligned more closely with the natural world, through their biology, in a negative sense, as in psychoanalysis, in which women’s sexual difference is constructed as less civilised, and more susceptible to neurotic conditions. It therefore seems reasonable to consider that Cixous’s multiple references to the symbolic power of blood in relation to her development of a feminine writing practice can potentially be linked to menstruation.

Cixous ruminates on a writing practice that is given to the self, is a gift, and is sustained through love, becoming a ‘blood-rapport,’ by which Cixous means to point to the coming through the body of writing, onto the page and into the world (Cixous, 1991, p. 4). The ‘blood-rapport’ is one of several references to ‘blood’ that Cixous makes in her essay in relation to developing a writing practice. She writes about the ‘blood of the beloved body’ and of ‘the word of blood’ (Cixous, 1991, pp. 4-5). She discusses the text as a bodily substance that lives and dies and is made of ‘paper and blood,’ of ‘flesh and tears’ (Cixous, 1991, p.13). Moreover, Cixous points out that women are somehow considered ‘sick,’ in need of being examined, sent to the doctor’s surgery to be looked over, pried open, if they wish to write. As if they have
no right to write. On an imaginary visit to the doctor Cixous relates that the doctor asks her to open up her mouth and stick out her tongue.

I stick out my tongue. I have three of them. Three tongues? Pardon me. And what’s more, he doesn’t know that I have one or two that aren’t attached there, or perhaps just one that changes and multiplies, a blood tongue, a night tongue, a tongue that traverses my regions in every direction, that lights their energies, urges them on and makes my secret horizons speak. Don’t tell him, don’t tell him. He’ll cut out your tongues … (Cixous, 1991, pp. 32-33).

She has many tongues: a ‘night tongue,’ a ‘blood tongue,’ and even a third, a multiple tongue that is not attached, rather it moves freely about her body (Cixous 1991, p. 32-33). Is this blood tongue in fact a menstrual tongue? Cixous does not directly identify with a menstrual voice, or indeed with red ink, but it seems to be a subterranean source of her writing practice, related through the maternal figure. It is perhaps exiled from her text. And yet, it cannot be entirely banished. It threatens to return.

Approximately every month a woman gives bloody birth to herself, against death, becomes herself somehow, or is in exile from herself: she menstruates. Sometimes she connects with herself more profoundly, sometimes she effaces herself, but she is always approaching her periodicity.11 Similarly, Cixous writes of her cultural exile as ‘Jewoman,’ as an Algerian person, but she is also speaking of a broader condition of the exile of women from the ‘social scene,’ to history, to progress, to nations … She could also be inadvertently describing the sense of exile that many women ‘undergo’ prior to menstruation, and/or during menstruation on a cyclical basis. In fact, many women might benefit from ‘undergoing’ writing in relation to their menstrual cycle in order to defend themselves against exile, because their women’s body can be spoken, acknowledged, valued, and celebrated as a menstruating woman’s body in Western patriarchy. In so doing, women potentially defend themselves against the dominant discourses on menstruation throughout history; these are the premenstrual syndrome, hysteria, witchcraft, monstrousness, and a general idea of feminine vulnerability, and of women being in the state of mental disorder. Red ink then becomes a very useful mode of exploring a vital aspect of femininity.

11 Unless of course, she has suspended her periodicity through cycle stopping birth control pills, or has amenorrhea, which is the medical condition of not menstruating. There is also the possibility that an athlete’s menstruation will cease, and that a transgender person might choose to take hormone pills that suppress their menstruation.
**Medusan Ink: Writing the Volcanic Unconscious**

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way. There’s no room for her if she is not a he. If she’s a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter (Cixous, 1994, p. 88).

Medusa is a beautiful figure of antiquity, as well as a monstrous one. Canonically emphasis is on her horrific face, her serpentine hair, and of course her gaze, which can turn men to stone. Cixous shifts the focus onto her beauty and her laughter in her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa.’ David Leeming looks closely at the Medusa myth in *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time*, and points out that:

> The Story of the Medusa, then, is well known, but the biographer must go beyond the reported ‘facts’. Questions remain. Medusa is, after all, a mythical personage who, given her power to fascinate, possibly has a source of meaning that transcends the somewhat absurd and unbelievable events of her myth. Is there a shadow meaning behind Medusa? Is her famous head a mask behind which aspects of human nature hide? (Leeming, 2013, p. 18)

It is Cixous who penetrates the symbolic power that Medusa wields, particularly in relation to the maternal body, creativity, and specifically a feminine writing practice. In her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ Cixous makes a special claim for the inexhaustible resource of women’s imaginary in relation to women’s procreative bodies and particularly the figure of Medusa.

In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ Cixous alerts us to the need for women to access their bodily drives as a means of gaining access to a vital feminine imaginary. She talks about ‘waves’ and ‘floods’ of poetry, of ‘outbursts’ that can be expressed by women (Cixous, 1994, p. 79). For Cixous, this writing practice constitutes a return to culture, as from Freud’s ‘dark continent,’ which is historically how phallocentric culture has discursively positioned women, as a dark dangerous territory:

> Where is the ebullient, infinite woman, immersed as she was in her naïveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn’t been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a…divine composure), hasn’t accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn’t thought she was
sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble (Cixous, 1994, p. 79).

It is this repressed landscape, this ‘dark continent’ constructed through rational discourse, of an imposed masculine symbolic authority, which Cixous seeks to critique. And, perhaps Freud’s ‘dark continent’ is also directly related to Africa as place of human origin, in which case to return to the dark continent for a woman would be to seek to re-imagine the feminine in relation to the black woman’s body, as a source of human life connected with the Black Goddess. This is how Cixous positions Medusa, as a sacred black maternal figure of antiquity who is laughing, and bringing forth a feminine imaginary, which has been forgotten. Thus, her Medusa is directly positioned in opposition to the canonical myth of Medusa as monstrous.

It is with reference to Freud’s concept of woman as a dark continent that Cixous invokes a re-configuration of Medusa and the unconscious as a means of bringing forth a poetic feminine writing. ‘Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women’ (Cixous, 1994, p. 81). And yet, she argues for a woman’s writing practice that draws from her libidinal surges, her erotic drives, against the pathologising of women’s bodies, against the notion of woman-as-monster who must be controlled, and contained. In my view, Cixous seeks to rupture the authority of patriarchal ideology and male rationality by arguing for what is best described as an eruptive unconscious. Moreover, Cixous in fact refers to a feminine text as ‘volcanic’ (Cixous, 1994, p. 88).

The concept of a volcanic unconscious is a re-configuration of abjection, an outer limit of creativity that is periodically eruptive, and is intimately associated with the abyss, and the animalistic procreative body, which can potentially be drawn on by women, and particularly the female writer/poet in the forging of her own menstrual imaginary. Celebrated French/American artist Louise Bourgeois was one of the first people to discuss the concept of a volcanic unconscious, and it is with reference to this concept that I develop my concept of a menstrual imaginary. The volcanic unconscious is a pertinent concept for a theorisation of a menstrual imaginary because

12 Louise Bourgeois wrote in her diary about the shocking nature of her work: ‘The only access we have to our volcanic unconscious and to the profound motives for our actions and reactions is through the choices of our encounters with specific people’ (Bourgeois, 1998, p. 130).
it draws attention to metaphors of eruption from the depths and a taking from the unconscious for inspiration. Moreover, an active volcano is not unlike a powerful menstruation – a hot lava, a warm viscosity made of multiple fleshes, and fluids, red, dark, and chaotic, surging, sometimes explosively, out of a womb of the earth. The volcanic is a great mother periodically bringing up the most active elements of the psyche, which can no longer be repressed. Cixous constantly draws on this eruptive fluid of the Great Mother that feeds her writing practice, and which she clearly reveres.

Cixous’s volcanic unconscious then can be considered to be a configuration of writing abjection (though written prior to Kristeva’s writing of the abject) and certainly unique in its own encounters with an abyss that is transformative, as well as positive, rather than terrifying or disgusting. In my view, Cixous’s encounter with the mythological female figure of Medusa gives rise to the volcanic unconscious. Cixous draws on the mythological figure of Medusa to bring out her own feminine imaginary in poetic writing. It is at such times in Cixous’s writing that she seems to swap her aesthetic motif of ‘white ink’ for a red ink, which runs beneath the surface of her text.

Cixous therefore seems to be referencing writing in relation to an imaginary maternal power that has been repressed, but returns, to exert its influence in red ink, rather than in an exclusively ‘white ink.’

We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies – we are black and we are beautiful.

We’re stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we’re not afraid of lacking (Cixous, 1994, p. 80).

The mother’s blood flows in poetic writing. Cixous describes a linguistic maternal influence that is rhythmic, prosodic, and can be drawn on. It is a poetic evocation of woman’s force, desire, and power to erupt into language in relation to the maternal figure (Cixous, 1994, p. 83). Could it be that she erupts periodically in a controversial red ink, or a ghostly red ink, which I argue haunts Cixous’s writing?

As I have already pointed out, Cixous makes a special claim for women’s bodies and a feminine imaginary trapped ‘within’ phallocentric discourse, constricted within
man’s unconscious or conscious construct of the feminine other: a dark continent. She petitions women to write their way out of this exile space, *explosively*.

If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you’ll see with what ease she will spring forth from that ‘within’ where she so drowsily crouched – to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam (Cixous, 1994, p. 87).

It is as if Cixous’s ‘white ink’ has been bitten into, so that it bleeds, so that what springs forth from ‘within’ is Medusan ink. Cixous gives a close reading of the Medusa, the so-called monstrous maternal figure, who stands on the cusp of civilisation and is laughing riotously, blowing apart the old law of the symbolic, shattering its structures, its institutions, its old way with her volcanic symbolic guffaws. She is not castrated; that was Freud’s phantasy. Rather, she is the muse of women’s future texts and the ‘new’ feminine writing, which has already happened, and continues to happen in Western culture. According to Cixous it is therefore Medusa’s symbolic strength on which women writing the feminine can draw. Moreover, Cixous urges women to write feminine texts that are eruptive, that blow apart the old law, and its institutions. In fact, Medusan ink is red ink.

Finally, in her essay Cixous talks of woman’s desire to have a child, which she argues is clearly a woman’s choice, to have a child or not, standing against the patriarchal biological determination of woman historically. Cixous points out that giving birth is potentially a drive, a desire, a peak bodily performance, which speaks volumes of women’s strength, and she compares it to writing:

> We won’t advance backward anymore; we’re not going to repress something so simple as the desire for life. Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive – just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood (Cixous, 1994, p. 90).

Cixous suggests that pregnancy is a time when a woman takes power, ‘doubles her market value,’ and ‘takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex’ (Cixous, 1994, p. 90). And of course, we can conceptualise menstruation as a time that a woman acquires body, and sex, which can be written by women. Moreover, women’s blood time is also potentially a time of
drawing on the volcanic unconscious to write in ‘red ink’ of women’s experience, and
add to an already existing menstrual imaginary.

Clearly then, Bourgeois’s volcanic unconscious is important in relation to my theory
of the menstrual imaginary. In The Foundations of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud
and the Birth of the Modern Psyche, theorist Matt Ffytche gives an historical account
of the unconscious prior to psychoanalysis, particularly as it relates to Romantic
psychology and early nineteenth century thought. He points out that the unconscious
doesn’t have a specific ‘provenance,’ rather it is a broad and interdisciplinary concept,
pervading

… psychiatry, medicine and psychology, but also philosophy, religion and metaphysics and
theories of nature and history, as well as more popular psychology and cultural elaborations in
novels, poems and moral essays (Ffytche, 2011, p. 9).

If we think about the unconscious in these broader terms, pre-psychoanalysis, then we
can re-evaluate a concept of the psychic unconscious that reaches beyond Freud and
Jung.

Ffytche sets out the ways that the ‘psychological individual’ seeks to search for new
foundations for a concept of themselves as ‘autonomous rational agents’ in the
Romantic period (Ffytche, 2011, p. 27). He finds that with the emergence of the
unconscious psyche, human subjectivity comes to be understood in terms of the de-
centred subject. ‘There is a process within our minds and bodies which seem to
operate unconsciously, and there are states of mind (dream, madness, poetic
invention) of which we are not wholly consciously in control’ (Ffytche, 2011, p. 27).
Moreover, an unconscious aspect of the human mind comes to be related to
‘processes of nature, empirically (theories of instinct, for instance) or spiritually and
mystically’ (Ffytche, 2011, p. 27). Finally, a dimension of ‘irrationalism’ is built into
subjectivity, which is favoured by German philosopher Friedrich Schelling. In fact, all
of these emerging modalities for thinking the human subject are related to the idea
that the unconscious exists as an organic thing, or state, that sets up a concept of
boundary, which Ffytche doesn’t actually signpost. Perhaps, claiming a concept of the
psychic unconscious aligned with boundary is the most subversive way a woman can
position herself in relation to existing modalities of subjectivity in Western patriarchy.

As Kristeva argues, woman is more closely aligned with boundaries because of her
menstrual cycle and the fact that she gives birth. When a woman menstruates and
gives birth she opens up the borders of her body and transgresses a limit of the
‘proper,’ clean, and ordered body. At such times her psychic unconscious expands to
encompass, or take in the boundary, and see beyond, as I will explain in the next
chapter. At these times a woman can gather to herself new meaning, new ideas, drawn
from her own imaginary, and return through writing, or making art, to share what she
knows about the human subject beyond borders of selfhood in patriarchal culture, thus
undoing the rationalist model, or patriarchal stronghold. Certainly, Cixous’s writing
would agree with the idea of a woman subject armed with procreative powers, a
special mediator of boundaries, who touches on the abyss, not a terrifying abyss,
rather a transformative or good abyss, to return repeatedly in poetic writing. It is this
red ink in women’s writing practice that needs to be identified as a powerful source of
feminine writing, which haunts Cixous’s writing rather than breaks through. It is as if
even with this break-through feminist, there is an unseen pressure to sublimate into
the more seemly, clean and relatively proper whiteness of milk.

Ultimately, Cixous’s writing explores women’s ‘white ink,’ and yet a red ink haunts
her texts as a subterranean source. It remains unnamed by Cixous. However, Cixous
persistently gives us clues as to how women might discover their own flow, river,
‘floodgate,’ ‘waters,’ ‘bloodsong,’ and so on, through an engagement with the
animalistic procreative figure, and the transformative or good abyss, toward a poetic
writing of their own story (Cixous, 1991, p. 56-58). To this end, I have sought to point
out how women can choose to align themselves with a concept of the boundary on a
cycclical basis, and take from the unconscious in the form of imaginary material, in
order to write in red ink. That is not to say that women can’t also write in Cixous’s
‘white ink,’ or even in Mallarmè’s ‘black ink.’ Red ink, however, is not to be
ignored. I have sought to show that red ink is associated with death, rebirth, eruption,
self-renewal, metamorphosis, and the female cycle, and is a very powerful, and often
confronting, mode of poetic writing.

13 In The Process of Art: Nineteenth Century Art Offered to Alain Raitt, Roger Pearson argues that
Mallarmè’s talks of writing in relation to black ink in which the writer attempts to grapple with his/her
existential conundrum and make sense of the universe. For Mallarmè writing in black ink is an attempt
Chapter Three

Julia Kristeva: From Abjection to a Menstrual Imaginary

In this chapter, I will present a close reading of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection, as set out in *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (1982), with particular reference to her theorisation of an imaginary border of consciousness that originates with the maternal body. I will also explore her claim for the semiotic, or pre-linguistic, influence of the maternal figure on the subject, as well as her emphasis on the poet’s encounter with the abject. However, as it is predominantly a male poet that Kristeva considers in relation to abjection, I will alternatively consider the female poet’s journey to confront and in fact overturn the abject. I will argue that the female poet has a different relationship to the abject because of her procreative functions. Moreover, I will find that menstrual blood, which is a heightened symbol of femininity, periodically calls forth a metaphorical language deriving from the mother, bringing about the poetic articulation of a menstrual imaginary, as written by the female poet. Furthermore, the female poet’s periodic confrontation with the abject represents a journey into herself as a means of celebrating her procreative functions and rediscovering her animalism, against the horror historically attributed to the maternal body. It is because the female poet has procreative functions that she is not distanced from the maternal other, unlike the male poet, whose separateness allows him to ‘remove’ himself from the scene of menstruation.

An Archaic Border Signified

In the world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task – a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct – amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject (Kristeva, 1982, p. 18).

In her essay *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva lays down the foundations of the workings of the imagination in relation to abjection. She theorises abjection as an imaginary border that operates at the very limits of consciousness, as ‘a dark revolt against being,’ which threatens the living subject. The abject fascinates desire, even whilst it haunts the subject who encounters it.
What is abject is not my correlative, which providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homogenous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 1-2).

The abject then seems to straddle the unconscious at its outermost limit. It is an ‘autonomous’ imaginary of ‘thoughts’ and ‘affects,’ where meaning collapses. In fact, the subject who encounters the abject is de-stabilised by its very existence, and yet is dually compelled to encounter it, presumably as a means of seeking to understand and reinstitute the self. Even whilst the abject has an atmosphere of the uncanny about it that ‘bears down’ on the subject, and which ‘threatens to annihilate’ him, the abject is necessary to the survival of the self (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).

According to Kristeva the corpse is the utmost in abjection. It is the decaying body without science or God, ‘death infecting life,’ because it reveals what must be pushed aside in order to live. The abject touches on the boundaries of a living being, it represents a real threat, which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Kristeva argues that other improper matter such as menstrual blood, which is expelled periodically from the human body, is also a marker of abjection, stemming as it does from the maternal body. I would like to briefly point out here that Kristeva draws on British anthropologist Mary Douglas in her important work *Purity and Danger; An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), in which she argues that pollutants such as menstrual blood are imbued with meaning in religions, and are in fact divested with a socio-symbolic power, which enforces the logic of religion culturally. It is on this basis that a substance like menstruation is tabooed, becomes an exiled fluid, or indeed abyssal fluid, which Kristeva theorises as abject fluid. However, I will look at menstrual blood more closely later in this chapter.

Kristeva argues that the one for whom the abject exists is beyond the system of unconscious effects, is a ‘deject,’ is ‘separated,’ ‘strays’ from culture, and is likened by Kristeva to the poet (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). The poet is saved from this ‘land of oblivion,’ or sphere of the abyss, through drawing on his jouissance, and which is brought about by a confrontation with the maternal other. And yet, in my view, Kristeva seems problematically to focus on a maternal abjection that only a male poet/
subject confronts and draws on through his imaginary experience. It is therefore an essentialist position that Kristeva holds in relation both to accessing and writing a maternal abjection, which is particular to the male. She writes:

Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their objects, that is, from their representations, out of such a daze he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up – fear (Kristeva, 1982, p. 6).

Has he looked at a Medusa who has petrified him, sent him into a daze? She is a loathsome animal maternal other that he both desires and fears because she has the power to castrate him! As such, Kristeva’s theory of abjection seems to have phallocentric underpinnings that appear to be tied strongly to the imaginary of a male desiring subject. Kristeva therefore conceives of a maternal abyss closed over at birth, revisited by the male subject, through poetic writing, but overlaid with violence, such as in Dante Caligari’s Inferno, and which offers a very masculine view of hell. Kristeva constantly refers to a male gendered subject in her text and she reads only male writers who encounter the abject in their texts, such as Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline, and Joyce. She does not appear to account for a woman’s approach to abjection.

A Maternal Abyss

Kristeva envisages abjection as first forming in relation to the pre-objectal relationship encapsulated in the ‘violent’ separation of the infant’s body from the mother’s body, in order to ‘be,’ and in which a gulf opens up. This constitutes an erotic gulf as Bataille had suggested, which has pre-linguistic, or semiotic strength. It is the deject or the stray, and often the poet, who re-births through this pre-objectal sphere of the maternal other. This is not an other that is incorporated into the self, but rather exists as a sphere of animalism, which cannot be assimilated because it is at a limit of ‘primal repression.’ According to Kristeva:

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representations of sex and murder (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 12-13).
To this end, abjection operates as a body of language expressed through a symptom, a symptom sublimated, kept under control because it is monstrous, a tumor, an alien.

Kristeva therefore finds that we confront the abject in language both through our ‘personal archeology,’ as well as through our encounters with the territories of the animal, as a means of releasing the hold of the maternal entity, and by way of mourning after the loss of it (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13).

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hand of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm – in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for – is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion (Kristeva, 1982, p. 12-13).

This encounter with and releasing of the maternal entity in language is marked by anguish because we both desire its influence, and its release, in the subsequent forging of our own identities. It is extremely important that Kristeva assigns the child’s first influence to the mother, which has an impact on our ongoing development as human beings in culture.

The child can serve its mother as a token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting (Kristeva, 1982, pp.12-13).

Thus, Kristeva argues that the moment of birth is characterised by an ‘immemorial violence,’ both physical and psychical (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10). But, in my experience this crossing over as at birth, the muscular pulsing from the stretched lips of the vagina into the world, is not necessarily physically violent at all, unless the birth is difficult, even dangerous.14 Rather, birthing is an animal act in which the child breaks away from the maternal body, as by muscular expulsion, a continual rhythmic opening, a concentrated effort towards a magnificent releasing of life, which is beautiful, raw, and basic. In these terms, the imaginary maternal border of meaning

14 That is, unless vaginal tearing, or other medical intervention occurs for a woman.
might be re-approached by the poet less violently in language. Perhaps then, what is preserved in the subject and the affect that is carried out is less traumatic, possibly beautiful, and even unique. I will take up this line of argument in relation to a female poet’s approach to the abject later in this chapter. It is important to point out that Kristeva is also asserting the symbolic violence of birthing, the separation of the child from its maternal home, and its constitution is an act clouded by abjection.

Kristeva advises that this struggle to break away from the maternal influence ‘fashions the human being’ and is thereafter drawn upon through jouissance, that is, when repression is relaxed. As Freud argues, what is repressed returns and gains power, is articulated through language, has an influence on the subject (Kristeva, 1982:13). According to Kristeva repression reminds us of the pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and child, which is the ‘semiotic chora.’

Let us enter, for a moment, into that Freudian aporia called primal repression. Curious primacy, where what is repressed cannot really be held down, and where what represses always already borrows its strength and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language. Let us therefore not speak of primacy but of the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect – the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo). Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (Timeus, 48-53), a chora, a receptacle (Kristeva, 1982, pp.13-14).

Kristeva’s semiotic is one of the most important contributions she makes to the field of critical analysis and relates to Freud, and Melanie Klein’s infantile pre-Oedipal stage, as well as Jacques Lacan’s pre-mirror stage. In this ‘strange place’ of the ‘semiotic chora’ the drives of the ‘not yet’ ego hold sway, and are related to the maternal body, which has a pre-linguistic influence on the subject, and brings about a confrontation with abjection. For Kristeva it is therefore a ‘narcissistic crisis’ that the subject encounters through the abject, a weakening of the super ego. Moreover, Kristeva considers the semiotic to be of the drives and instincts related to the maternal body. The semiotic is therefore aligned with rhythms, cadences, and movements of the maternal body that is signified, closely related to the prosody of language, and indeed poetic formulations of language.

The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language – style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject’s judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of
It is the writer or poet’s task to imagine the logic of the abject as a means of transgressing the limits of culture, coming under the sway of the maternal other and her semiotic, temporarily, encountering his personal archeology, and the realm of the animal, before returning to convey the abject in symbolic terms. It is extremely important to understand then that the signification process for Kristeva is devised of these two aspects: the semiotic and the symbolic. It is in these terms that Kristeva’s ‘semiotic chora’ may periodically be abreacted by the male poet when repression is relaxed, or undone.

**The Artist’s Role is to Confront the Abject**

The various means of purifying the abject – the various catharsis – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions (Kristeva, 1982, p. 17).

Kristeva points out that ‘outside of the sacred, the abject is written’ as by the poet/writer whose ‘aesthetic task’ is to trace the limits of the symbolic, of the speaking being, to its lowest mark, its ‘primacy,’ or ‘primal repression,’ which is ‘managed’ by the other, the maternal aspect that is confronted and repelled at the boundary of meaning (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 17-18). As I have already mentioned, Kristeva reads the abject in literature, finding that it unfolds in the writings of Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline, and Joyce. She investigates literary texts written by these male authors in order to account for ‘different psychic structures’ of abjection (Kristeva, 1982, p. 26). Kristeva finds that it is ‘poetic catharsis’ that offers the means of exploring the abject, gives control over our defilements, bringing about a rebirth, and renewal of the self. The abject is therefore to be found in poetic mimesis, extended through speech. It arises through our jouissance, to do with the fascination of the image, of ‘phantasmatic articulations,’ to be explored potentially through poetic writing (Kristeva, 1982, p. 31). And yet, Kristeva warns that writing abjection is ultimately an ‘impossible
catharsis’ related to the wound, which must be kept open. She warns of closing the wound over, of allowing institutions and power structures to eradicate its presence.

Kristeva reclaims the term ‘catharsis’ from its purely therapeutic meaning, with reference to Freud’s use of the term. For Plato catharsis is an ethical concept, to do with logos and the mind, performed as a purification by the ‘wise person,’ or the poet. She points out that for Plato, ‘It is the mind alone, as harmonious wisdom, that insures purity: catharsis has been transformed, where transcendental idealism is concerned, into philosophy’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 28). By contrast, Aristotelian catharsis is aligned with ‘sacred incantation’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 28).

Through the mimesis of passions – ranging from enthusiasm to suffering – in ‘language with pleasurable accessories,’ the most important of which being rhythm and song (see the Poetics), the soul reaches orgy and purity at the same time. What is involved is a purification of body and soul by means of a heterogeneous and complex circuit, going from ‘bile’ to ‘fire,’ from ‘manly warmth’ to the ‘enthusiasm’ of the ‘mind.’ Rhythm and song hence arouse the impure, the other of mind, the passionate – corporeal – sexual – virile, but they harmonize it, arrange it differently than the wise man’s knowledge does (Kristeva, 1982, p. 28).

Moreover, Aristotle believed that there is a ‘discourse of sex’ that has nothing to do with knowledge per se, which is the only possible catharsis, and which brings about a purification from the impure. The poet therefore brings about poetic catharsis through his confrontation with the abject in both these forms.

**Silencing/ Un-silencing the Mother**

Kristeva argues that abjection is the discursive border of negotiating inside and outside, nature and culture, prohibition and sin, order and disorder, morality and immorality, self and other, within the male poet. According to this logic the male poet therefore demonstrates in his writing a metaphorical law of the mother that exerts its influence pre-linguistically, and is enunciated through the symbolic function in Western culture. Kristeva’s project is therefore to chart the male poet’s journey in society through gaining symbolic competence to confront the feminine, the other maternal power, as through abjection.

What we designate as ‘feminine,’ far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an ‘other’ without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity … a coming face to face with an unnamable otherness – the solid rock of jouissance and writing as well (Kristeva, 1982, p. 59).
Thus, Kristeva ascribes a pre-linguistic power to the mother, calling it a metaphorical rite of the mother, or a maternal influence that predates the subject’s entrance into the symbolic, which the male poet draws on. As I have already discussed, this is the ‘semiotic chora’ relating to bodily drives, to the rhythms, cadences, and movements stemming from the maternal body. Thus, Kristeva seeks to account for the need human beings experience verbally to represent the external world from within, that is, in light of the internal world, and the continuous crossing over of an archaic border of meaning within the self, presided over by the unnamable other, an animal maternal aspect that designates our pre-verbal semiotic beginning. In these terms the male poet is privileged journeyer who conveys himself through endlessly negotiating his subjective experience of pleasure and pain, bridging taboo, and establishing a preverbal maternal influence in poetic language. It is therefore the logic of taboo, or prohibition, by which the male poet relates the abject, and conveys the existence of a maternal influence.

Historically, it is the ‘demonical’ influence of the maternal that threatens the ‘clean and proper self,’ and so religious rituals of defilement were instituted in order to ward off the danger of the maternal power, based on the ‘feeling’ of abjection (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 64-65). Kristeva argues that polluting bodily substances stem from the maternal and become the markers of taboo. These polluting stuffs that are associated with the maternal body pre-date the father’s symbolic influence on the subject, and continue to have an affect on the subject through encounters with the abject. The exclusion of filth, the taboo on it, then is a means of separating from the maternal aspect based on the ‘feeling’ of abjection that a subject experiences. That is:

Matter issuing from them [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. […] The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins (Douglas cited in Kristeva, 1982, p.69).

Kristeva examines the dangers incurred by the speaking subject if they infringe on these borders of filth, or defilement, because it puts the symbolic order at risk. Filth is traced to the maternal body and becomes a source of discrimination against all women, and hence the institution of prohibitions carried out through ritual practice, like menstrual prohibitions, which have been damaging to the status of women socially and culturally.
The overall prohibition on the maternal body through the practice of ritual defilement has the effect of silencing the archaic pre-linguistic authority of the maternal other, according to Kristeva. She points out that ‘polluting objects’ fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71). Interestingly, ‘Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71). Excremental stuffs are related to ‘the danger to identity that comes from without,’ whilst menstrual blood stuffs are related to ‘the danger issuing from within the identity,’ which ‘threatens the relationship between the sexes…’ and is a prototype substance of femininity (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71).

Abjection can therefore appears as a rite of defilement and pollution, taking the form of exclusion of a substance, such as for example menstrual blood, which has historically been considered the very essence of femininity. In Christianity, menstruation has historically been constructed as the curse of Eve, a dialectical elaboration of a threatening otherness, encapsulated in the feminine sex, which must be sanctioned, and purified, in order to safeguard patriarchal society. In post-Christian society it seems possible then that the abject might be confronted by the female poet as a means of re-articulating the maternal and the menstrual in relation to the social sphere, and dually as potentially a means of personal and cultural catharsis from phallocentric discourses, such as those established in Christianity, and other religious doctrines.

So then, what of this danger within? This menstrual substance threatens male power over the symbolic because it stems from the maternal body and signifies sexual difference. Given these two defilements, the excremental and the menstrual, stem from the maternal, it is the elaboration of the animal procreative female body in poetic writing, which therefore brings about an encounter with the abject for the female poet. It seems logical to suggest that procreative functions like menstruation ought to be accounted for particularly by the female poet, in order to remind Western culture of what it has cleansed and over purified. However, Kristeva neglects to theorise the journey of a female poet.

A Metaphorical Language of the Mother

Kristeva claims that the semiotic or pre-linguistic influence of the mother on the infant subject is extremely significant. She theorises a maternal authority in the form
of a pre-linguistic bodily language taught to the infant, prior to their coming to language, for example through toilet training. The mother maps the child’s clean and ordered body, teaching him/her how to eradicate abject stuffs like piss, shit, vomit, and so on, ahead of his/her entrance into phallic law.

It is as if, while having been forever immersed in the symbols of language, the human being experienced, in addition, an authority that was a – chronologically and logically immediate – repetition of the laws of language. Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation between proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is a ‘binary logic,’ a primary mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependant upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 71-72).

So, culturally there is a pre-linguistic or semiotic authority assigned to the maternal, a mapping of the infant’s body, as a pre-condition of language, on which a poet necessarily draws. And yet, Kristeva doesn’t really explore how the female poet experiences the abject, as differentiated from the male poet, particularly given that females have procreative functions. In my view, a female poet’s approach to the abject and semiotic is more about a journey into her self, because unlike a male she is not distanced from her own so-called abject menstrual self. That is, she menstruates, ovulates, gives birth, lactates, and discharges other fluids cyclically. She might feel ambivalent because, on the one hand, approaching the abject on this cyclical basis takes her back to those early beginnings when she was beholden to the mother. And yet, on the other hand, she might simultaneously desire to break away from the maternal influence, to celebrate her own fertility, and forge her own identity in society. If what Kristeva claims is true and the maternal authority maps a territory of pre-discursive power ahead of the subject’s entrance into paternal law, then this seems a potentially highly interesting sphere of women’s writing. Potentially then the task for the female poet is to map the animalistic procreative female body, a continuous crossing of borders within herself, as a means of trespassing on a semiotic maternal authority, bringing about a confrontation with the abject in poetic language, and voicing her own personal journey at the level of culture.
A Journey for the Female Poet

Kristeva’s chief concern is to chart the abject as abreacted by the male poet, which she argues is a poetic catharsis that purifies the abject, and so protects the poet from obliteration in his dealings with that terrifying primal repression to do with the maternal body. If a man is confronting the maternal abject there is a sense that he is distanced from her, but if a woman is confronting the abject she is already on the border with the maternal abject because of her own procreative functions, that is, through the animal-ness of her ovulating, menstruating, lactating, birthing, mothering, and the passing of bodily fluids. It is therefore more of a journey into her self that a female poet may undertake, which she writes in red ink, and which Kristeva doesn’t account for, or explore in her work.

In my view, a female poet potentially confronts the abject as a means of poetic catharsis to/from the other maternal entity broken away from, as at birth, which demands to be known, traced, revealed, but which she must ultimately be separated from in order to re-establish her own boundaries of selfhood. The menstrual cycle in these terms gives rise to a periodic poetic catharsis to do with the maternal aspect to be written by the female poet. Moreover, it is also a means of cultural catharsis from negative Western accounts of the reproductive female body, that other maternal body that has been constructed in accordance with a masculine imaginary, such as Freud’s in relation to the so-called horrific Medusa figure in Western history.

A key aspect of Kristeva’s theory of the abject is that it is an outermost limit of the unconscious, which is correlative of repression. So then, abjection does not operate on the same terms as the unconscious; rather the abject is a hinge of the unconscious. In fact, the abject is a correlative of ‘abreaction’ according to Kristeva, a technique Freud applied in relation to hysteria. So, the abject, presupposes the abreaction of its contents periodically, accessed by consciousness, as having an effect on the subject, that is, needing to be expressed in language. In this sense the abject ‘borrows strength’ from language and abreacts periodically when repression is relaxed. It therefore still works in relation to, or with the unconscious, and the concept of repressed contents.

In their study of hysteria, Freud and Breuer explain that through hypnosis a repressed memory is ‘abreacted’ in the patient, or hysteric, acting like a ‘foreign body,’ which is brought up (Freud and Breuer, 1936, p. 3). Even though it is a reminiscence, the body
of memory brought up in the hysteric acts like a thing of the present, which needs to be released in order to relieve the hysterical patient. ‘For it was really shown that these memories correspond to traumas which were not sufficiently ‘ab-reacted’…’ (Freud and Breuer, 1936, p. 6). Breuer and Freud give two reasons as to why the trauma might become blocked. The first reason is that social circumstances made a reaction impossible, or the trauma was repressed by the subject because he/she wanted to forget the incident altogether. The second reason is that the trauma became mixed up with other insignificant psychic states in the subject. In these cases, Freud and Breuer applied hypnosis to the hysteric in order to resolve the trauma. Speech therefore became the means of recalling the emotion attached to the foreign body of meaning, which had been repressed. Freud found that apparently unrelated reminiscences from the ‘hysterics’ past lives built up in them as a stream of consciousness, revealing a psychic agency in the hysteric to be accessed through a ‘free association’ technique. Moreover, Freud detected that a patient’s avoidance of certain unpleasant ideas showed an active repression. Hysteria was therefore thought to be a blockage of memory that needed to be unblocked by a physician like Freud or Breuer, encouraging the hysteric to narrate this aspect of his/her past. Abreaction then is strongly linked with hysteria although somewhat problematically.

In my view, it is woman’s unique relationship to abreaction, by virtue of having a menstrual cycle, which speaks through poetry and the artistic imagination. The process of abreacting potentially brings about the articulation of a menstrual imaginary, which is undertaken in direct relation to the menstrual cycle. Freud and Breuer’s idea of abreacting a ‘foreign body’ from within, also a maternal body of meaning, could be considered a non-pathological phenomenon. Rather, this could be seen as a ‘poetic catharsis’ periodically articulated by the female poet, as a means of confronting the so-called maternal abject, and expressing her response through ‘jouissance’ in order to positively develop female subjectivity. It is possible that this is the experience of many women writers, poets and artists at pre-menstrual, pre-ovulation and menstrual times. Even Freud recognised the connection between hysteria and the witch, or the sorceress, whereby the hysteric’s symptoms are considered pathological, and the witches are brought under control by the church. But, when this maternal reminiscence is periodically abreacted by the female poet through creative catharsis, then it is possible to consider she might be giving birth to a menstrual imaginary, which can bring about self-renewal.
A menstrual imaginary can potentially therefore be abreacted in accordance with the menstrual cycle, by the female poet, who confronts the abject through writing. It is a maternal repository from which she draws, engages, desires and explores. She is, however, able to cut away from this in order to re-establish the borders of her own corporeal country; her own status as a woman and a stray in relation to patriarchal society and culture.

A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8).

A fluid border of selfhood is what the female poet potentially constructs then periodically through her poetic writing practice. Before she menstruates she is a stray, on the outermost limit of her culture, at the very cusp of the symbolic, aligned with a defilement, which has the power to unsettle her. She menstruates, is released again back into wild streams of her being and comes to know herself intimately as periodically separate from the maternal other. The female poet writes her way toward/from formlessness, negotiates those seamless borders of self, never oversteps the mark, dangles her foot at the edge pondering a ‘good abyss.’ All of those incongruous thoughts, ideas, bodily processes that she must have, stem from the maternal body, and must continually be broken away from, otherwise they will crush her. And yet she must have some edge from its imaginary zeal, a sword to sharpen her beingness, to cut out with pen and ink, her body, her country, up against the infinite so as to gain control over her very existence. The female poet potentially periodically abreacts her own menstrual imaginary and brings about a cyclical poetic catharsis in this way in red ink.

In fact, women in general may choose to articulate their primal flow, and/or jouissance through poetic mimesis, periodically, in order to speak their corporeal selves, transgress ordered meaning, and approach a different border of human animal species, going toward an other identity of woman. A vandal of former maternal prohibitions that have historically been constructed by men in patriarchal culture, *she* can write the abject too, but from a different place. It is a periodic crossing of borders from pure and impure, inside and outside, prohibition and sin, morality and

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15 In her essay *Coming to Writing* Cixous theorises a ‘good abyss’ as a maternal aspect that a woman writer approaches as a means of self-renewal (Cixous, 1991, pp. 37-38).
immorality, and so on, which can be written by the female poet, so as to override patriarchal cultures’ prejudices about female sexual difference, which is rather less threatening and/or horrific than it has hitherto been considered.

It is important to point out that Kristeva has been criticised for being essentialist mostly on the basis that she supposedly offers a biological explanation, such as maternity, for a psychological state like abjection. Feminist critics have expressed concern over Kristeva’s concept of the pre-linguistic maternal influence on the child, viewing it as a powerless positioning of the child in relation to a male symbolic structure already firmly set in place, and seemingly impenetrable.

During the 1980s and 1990s, leading feminist critics in the English-speaking world, such as Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Toril Moi... took issue with her conceptions of the *chora*, maternity, and the semiotic, arguing that, in invoking these, Kristeva is positing some female essence. Critics linked her idea of the *chora* with a maternal receptacle, which they linked with her semiotic aspect of signification and with woman. They made claims about Kristeva’s supposed ‘compulsory maternity,’ about her quietude in the face of an ‘implacable symbolic structure.’ The concern among many feminists has been that, in Kristeva’s philosophy, woman is linked necessarily with the maternal and that she is powerless to change a male-driven symbolic order (McAfee, 2004, p. 77).

However, for Kristeva the semiotic is not an inherently biological sphere. Kristeva is a theorist of poetic language as well as estrangement and the border of exile, of abjection, which she views as encapsulated in the maternal body. It is the maternal subject who potentially affects a profound subversion of the nature/culture division through her procreative functions, most notably through pregnancy and birthing, but also through menstruation, ovulation and lactation, repeatedly bringing to life a language born of the other within, and as a profound act of love. She argues in her essay ‘Hérethique de l’amour’ (1977), titled ‘Stabat Mater’ in English, that the maternal figure is bound by a profound love of the other within, as well as dually bound to raise the child in accordance to the law, and fulfill her obligation to the species. In these terms the mother’s position is subversive because she exists on a threshold of nature/culture, both ‘guarantor of the community and other.’ (Alison Ainley cites McAfee, 2004, p. 86).

My focus on Kristeva’s writing on the abject in this chapter has been to explore her psychoanalytic framework for theorising an imaginary border of human meaning, which originates with the maternal body, shown to be an influence on human
subjectivity. It has been my intention to reveal how Kristeva theorises the abject primarily in relation to the male poet. Nevertheless, she claims a semiotic, or pre-linguistic influence for the mother in relation to human subjectivity that is significant for women, particularly in terms of the female poet’s ability to voice her self in poetic writing. To this end, I have sought to demonstrate that men and women have a different relationship to the abject. I have argued that it is potentially the task of the female poet to confront the abject in conjunction with her menstrual cycle, through abreacting a metaphorical language of the mother, which shapes her subjectivity on an ongoing basis, and in fact has the potential to bring about creative catharsis both on a personal level, as well as from negative Western patriarchal discourses on her sexual difference. Moreover, the female poet who potentially confronts the abject periodically enters a journey of self-exploration in relation to her animalistic procreative functions, repeatedly, as a means of both connecting with, as well as separating from the maternal influence. She repeatedly returns from this internal experience to write in red ink. As such, through menstruation women can get in touch with themselves as a species, as a human animal – although in patriarchal civilised societies we don’t necessarily want to see ourselves this way. But, this is precisely what a confrontation with the abject brings about for a woman on her journey into a menstrual imaginary. And, in my view it is not necessarily as terrifying as Kristeva has theorised. Furthermore, such a journey is potentially a means of creative catharsis not just for the female poet, but for every woman.
Chapter Four

A Heroine’s Journey: Re-Entering the Forbidden

In this chapter, I will read three classical narratives in myth, legend, and fairy tale, which are the stories of *Persephone and Demeter*, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, specifically for a menstrual imaginary. I will look at these classical narratives in relation to feminist theorists’ readings and offer an against-the-grain reading. In so doing, I hope to show how each of them in their own way references the cyclical nature of women’s reproductive life and women’s blood, and thus belongs to a menstrual imaginary. It is my intention to retell the story of women’s animalistic procreative bodies in such a way that strengthens female difference and artistic processes against the persistent patriarchal narrative that views women as potentially periodically neurotic, monstrous, and even horrific.

A Persephone Descent; Periodically Facing the Good Abyss

The mysteries remain,
I keep the same
cycle of seed-time
and of sun and rain;
Demeter in the grass,
I multiply,
renew and bless
Bacchus in the vine;
I hold the law,
I keep the mysteries true,
the first of these
to name the living, dead;
I am the wine and bread.
I keep the law,
I hold the mysteries true,
I am the vine,
the branches, you
and you.
(Hilda Doolittle).

In my view, the myth of Persephone and Demeter is a menstrual tale that tells of a periodic descent that the archetypal heroine undertakes, in order to draw on her own imaginary and bring about creative catharsis for herself. In her introduction to *The Long Journey home: Re-Visioning the Myth of Persephone and Demeter for Our Time*, Christine Downing argues that the myth of Persephone and Demeter has long been associated with the vegetal cycle and the mother daughter bond, as well as the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Downing urges women to re-consider Persephone particularly in association with the concept of a descent into a ‘sacred realm.’ Downing advises that the myth has also been associated with the experience of undergoing grief and loss. Additionally, the myth has been viewed by feminists in relation to gender roles, as well as by ecofeminists in relation to the earth’s renewal (Downing, 1994, p. 4).

Some women have found in this myth resources for the imaginal re-creation of a pre-patriarchal matristic, that is, woman centred, world. Many, concentrating on the myth’s account of Demeter’s love for Persephone, have seen it primarily in terms of how it valorizes the beauty and power of the mother-daughter bond. Others have focused on Hades’ abduction of Persephone and read the myth as primarily a story about paternal violation; about rape, incest, abuse; about male intrusion into women’s mysteries; about the rise of patriarchy and the suppression of goddess religion (Downing, 1994, p. 2).

Downing’s observation that the myth has been drawn on by women for its imaginary maternal aspect is very interesting. Certainly, an exploration of this myth as it relates to a sacred periodic descent that women can take on a periodic basis, specifically with regards to the notion of connecting with an imaginary maternal aspect, is compelling.

And yet, if we look back into antiquity the two deities were not always linked. In pre-Grecian times Persephone was an underworld deity associated with death, whereas Demeter arrived with Greek culture and is generally held to mean ‘grain mother.’

Even in the archaic period we find Demeter associated with a maiden goddess, Kore. This Greek appellation simply means ‘maiden’; it is the female form of *Kouros*, ‘youth.’ Some believe *Kore* may have originally signified simply ‘the young Demeter’ … Eventually the two distinct names led to there being two distinct goddesses: Demeter, a mature mother goddess who is regularly accompanied by Kore, the maiden. Thus the bond between Demeter and Kore is not due to a sense that mother/maiden (or mother/daughter) are inextricably linked (Downing, 1994, p. 11).
There is much deliberation as to whether Persephone is Demeter’s maiden aspect, or indeed her daughter. Later on, though still prior to Homer, the Demeter/Kore cult was co-joined with the Persephone cult, probably because of a felt connection between Kore and Persephone. But, maybe also because of the fact that Demeter had been previously known as ‘Black Demeter’ and had her own death aspect, which Downing advises is perhaps another reason for the merging of the Persephone cult with the Demeter cult (Downing, 1994, p. 12). We can surmise that the myth of Persephone and Demeter relates to a sacred underworld experience, or a periodic descent.

Homer’s writings of the eighth century ‘Before the Common Era’ are believed to be the earliest reference to the myth, in which Persephone is goddess of the underworld and Demeter is goddess of the grain (Downing, 1994, p. 12). In ‘The Homeric Hymn to Demeter,’ Persephone is picking flowers on the Nysian plain when the son of Kronos, Hades, rises up from the underworld in a chariot drawn by horses, and takes her against her will down into the underworld. Persephone’s longing to be returned to her mother echoes through the natural world, finally alerting Demeter to the wrong doing. Demeter then goes out searching for her daughter. And yet, she doesn’t know the details of the abduction. It is Hekate who finally tells Demeter, who then hastens to Helios to get the full truth. Helios tells Demeter that Hades indeed snatched Persephone to become his ‘fertile wife.’ Helios tells Demeter to give up her lamentation and her anger. Demeter is grief stricken and goes away from Helios, disguises her great beauty, and travels alone among the cities and fields, until she comes to Eleusis. There she has the appearance of an old woman and offers to become nurse to Metaneira’s son named Demophoönë. Demeter regularly puts Demophoönë in flames to make him immortal. But, when Metaneira discovers this she is horrified. Demeter reveals her true identity and chastises Metaneira for interfering. A temple is built for Demeter at Eleusis to appease her, but she is too consumed by grief over the loss of her daughter and longs only to be reunited with her. Demeter makes the earth barren, until she strikes a bargain with the sun God, whereby Persephone is allowed to rise out of the underworld on the condition that Demeter end the worldwide famine. Persephone is given a pomegranate fruit to eat before she rises out of the underworld. Demeter finds out that she has eaten in the underworld and informs Persephone that she is therefore fated to spend a part of the season in the underworld. In ‘The Homeric Hymn to Demeter,’ Demeter tells Persephone:
When the earth blooms in spring with all kinds
of sweet flowers, then from the misty dark you will
rise again, a great marvel to gods and mortal men
(Foley, 1993, p. 31).

Demeter restores fertility to the earth. It seems highly likely then that the myth speaks
not only of periodic descent into the underworld, but also of women’s fertility
cyclical, which corresponds with the cycles of nature in the world, and which I will
now discuss in relation to the Eleusinian mysteries.16

In Ancient Greece, the Eleusinian mysteries were initiations held annually for the cult
of Demeter and Persephone, based in Eleusis. The mysteries were observed through a
series of secret religious rites during a yearly festival. There is much conjecture and
speculation around the mysteries. According to John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and
Oswyn Murray in The Oxford History of the Classical World, it was the hope of a
better afterlife that drove the ritual practice (Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, 1993,
pp. 268-9). Boardman, Griffin, and Murray propose that the ritual probably consisted
of a re-enactment of the myth of Kore (the other name for Persephone), to be acted
out by its initiates. The myth seems to correspond with Homer’s version whereby
initiates fasted in sympathy with the grieving Demeter. The initiates then made a
pilgrimage from Athens to Eleusis, where they drank the barley drink to break their
fast. It was of course at Eleusis that Demeter was reunited with her daughter
Persephone. It was there that Demeter relented and restored the seasons.

The anger of Demeter plunged the world into an abnormal and horrible state, in which the
earth’s fertility failed, and it seemed that mankind would die out and the gods would cease to
receive their cult and their honours … The seed dying and being reborn suggests the idea of

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16 Antiquities scholar, Helene Foley points out in her book, The Homeric Hymn to Demeter;
Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays, that the Homeric Hymns are ‘sung prayers’ to the
gods and goddesses. There are many other versions of the myth that came after Homer’s. According to
Downing, in Hesiod’s Theogony, composed around 700 BCE, there is reference to both Demeter
birthing Persephone and the abduction of her by Hades. Later, in the Orphic period Downing
comments that there is little direct documentation of the myth of Persephone and Demeter, although
they were thought to be significant figures, the knowledge of which seems to have been secretly
guarded. However, there doesn’t seem to be a single coherent version of the tale during the Orphic
period. Nevertheless, Persephone plays an important role in Orphism, which in turn influenced the
Eleusinian cults. In the late classical period Ovid’s retelling of the myth in Metamorphoses, highlights
the psychological significance and power of the myth. In Ovid’s retelling he emphasises the rape of
Persephone. Persephone’s innocence is emphasised, as well as Demeter’s violence.
rebirth and immortality … The seed is sown, it disappears in the darkness, and yet it lives and will rise again; Kore was snatched away to the Underworld, and yet she comes back; and the initiates at Eleusis were promised a happier and more glorious life after death (Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, 1993, pp. 80-1).

Interestingly, Boardman, Griffin, and Murray point to the fact that there was something more to the secret rite, some further significance beyond ensuring safe passage to, as well as prosperity, in the afterlife. However, the all-male authors of The Oxford History of the Classical World are quite focused on the male seed and its replication in the seed of the crop, that is, over and above an interest in the female cycle of fertility, its seasonal significance in the sowing, and harvesting of the crop. It might therefore be useful to consider how the Eleusinian mysteries are relevant to women’s cycles in relation to the concept of periodic descent.

In The Wise Wound, Redgrove and Shuttle discuss the concept of withdrawal into menstrual experience in ancient times. They examine an annual festival held in autumn to celebrate women’s periods, linked to the fertility of the earth in agrarian cultures, involving the observance of sacred rites, involving animal sacrifice. The women’s festival, the Thesmophoria, was held to be the main expression of the cult of Persephone and Demeter, aside from the Eleusinian mysteries. The rites developed and undertaken were for the purpose of promoting the earth’s fertility akin to women’s fertility and natural cycle. According to Shuttle and Redgrove:

The Thesmophoria took three days, and the first one was called kathados and anaodos: this was when the women went down into caves in which pigs had been thrown early in the summer, and recovered the remains which they mixed with the seed grain, on the third day scattered on the fields. It is probable that the origin of this festival was a specifically menstrual mystery. The women, who according to some authorities, invented agriculture, did so because only they had the secret of the strong fertility of the seed corn. The reason for this was that originally the women mixed the seed corn with menstrual blood, which was the best possible fertilizer, before planting it. Since the men had no magic blood of this kind, they could not grow corn as well as the women could, any more than they could grow babies. No doubt the men discovered somehow that the magic of fertility was in the menstrual blood, and tried to obtain magic blood themselves from their own genitals (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005 p. 173).

And they go on to make further comment about the Thesmophoria festival in relation to the Eleusinian mysteries:

We may also conjecture that rites of blood-sacrifice repeat in external and visible form the fertility-secrets of the menstrual blood-shedding that only women truly possess. The sacrificed
animals, then, would represent the womb, the womb’s instincts of fertility sacrificed at the period. The sacrifice inwardly brings renewal, as sacrifice has always been held to do (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005 p.173).

Shuttle and Redgrove point out that the Thesmophoria women sacrificed pigs, also sacrificed in the Eleusinian mysteries. They state that the pig is a moon, as well as a womb animal, and is linked with many other sacred animals associated with female menstrual rituals since Mesolithic times (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005 pp. 174-5).

We are suggesting that these rites whatever the function of their outer language in denoting custom, taboo and kinship, had an inner meaning also as ‘psychodramas’ based on the natural menstrual sacrifice. Perhaps it was some whim of generosity, or the wish for male companionship, that led women to admit men to these rites, or to devise rites in which the men could take part, that involved ‘symbolic wounds’ to the man’s person, or dances in imitation of the animals, followed by animal (or human) sacrifice (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005 p.174-5).

The ritual practice of sacrificing animals and/or humans and using their remains to make the field fertile to then grow crops mimics the internal process of blood letting during menstruation, which ensures the continuation of the fertility cycle, and the potential conception, gestation, and birthing of new life. All of this was ritually acted out under the rubric of Demeter/Persephone cults and festivals in ancient times, which leads me to reconsider the significance of the mythological figures with respect to women’s cyclical being. The myth of Persephone and Demeter in fact shows how the vegetal seasons are associated with the animalistic procreative cycle of women, such as the onset of winter and barrenness when Persephone descends into the underworld, and of her return to culture and Demeter, whereby she brings forth spring and fertility. Persephone and Demeter are therefore guardians of women’s fertility cycle and can teach us about the significance of periodical descent into the underworld, into an imaginary realm, in order to integrate our animalism, and return the maternal to culture.

In a text on the rise of Persephone in modern literature entitled *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927; Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality*, Margot K. Louis reads Persephone in Victorian and early modernist literature alongside the rise of Paganism, and the undermining of Christianity in the nineteenth century. She puts forward the idea that Persephone becomes a romantic figure onto which is projected the ideal Pagan female body, the source of fertility, as constructed by a mostly masculine ideal, toward the production of a mythological imaginary in Western
culture. Yet, Louis argues that there also dually existed a female interpretation of Persephone, namely the development of ‘fresh female perspectives on the mythic imagination, the nature of sexual freedom, the complexities of reproduction, and the potential of a female deity’ (Louis, 2009, p. x). Still, it is in relation to the modernist poets and particularly, T.S. Eliot’s post WWI construction of the underworld in ‘The Waste Land’ as a perilous place, a space of human alienation and despair, from which one must escape in order to return to feeling, to physicality, and to revaluing life, that Persephone is re-imagined for the Modernist era. An image that loses relevance for the twenty-first century, rather what is required is a remembering of Persephone as a menstrual deity whose periodic descent into the underworld, or the good abyss, potentially brings about creative catharsis, and rebirth into culture for women.

Writer and psychotherapist, Phyllis Chesler revised the Persephone Demeter myth in her famous text *Women and Madness* (1972). In her telling of the myth Persephone, sister to Psyche, Athena, and Artemis, is menstruating for the first time when she is abducted by Hades. In Chesler’s rendition of this classic myth ‘Persephone belonged to her mother’ (Chesler, 1972, p. xi). The mother therefore intervenes in Persephone’s patriarchal fate and puts a stop to her supposed duty to fulfil her role as reproducer of the species, whereby she is to be brought into a masculine concept of society. Chesler seems to be proposing in her interpretation of the classical myth that in the West becoming a woman and menstruating has historically been aligned with the prospect of becoming subordinate to laws of male dominance and violence. Chesler seeks to overturn this narrative by re-examining the myth for the benefit of women’s mental health. It might be useful then to consider that this myth potentially tells the story of a periodic descent into an imaginary realm that women can experience and draw from. Moreover, this periodic descent can potentially bring about creative catharsis and can be articulated symbolically at the level of culture, thus linking the descent of the daughter with the return to the mother, and bringing about a unified psychical process.

Cixous sheds light on the concepts of descent, creative catharsis, and return. In ‘Coming to Writing,’ she discusses her encounters with the ‘good abyss’ and the Mother Goddess in relation to her writing practice, which can be linked to the Persephone/Demeter myth, as well as women’s cyclical being. In her essay Cixous is clearly concerned with entering the forbidden through writing a femininity returned from exile. She says: ‘Thy mouth is a slice of pomegranate’ (Cixous, 1991, p. 18). Here she references the fruit in the Garden of Eden and the supposed fall of Eve. But
pomegranate is also considered to be a menstrual fruit. Pomegranate seeds are the seeds that Persephone eats, is tricked into eating by Hades, before she is allowed to leave the realm of the underworld, to reunite with her mother Demeter in the upper world. This ensures that she will return to Hades and the underworld for a portion of the year. Cixous states that all of her writing comes from death, which she further relates to the Great Mother. She calls this maternal abyss a ‘good abyss,’ not a horrible devouring abyss, out of which she is resurrected, returned to the world, through writing repeatedly. We might consider the possibility that this good maternal abyss is related to the Persephone Demeter myth and opens within women cyclically, allowing them to integrate their own fertility through their creative practice, which brings about personal rebirth. Thus, a periodic descent into the underworld can facilitate an opening to a feminine imaginary linked with the maternal, which can be drawn on as a means of bringing about a creative catharsis, by women.

Cixous’s writing of a good maternal abyss is specifically related to ‘a period of death’ that she undergoes (Cixous, 1991, p. 37):

And from this period of death, one retains the greatest fear and the greatest benefit: the desire to remain as close as possible to Her, death, our most powerful mother, the one who gives us the most violent push of desire to cross over, to leap, since one cannot stay close to her, she desires and incites desire; and this desire is split, it is simultaneously its own opposite, the desire to approach her close enough to die from it, almost, and to hold oneself extremely far back from her, as far as possible. Because it is before her, against her, right up against her, our most dangerous and generous mother, the one who gives us (although we aren’t thinking, there isn’t a glimmer of thought in us, only the tumult, the roaring of blood, precosmic, embryonic confusion) the staggering wish to come out, the desire for both extremes to meet, enter into and reverse each other, and day doesn’t come after night, but struggles with it, embraces it, wounds it, is wounded by it, and the black blood and the white blood mingle; and in the same way, life emerges crawling from the entrails of death that it has lacerated, that it hates, that it adores, and it never forgets that death doesn’t forget it, that it is always there, never leaves it. Open the window, the terrible breast is there, the bed of peace – and this is life’s greatest strength, it understands that death loves us as we love it, and that, in a strange way, we can truly count on it. That we move away from and approach Death, our double mother, through writing, because writing is always first a way of not being able to go through with mourning for death (Cixous, 1991, pp. 37-38).

In fact, many women experience this concept of a descent, or confrontation, with a ‘good abyss’ periodically. Certainly, there is a ‘roaring of blood’ that seems to go hand in hand with a desire to speak, to articulate, just what it is to be a human animal,
and a woman in Western culture, especially as a means of protest against outmoded patriarchal concepts of female maternity, and subjectivity in general.

It is Cixous then who offers a truly feminine interpretation of the abyss as potentially nourishing, maternal, and life giving, since there are so many masculine abysses of the literary canon, such as Dante Caligori’s *Inferno*, born out of a Christian mythology. Cixous’s ‘good abyss’ stands face to face with such male constructed death spaces, in so far as she laughs at them, like Medusa herself. She pulls a monstrously funny face and says: ‘You can’t scare me!’ I believe that it is Cixous’s concept of a ‘good abyss’ that can be related to a Persephone descent, which will sustain women’s writing practice through a confrontation with the maternal aspect, and the procreative cycle, and which leads to creative catharsis, and self-renewal.

At first I laughed, I cried out, a deep pain dictated my first letters from hell. Fashioned new ears for me for the future, and I heard the cries of the world, the rages and the appeals of the peoples, the bodily songs, the music of tortures and the music of ecstasies. I’m listening (Cixous, 1991, p. 41).

Importantly, through facing the ‘good abyss’ that has a maternal character Cixous says that she ultimately gives birth to a love source. Cixous talks of other bodies, their blood, added to her own blood, circulating freely in her, toward the writings of her texts when journeying through this ‘good abyss’ (Cixous, 1991, p. 47). It seems to be Cixous’s theorisation of an abject border of human meaning, but with less emphasis on its horrific aspects, and from which she triumphantly returns. Cixous then delivers a call for women to periodically encounter their own ‘good abyss,’ in order to draw on their own imaginary powers, and undertake writing, as an act of commune with the Mother Goddess, which can bring about personal healing.

**The Sphinx and the Great Mother**

The Sphinx is historically depicted as a monstrous, almost demonic, and yet intriguing figure that comes out of antiquity. She is a hybrid of animal and woman, devised of both animal and human parts, often with the head and breasts of a woman, the body of a dog or lion, and the wings of an eagle. The Sphinx challenges those that pass her on their way to the city of Thebes to answer a riddle, and if they fail to answer correctly she kills them. She is a representation of the archaic mother that can also be compared to the mythical image of Medusa, insofar as they are both primitive figures linked with the abyss and death. Jung described the image of the Sphinx in his
work on symbols as the ‘terrible mother,’ who potentially devours (Jung, 1956, p. 179). In his text *The History of Magic*, Kurt Seligmann states that the Sphinx sits at the foot of the pyramids of Egypt with talons outstretched, guarding over the city of the dead and its magical secrets (Seligmann, 1946, p.59). He states: ‘In his book on Isis and Osiris[,] Plutarch (A.D. 45-126) says that the Sphinx symbolizes the secret of occult wisdom’ (Seligmann, 1946, p.60). Seligmann goes onto state that:

> Never in the history of mankind has a statue so lastingly caught the imagination of the peoples. The thoughts of countless generations dwell in it; numberless conjurations and rites have built up in it a mightly protective spirit, a soul that inhabits this time-scarred giant (Seligmann, 1946, p. 61).

Pliny called the Sphinx a deity over which rests a spell of silence. Perhaps, it is the ‘secret’ of existence and human life itself that the Sphinx guards. In fact, the Sphinx can be linked both to human fertility and cyclical being. In my view, it is possible to re-think of the Sphinx as a sight of resurrection, a womb of the earth, out of which new life springs.

In William Butler Yeats’s poem ‘Second Coming,’ he conjures a womb of life that renews itself in the eternal image of the Sphinx. As, Lynne Parramore explains in *Reading the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in nineteenth-century literary culture*:

> Ovid told that the Sphinx hurled herself into an abyss after Oedipus triumphed over her, but Yeats’s creature has arisen—on its way to be reborn after a long stony sleep. In the poet’s imagination, ancient Egypt has been transformed from a symbol of horror to a sign of redemption. The tomb of the past is shown to be a womb where life always renews itself. On this fragile note of hope, modernity officially begins (Parramore, 2008, p. 116).

However, Yeats also interprets the Sphinx as male. Apparently the first images of the Sphinx were male. Perhaps, modernity wasn’t ready to fully embrace the Sphinx as female.

In her text *Alice Doesn’t; Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, theorist Theresa De Lauretis points out that we don’t have the point of view of either the Medusa or the Sphinx because they are mythological figures relayed only in relation to the male hero quest:

> Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else’s story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions – places and topoi – through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 109).
These monsters survive in the modern imaginary, inscribed in hero stories and are ‘semantically associated with boundary,’ which they transgress, passing over a threshold between nature and culture (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 109).

The Medusa and the Sphinx, on the contrary, are more human than animal, and definitely female: the latter has the body of a winged lion but a woman’s head; Medusa is female and beautiful, although she too is connected with bestiality (she was Poseidon’s lover and pregnant with his offspring when Perseus killed her, and from her body, as her head was severed, sprang forth the winged horse Pegasus). Medusa’s power to cast the spell which in many cultures is actually called ‘the evil eye,’ is directly represented in her horribly ‘staring eyes,’ which are a constant feature of her figurative and literary representations; while the serpents in their hair or ‘girdles’ are a variable attribute of all three Gorgons, together with other monstrous features such as wings, ‘a lolling tongue,’ or ‘grinning heads’ (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 110).

De Lauretis points out that the Medusa’s look is more terrifying than that of the Sphinx, but both kill, devour, and blind. The Oedipus legend makes it clear that they are a threat to man’s vision in connection with their ‘enigma,’ and ability to draw men’s gaze to them (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 110). As such, they are represented as ‘obstacles’ on man’s path to manhood, and the claiming of his power, whereby he must destroy them, in order to continue his quest and fulfil his destiny (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 110).

Consequently, the Sphinx has been an important figure of interpretation for feminist theorists and can alternatively be linked to a subversive heroine’s journey as I will discuss in relation to Cixous’s interpretation of the Sphinx. In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous begins by ruminating on the ‘sign’ of ‘a face,’ its beauty. It is the primitive mother’s face ‘… with all of the mysteries inscribed and preserved on it’ (Cixous, 1991, p. 1). Cixous is talking about the mystery of the Sphinx. She ruminates about a mystery guarded by a riddle. She states that there was something ‘beyond’ the face that she didn’t have access to, something forbidden, which she wishes to access through writing. She writes of the experience of first seeing her mother’s primitive face, it’s beauty, and its terror, and most significantly the sign system that it protects, to which she must somehow gain access:

What had reached me, so powerfully cast from a human body, was Beauty: there was a face, with all the mysteries inscribed and preserved on it; I was before it, I sensed that there was a beyond, to which I did not have access, an unlimited place. The look invited me and also forbade me to enter; I was outside, in a state of animal watchfulness. A desire was seeking its home. I was that desire. I was the question. The question was this strange destiny: to seek: to
pursue the answers that will appease it, that will annul it... Yet what misfortune if the question should happen to meet its answer! Its end! (Cixous, 1991, p. 1).

What then? Death? The abyss? The question that the Sphinx asks Oedipus is about the origin and destiny of the human species. It is as if Cixous’s primitive mother’s face is connected with the mystery of the Sphinx and is protected by a riddle that needs to be answered by Cixous herself, and perhaps by other women writers. Perhaps Cixous seeks out this primitive mother’s face that is Sphinx-like in pursuit of a feminine language hitherto locked out of culture, exiled on the very cusp of the ‘civilised’ world, on the outskirts of Thebes, stationed there alongside all of the forbidden femininities.

It is in this sense that Cixous seems to respond to Freud’s treatment of femininity as a ‘riddle,’ relating to the enigma surrounding the Sphinx. In his essay ‘Femininity,’ Freud says: ‘Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity …’ (Freud, 1990, p. 342). In fact, it is this Sphinx-like aspect of femininity that Freud ends up omitting entirely, in favour of his Oedipal theory, which attempts to account for the development of human sexuality, but which cannot account for the development of female sexuality proper. Of course, we are very familiar with Freud’s theory of penis envy, feminine lack, and castration.17 Certainly, Cixous is at cross-purposes with Freud’s Oedipal desire and his silencing of the archaic mother. In my view Cixous breathes life into the image of the terrible mother’s face as potentially beautiful, a guardian of feminine knowledge, who potentially offers women insight into the nature of their cyclical being.

Cixous infers that this Sphinx-like face is not to be feared, rather revered, and respected for the knowledge she can offer women about the great mother and the mystery of birth, hitherto unregistered at the level of cultural discourse. Cixous elaborates on the ‘primitive face of the mother’ that caused her great happiness and

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17 The riddle of the ‘nature’ of femininity is theorised by Freud through the masculine type. Freud says that ‘We are obliged to recognise that the little girl is a little man.’ What marks the little girls entry into the ‘phallic phase?’ The clitoris functions like a small penis; – it is a sensual organ. The clitoris then is the ‘penis-equivalent.’ In this scenario ‘the truly feminine vagina is still undiscovered by both sexes’ (Freud, 1990, p. 346). However, later on in the girl’s development the vagina becomes the ‘leading erogenous zone’ according to Freud. This underplays the continuing pleasure derived from the clitoris for girls, in order to emphasise the importance of the vagina as receptacle of the penis. Freud goes on to theorise penis envy, feminine lack, and castration. Moreover, he finds that the mother’s influence on the daughter must be prohibited in order for a ‘normal’ female sexuality to develop, and so she is repressed.
terror, and which both ‘illuminated’ and ‘annihilated’ with a slight movement.

I read it: the face signified. And each sign pointed out a new path. To follow, in order to come closer to its meaning. The face whispered something to me, it spoke and called on me to speak, to encode all the names surrounding it, evoking it, touching on it, making it appear (Cixous, 1991, p. 2).

As Cixous elaborates this primal mother’s face, we learn that it is a benevolent face that engenders a kind of ‘holy dread.’ In fact, for Cixous the primitive face or Sphinx-like face of the mother acts as a doorway into accessing a femininity that has been prohibited, which offers an imaginary relating to women’s animalistic procreative bodies, and which can be drawn on in women’s symbolic representations, both in writing and artistic practice.

Whilst Cixous is interested in exploring the forbidden femininity that can be related to the animalistic maternal Sphinx, Freud on the other hand hardly explores the Sphinx at all. The Sphinx is seemingly tabooed from Freud’s theory of female sexuality, alongside the maternal body, and menstruation. However, it is important briefly to elaborate on Freud’s interest in the Sphinx, particularly in light of the fact that there is evidence to suggest that Freud had some sense of the correct answer to her riddle of the Sphinx, but ignored it, in order to pursue his theory of the Oedipus complex.

Janine Burke writes on Freud’s art collection in *The Sphinx on the Table; Sigmund Freud’s Art Collection and the Development of Psychoanalysis*, and proposes the idea that Freud’s art collection offers a key to unlocking his theoretical development of psychoanalysis. In fact, Freud was quite a discerning collector of antiquities, even though he called himself a ‘layman’ collector. His art collection included several images of the Sphinx. Burke considers the figure of the Sphinx in Freud’s art collection and his subsequent development of the Oedipus Complex.

West Asia was the source of another fabulous winged female who made her way into Greek art and into the heart of Freud’s collection and his theories: the Sphinx. She remains a mystery. Even the origin of her name is open to conjecture. The first representations of the Sphinx are male. In Egypt, the Sphinx was a wise and benevolent guardian, a valuable ally and the representative of the pharaoh. The Sphinx was kindred to the Assyrian lamassu, the winged protector of entrances, that Freud had seen in the Louvre. By the time the Sphinx arrived in archaic Greece, she was transformed into a winged female with an ecstatic smile who guarded funerary monuments. Freud could see some fine examples in Athens’ National Archeological Museum. Like the Chimaera, the Sphinx was a popular subject on Corinthian vases but her roles was purely decorative and she had no narrative context. In the fourth century B.C., Sophocles
cast her in *Oedipus Rex* as the destructive trickster who besieged the city of Thebes. By solving her riddle, Oedipus defeated her and sealed their mutual doom (Burke, 2006, p. 203).

It is therefore with particular reference to Sophocles’ play that Freud develops the Oedipus Complex, in which he interprets the Sphinx as a mischievous and monstrous mother, who propounds a riddle, the answer to which is thought to be ‘man.’ In fact, it is as though Freud’s notion of the Sphinx as terrifying mother represents the true ‘nature’ of femininity for him, as well as the forbidden territory of the unconscious, conflated into one mysterious realm of meaning. The Sphinx comes to signify the point of no return, the border, over which hangs a terrifying abyss, and indelibly linked with the feminine for Freud in psychoanalysis.

As Burke suggests, Freud tries to penetrate the meaning of the Sphinx through his subsequent attempts to acquire multiple images of the Sphinx in his art collection. But it is in relation to Sophocles’ play that he ultimately defines her, which is interesting, given that there are earlier interpretations of the Sphinx as guardian, a protector of entrances, and funerary monuments. Freud therefore seems to deliberately pass over, or even ignore, these alternative interpretations of the Sphinx.

In Sophocles’ play, Oedipus describes her as ‘the dog-faced witch’ … most probably born of the Chimaera and the dog Orthrus … The Sphinx alights at Thebes and positions herself either on the road into the city or on a nearby mountain and asks a riddle, prepared for her by the Muses. Each man who fails to correctly answer is promptly devoured (Burke, 2006, p. 204).

Burke inquires into why the Sphinx was in fact terrorising Thebes, finding multiple answers. She could have been a literary device to add drama to the play, or a symbol of the dilemma facing ‘man.’ The riddle that the Sphinx asks Oedipus is: ‘Which is the animal that has four feet in the morning, two at midday and three at evening?’ (Burke, 2006, p. 205) Oedipus gives the answer: ‘man.’ However, he ignores the deeper meaning of the riddle, as I will go onto explain. The reasoning for his answer is ‘Man, who in infancy crawls on all fours, who walks upright on two feet in maturity, and in old age supports himself with a stick’ (Burke, 2006, p. 205). The Sphinx then commits suicide in some versions of the myth because she is so horrified at being out-smarted. The myth made a big impression on Freud, that is, the figure of Oedipus, whereas the image of the Sphinx remains bound to the riddle of the feminine unconscious in psychoanalysis. It is in this sense that the Sphinx becomes a voiceless trope in the narrative of the male hero quest in Freud’s Oedipus Complex, which reveals a precipice of unexplored meaning in psychoanalysis, potentially an anti-
Oedipus Complex within the Oedipus Complex.

For his fiftieth birthday Freud’s followers gave him a bronze medallion designed by Karl Maria Schwerdtner – on one side was a portrait of Freud in profile, and on the other side was a picture of Oedipus facing the Sphinx with Sophocles’ text inscribed ‘Who divined the famed riddle and was a man most mighty’ (Janine Burke, 2006, p. 210). It is the figure of Oedipus and his love of the mother and jealousy of the father that resonated with Freud. He saw in the figure of Oedipus the potential to create a grand universal narrative of human sexual development, and ends up theorising male sexuality, which cannot adequately account for female sexuality. In his desire to supplant Oedipus in the imaginations of the world, Freud underplayed the Sphinx’s meaning in the myth, or rather interpreted her in accordance with the male hero narrative of Western culture as De Lauretis suggests. As Burke points out, ‘In formulating the theory, Freud erased the Sphinx, the tricky, troublesome feminine, and re-interpreted the tale as a tragic, triangular equation: son loves mother and resents father or daughter loves father and resents mother’ (Burke, 2006, p. 207). In Freud’s view, we are all born into the Oedipal scenario and those who fail to master this complex fall prey to neurotic behaviours.

Interestingly, it is perhaps Freud who actually ends up solving the riddle of the Sphinx correctly. Burke advises us that “Freud decoded the Sphinx’s riddle as fundamentally sexual: it was ‘the question of where babies come from’” (Burke and Freud cited in Burke, 2006, p. 212). The answer to the riddle of the Sphinx then is ‘man,’ but behind him is the Great Mother who gives birth to man – the reproductive mother who ovulates and menstruates – and brings about the human cycle central to life. The shadowy presence of the Great Mother as birth mother haunts the riddle of the Sphinx, which is about the passage of life (the child on all fours), the man (who walks on two) and approaches death (the old man with a walking stick). Oedipus, the son, gives only a partial answer. In the formulation of psychoanalysis, Freud constructs the Sphinx as a potentially monstrous chasm of female sexuality, which is the source of a feminine ‘nature,’ and the maternal aspect, becoming the site of man’s fear of women, which is ultimately forgotten, passed over, or repressed. And yet, the Sphinx, who becomes the site of the feminine ‘problem’ for Freud, returns to disturb and confront him because she signifies the great womb and the perhaps even a good maternal abyss. In my view, the animalistic female Sphinx is a Great Mother who guards the
secrets of fertility, to be accessed through an imaginary process, to do with women’s animal cyclical being, and experience of periodic descent. It is Cixous then who takes up this investigation of the maternal aspect of female sexuality, whilst not actually naming her the Sphinx. Women can periodically penetrate the secret of the Sphinx and partake of sacred rites associated with female fertility and the Mother Goddess through their creative practice, by drawing on an important feminine imaginary, and which contributes to a menstrual imaginary.

Little Red Riding Hood: A Menstrual Tale

An “animale” – “a he-or she-bird” – plays with gender – is shamed – is “crazy” – gives pleasure – keep it a secret – uncontrollable – “species” – she feeds it – she is watched by the “wolf” – the wolf of the fairytale – he reprimands her for feeding her “animale” – the “wolf” separates her from her “animale” – she must not bring her up – will become “beastly” – will certainly NOT “become a woman” – if she persists – with this animale – which cannot be made to leave – he/she always comes back and slips between her legs – her pleasure – a “wild thing” – or a woman – doing it “breathing” – multiplying – touching herself – chastised for touching herself (Cixous, 1991, pp. 34-35).

Little Red Riding Hood has captured the popular imagination throughout the ages and is perhaps the most retold fairy tale of all. According to Jack Zipes in his book *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, it is because of the central themes of rape and violence at the fairy tale’s core that the tale remain central in patriarchal cultures of the West, and which makes it such a notorious tale (Zipes, 1993, p. 18). But, perhaps, it is equally the symbolic power of the Red Riding Hood, her cap a clitoris doused in blood, signifying menarche, and the unfolding sexual path of a young girl en-route to becoming a woman, which continues to reinvigorate this tale, and therefore allows for an against-the-grain reading of blossoming pubescent sexuality.

Certainly, Little Red Riding Hood’s cape has been theorised as symbolising menstrual blood, and her ‘red riding hood’ has been thought to symbolise the clitoris. Fairy tale expert Catherine Orenstein comments in her text, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, that ‘Her basket of wine and cakes, it’s said, represents Christian communion; her red cape stands for menstrual blood’ (Orenstein, 2002, p. 4). In his book *The Forgotten Language* (1951), Erich Fromm also interprets the red velvet cap as signifying menstruation and the onset of sexual maturity (Fromm cited in Dundas, 1989, p. 211). Moreover, it seems that there is something subversive about Little Red Riding Hood, notably her desire not to conform to the moral code dictated to her by her mother, which makes her an
intriguing figure.

In her essay ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous briefly refers to the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood,* in order to explain a woman’s entrance into the textual landscape, a space dominated by masculine writing. Cixous refers to the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood,* as a metaphor for describing her journey into a feminine writing practice, that which has not yet been articulated, ‘the never-yet-said.’ She compares a woman’s ‘coming to writing’ to taking a journey from the mother’s house to the grandmother’s house, and the sacrifice of the ‘pretty red offspring’ to the wolf (Cixous, 1991, p.14). The curious girl enters the forest, is out of her habitat, her domesticity, and is devoured by the wolf, by logos. Clearly, Cixous is writing the body of woman up against a male symbolic order.

For the daughters of the housewife: the straying into the forest. Deceived, disappointed, but brimming with curiosity. Instead of the great enigmatic duel with the Sphinx, the dangerous questioning addressed to the body of the Wolf: What is the body for? Myths end up having our hides. Logos opens its great maw, and swallows us Whole (Cixous, 1991, p. 15).

Interestingly, Cixous doesn’t refer to the possibility of a menstrual narrative in *Little Red Riding Hood.* Her emphasis is on the wolf as devourer of woman’s voice and sexual freedom.

Cixous points out that fairy tales that moralise feminine codes of acceptable feminine behaviour reveal that if you stray into the forest, if you dare to journey to the cusp of the civilised world, perhaps to challenge the discourse on feminine ‘nature,’ to duel with the Sphinx, then you will be devoured by the wolf. In her interpretation of the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood,* Cixous warns of the potential death of a feminine voice, and women’s ability to write her own body. As feminist critic, Deborah Jenson writes in her preface to ‘Coming to Writing,’ Cixous is an escapee from the traditional literary canon in her many wanderings into the fairy tale forest of the other, of the mother. ‘It is the haunted site of the fairytale’ where mothers and daughters stray into forests and encounter dangers, and the threat of the patriarchal abject (Jenson, 1991, p. 193). Cixous therefore restores *Little Red Riding Hood* to an adult morality tale, warning women of the perils of the wolf. Similarly, Orenstein recounts the role of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood:*

The heroine encounters a wolf (or a werewolf, depending on the version you’re reading) who hides himself in Grandmother’s bed. In the earliest written version of the tale, the girl strips off
her clothes, joins the beast under the covers – and dies. A rhyming moral at the end warns young women to watch out, because a man can be a ‘wolf,’ popularizing the use of the term, still common today, to mean a seducer (Orenstein, 2002, pp. 4-5).

Certainly, for Cixous the wolf comes to embody the phallic power that devours female sexuality and the voice of women. In Cixous’s reference to *Little Red Riding Hood*, the moral message is therefore largely concerned with having adolescent sexual development conform to a patriarchal agenda. Moreover, in Cixous’s interpretation of the fairy tale the forest figures as a metaphor for the unconscious, that part of the human psyche assigned a feminine mystique in patriarchal culture, and in which the girl leaves her mother’s house and influence, soon to be threatened and devoured by a wolf. As I have mentioned, for Cixous the wolf represents the threat of phallic power of logos that has the potential to castrate women’s voice. Her essay is all about retrieving this castrated feminine voice of Western discourse, fighting the wolf of the fairy tale, and reclaiming access to a feminine language. Furthermore, Cixous acts as the woodsman who cuts open the wolf’s gut with her axe and pulls out the grandmother, and Little Red Riding Hood, to bring about a feminine rebirth, and the potential renewal of feminine writing. Whilst Cixous’s reading is important it is not in my view the most plausible interpretation of the fairy tale. Clearly, Cixous doesn’t identify a menstrual theme in relation to Little Red Riding Hood. She does however interpret the tale in relation to the girl’s encounter with patriarchal prohibitions. Yet, it is perhaps the girl’s triumph over the patriarchal abject and the granting of her sexual pleasure with the wolf, or indeed her own metamorphoses, which makes this tale so intriguing.

Fairy tale scholar, Marina Warner points out that there is, in fact, an aura of femininity around fairy tales, given that over half of the fairy tales written have been written by women, which are often dominated by themes of metamorphosis. Fairy tales explore the fantastical through an elaborate symbolic language of the dream, which has the effect of teaching the boundaries, by straying into those spaces of wilderness, of animalism, touching on the realm of the abject, and the transformative abyss. As Warner argues, there is the possibility in Charles Perrault’s (1628-1703) early version of the tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, of confusing granny with the wolf. She adds ‘The climactic image of ‘Red Riding Hood’, the wolf’s mouth, has led many

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18 Whilst this is often the case, it is not in author Angela Carter’s version of the fairy tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, in which Rosaleen, who is an interpretation of the figure of Little Red Riding Hood, shape-shifts into a wolf herself.
commentators to note the emphasis on orality’ (Warner, 1994, p. 182). We might consider the possibility that granny has the ‘wolf nature’ capable of taking Little Red Riding Hood or Little Red Riding Cap across a threshold to teach her ‘language or oral knowledge’ of the animal, associated with her own animalistic menstrual aspect, bringing about the full blossoming of her sexuality (Warner, 1994, p. 182).

It is also possible that the wolf’s mouth symbolises a ‘vagina dentate.’ In The Monstrous Feminine, Creed theorises the vagina dentata in relation to myth, legend, and the horror film. Creed gives the example of the vampire film with close up shots of women whose open mouths, often bloodied, reveal pointed fangs, which are representations of the vagina dentata. She points out that the notion of the vagina dentata challenges Freud’s castrated female because it has the power to castrate, and therefore sever male phallic power (Creed, 1993, pp. 106-108). So then, if the wolf’s mouth is potentially an abyss that speaks with blood, Little Red Riding Hood is devoured by a powerful femininity, perhaps even initiated into feminine mysteries, through engaging with her own wolf sensibilities. Moreover, the wolf’s stomach is opened up and the grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood are brought out as if newly born.

The poet, Anne Carson writes about the wolf in relation to female orality in her essay ‘The Gender of Sound,’ stating that:

The wolf is a conventional symbol of marginality in Greek poetry. The wolf is an outlaw. He lives beyond the boundary of useful cultivated and inhabited space marked off as the polis, in that blank no man’s land called to apeiron (‘the unbounded’). Women, in the ancient view, share this territory spiritually and metaphorically in virtue of a ‘natural’ female affinity for all that is raw, formless and in need of the civilizing hand of man (Carson, 1995, p. 124).

The idea that the wolf occupies marginalised space that a female dually occupies, particularly with regards to her sexual coming of age, potentially offers her an animal voice, which subverts patriarchal notions of femininity. It is therefore possible to interpret the wolf of the fairy tale from an angle of reclaiming a female source of animal sexual power. Certainly, the tale depicts a very sexual scene that can be related to women’s metamorphosis, particularly the claiming of her animalism, as well as her menstrual voice.

We might also consider the possibility that with the onset of her first menstruation Little Red Riding Hood takes on shamanic powers and undergoes lycanthropy,
becoming herself a wolf, and therefore shape shifting, in a sense devouring her prepubescent self, and her girlish naivety. In her text *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast Within*, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray discusses menstruation in relation to lycanthropy:

*The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978) by Penelope Shuttle (a feminist poet and novelist) and Peter Redgrove (a poet, scientist and Jungian analyst), for example, focuses on menstruation as a *natural* process which should be embraced in order to ‘enhance the growth and powers of individual women’ rather than hidden, dreaded or shunned. Correspondingly, some parallels between lycanthropy and menstruation have pursued this logic, showing the lives of female werewolves to be deeply influenced by their awareness of their own bodily cycles. In such narratives, lycanthropy is presented as a cause for celebration or at least as the source of a richer experience of embodiment (Bourgault du Coudray, 2006, p. 123).

Clearly, Little Red Riding Hood is considerably changed for having entered a forbidden other world of animalism, a space presided over by the grandmother, or the sorceress who duly imparts her knowledge of the outer limits. For the grandmother is a witch, or sorceress. She has the wolf nature herself and knowledge of the feminine, which she must pass down to her granddaughter.

British novelist, Angela Carter tells of the girl’s blossoming sexuality and animalism in relation to her recent first menstruation in her version of the tale:

Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has started her woman’s bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforth, once a month.

She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing (Carter, 2006, p. 133).

This is how I prefer to view Little Red Riding Hood, certainly not as a victim, but as a powerful heroine in charge of her own destiny, newly menstruating, having begun her journey to become a woman. But, more than that, taking on powers and abilities that far exceed her adolescent self, mentored through the transformative abyss by her grandmother, taught how to cross the border of her animal self, and return safely with new knowledge of women’s periodic being. The fact that the grandmother made the red riding cap in the first place tells us from the very beginning that she is the one who presides over this rite of passage story, presumably with direct reference to first
menstruation, since Little Red Riding Cap is wearing a red cap that symbolises blood. Moreover, the clitoris is referred to as a ‘riding hood.’

In Bruno Bettelheim’s reading of Perrault’s early version of the tale *Little Red Riding Cap*, he dismisses it as an untenable version because of the ending, whereby Little Red Riding Cap happily jumps into bed with the wolf, and is devoured. He argues that:

> Perrault’s ‘Little red riding Hood’ loses much of its appeal because it is so obvious that his wolf is not a rapacious beast but a metaphor, which leaves little to the imagination of the hearer. Such simplifications and a directly stated moral turn this potential fairy tale into a cautionary tale which spells everything out entirely (Bettelheim, 1976, pp. 168-9).

Bettelheim believes that Perrault’s version doesn’t allow the reader’s imagination to become charged and active when reading the tale. Rather, the Brothers Grimm’s later version successfully achieves this for him. For Bettelheim the wolf must be terrifying, as well as strangely alluring, to hold the reader’s interest, who is most likely a child.

Bettelheim argues that the story, *Little Red Riding Hood*, holds a great unconscious attraction for children, which he attributes to a mixture of emotions, some of which are sexual, and some of which are fearful and anxious, particularly regarding the fact of the little girl getting into bed with the wolf. Bettelheim quotes the modernist fiction writer Djuna Barnes, who wrote that “Children know something they can’t tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!” (Barnes cited in Bettelheim, 1976, p. 176). We can ascertain then that the tale centres on the unfolding of an adolescent sexuality and potentially animalism.

In Perrault’s version the wolf doesn’t dress up like the grandmother, but simply lies in her bed after eating her. Little Red Riding Cap jumps into bed with the wolf. She is not afraid of the wolf. And yet, for Bettelheim, Little Red Riding Cap merely becomes a ‘fallen woman,’ which is a very patriarchal interpretation of the tale. Certainly, the threat of being devoured is central to the theme of the tale, but it is perhaps a metaphorical devouring, and even a sexual devouring. This emphasis on the importance of female pleasure as rite of passage runs counter to the notion of Little Red Riding Cap as a victim. Perhaps the newly menstruating Little Red Riding Cap is being devoured by her animal desire, or even her own animal power.
It is unusual that Bettelheim doesn’t interpret Little Red Riding Cap’s ‘red cap’ as related to menstruation, whilst noting the significance of the colour red in the tale. Bettelheim emphasises the sexual nature of the colour red and the ‘danger’ of Little Red Riding Cap’s ‘budding sexuality,’ which she apparently cannot control (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 173).

All through ‘Little Red Cap,’ in the title as in the girl’s name, the emphasis is on the colour red, which she openly wears. Red is the colour symbolizing violent emotions, very much including sexual ones. The red velvet cap given by grandmother to Little Red Cap thus can be viewed as a symbol of a premature transfer of sexual attractiveness, which is further accentuated by the grandmother’s being old and sick, too weak even to open a door. The name ‘Little Red Cap’ indicates the key importance of this feature of the heroine in the story. It suggests that not only is the red cap little, but also the girl. She is too little, not for wearing the cap, but for managing what this red cap symbolizes, and what her wearing it invites. (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 173).

And yet, it seems obvious that Little Red Riding Hood or Cap is a menstrual tale. In my view, it tells of the girl’s journey to the cusp of society, to the boundary of culture that hinges on the abyss, to integrate her animal aspect, and bring about her sexual rite of passage, and personal metamorphosis. Certainly, Bettelheim’s observation of a heroine’s journey is at least poignant.

In my view, Little Red Riding Hood is not a victim; rather she is setting out on a heroine’s quest to become a sorceress, or witch, or even a medicine woman, with the onset of her menstruation, and by/through her confrontation with the abject animalistic aspect, which she must be initiated into, and learn to control. Her grandmother is guardian of this cyclical process. The mother of the tale delineates the boundary to her daughter, the newly menstruating girl, tells her not to stray into the woods, effectively warning her not to trespass on the abject, and the possibility of being violated on the way to visit her grandmother. Of course, the girl does trespass because all truly sensible girls do exactly what their mothers’ tell them not to do. She must go away from her mother, separate for a time, which she does, and encounters the realm of the animal, specifically the wolf, in the forest. Little Red Riding Hood is bedded by the wolf, and metaphorically devoured. The wolf’s mouth symbolises an abyss, into which the newly menstruating girl journeys, going into the belly of the wolf, there to be re-birthed, brought out into the world by the woodsman, and gain the power of lycanthropy. Certainly, Little Red Riding Hood, is a menstrual tale that deals with themes of animalism, abjection and female pleasure, which can also be interpreted as a coming of age tale, and of blossoming sexual desire, which
strengthens female identity rather than weakens it. There is strong female agency active in the newly menstruating adolescent girl who is interested in the wolf and gives very specific instructions to grandmother’s house, least he take a wrong turn and not arrive!

In this chapter I have read the classical narratives of Persephone and Demeter, Oedipus and the Sphinx, and Little Red Riding Hood in relation to feminist theory, as well as through the perspective of a menstrual imaginary. Through an exploration of these classical figures, who are in fact guardians of women’s cycle, I have shown how women can embark on a psychical heroine’s journey to the border of culture to cross a threshold periodically, for the purpose of integrating their animalism, entering a good and/or transformative abyss, and drawing on their own feminine imaginary. This journey is undertaken with and against abjection because in Western culture the female heroine is implicated in a patriarchal culture that has predominantly sought to account for her menstrual cycle as a tabooed substance, which is frequently related to neurotic behaviour. These classical tales have traditionally been interpreted through a patriarchal lens. Yet, the female heroine can journey through the abject by voicing her own menstrual imaginary, against dominant narratives in Western culture on women’s procreative animalistic bodies, which have negatively sought to align women exclusively with the natural world and the biological. Thus, women who choose to embark on a psychical heroine’s journey periodically experience descent and draw on their own imaginary, in order to rebirth themselves in poetic language, or through various other artistic practices, which serves to enrich an existing menstrual imaginary.
Chapter Five

In Red Ink: Blood in Fairy Tale, Poetry and Art

This final chapter will explore the many representations of women’s blood, the menstrual cycle and the animalistic procreative female body in the work of mostly female poets and artists, in order to demonstrate the existence of a menstrual imaginary. Whilst in the last chapter I read the classical texts of Persephone and Demeter, the Sphinx, and Little Red Riding Hood against-the-grain, that is for submerged or underlying menstrual meanings, in this chapter I will read various cultural texts for direct references to a menstrual imaginary. Moreover, Lupton’s concept of ‘good blood’ that is maternal, nourishing and the source of creativity will drive my analysis of a menstrual imaginary in a range of texts and artworks. It is important to point out that often ‘good blood’ is tinged with feelings of ambivalence because it brings about a confrontation with the abject, and can be painful, even whilst it allows overflowing creativity to issue forth. Through identifying and exploring the concept of ‘good blood’ female artists and writers claim menstruation as a source of creativity that is bound up with both life, as well as the violent disruption of life, which is potentially painful, but can bring about personal transformation and renewal.

Good Blood

In The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation (1976), Delaney, Lupton, and Toth are among the earliest to discuss menstrual themes present in fairy tales, myth, and poetry. They find that direct references to menstruation in cultural texts are uncommon and the most universal symbols are ‘flowers, fluids, witches and the moon’ (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 157). They point out that critics have been loath to identify these images as menstrual due to the blood taboo. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth advise that, ‘Of all the menstrual symbols, the most clearly connected to the monthly flux is blood. At times, however, the mythmaker or poet disguises the blood, converting it into a sacred river, a tide, a flood or some other liquid (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 157). In Her Blood is Gold (2008), Lara Owen discusses blood as ‘one of the oldest and most central symbols for humankind … Blood is the primary symbol of the life force. It is found in the most ancient forms of art as red ochre painted on figurines and cave walls. Blood is one of the earliest sacraments used by humankind’
Moreover, Owen tells us that: “The dead were buried in the fetal position with their arms across their chests, their bodies marked with red ochre, the pigmented earth, symbolic of life-giving blood” (Gadon cited in Owen, 2015, p. 24). We can ascertain that blood signifies ‘the mystery of our existence’ and conversely our mortality when it pours from a wound (Owen, 2015, p. 24). Blood is meant to flow within the body, not seep out. However, blood transgresses the borders of the body during menstruation and childbirth. As Owen points out: ‘The fact that women can bleed without dying added to their numinous power in ancient times’ (Owen, 2015, p. 25). Moreover, ‘In some cultures there is a belief in the mysterious healing nature of menstrual blood’ (Owen, 2015, p. 25). In The Curse, Delaney, Lupton, and Toth explain that in various societies:

Menstrual blood has been known to cure leprosy, warts, birthmarks, gout, goiter, hemorrhoids, epilepsy, worms, and headache. It is effective as a love charm, could ward off river daemons and other evil spirits, and was occasionally fit to be an honorific offering to a god. The first napkin worn by a virgin was to be saved for use as a cure for the plague (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p.7).

The exaggeration of such claims attests to the great power many cultures attribute to menstrual blood. Owen adds that ‘Menstrual blood was also considered sacred by many cultures’ (Owen, 2015, p. 25). The red wine sacrament taken in many religions in the world is thought to originally symbolise the Great Goddess and possibly her menstrual blood, rather than the blood of Christ. As Owen explains:

In the Tantric tradition men become spiritually powerful by ingesting menstrual blood. In the group rituals of the left-handed Tantric path, menstrual blood is taken along with red wine as a ritual drink. The Taoists, Egyptians, Persians, and Celts all had similar beliefs (Owen, 2015, pp. 25-6).

Thus, menstrual blood has historically been treated by some cultures as a sacred fluid, as well as an accursed one. In my view, it can again be thought of as the ‘good blood,’ that is, as nourishing and a source of life and creativity, bringing with it the potential for spiritual awakening, particularly through creativity. In my reading of the menstrual imaginary, in this final chapter of my thesis, I will therefore specifically focus on the imagery of blood and particularly the ‘good blood’ in fairy tales, poetry and art, whilst also pointing out the frequently ambivalent attitude that marks even the most positive appraisals of blood in creative works.
In Fairy Tale

Delaney, Lupton, and Toth argue that the menstrual taboo can be found amidst the pages of universal moralistic folkloric tales that are rich with menstrual symbols and motifs. Their focus is on the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, which they argue are indicative of European-American heritage:

Studies of repeating themes and motifs in folktales throughout the Indo-European language group and beyond reveal these homely tales to be rooted in common experience, fears, and misconceptions. It is thus logical that the terror of menstrual blood, one of the most profound imprints on the collective unconscious, should occupy a prominent place in these tales (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 131).

They find that a common narrative theme in the examined fairy tales involves a maiden who must undergo a ‘pubertal rite’ and be secluded, as well as experience an encounter with a witch, before being able to meet Prince Charming (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 132). Notwithstanding all of the negative meanings of menstrual blood in fairy tales, of which there are many, their reading of the Grimm fairy tale titled The Juniper Tree, which in some editions is also called The Almond Tree, tells a very different story about blood. In The Almond Tree, blood features as a direct reference to menstruation and is portrayed in positive terms as a ‘life-giving menstrual fluid,’ which is rare. Moreover, the cyclical life, death, and rebirth of the womb is depicted.

In the following passage taken from The Almond Tree, we see the direct link between the blood of the mother’s cut finger with the fertility cycle and the seasonal world. The story tells of a woman who peeled an apple under an almond tree one day and cut herself. A drop of blood fell on the snow beneath her and she wished for a child, grieving the fact that she did not yet have one. Instantly, her heart was lightened and she had a premonition that something ‘good’ would come of her wish. Then she went into the house; and a month passed, the snow disappeared; and two months, then all was green; and three months, then came the flowers out of the ground; and four months, then all the trees in the wood squeezed up against one another, and the green boughs all grew twisted together, and the little birds sang, so that the whole wood resounded, and the blossoms fell from the trees. When the fifth month had gone, and she stood under the almond-tree, it smelt so sweet, that her heart leaped for joy, and she could not help falling down on her knees; and when the sixth month had passed, the fruits were large, and she felt very happy; at the end of the seventh month, she snatched the almonds and ate them so greedily, that she was dreadfully ill;
then the eighth month passed away, and she called her husband and cried, and said, ‘if I die, bury me under the almond-tree,’ then she was quite easy, and was glad, till the next month was gone; then she had a child as white as snow, and as red as blood; and when she saw it, she was so delighted that she died (Grimm, 1991, pp. 225-226).

Delaney, Lupton, and Toth interpret the drops of blood from the woman’s finger that fertilise the ground as menstrual blood making the tree grow more fecund, as well as bringing about a baby, which tells of the connection between ‘the mystery of woman’s bleeding’ and the ‘mystery of life’ (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1976, p. 140). Certainly, The Almond Tree, depicts the ‘good blood’ of menstruation, rather than the polluted, or contagious blood of menstruation.

In Poetry

In Blood, Bread, and Roses, feminist poet, Adrienne Rich discusses her struggle to find her own voice as a poet, that is, whilst frequently coming up against the canonical poetry of male poets. She talks of the journey that women poets take to the edge of culture, the ‘drift’ to the boundary, to where the terrain is volcanic, in order to write, which invokes Bourgeois reference to the ‘volcanic unconscious.’ Rich says:

I had been born a woman, and I was trying to think and act as if poetry – and the possibility of making poems – were a universal – a gender-neutral – realm. In the universe of the masculine paradigm, I naturally absorbed ideas about women, sexuality, power from the subjectivity of male poets – Yeats not least among them. The dissonance between these images and the daily events of my own life demanded a constant footwork of imagination, a kind of perpetual translation, and an unconscious fragmentation of identity: woman from poet. Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of the dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it (Rich, 1986, p. 175).

It is this ‘constant footwork of imagination,’ or the constant need to find a language that can convey the breadth of feminine experience, which is so powerfully articulated by Rich. Writing poetry becomes for Rich a form of political protest, of resisting patriarchal frameworks, that is, with careful attention to speaking her experience as a woman, which is an embodied experience. She says, ‘To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take woman’s existence seriously as a theme and source of art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my life’ (Rich, 1986, p. 182). As such, to write poetically about a woman’s embodied experience is vital as Rich suggests and can in fact release great agency in women. The female cycle is a core part of women’s embodied experience and can be
given credence as a topic worth exploring in poetry, and which brings positive agency to women.

Rich also writes about Emily Dickinson’s poetry and life in her article ‘Vesuvius at Home.’ Rich tells us that Dickinson adopted a ‘dialectic of metaphor’ to convey ‘original’ and ‘unorthodox’ poetry that is volcanic, not only because of her voluminous output, but also because her poetry stands testimony to a woman’s emotional life. The fact that Dickinson let her creative energy burst out, volcanically, even from the domesticity of her bedroom, during the nineteenth century seems revolutionary. Rich advises that ‘Poetry [as opposed to other literary forms like the novel] is too rooted in the unconscious; it presses too close against the barriers of repression; and the nineteenth century woman had much to repress’ (Rich, 1976). But, in spite of this Rich explains that Dickinson rode the boundary repeatedly in order to renew herself against the dominant patriarchy of her time. It seems that it might therefore be possible to look at Dickinson’s entire oeuvre in relation to motifs of eruption in women’s embodied experience. It is outside the scope of this thesis to conduct such an enquiry. However, I will read one poems of Dickinson’s that specifically discusses blood in relation to the female cycle.\footnote{In The Curse, Delaney, Lupton, and Toth refer to a male critic, Clarke Griffith, who finds menstrual themes in the poetry of Emily Dickinson in his 1964 study of her work titled The Long Shadow. In the book he argues that a ‘rhythm of suffering’ is present in Dickinson’s work, comparable to the menstrual rhythm. He attributes her menstrual distress to penis envy. He identifies the main menstrual images used by Dickinson as: ‘the clock (a symbol of the repetition of pain), the father (the envied male who doesn’t menstruate), and childhood (the only state in which pain could be escaped)’ (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 156). It is likely that Dickinson was completely unaware of these ‘apparent’ menstrual motifs in her work. Even though it is commendable that Griffith should be interested in menstrual themes in the first place, he interprets the menstrual rhythm in terms of Dickinson’s neurosis and enduring suffering, which is deeply problematic (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 156).}

Dickinson’s poem, ‘The name – of it – is Autumn,’ appears to discuss blood in relation to seasonal shifts and to female flow in a mostly positive sense.

The name – of it – is ‘Autumn’ –

The hue – of it – is Blood –

An artery – upon the Hill –

A Vein – along the Road –
Great Globules – in the Alleys –

And Oh, the Shower of Stain –

When Winds – upset the Basin –

And spill the Scarlet Rain –

It sprinkles Bonnets – far below –

It gathers ruddy Pools –

Then – eddies like a Rose – away –

Upon Vermillion Wheels –

(Dickinson, 1975, p. 326-327).

Whilst the menstrual blood potentially ‘upsets the [vaginal] basin,’ it is Dickinson’s allusions to flow that persist, flow which ‘eddies like a rose,’ and is like a wheel of self-renewal, and life. The arrival of Dickinson’s menstrual cycle is described in this poem in relation to the flowering of her femininity, which is mostly positive. The association of menstruation with autumn highlights the continual menstrual shift from shedding, to regrowth, which dually occurs in the seasonal world.

Erica Wagner, suggests in her book, Ariel’s Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters By Ted Hughes, that the colour red was significant for famed poet, Sylvia Plath, in her work, as well as for her husband, Ted Hughes, in his collection of poems, The Birthday Letters, and particularly in his poem ‘Red.’ Wagner points out the many references to red and blood in Plath’s poems.

In Plath’s ‘Poppies in October’, a woman’s ‘red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly’; in ‘Nick and the Candlestick’, addressed to her son, ‘the blood blooms clean/ In you, ruby’. In Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Judith Kroll writes of red’s ‘dominance’: ‘It is a color naturally associated with blood, danger and violence, as well as with vitality’. Red, in Kroll’s view, is the colour that calls to the true, vital self sleeping within the poet, who, in ‘Poppies in July’, is ‘colorless’. Plath observes the red of ‘Tulips’: ‘their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds’ … (Wagner, 2000, p. 194).
In fact, Hughes’s poem ‘Red’ is a meditation on red, as well as blood, in relation to Plath. Susan Bassnett writes about the collection, *Birthday Letters*, in which the poem is collected, in her book *Writers and their Work: Ted Hughes*:

*Birthday Letters* tells the story of the meeting between Hughes and Plath, traces their life together and the disintegration of their marriage, her development as a poet, the demons she could not escape from, her ultimate death and his subsequent life. The poems expose the fundamental differences between them: their different personalities, different cultural backgrounds, different expectations from life. A thread that runs right through the collection is the idea of miscommunication, of words spoken and misunderstood, a language apparently that they held in common but which neither could really comprehend (Bassnett, 2009, pp. 96-97).

In ‘Red’ Hughes asserts that red was the colour he identified Plath with most of all. Red: the colour of blood, and also of Plath’s wounds. Is Hughes talking about menstrual wounds? He says: ‘Like blood lobbing from a gash,’ which conjures an image of Plath as wounded, and yet simultaneously on a more subsumed level also conjures her bleeding sex. It is interesting that Hughes picks white as her possible other colour, which is linked with milk and maternal nourishment, that is, in direct contrast to red, which is linked with blood, menstruation, wounds, life, death, and rebirth. Hughes sets up red in opposition to white and in so doing consciously or unconsciously casts red as distinctly violent and disruptive. Moreover, Hughes surmises about Plath’s connection to blue, which he likens to kindness, and which he states Plath lost in the end. It is worth quoting the poem in full to appreciate the power Hughes attributes to woman’s blood.

Red was your colour.

If not red, then white. But red

Was what you wrapped around you.

Blood-red. Was it blood?

Was it red-ochre, for warming the dead?

Haematite to make immortal

The precious heirloom bones, the family bones.

When you had your way finally

Our room was red. A judgement chamber.
Shut casket for gems. The carpet of blood
Patterned with darkenings, congealments.
The curtains – ruby corduroy blood,
Sheer blood-falls from ceiling to floor.
The cushions the same. The same
Raw carmine along the window-seat.
A throbbing cell. Aztec alter – temple.

Only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness.

And outside the window
Poppies thin and wrinkle-frail
As the skin on blood,
Salvias, that your father named you after,
Like blood lobbing from a gash,
And roses, the hearts last gouts,
Catastrophic, arterial, doomed.

Your velvet long full skirt, a swathe of blood,
A lavish burgundy.
Your lips a dipped, deep crimson.

You revelled in red.
I felt it raw – like the crisp gauze edges
Of a stiffening wound. I could touch
The open vein in it, the crusted gleam.
Everything you painted you painted white
Then splashed it with roses, defeated it,
Leaned over it, dripping roses,
Weeping roses, and more roses,
Then sometimes, among them, a little bluebird.

Blue was better for you. Blue was wings.
Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco
Folded your pregnancy
In crucible caresses.
Blue was your kindly spirit – not a ghoul
But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.

In the pit of red
You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.

But the jewel you lost was blue.
(Hughes, 1998, pp. 197-8).

For Hughes Plath’s red is distinctive and arresting, as well as suffocating. It is a pit and a stiffening wound. Hughes suggests that after Plath ‘had her way,’ presumably he means by killing herself, his room was covered in the red blood of blame and betrayal. But, also by contrast, Hughes says that Plath ‘reveled’ in red, which ties red back to a source of life and vigor. Moreover, Hughes describes Plath’s red as having a raw quality, even a preciousness, which gleams, and is jewel-like. It seems that red is the source of something in Plath that Hughes tries to grasp in this poem, and which threatens him, but which he can not fully understand. As I will discuss, red was in fact Plath’s ‘blood jet’ and a vital source of her poetry.
In her poem ‘Kindness,’ collected in *Ariel*, Plath tells us: ‘Kindness glides about my house. Dame kindness, she is so nice!’ (Plath, 1990, p. 83) Plath is possibly referring to one of the women who came to help her care for her children just prior to her suicide. Yet, their sugar cannot give cure and we can deduce that she was suffering depression at the time of writing the poem. Plath speaks sardonically of sugar as a cure all. Moreover, the woman attending Plath and her children with ‘kindness’ is also a bit of a nuisance to Plath because she upsets her Japanese silks. Plath draws our attention to the possibility that she herself is potentially like one of those ‘desperate butterflies’ that ‘May be pinned any minute’ and numbed. Plath goes onto explore the motif of blood in relation to the poetic urge, which is a powerful force in her.

… The blood jet is poetry,

There is no stopping it.

You hand me two children, two roses.

(Plath, 1990, p. 83).

The tension between what a mother must do, that is, tend to her children and their needs, and what a writer must do, that is, tend to the blood jet, is exposed in this poem. Plath is writing of the blood of vitality, the blood of the female cycle, and of poetry, but also of death and wounds. Blood in this poem is clearly linked to the great surge of poetry, which is a ‘blood jet.’ What is at stake in this poem is Plath’s creativity and her life reflected through the emblem of blood and roses, and with reference to her two children.

In ‘The Munich Mannequins,’ also collected in *Ariel*, Plath describes mannequins who are devoid of reproductive functions that she sardonically calls ‘perfect,’ and whom she sees whilst on a train journey to Munich. Plath reflects that the mannequins project an image of womanhood that is fake and unattainable: they cannot have children. Plath is offering a commentary on the mannequins and their constructed or artificial image of womanhood. She then refers to the monthly tamping of the womb and the ‘unloosing’ of moons. The moon is a frequently-used symbol of menstruation and Plath seems to be exploring her feelings about menstruation in relation to the biological drive to reproduce that is meant to fulfil women. Plath writes: ‘The blood flood is the flood of love, the absolute sacrifice’ (Plath, 1990, p. 74). As such, we might contend that whilst menstruation engenders human fertility, ensures ovulation,
and is a source of poetry, and love, it is also for Plath a sacrificial rite, which women potentially endure as a means of bearing children, that is, in order to fulfil an imperative ordained by patriarchal culture. Whilst menstruation brings ‘a flood of love’ and poetry with it, for Plath, it also potentially fulfils a sense of duty, about which she is ambivalent.

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydreas,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice …
(Plath, 1990, pp. 74-75).

Plath questions the purpose of her bleeding on the train journey to Munich, which she compares to a ‘morgue between Paris and Rome.’ We might surmise that for Plath menstruation is, on the one hand, an abundant source of life and creativity, a ‘blood jet’ of poetry, and, on the other hand, potentially an emblem of death. Blood for Plath then brings creativity and specifically poetry, but it also engenders pain and suffering.

Lucille Clifton’s ‘Poem in Praise of Menstruation’ celebrates women’s menstrual cycle. Clifton’s characteristically pared down poetry, with no punctuation, facilitates flow, or unimpeded movement, and therefore seems to mimic an evacuation of fluids, though packed with an unfolding humanity and wonder at life.

if there is a river

more beautiful than this

bright as the blood

red edge of the moon if

there is a river
more faithful than this

returning each month …

(Clifton, 2000).

Clifton compares menstruation to a river, to the moon, to surging passion and pain, to a sacred biblical source, to wild water, and to ancient feminine flow. This poem is a gentle and hypnotic evocation of women’s fertility, and strength. Clifton’s poem insists on women’s timeless connection with the natural and animal worlds in a most positive light.

Sharon Olds’s poetry in general is well documented for its honest and unflinching exploration of human life and celebration of the human body. In her poem ‘When it Comes’ Olds closely observes the letting down of the menstrual blood as an erotic experience. Importantly, she places menstruation in opposition with the concept of a wound in patriarchal societies. Menstruation has historically been thought of as a discharge from a wound. By contrast Olds’s poem celebrates the arrival of life-giving blood as a sacred event of the everyday that brings with it a kind of beauty out of women’s sex, which Olds associates with its ‘dazzling’ colour, and which can be anything from ‘golden red’ to ‘black vermillion.’

Even when you’re not afraid you might be pregnant,

it’s lovely when it comes, and it’s a sexual loveliness,

right along that radiant throat

and lips, the first hem of it,

and at times, the last steps across the bathroom,

you make a dazzling trail, the petals

the flower-girl scatters under the feet of the bride. And then the colors of it,

sometimes an almost golden red,

or a black vermillion, the drop that leaps

and opens slowly in the water, gel

sac of a galaxy,

the black-violet, lobed pool, calm
Olds’s poem gradually and seductively draws the reader in to consider closely an alternative meaning of menstruation. Olds goes onto describe menstruation as a ‘delicate show’ that is moving and accurate. It encourages the reader to think of childbirth when the plug of mucus ‘shows’ tinted with blood and tells of the coming birth. The feeling of fecundity and the life force that accompanies birth is therefore conjured by Olds in relation to menstruation. Moreover, Olds considers the shedding of the blood and the egg with a sense of universal wonderment. She imbues menstruation with a knowledge that marks women as different from men in a sacred way, by virtue of the fact that women’s fertility cycle allows them to give birth, but also connects them to the wider cosmos.

In Bernadette Mayer’s poem ‘Ode on Periods,’ she points out that whilst the penis can be the subject of an academic poem, the menstruating vagina cannot. Her aim is to break with this tradition.

the penis is something that fits into the vagina

so’s the tampax or sponge

therefore Aristotle never thought of women at all

the penis like a tree fits into mouth, hands and asshole too

it can be the subject of an academic poem

disguised as a sloop, catapult or catamaran’s mastpole

never the monthly menstruation will she

belie tradition’s bloody demagoguery enough

to appear in the rough in a poem in a monthly

I dream I had a deep cut on my finger

filled with a delicious tofu cake

and when you took off your clothes your penis

was among them hanging by a cord on a hook
I took it down hoping its disassociation from being

would not thus prevent its manly erection from existing

and therefore I tried it out and it went well

such as license as mine perhaps made it swell independent

I think the world is all f*cked up in many ways (see footnotes)

and one of these is the apparent interdiction in dumb poetic tradition

of speaking of and being heard on the glories of sublime menstruation …

(Mayer, 1998).

Mayer points out that the world is ‘fucked up’ if we have to read poems from a ‘dumb poetic tradition’ of essentialist seventies spiritual feminism that insists only on the celebration of menstruation. Mayer isn’t interested in the anthropological, magical, or sacred aspect of menstruation. Rather, she is interested in exercising her freedom to speak on whatever topic she wishes to speak on. Therefore, in this poem she has chosen to speak of menstruation as part of her ordinary everyday Western urban life, that is, in direct contrast to women of the nineteenth century who wrote nothing about menstruation at all, as she tells us in her poem. By writing about her menstruation, as well as pointing out that it is part of women’s lives, which is often discussed among women, Mayer protests against the patriarchal subjugation of the vagina, and the overt celebration of the penis. Furthermore, Mayer’s is an academic poem, which attempts to challenge the dominance of the penis as a symbol of masculine writing from within the structures of Western secular discourse. In the end, Mayer’s poems does celebrate menstruation as a form of female synchronicity and everyday experience that needs to be outed, even though she shudders at feminist attempts of the seventies to overly imbue menstruation with spiritual significance. All of these poems that deal with the blood of menstruation attest to the power and complexity of the menstrual imaginary.

**In Art**

In contemporary art the silence on menstruation is well and truly broken. ‘Today, menstruation appears as theme or subject in the graphic arts, in painting and sculpture, in feminist comic strips, and in menstrual shows of all kinds’ (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1976, p. 236). In fact, Delaney, Lupton, and Toth are among the first to
recognise fully menstrual imagery and motifs that focus on women’s experience in cultural texts. They refer to Judy Chicago’s famous menstrual taboo-breaking artwork, *Red Flag* (1971), in which she depicts a woman removing a tampon. (See appendix one). Also, in a collaborative artwork titled ‘Womanhouse’ (1972), Chicago contributed an installation called ‘Menstruation Bathroom,’ in which ‘The room is covered with gauze veil and is white, clean, and deodorized. On a shelf are Modess and Tampax boxes; the wastebasket overflows with used napkins. On the floor, a saturated tampon lurks’ (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1976, p. 238). (See appendix two). Chicago depicts menstruation as an intrinsic aspect of female experience that must not be ignored. However, it’s possible to go back even further to find evidence of a menstrual imaginary in female artistic practice.

Celebrated Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) famously depicted her injured body in her work, which became one of her enduring motifs. Yet, her continual depiction of her damaged body transgressed suffering to portray a transformative emotional life. In his introduction to *Frida Kahlo: National Homage 1907-2007*, novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes writes that in Kahlo’s paintings ‘… she directly describes her own pain, her pain does not silence her, her cry is an articulate howl because it attains a visible emotional form’ (Fuentes, 2008, p. 24). Much has been written about Kahlo’s depiction of pain, as well as her surrealist connections, but less has been said about her preoccupation with exploring an imaginary landscape related to abject things and states. She has said that she depicted her own reality rather than the dream world, but in depicting her reality she clearly drew heavily from an imaginary tradition, and particularly on women’s blood, and the procreative body of woman. British writer Jay Griffiths tells us in ‘Frida Kahlo: A Life of Hope and Defiance,’ that Kahlo painted with her own blood (Griffiths, 2014). By using her own blood in her work Kahlo channels a primitive energy, associated with death and her wounds, as well as human infertility, and by implication fertility. Kahlo depicts human detritus and matter, like blood, animals, ‘tendrils, ribbons, ties, tentacles, hair, roots, vines, veins, fallopian tubes’ and breasts, and so on (Griffiths, 2014). Moreover, she explores themes of menstruation, breastfeeding, childbirth, and miscarriage in her work. We can see in Kahlo’s work that the abject resides in the bodily fluids, tissue, and flesh of the mortal that is a source of her creativity, and even potentially brings about communion with a Mexican Indigenous divinity.
Kahlo navigates the animalistic and primal desire for nutriment from a maternal source in ‘My Nurse and I’ (1937). (See appendix three). She depicts herself as an infant drinking the white milk that starts out red-tinged, which she draws down from a Great Mother’s enormous breast, and which could potentially be considered a part of her own body. She depicts herself as infant drawing on a divine source of inspiration, creativity, and of course healing. Griffiths comments that:

In My Nurse and I, breastmilk is depicted like sap, so intensely realised that you can almost hear the milk drawing down within the breast. She reverses the normal scale of female experience, so breastfeeding – too often a secretive and furtive action – is painted as a huge, cosmic activity. She tells a grateful truth: that breastfeeding women may experience themselves as enormous with life, world-mothering and miraculous. The nurse's face is a huge mask, and Kahlo's work acts like a mask for many women: her work both disguises them and gives stature to their experience (Griffiths, 2014).

It is both red milk and white milk that the infant Kahlo imbibes. The enormous breast of a Great Mother is depicted as a kind of tree of life, through which the primal red milk from the uterus becomes white nurturing milk. Kahlo portrays the animalistic procreative function of breastfeeding in terms of the enormity of the life-giving mother and of the divine feminine. We can detect that there is great hope in her artwork: the hope of transcending human suffering and fragility. Conversely, in another painting, ‘Without Hope’ (1945), Kahlo depicts herself lying in her bed, drinking from an animalistic primal mass of red things: a plucked chicken, fish heads, a pig, an opened up carcass, all bloodied. (See appendix four). Kahlo is crying. Her imbibing of dead things, of discarded detritus, is painful. Certainly, these motifs of suckling from both a white and a red maternal source link Kahlo thematically to the abject. Moreover, in ‘My Birth’ (1932), Kahlo depicts her own blood-tinged adult head being birthed from presumably her own body. (See appendix five). However, we can only speculate about who is birthing Kahlo, as the top half of the woman’s body is covered with a white sheet. There is blood on the sheet of the bed where Kahlo’s head is emerging. The work conjures themes of personal rebirth and self-renewal from a womb source, through pain and suffering, and as such the duality of human experience is explored.

In Fantastic Reality; Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art, Mignon Nixon points out that important French/American artists Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) developed a diverse body of work that constructs the maternal subject ‘of desire and
death’ (Nixon, 2005, p. 12). Nixon argues that, ‘Any matrix of interpretation for Bourgeois’s art must surely be drawn along the axes of feminism and psychoanalysis’ (Nixon, 2005, pp. 2-3). Of course, in psychoanalysis ‘the mother is strangely absent’ (Nixon, 2005, p. 4). Deliberately then, Bourgeois’s work explores the subjectivity of the mother from a feminist perspective and as a means of protest. I am particularly drawn to Bourgeois’s red gouache drawings, which were completed towards the end of the artist’s life, in 2008. In his article ‘Blood Ties’ Duncan MacMillan comments that the impact of the red gouache drawings is ‘urgent, direct, and immediate’ (MacMillan, 2008). He further remarks that:

… it looks as though her brush had been dipped in freshly spilled blood, or even as if she had been drawing directly with a bleeding finger. Yet though their bloody rawness is shocking, the drawings are also at times tender and often beautiful (MacMillan, 2008).

Interestingly, MacMillan does not directly suggest that any of the works might depict menstruation. For instance, ‘In *Couple*, two blobs of red, close together on the page, have run into parallel vertical lines of feathery wash’ (MacMillan, 2008). (See appendix six). The parallel blobs, in fact, resemble vertical flows that have bled out and into each other. It is an abstract depiction of menstrual flow that MacMillan seems to shy way from exploring. Although, Macmillan does point out that, ‘The artist herself has said, ‘Menstruation … it is your best, most creative time. It is a blessing’ (Bourgeois cites MacMillan, 2008). MacMillan suggests that it seems highly likely that in these blood red gouache drawings Bourgeois is claiming something ‘definitively feminine,’ and which I would emphasise is clearly related to the animalistic procreative female body. Moreover, there is a starkness and pared back quality to the drawing ‘Couple,’ as well as in all of the other red gouache drawings that suggests a primitive component to human experience, which symbolises the blood of birth, death, and rebirth.

The red gouache series created by Bourgeois, who was in her nineties, primarily consists of depictions of pregnancy, breast-feeding, and childbirth. In ‘Self-Portrait’ Bourgeois draws twenty rotund maternal figures with sometimes five, sometimes six, breasts hanging around their necks, most probably with reference to the Goddess Artemis Ephesia, who bore multiple breasts sometimes described as eggs or fruits. (See appendix seven). Bourgeois depicts fertility as symbolised by raw, basic, and super-abundant breasts. In fact, the breasts are so multiplied as to become the most significant feature in the work, while the faces remains featureless. In ‘The Good
Breast’ we see twenty drawings of the oversized red breast that leaks out a red nutriment, flowing down to an overly simple, somewhat primitive human character, in various forms, sometimes with a body, and sometimes just a head, receiving the nipple and its offerings. (See appendix eight). This drawing depicts the red milk not white milk of maternal nourishment. In ‘The Feeding’ the twenty drawings are of breasts again overhanging the primitive child’s face, but the breasts are not entirely red; rather, we see more detail of the child taking from the breast. (See appendix nine). Bourgeois depicts the child open-mouthed in need of the breasts and their red fluids. In ‘Mother’ Bourgeois depicts a pregnant torso that is armless. (See appendix ten). The child floats upside down inside the mother’s womb. The fine detail of the gouache bleeds to create numerous watermarks, so as to overlap, producing a very primal scene, which is startlingly beautiful. ‘The Umbilical Chord’ depicts a bloody baby with umbilical cord attached. (See appendix eleven). The figure of the baby is abstracted somewhat and yet it is clearly a newborn. It is a raw and archaic depiction of human birth. In another drawing ‘The Arrival’ Bourgeois directly depicts the opening of the vagina and the newborn doing a back dive out of a reclining female body, so as to privilege the vagina as a focal point, or a central source of human creativity. (See appendix twelve). All of these works are drawn in red gouache, which looks unmistakably like blood and can be intimately linked with the animalistic procreative body.

Finally, I would like to consider several works by contemporary Australian artist Del Kathryn Barton, who has said that she is heavily influenced by Bourgeois’s work, and similarly her work also explores maternal and feminist themes. In a series of watercolour and ink works on paper titled ‘Go Me True’ (2012), Barton depicts six spread-open vaginas all red and bloodied to some degree. Barton’s work is often highly decorative but in these drawings on paper she depicts menstruating vaginas with a sparseness that gives them a primal quality. (See appendix thirteen). Barton uses water with red ink to give it the appearance of bleeding. In the first drawing in the series the words ‘the fountain of her’ are written at the top of the work and below is an open vagina with legs spread to either side. The vagina is at close range and it is the focus of the image out of which a tree is growing. This suggests that the vagina is a source of life. Moreover, it is clear that Barton is referring to the fountain of menstruation. (See appendix fourteen).
In the second drawing, the vagina is at close range and even more bloodied. A house rests atop it, which suggests that the vagina is a source of life, comfort, and homeliness. (See appendix fifteen). The third drawing represents a vagina at close range and a dark archaic space inside, perhaps a good abyss, out of which blood emanates, and which suggests an unknowable aspect to women’s cyclical being. (See appendix sixteen). The fourth drawing depicts a vagina at close range with a black abyssal slit out of which a root system is growing, and which is dripping with upside-down love hearts. The menstruating vagina here is represented as both a mystery and as a source of love. (See appendix seventeen). In the fifth drawing, the vagina is a small black hole with rings around it, possibly a spiral, which is a symbol of the Mother Goddess. (See appendix eighteen). In the last drawing the vagina is at close range and blood is vividly flowing out in tributaries. (See appendix nineteen). The black hole at the centre of the last two vaginas suggests that the vagina is becoming a kind of eye, or even oracle, out of which women can express themselves. Barton also depicts a triptych of watercolour and ink works on paper titled ‘More the Him’ (2012), in which three bloody penises are seen. (See appendix twenty). These taboo breaking penises are covered in what can be interpreted as menstrual blood. All of these images partake of an extensive catalogue of menstrual imagery and symbols that indicate a confrontation with the abject as well as the richness of the menstrual imaginary.20

It is important to emphasise that the menstrual imaginary doesn’t just signify positive images associated with the female cycle, but rather is a rich, complex, and sometimes contradictory concept. It clearly means a range of different and personal things to the artists, and poets, who draw on its diverse and powerful images. We can see in Plath’s poetry that blood signifies life and creativity, as well as suffering and death. Whilst in Bourgeois’s art it represents the fullness of fertility, maternal strength, and primal energy linked with creativity. As such, menstruation is represented by these artists

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20 There are so many other artworks that belong to the menstrual imaginary, far too many to mention. But, two artworks stand out as important. In Jessica Chow’s display at the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2010, she strung used tampons on a board, but it was considered too shocking and covered up by the Dean. In Carina Ubeda’s exhibition, ‘Cloths’ (2013), she put ninety sanitary cloths stained with menstrual blood on display, each embroidered with words like ‘destroy’ and ‘production,’ placed them in an embroidery hoop, and hung them up. These two artists depict the menstrual cycle in radical feminist terms and belong to a menstrual imaginary.
and poets as life-giving good blood associated with the maternal, though marked by an ambivalence, which ties it to the abject. Menstruation therefore delineates a space that poets and artists potentially ‘confront,’ as it sometimes invokes a painful and uncomfortable process, associated with the maternal, animalism, the abyss, and wounds, which also brings about personal renewal, and a flood of creativity. Moreover, menstruation can potentially offer poets and artists access to an important mode of self-expression in red ink.

The poets and writers that I have discussed in this final chapter have developed a symbolic language in relation to blood, the menstrual cycle, and the procreative female body, in order to articulate this area of female experience. Clearly, there exists a repository of symbolic material that relates specifically to the menstrual cycle, particularly one in which the character of blood flow is represented positively, albeit often ambivalently as well, but which has not previously been theorised or articulated as signifying the existence of a menstrual imaginary. Kristeva’s concept of the abject that both repels and entices, speaks perfectly to the concept of a menstrual imaginary, even though she herself neglected to specifically consider the female poet’s journey. A menstrual imaginary brings about the ambiguous, alluring face of menstruation, and offers a rich source of imagery and collection of narratives about woman, and her procreative life, which can potentially combat negative patriarchal interpretations of menstruation. Certainly, it is important that menstruation is recognised and celebrated as a source of female creativity, and as part of the creativity engendered by a menstrual imaginary, which speaks in a language that is complex, rich and powerful.
Conclusion

As I have argued, the menstrual imaginary is complex and varied, and best understood through a range of theoretical perspectives. It is important to recognise that it is an imaginary domain that can be drawn on periodically by artists and writers, and expressed in symbolic form, which is marked by ambivalence. It has been the central thrust of this thesis to, on the one hand, theorise its existence and, on the other hand, to show where it exists culturally both at a subsumed as well as on an apparent level. I started out giving a very brief survey of the menstrual taboo, in order to show how menstruation exists as a death-space of knowledge in patriarchal cultures where it is detectable mostly as a symptom, frequently identifiable relative to the phenomenon of the premenstrual syndrome. I argued that many women have internalised negative stories about menstruation, such as the persistent notion that ordinary women periodically experience neurosis, a pejorative concept, which can be traced to the figures of the hysteric and the sorceress. These are in fact the same figure throughout history: a woman with a voice of ‘milk and blood’ who is silenced because of her wild, basic and animalistic aspects. The reason for this is that man wishes to see himself as civilised and separate from woman and nature.

And yet, if this menstrual voice has been repressed and exists as a dark continent of meaning in patriarchy, then many mostly female artists and writers have travelled to that terrain in order to listen to this voice. It is where Persephone and Demeter, the Medusa, The Sphinx, and Little Red Riding Hood reside, and are brought back to life through writing and art. On a periodic basis a large portion of the world’s population gives birth to a primal animalistic flow that potentially connects them to a powerful imaginary, and a rich and complex source of creativity, which some writers and artists choose to draw on, as well as articulate in symbolic form at the level of culture. In this thesis, I have sought to identify its existence so that collectively we can start to think about menstruation in much more positive terms as a periodic ‘good blood’ flow that brings with it a range of emotional experiences, some ambivalent, but which harnesses a vital creativity.

Whilst Daly depicts his ‘menstrual complex’ and the influence of a phallic mother in problematic terms, he is the first to detect menstruation in literature, albeit in relation to the unfolding of male sexuality, not female sexuality. Yet, he at least is able to recognise menstrual imagery and reclaim menstruation as a valuable creative
influence on male poets and writers, even though he fails to identify menstruation as an important creative influence on female poets and writers. By contrast, Shuttle and Redgrove focus on menstruation as a key aspect of female sexuality. They contribute the important notion that periodically women gain access to a ‘primary’ and ‘imagistic’ process connected with the dream world and poetry. They consider themes of woman’s monthly descent into a shamanic abyss for the purpose of integrating her animalism, in order to bring about a deeper connection with herself. Irigaray also reclaims the female sex organ and its ‘economy of fluids,’ which she argues is connected to psychic life, and creativity, specifically writing. She asserts the very real quality of women’s fluids in relation to their voice, which energises female agency. Lupton’s ‘good blood’ builds on Irigaray’s idea that the foetus in the womb receives its first nourishment from women’s fluids. As such, women can consider their wombs and their fertility cycles in far more positive terms. For Lupton the monthly blood flow is strongly linked with libidinal energy and creativity, which also brings about personal nourishment and self-renewal.

Cixous’s theory of ‘white ink’ helps us to understand the importance of bodily fluids in thinking about a menstrual imaginary. Her ‘white ink’ is linked with maternal milk, nourishment, and life, whilst my related idea of red ink is linked with death, renewal, wounds, and rebirth, all of which can be detected in Cixous’s writing at a submerged level. Her ‘voice of milk and blood’ is rather less bloody than she had suggested. And yet, Cixous’s Medusa figure riotously laughs and is beautiful, rather than monstrous, and brings with her erupting volcanic voice, which is associated with the animalistic maternal body, and the good or transformative abyss. She is not horrifying. Rather, she is a volcanic mother periodically surging into the world and bringing with her Medusan red ink. By contrast Kristeva’s theory of abjection takes us in a different direction, exploring the dark side of the human psyche and the creative impulse. She theorises an imaginary border of human meaning that stems from the animalistic maternal other, and leads to the emergence of the abject. Kristeva explores the journey for the male poet into this abyss. But, by contrast I have argued a female poet gains access to this imaginary domain through her own procreative body and her cyclical flow. Certainly the female poet’s relationship to the abject is vastly different from the male poet’s. Although, the abject when confronted by the poet offers the possibility to both male and female poets, and artists, to experience creative catharsis, it is for the female also a journey of self-exploration. In my view, the abject is rather
less terrifying than Kristeva claims, although it is still confronting, and therefore has the power to disturb, even whilst it also has the power to bring forth a burst of creativity, and self-renewal. The primal self or animal self resides within all of us and is an integral part of human nature, although this force has been denied in patriarchal culture.

Whilst all of these important precursors identify the importance of menstrual themes in relation to creativity, none actually theorises a menstrual imaginary. Women poets and artists, and indeed women in general, can potentially draw on this domain, in order to enunciate in symbolic form their creative and artistic desires. This is why it is necessary to identify the menstrual imaginary at a sub-textual level, as I have done through reading against-the-grain the classical tales of *Persephone and Demeter*, the *Sphinx*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*; these narratives reveal that there is a whole range of references to the creative power of female blood, which haven’t yet been identified. Moreover, I have read many overt or apparent references to female blood in poetry and art that are marked by both desire, as well as by ambivalence – characteristics, which are central to a menstrual imaginary. As such, the menstrual imaginary is a powerful and confronting concept that is articulated by women through a varied range of perspectives and artistic forms, from poetry and literature to film and art. The menstrual imaginary writes and is written in red ink.
Bridging Statement

In the creative component of my thesis The Butcher’s Daughter, I have composed a poetry manuscript. I have sought to apply several key aspects of my theoretical work to my poetry and express my own menstrual imaginary. The manuscript is arranged into five sections: Daughter, Witch, Mother, Shape-Shifter, and Animal. Thematically then my poetry manuscript closely follows my own personal archaeology, as Kristeva suggests in her writing on the abject, and therefore I confront the creative journey through my own procreative animalistic self. I have paid close attention to the animalistic maternal influence that shapes human life, and which has historically been reviled and tabooed. I have portrayed my own blood flow and the nuances of my menstrual cycle. I have sought to explore my maternal influence on my children and their lives, as well as their profound influence on me, and my life. Moreover, I have reflected on our collective status as human animals bereft of a sense of animal-ness in Western culture, which seems evident in our inability to embrace, and/or openly acknowledge woman’s menstrual cycle, and its relevance to creative life.

Red ink has been a central trope for exploring my menstrual imaginary. Red ink: a concept that I constructed in direct relation to Cixous’s different, but related concept of ‘white ink,’ is connected with blood, menstruation, wounds, death, and rebirth. It is disruptive and explosive with the power to shatter taboos. Red ink has allowed me to confront the abject and question concepts of maternity, and the female cycle that are reductive, and impact negatively on women. As such, it has been more of a confrontation with a good or transformative abyss that has brought about a creative outpouring to do with my own maternity and animalism, a kind of lava. I have certainly experienced a connection with a primary imagistic process that lends itself to poetic writing. I can therefore attest to the fact that my most creative time, as Louise Bourgeois suggests, has been pre-menstrually, at which time I have drawn on my own imaginary, and which I have articulated in the symbolic language of poetry. In summation, as a female poet I have sought to explore the good abyss, the volcanic unconscious, and the well of red ink, all related to Kristeva’s abject, and with respect to my status as an animalistic procreative being.
Poetry Manuscript: The Butcher’s Daughter

I. Daughter

The Bull-Cow

The way that he used to chew so noisily
all of us hanging there off his lip
suckered into his mouth, becoming his cud,
our softness gone to acids, dissolved
into the brine of his stomach, the pit.
His gut ragged, decayed, an overly meaty
swill of circling cardinal, carmine,
tinged with grey. Further down swollen
intestines of antique ruby, cerulean,
ingled with mouldy hue of celadon green.
The damaged bowel twisted, frayed,
fissures sprouting out as song, an
animal logic of decay, corn silk, dandelion.
Still further down, the anus jutting out
toward the unholy grail of human life
from which we escaped, the very arse-end
of matter, haemorrhoids, oh God save us –
those saddened sacks of impish pink,
gerying gnarls that hurt so much.
A slow demise down the cavernous mile
of my father’s gut and shoddy law,
intestinal sway, a descent into madness.
Oh the slippery coil, the mess (perhaps
I glimpsed that unearthly place) escaped.
Until my children called me back to
the man we playfully named the bull-cow,
who adores his grandchildren.
The Butcher’s Daughter

In the hook room I was scared, carcass meat all around, sawdust under my shoes, a dry cold air pressed into my skin. I stood within that salt cage, frosted cell centring myself on bodies burst; exposed flesh turning inward as melted edges, exposed bones jagged from the saw, whole-bodies halved, animal heads hung-low. My father, the butcher, opened the door unhooked a carcass, shouldered its load took its hulking frame to the workbench, cut, knifed, wrestled with its lifelessness as I stood motionless, frozen. There was no blood in there, not in an obvious sense. It wasn’t gory gutsing before me like the window display at the front of the shop with its slapped pork-fillets, its pulping steak, bulbous sausages, the slithering eyes of filleted beef ripe with syrupy God-fuel stuff. The phallic stretch of oxidised red as side by side the meat lay down, the goose skin chickens, their naked breasts milky eyed with blood-splash veins. Cut flesh sticking on more cut flesh, animal fleshes merged totem-less, the castration of animal displayed as muscles numbered along the bone. The aroma stench of blood suppressed the fact of death made invisible. My father our ‘bull-cow’ at the helm dispensing orders, serving customers.
At the back of my father’s shop
blades for cutting, intestines in buckets,
guts in buckets, skins in more buckets.
The flecking out of the bloodied parts,
the holding in of the bloodied parts,
an abattoir of aging flesh, divorced
from actual, real live animals.
As still flesh sat, and sat, and sat
waited to be eaten, its pact with humans
long since broken, I stood in the hook room
the butcher’s daughter, heir to it all.
Haired

The other girls had unhaired legs, mine outpoured, simian.
I wanted to run right out of the playground but was stuck there in my body aware of myself half-manned.
Later I discovered black-weeded death above my lip, the barnacled beard of stray hairs came later.
Shower of dusty dark wired pubic tendrils in my armpits, though not as thick as the German girl’s witnessed in the change room, shamed her for not shaving it off to my friends later. But she was just like me, covered in latticed thread to her mid-thigh, hiding the underling, grain of blood we all waited on expectantly.
There was even more hair knitted, a furry rainbow that arched over my eyes, fighting for my life against the insults until I waxed it off. Even then naked of hair, I hid behind my wintry coat, an invisible Athenic shield preparing to fight, sharpening, having torn from myself the bushy blessing, wanting to fit in, but never quite able to take it all off, my furry blood at the hinge of my sex, a creature stirring.
Reincarnation

Vic and Shirley lived in Burnley.  
Shirley was pretty. Vic was proud. A prize boxer.  
Fought at the stadium. Shirley wore high heels, a city girl.  
They had two children, Barbara and Margaret.  
Then Shirley had an affair with the dentist.  
Shirley and Vic moved to the country.  
Had my father Barry. The doted-on first son.  
Slept in bed with Vic until age nine.  
Caught double pneumonia, had to have flannel shirts, even though they were dirt poor.  
Four more children: Cheri, Steven, Susan, and Geoffrey.  
Lived on a farm. On weekends Vic fought at Victoria Park in Daylesford. Sharman’s boxing tent, anyone brave enough to take him on.  
No one ever knocked him out up there.  
He’d go back and forth, fists raised, crossing thresholds in himself.  
Never let Shirley forget she’d cheated.  
Beat her when his troubles came over him.  
That’s when the children cleared out, hid in the paddocks, waited till he drank himself to sleep.  
Could have been world champion, but missed his chance.  
Later, rail thin, greying, pale with emphysema.  
Shirley penned poetry, ‘Bottle tops, bottle tops, one, two, three…’  
Clang went the bottle tops on the concrete floor.  
She should have gone off with the dentist, but then I wouldn’t exist, so I thank her for her troubles.  
When we’d visit, dad would call her tubby, but she was a fighter too. I can still hear her out of breath broad laconic, smoker’s rasp telling me that when we die we are reincarnated.  
I believed her, knew straight to my heart it was true.


**The Dressmaker and the Poet**

My grandmother drove a Singer
with her clean white church-going hands.
Ruby May’s chaliced hands could hold anything.
But, if you looked a bit closer at them
you might have observed that they had
nib bits at the edges, hardened law
along the seams, and prophecy-laden lines that
wavered from too many years of compromise.
Perhaps, she was pricked too often by
the needle sailing on past the thimble,

driving into her finger tips, stabbed to death
by insignificant sharp ends, by the
necessity of getting the clothes sewn,
made to measure for moneyed people.
A life governed by so much fastened thread.
And yet, it is my reverie that as she
cut along the dotted line of pattern
over and over she learnt not to give in.
I myself cannot sew.
A needle and a thread are only a nuisance
to me, they are something I dread.
They make me think of being shackled to a
buzzing dusty machine, a buzzard’s voice
gloating about torture, about patriarchy. But,
perhaps my needle is a pen,
my thread an unbroken line, attempts
to string together bruised words
ordered according to their bloody smarts.
My fingers stabbed too many times
by insignificant sharp ends, tell of
the continual life, death, rebirth of song.
Ruby May

The clean white prism of the bed, her supine
on it, facing heaven, inner animal curled up,
estling under covers, last part to disembark
for the realm she held in highest Baptist regard.

Plain-faced women came to dress her,
I watched them work at her body pale with cancer
of the ovaries, sugary ovals putrefied to pale chestnut pink,
perhaps speckled with ruby red blot of neglect –

For the life she wanted, a carer since childhood,
made to look after her siblings. That day when
she sent Eva to run the bath, Eva slipped, banged her head,
fell in, her hair gathered in a clump, formed a plug, drowned her.

The scar of her death crossed (dear) Ruby’s heart,
her happiness exposed to God at twelve.
Later on, she fell in love, wanted to study at
bible college with her suitor, but her parents said no.

Ruby May obeyed, became a dressmaker,
made to look after her siblings. That day when
she sent Eva to run the bath, Eva slipped, banged her head,
fell in, her hair gathered in a clump, formed a plug, drowned her.

I recall days spent at her house, Sunday school
colouring-in activities, the smell of the old gasoline heater,
Pa in the front room reading the newspaper,
peeling his apple, slicing it up with that old knife he used –

Black tourmaline handle with the golden stripe,
made liturgy bent to the apple, as if God’s first,
sharing it with all of us, thinly sliced, edged pastoral green,
and the calm quietude of that front room in which he sat.

My grandmother busy in the kitchen, old church organ out back, guarding the backdoor, snapdragons lining the driveway, upturned faces, Ruby May delighting in making those purpled lips talk with her fingers, gently throttling the flute of petal, releasing it.
Lolly Days

At Jubilee Lake, floating, bellowing sun on my face, mineral cleanness of water on my skin. Later, sitting by waterlilies, red polish on my toenails, wearing a floral frock, eating ice-cream. The dry bush heat a blanket covering my skin. A willow tree above me. Increasingly aware of a desire for solitude, for intimate knowledge of all that is marked by an edge. The lake’s maternal mouth whispering.

Back at Daylesford house my brothers running to their cubbyhouse in the bush, trying to lose me in the scrub, in the prickles, hacked out morals of a coppice. Finding my way to the creek’s neck to catch yabbies before seeking out the boys’ hidden lair, but unable to find it this time. The trench dug out with corrugated metal sheeting thrown over the top. Going back to the orchard to pick apples bundled in my tee-shirt to feed horses, heading inside to draw, mum busying herself.
Later on, up at the milk bar,
over the bridge, a new shop owner,
his glass case full of lollies
we’d never seen before;
candy necklaces, fags,
sherbet bombs, cigars with
narrow golden foil wrappers,
pez lollies from America
with Disney dispensers.

Sometimes on the weekends
ice-creams in the main street
when dad would ask the man
over the counter for many flavours
stacked in balls of chocolate,
spearmint choc-chip, sometimes
rainbow, or banana, the arrival of
liquorice, blue-yonder colour.
The sugary cold silk, saccharin fuel
of our childhood summers.
Out of the Law (of the Mother)

We’d swum out to the raft against her wishes, if big brother, a strong swimmer, could brave that brown bellied lake, so could we. Fat throat of muddy water, a mineral grove, with light-wells to underneath, sacrament of death down there, scent of Gaia, dense closeness of volcanic geology. That smell comforted me whilst treading water confidently, preparing to swim out to the forbidden raft, already practised, since we’d swum across the entire lake that time with dad in terror and exhilaration. Surely this narrow stretch was achievable.

We looked back at mum sunbathing on the bank, she warned us not to continue, unable to swim well herself. We went anyway. Back at Daylesford house she took out the kettle cord, thrashed at my thigh, the sting whip bit, made flesh rise in welts, white tearing with blood dots: a new mapping of my childhood. I ran to the forest, tore into the bush howling, my brothers ahead of me making for their cubbyhouse. I ran into dense uneven scrub, it opened to me, a barbarous contour, or subterranean outpost, God made literal in feral sprawl of prickled bush-weed, thin-limbed gum trees, to right up top of the hill, thick-skinned boughs of white ghostly incandescence, and beyond the neighbour’s land, a forbidden zone. I looked back, saw mum standing there drowning in oxygen, her children driven across a threshold.
II. Witch

What Cyst Knows

It inhabits me under the skin
on my left thigh, its thick, unsightly
dense plasma itches me when the rain comes.
A weather sensor, had it since twelve.
Once dreamt bugs crawled out of it,
a Dali horror show, not ants marching,
but beetles sprang out of it.
A blot on my liver channel
according to the Chinese Doctor.
For the first time I desire to get it out,
suddenly aware that it is better cut out than lived with.
Its predictions bore me, dumb benign hub,
a brain gone askew from meaning.
It has to feel everything all the time.
My sensory button, my animal awareness.
Its thoughts are the rolling clouds
approaching thunder, tidal musings
on gritty sand, the sticky pelts of rain
powering down on sodden earth.
Its iris sees unseen things like a drawing
on the wall done on butcher’s paper
by my son and daughter of monstrous creatures,
to make us laugh at the strange truth of
a world peopled by eyeball heads.
Its hearing prevails into human longing,
especially at night when our house purrs
alongside the womb-lit-dark, and when the
wind picks up, a twang of wind chime
can startle it, make it stop a while.
Its door opens at the front, at the back of
my house, bangs shut, as if to say
pay attention to summer receding into a desideratum of the seasons. Well, at least these are the things cyst used to know, now it knows nothing at all, just throbs in me with chimerical end music.
**Patti and Me**

I read that Patti Smith eats wholemeal toast,  
drinks watermelon juice.  
Those fuels now gather momentum for me  
as I slowly eat a piece of sourdough rye.  
An omen of her dissidence is brewing in me.  
I feel overly obedient, only drink tea,  
having given up coffee long ago.  
Patti drinks coffee ritually like  
a Hebrew call to prayer, even though  
she refuses religion. Coffee is her mantra.  
_She_ puts a shine on it again for me,  
a matriarchal halo, so I pour myself a cup.  
I try my luck on a second,  
reach into my pocket to find  
another omen written in faery font.  
Taken from the magic shop I browsed  
weeks ago with my children, superstitiously kept.  
My life path: seven. A prophecy of breakthrough.  
Within me a fate, a riveting line,  
my superpower, my medicine,  
my affliction all bound, animal-sore.  
Curled into a ball, it needs to unfurl.  
Coffee seems to fuel its rebirth.  
My voiceless torpor is a feral animal  
preparing to speak its unruly line.  
Maybe, reach out for Patti’s ecclesiastical hope  
that someday I will rise up, free myself  
from the burden of technology,  
of government, to simply become _myself_.  

New/Old Scar Body

She rides her bicycle
in the libertine sun, insouciant
under the plume of a God.
Goes to him, atonement of his skin
feeds her eager mouth.
The sliding anatomy of awakened skin
puts together, takes apart,
in homage to death.
His muscular torso grips,
balletic hips quicken, and
her heart turns redder lipped,
a pirouette, the enfolding circle
goes down upon itself.
All that has taught her senses
to heighten their prospects,
call up a sacred love,
starts to remember Hades.
She’s in his red room feeding
on sea lava fish eggs,
raspberry slippery jam,
he calls it pomegranate.
Makes her return again and again
for the ritual, in which
they multiply themselves,
go on dying. Surely it will
annihilate her in the end,
and yet it makes her live.
The Love Crush

I sat in a booth in the old narrow café waiting for Bobby to make the first move. As he surveyed me from his booth opposite, I pretended to read the newspaper, afraid I might miss the chance to talk with him, touring his album Vanishing Point, playing the Forum theatre next door where I was working. He asked me the time. I mumbled.

A guy came in to ask for an interview, but Bobby said ‘Not now’ and instead chatted to me. He was pale, subterranean, smallish, but sexual. A doll that I would caress. My desire went full spectrum, but I remained restrained, piecemeal, had to appear unimpressed, couldn’t break free. I’m not even sure if I told him how much I liked his album, my heart agitated in my chest until I left to go to work. He paid for my coffee. Later onstage he said: ‘This is for the girl from before.’ I wondered, bowels curdled under the pressure of my desire, wet hot throng of lashing crush cascaded out of my body, pulsing liquids discharged aniseed, burnt umber, slicked down, out of my life, my love, my happiness, vanished. Until, emerging from the bathroom I went back out to watch him on stage. His voice a fistula preparing the way for our soft hairs tangling, netting together like my spinal column erecting a stair to fathom in him, to fuck with despair toward each other in the night, in force fields of light. But, I didn’t go to him, instead I left. The animal passion would not abate, even fucking someone else couldn’t tear out the love crush.
At the Laura Marling Concert

We had plans to meet early,
to hang out before the concert, but
then you said you were on a writing spurt.
When we did meet up I blurted out
that it was a bit shit the way you
blew me off for your work.
These words you took into your egg-shell-heart,
your quiet-violet-good-heart.
You cried and I felt the loss of my mantel
in your life, youthful-aunt-friend fallen
from grace. Sore in my heart
as though a walnut shell that won’t close,
my one-eyed silver-eyed-heart
knocking back and forth, ever looking out,
stuck on its fungal fan of brains,
bruised from the struggle to be good.
And yet, as Laura Marling sang tonight
of holding her head up, coming to know herself
an eagle, her driving-light-guitar made me
a gift of song strands, put me across the divide.
The Luckiest

I recall that day the old genie sat on the footpath propped up by the wall, drunk to his eyeballs. He said ‘What have you got to be worried about? You’re the luckiest girl in the world!’ I smiled at him, momentarily prised open.

I had been walking home along Grey Street downcast, given a leg up by a kindly old drunk who sat on the footpath stinking of piss, with an undercoat of filth clinging to his skin. Later on, at The Pogues concert a man randomly came up to me on his way to the bar, shouted ‘You’re the luckiest girl in the world!’ I stood there stunned, grabbed his shirt, yelled back ‘Why did you say that,’ but he just walked off as my world opened to song.

We were standing there at the concert watching Shane MacGowen swaying, holding the microphone stand, another drunkard’s face wrecked by booze though none of us pitied him because he sang those Irish ballads as deep sea shanties, a Goddess in his mouth, Morgan Le Fay. It was perhaps the vodka numbing his tongue that made the vowels echo, the consonants clang. And, he resurrected me with his Irish rogue-songs; a broken DNA strand that binds me to a Gaelic motherland, to a tradition of bluesy God-babble.
Pagan Ritual

I took three incense sticks
around the house.
A smouldering resin,
smoky liquid musk
drifted upwards,
cleansed the air.
An old pagan ritual
re-imagined, a
polytheistic pre-Christian
cult of bundling sage leaves
to burn, to expurgate
nocturnal wounds,
throw out the blast of ailment.
The smoke lichen
tightened on the night
as I chanted my exhortation.
I opened the door,
banished it. I swear
I saw a dark bird lifting,
its shadow asphodel shaped.
Civilisation

Driving up the highway to an outpost,
a wasteland of spinifex and red brick houses
to the facility for the mentally ill, an
attachment to the hospital proper.
My heart drags open, he’s here again.
This place must be a backwater of all creation.
When a woman tilted her head back
last time, screamed as though life had
stultified her brain to her base stem,
to her fragile nerve end, it shocked me.
Brought back to this outpost for poor bastards
whose sickness seems a life sentence.
He’s always in the high dependency unit first,
inner sanctum space where he smokes endlessly
like the rest of the inpatients, before they
passed legislation to give them patches.
Then he kills time in the courtyard
fenced by a red brick wall, no view,
only this fault line of Western civilisation.
I want to run for my life, but instead talk
with him a while, give him a gift of borscht
homemade, until he asks for money, cigarettes.
Soon he’ll be in low dependency,
he’ll call his drug dealer who will
come and take him on day leave
to shop him some dope. He’ll be discharged,
go home, get welfare, get medicated.
Another Visit to the Psych Ward

I entered through the glass security door, stood at the curved counter waiting for a nurse to attend me, to distinguish me from patients milling about. I stepped behind the counter, poked my head in the doorway leading into an office to make it understood that I was a visitor come to see my brother in high-dependency. A nurse informed me that there had just been an incident, a patient restrained, told me to come back later, so I went outside into the rainy night, walked columns of buildings where memories of prior visits flooded my body.

Later, back inside, I was attended promptly, sent to a private room for visitors. The nurse got my brother ready, brought him in. He was still delusional, occasionally funny, grand in his gestures, lifted me partially off the ground as he embraced me, not threateningly, larger than life, as the nurse, a serene man, watched attentively through a window. My brother eyeballed him occasionally, playfully, to signal he understood he was being watched. His eyes bulged in their sockets with elation, he was joking and laughing about how this was the control centre, the heart-hub of high dependencies, the people out there in low dependency were the real nut jobs. He was doing
research, his ultimate goal to create an outreach program for sufferers of mental illness not coping in the community.

Amongst the higher echelons of mania he navigated those seemingly magical strands expertly. As I sat there, pretended not to be uncomfortable, made light conversation about my home, renovations, children, work, I was reminded how good he is at mania. I focused on the print of parrots on the wall, as he parroted away, charismatic species, order of Psittaciformes, with curved bill, strong legs, clawed feet, a bird of paradise and amongst the most intelligent of birds. His physicality seemed to take on my father’s.

Back at my parent’s house my father was drunk-dialling, slightly manic himself, while my mother looked after my children. I quickly gathered up the children’s things. As we drove away the floating fingers of DNA haunted, boneless, touched on my skin, a non-palliative caress. At home I lifted each child to their bed. Sat down to feel into the opened carapace of my heart.
Get a Fix Land

You call me strung out, emptied out
version of yourself, ramble on about
how you’re a performance artist now.
Your mania your performance.
You admonish me for reminding you
that last time we met, at my daughter’s
kinder fete, you were especially wasted.
I ask if you’ve been using harder drugs,
you say you’ll take whatever drugs you need.
The downward climb, ladder of nadir,
pushes against your back to take you down.
Or no, you’ve escaped, floated up higher
to zenith, gone out into space, weightless.
Boarded alien aircraft at the bar in St Kilda,
left to explore the fragile moon,
claim it as your known world. But,
I no longer know who you are.
Poem for Simon

At the kitchen sink I espoused my views, 
imparted my parenting philosophy, 
passed judgement on her mothering abilities, 
tired, strained from backache. 
Her eyes turned to taut drums of pain 
having come to my aid to help me 
look after my children. Her son, my brother, 
sicker than pain, pivotal on lithium, locked up again. 
His sad deep sadness crushing all of us, 
his intellect a mind-mash of substances. 
I hovered on an outer girth of blood, a 
tongued channel of thought, the 
place where stray lives gather to spoil. 
I rode the artificial chemical wave of 
anti-inflammatories, osteo-panadol, 
slight amphetamine drive, took me away 
from my deep-sprung-self, numbed. 
As though running parallel lives, the one by my life, and 
my life re-emerging, pain having taken me 
into its harbour of fragility for a few days. 
Dystopian world of my brother 
whose name means he who has heard 
the word of God, has taken himself for 
a god many times. He cannot hear me, 
mere witch, when I call him to return.
An Ordinary Fruitcake

When Frankie our new neighbour came over
with the fruitcake it was dressed in bows,
had sparkly flowers, lollipops, candy canes, and
love heart sweets all around the sides.
After she left I stripped it, gathered all the lollies
into a bag, hid them from the children
who’d already grabbed a handful each,
then peeled away that sugary curtain of icing.
Underneath all that bling an ordinary fruitcake.
A few weeks later Frankie popped in
for a cup of tea, told me how her mother had
once visited her from heaven in a dream.
She’d been granted permission to come down,
give counsel, take Frankie back up with her.
Told Frankie she was going to ruin her daughter’s life
if she didn’t stop taking pills and alcohol,
just as she had almost ruined Frankie’s life
with her own addictions. When Frankie awoke
it was clear as a bell. Frankie took Jesus Christ
as her saviour, travelled to South Africa,
met her husband at a church, and now
twenty five years together, raised her daughter sober,
except her daughter Violet sort of disowns her.
Frankie says she’s like a stone in her shoe,
an annoyance, and she’ll come round
eventually, but it hurts Frankie so badly.
Her husband José took her away to Spain,
his homeland, to try to make her better.
They lived by the sea, ate fish, lived a simple life.
Frankie grieved a lot, they couldn’t get jobs,
the economic downturn, had to return
to Australia, tail between legs, no dough.
Now Frankie is just trying to be herself,
wears hot pink lipstick, floral skirts
with button down cardigans, trainers.
Has perfectly painted eyebrows,
her long dark hair brings her youth, and
her eyes sparkle as a fairy’s ought to.
She’s kind to my children, recognises their gifts.
She gives me some good advice, tells me to
let my children be free, let them climb trees.
She says that a good marriage is like a tree,
it puts down roots, grows wiser with age.
‘There’s good love here,’ she says.
On her way across the road she shouts back,
‘Oh, and be kind to your mother.’
To Seamus Heaney

That day I first heard *At the Wellhead*
my fountain tip wetted, brine of my heart
seemed to spill over. The same day you died.
Your raw edge of tongue encumbered by
death, your brail song heard on the radio,
that sing-song colloquial speak you used
to intimate Rosie Keenan, so that her
generosity of spirit broke right through.
Thought I glimpsed you in a rotund belly
of all mothered-ness, there drinking from a
nipple, white ink, so I dug in after you with
pen tip, to follow you down beyond earth’s
embrace, a cerebral hinge unlocked, to
reveal an intimacy, a flesh of feeling.

All the while life went on, a walnut fell
to earth perfectly formed, its wrinkled
hemisphere a brain-heart-organ, flesh of
curvature and the tannins bulged with
readiness, ripe for eating. A farm animal
stalled in its chamber, oh the horror
of the slaughter house when a pig cried
from a stun gun, from an electric rod,
from scalding water. From beauty to un-beauty,
joy to practised sorrow, I watched from far below,
averted my Hecate-eyes callow with the
bidden law of a world disclosing, ‘far-voiced’
from beneath a dream, earth-music of
human animal fallibility, and I knew nothing at all.
**His Backwards Dream**

(After Ted Hughes).

He drifts through an imaginary gate,
sings from the bowels a bare-earth-folk,
our world decanted, as the wind cries of
birds collapsing into air. He is broken.
Remade by the earth, the unfurling mystery
of the dream knotting, fixing to a hope.
His dictation of rain swears backwards,
of the sun enclosed oyster sweating pearls, of
clouds bursting with ironies, gumming out sources.
He hears the earth shudder dead stones,
flowers burst with arrowheads of song,
butterflies cry with panic, their near and far voices
mutter across the rapturous tunic of sea,
weaving entrails of music, making sleepy drafts.
The interwoven over-woven fairy story
that he owns, a grafter among the elements,
posting new observations from a primitive frontier.
Healed by the gimlet brain, by swollen honey sums,
by sexual skirts of flowers, by desire wrenched
out of throats of violets, by crystal amulets
of blood and milk. It is almost as if each new thought
is too esoteric, but then he makes it stick
to the earth somehow with a yolk of om.
His chant doesn’t stop until the end, when
the crooked bat weeps, the bereft bear laments,
the doleful ant minces back and forth across
the haemorrhaging of nature. The whole
crush of life assembles for his dictation.
Diving In

(After Adrienne Rich’s poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’).

Standing at the deep end of the pool
jostling for a place beside a whole class
of children all trying out for swimming day.
That much bigger kid, dark skinned, maybe
Samoan, stood nearby. We all dove in.
With every thrashing of foot, each
migration of hand, I knew I could win.
I almost didn’t breathe with effort, as if
taking one inner-marked breath, going
down battlelines of soul to get there first,
not for glory’s sake, not to be praised, but
to fulfil on an inner tremor of knowledge,
vaguely sadistic like a drive, a calling,
the endless diving in. I drew first place
with the bigger kid, maybe she wasn’t
even trying, but I had given everything
to get ahead of the pack, to remain
apart from the herd. And now as I go
diving into the wreck she is my comrade,
my mermaid who looks with me at the
sundry lump of rust, hull shadow pooled,
deck destroyed by fungal Gods of sea, and
the masts skeletal, taken back to picked bones.
The burnished trinkets of finery hidden
under thick sand, obscured by sea floor.
As I swim under the sea’s lonely curtain
this celestial place almost feels homely.
All that lies under burnt umber calls to me,
half forgotten. An encounter with Cousteau’s
otherworldly paradise, a grail of wreckage,
my book of myths firmly tucked under my arm.
III. Mother

Hymnal Lines

I wear the organic blueprint;
patterned by silver pathways
where skin once spread
over my bulging belly.
When the soft skull
contracted out I waited
for the final push of
venix caseosa covered
blood-streaked body
to slip its muscled
heavy cultus life
from my dilated vagina.
The umbilical cord
papaya whip laced
with a dull Carolina blue
was attached to the ravaged sac
of placental-good.
Her purpled body warm
with light in my arms.
Standing in front of
the mirror naked
I see hymnal lines,
a silvery brail of our love.
**Birthing Song**

My fully lubricated machine
boiling, groaning, going, as if
coming upon a new territory.

A spindly path rolled out
before me as I went on and on
voicing every turning of the arc,
every node into being.

A descent, wrangled me down
muscle, bone, word,
fibres threading, thrashing
to the chaotic moment.

I got birthing like a cargo train,
made my voice deliver her,
the flowering of blood.
All the Bleeds

I bled post birth for weeks,
an endless menstruation
with a halo on it, a blood-trust
flowed out of me, new life, my own.

I give milk, an extension of myself.
It is good. The world sings out of
my body, sores cracked with news
of his suckling mouth, my newborn son’s.
I wipe away my daughter’s snot,
clamp down on its clear glutinous texture.
I kiss their soft tears, eat them up.
Wipe away shit, fears, urine puddles.
Bathe in the piss of my daughter and
son commingled, it does no harm.
Go on menstruating. Give milk,
lactate, deal with the retching of bile.
Punch out bad omens, suffocate bad thoughts.
Make pacts with hideous outcries, a
writhing on the floor haranguing voice.
Attend night troubles, sisterly doubles
of the dark. Keep them safe,
my lovely heads of coloured-light.
All the bleeds that have passed
through me, as effort, poetry,
humility with reason, these
children my most sacred parts,
will flow away eventually.
When the egg releases
blood gathers its
wet circumference, composes
the hormone structure.
The subtle uterine neck
tightens, twists, eliminates
detritus of the body,
a persistent dull ache.
A sponge wrung out repeatedly
as exiled fluids are flushed
away to tunnelled
otherworld of no sacrament.
A girdle of wet hard iron law
moves under, fat dense beads
let out to yawning cosmos,
threaded pulse of stars.
Your body the boundary
of universal plasma spent,
as spoken through a
language-belt-of-human.
It is a slow deaf stamp
of meaning, a nub-end-of-truth,
can only hear itself sing.
Hymn to Her

Today at the museum my daughter and I entered a dark circular room to watch a panoramic film of earth’s formation, both exhilarated, she slightly terrified. A volcano erupted, swollen belly of lava burst, cackled-sweet-sleet, orange sunset. It made me think how one day my daughter will excavate bole brown nervous tissue of earth, a Bulgarian rose hard crust of self, come through caput mortuum, and waves of auburn will blast, thrust antique ruby, carmine, opening to her. Later on at the museum we saw resin stones in their glass cases, crystal fluids solidified, body of earth broken away, waste materials, jagged-toothed jewels, starry-eyed shimmer bodies. The coral aquamarine feathered, sparkly dense fur growing on it, a cold obsidian face, quartz glimmered, its final hard-print dazzled us. When that day arrives my daughter’s dark matter will descend as human waste, then let flow.
Bongo Bongo Land

Yesterday we used a stick to thwack away spider webs,
to gain the heart, access its nerve centre,
squatted in the Bongo Bongo kitchen,
pretended to drink a cup of tea while Gabe had a bush wee.
Marlene cooked up a soupy-muck, gruel of morning,
then we went exploring as far as the neighbour’s
back fence, where we plotted the vegetable patch.
Last week, unearthed a broken down pond,
gave it a clean, tore down camellia bushes
whose hot pink skirts hung, defamed.
It felt sacrilegious, but they blocked out light
from our back windows. The week before,
planted a citrus grove around a concrete sculpture,
a mosaic at its centre fashioned from shells,
coloured stones, wandered about the olive ‘grove’
where one lone tree stands slanted toward the Western sun,
my daughter’s decomposed placenta
feeding it from below, matter of our blood corralled,
drawn up its thickening timber, a singular olive limb,
fruits not yet ready, hoping for company.
Out front an immature magnolia, my son’s
decomposed placenta underneath it,
a single florid plume, a gesticulating hand
closed in on itself, corollary of Spring, perhaps
a festive opening, slow-unfolding in love and daylight.
I Saw Her

To see her at the mirror learn herself
from sideways glance to full frontal gaze,
repeatedly try to take herself by surprise,
suddenly see herself as she really is –
I watched her observe her smile,
try to detect its underwork, a hidden fortitude,
uncover herself in machinations of face.
Really learn its archaeology of signs,
its felt beginnings, perhaps
some inherited, but so many of those
elucidations already hers.
I loved to see her have her secret moment.
She thought I was busy folding washing, but
I saw her discover happiness to herself,
then get a bit self-conscious for the watching
of her native moment of the soul.
A Fist of Stars

I

‘Beautiful things that make you stay up,’ she said and leapt off the sofa.

Thickish moisture in the air, height of honeyed fig, fresh cut grass, wetted eucalypt, and the watery dirt after a summery downpour.

Diving into the ocean, exploring pale cyan, pearl aqua, and the quiet of the sea floor at the bottom of the world.

Forest walks with uplifting scent, balm of lemon bottlebrush, cinnamon wattle, box mistletoe, rough tree fern, rush, sword-sedge.

Crackling bark underfoot, heat-shine throwing down.

The promise of quiet dark, a vault of clean light drained as our southern sky is ripped open with a fist of stars to reveal the uncomplicated everything.
A cup of finely blended Ceylon tea.
Couverture chocolate with an accent of vanilla bean,
a smattering of orange peel.
The smell of southern ocean, gathering
aquatic lather around my ankles.
The harsh Australian light, sun-burnt-sun
pelting my body, laying on a towel
on my back, scent of coconut oil,
sand sticking on junctures of skin.
Heading in for a dip, relief of positive ions
of sea, of salty exfoliation afterwards,
a quick towel dry, or simply lying down
drunk with sea lilt, letting the sun drink.
The familiar embrace of my husband,
warmth of his naked skin against mine.
His kind words when my tide has gone out
pulls me back in, holds me to shore,
having been grasping for pearls,
ferrying around primitive depths
searching for lost treasure, Incan gold,
shipwrecked Spanish galleons,
portholes into other worlds, taking in fathoms.
The smell of gasoline at airports,
departure lounges, dense atmosphere
of people intermingled, so awake with
uncertainty, the-not-knowing-of-it-all.
Sickness of alchemy when desire turns to love.
Blind miracle of a life conceived, birthed
and the smell of my kin in my arms, that
first look of my newborn, a grounding force
to bind me to the poultsice of family.
When the sky starts to spit a
smell of damp asphalt rises alongside
something else undetectable, perhaps
a bouquet of cinnamon bark, or no
something animal; pheromone mixed with
wet dust, earth emanating uneven stanzas.
The storm cloud hovers,
obscures the sun temporarily, a rainbow,
new state of union to call me back
to my being-ness, that state of grace in which
I am a kaleidoscope fitting,
turning the light, my watery spirit
bending, arching upward, a salute to
nothing other than empyrean sky.
Running for shelter, enjoying the
drenching as wet clothes stick with the
perfume acuity of creaturely truth; of
sweat, musk, and God. At home again,
rain storm drilling the tin roof,
hurriedly dressing in dry clothes to a
sonata of children’s seraphic kisses.
Lyrebird Path

Yesterday we returned to the forest.
We walked toward the lyrebird path where
we saw an enormous ash eucalypt fallen.
We stopped to snack atop the trunk
hollowed by black spot fungus.
Nearby stood the base of the tree semi-hollowed.
You climbed into it, explored the space
then went back to sliding down the side of the fallen tree,
a home for birds, possums, gliders, bats,
millipedes, centipedes, slaters, worms,
lizards, echidnas, even snakes.
We looked inside the trunk through a peephole,
a marvellous looking glass you’d seen,
strained, unsure what you might find:
minute world of the tree decomposing silently.
You continued sliding off the damp trunk.
Cold, I motioned to go, but your three-year-old body
is a synchronic machine that goes and goes, and
doesn’t need a jacket, refuses a hat,
gallops along at wild speeds of dense boy energy.
I followed behind as you finally made for the
track of hidden lyrebirds, their imitations
piercing the forest around us. I told you that
thousands of years ago dinosaurs walked here
feeding on these intricate patterned Pteridophyta.
We looked closely at a clearing amidst
the foliage. Among fronds and staves
we discovered an uncharted nave of life.
‘Where are we?’ he asks
amidst the kitchen clatter of dishes,
the hurried plating of risotto.
At first I stumble over his question
unable to latch onto his thrilling accent,
his newly found fascination for
other world discovery, for
discharging into space in a rocket ship.
‘Are we on earth?’ he asks.
‘Yes, the moon’s up there.’ I point.
‘We’re part of a solar system,
planets in orbit.’

Yesterday he looked through a
diorama of an astronaut on the moon,
his brain fused new ideas of
exploration, first-colonising-drive, or
perhaps just a desire to practice
moon-walking like the astronaut
atop the foreign membrane.
Gabe looked with his Kobe brown globes.
In the kitchen I ruffled his hair,
our reference point moon,
that broken away body of earth.
Paean to Her

Marlene runs freely with the pigeons
in the park, her fluorescent pink tutu
sails along, effervescent. Earlier she’d
swung round a signpost delighted to hang
from a vertical grip, to rotate, her smile
mainlined from an innermost source,
omniscient now of things redolent with
childhood joy. I stopped to watch her,
recalled to myself her made up song
set to a discordant piano tune, her anthem:
‘I like the swan girls, I love the Halloween boys,
everyone wants to fly the trapeze,
but no one can fly as high as me.’
I took up that lyric, sang it to a Mary Poppins tune:
‘Let’s go fly a kite, up where the air is bright
let’s go fly a kite and send it soaring…’
It worked quite well, a jolly rollicking paean:
‘I like the swan girls, I love the Halloween boys
everyone wants to fly the trapeze,
but no one can fly as high as me.’
On and on, higher and higher,
Marlene and the bright blue sky.
A maverick on the trapeze we bought her,
hung from a beam in the sitting room,
propelling backwards and forwards,
swinging her body downwards in mid-flight.
Her legs crooked at right angle degree of
muscled flexibility, of rubbery sureness,
hanging onto the wooden bar, back to an
upright position, jaunting along until
she almost put her head through the ceiling.
Her proper ceiling a raised limit, or no, not a limit,
rather infinite space, her future life
in which nothing holds her back,
her frolicsome person,
her dolphin-winged-freedom.
Sounding the Humans

We tore clumps of grass, twisted them, folded them over, made messy braids, threaded them through the wire for the horses to eat. Then we ran up and down some woodchip piles, walked on to an old red gum fairy tree raised on a small mound. The tree was distinguished by thick uneven bark skin, light-poured-on-sap colour, patterned by a creeper torn off. I said we had to skip around the tree seven times clapping and chanting to unlock its magic, but Marlene said she already knew its magic, Gabe did too. Then Gabe spotted an enormous earthworm that couldn’t easily be picked up with my bark-stick-bush-utensil, so I tried to use my fingers, recoiled at its clammy skin, tensile muscle pulsing beneath, pointy-end-head, probing away, enfolding into itself, then playing dead. We walked away, saw a bee take pollen, from flower to flower, walked on further through the fern glade toward emus with sharp beaks, almond eyes, bluish silver threadbare necks leading to canopies of delicate two-toned feathers that covered their bodies. They made simple grunts like bongo drums, as if gaging the humans, making a sound wall of protection to separate themselves, to define our otherness. All afternoon we had felt that it was all other to us, a milky-flesh-of-the-world to suckle on, to take.
Shepherd’s Flat

At Aunty Barbara’s place the land is dumb-faced, sun swells overhead, sends harsh sheets of light down our backs as we meander over a blanket of reddish dirt, the bruised meaningless landscape of Shepherd’s Flat. On pilgrimage to visit farm animals: pigs that mill about, wait to be fed, stand in an arc expectantly, bristle side by side, charge forward, make Gabriel laugh, lambs that hold their bodies against the probing certainty of Marlene’s hands, I pick one up to cuddle, touch on a stiff umbilical remnant, stray vanilla bean, feel it almost rip, which startles me. I squirm. The Appaloosa horse named Floyd loves attention, we feed him carrots, whilst the old pony Penny watches, dribbles froth, takes carrots too, though not as many. The chicken pen delights the children, the hen lays but won’t budge, guards her prize indignantly, so we go have a drink, chat, come back to the coop later. Back at the house with Aunty Barbara and Uncle Geoff we talk about connections between humans and animals, but Geoff thinks talk of animal totems is drivel. He believes only in this bare bones land, in his ancestors in antique picture frames on the walls. My genealogy cannot be traced here to this place, searching for a stray lineage in my aunt’s face to see myself in her dancing bird ways, in her magical fairy eyes. As we leave Marlene carries the eggs in a plastic bag, accidentally dashes them onto the ground, makes an alkaline mash of iridescent yolk, clear jelly and shell commingled. What might have been chick, now leaked on the ground, mixed with the dry dirt of Shepherd’s Flat.
The American Ex-Pat

The American ex-pat came from California, sat in the library in the children’s area, held a twisted brown stick, a branch taken from a Crab Apple tree in his garden. He had a leather rope around his neck near loose warbled skin at apex of self, with a turquoise gem to hold the rope in place; his sorcerer’s stone. He looked out of place. His face softened by age, his kindly eyes remote, already gathering fuel for his departure. Stopped a minute to rest on the sofa. We talked a while. He shared his past freely. Told me he was in the air force, travelled around a lot, then drove a yellow school bus for many years, which had given him great pleasure. Took out his wallet, a photograph of him in his air force uniform standing next to his beloved, so young, so sweet. He called her his darling. Gone two years. I gave my condolences. As we walked outside to the car park together he told my daughter to be a good girl, to listen to her mama. She ignored him, sized him up as an annoying old-timer. He ambled off, supported by his fabled ancient root; maybe drawing out of the earth a last wave of dynamism. A life well lived, almost done.
Chucknumb

Yesterday while her brother slept
we collected things for her *chucknumb*
at the arboretum, started with flowers,
a series of fallen leaves, acorns, all of which
she carefully placed into her duffel coat pockets.
Back at the house she put them into
a basket with a large flat base,
laid them out ornately, deliberately,
in order to permeate them with
fullest world sense. Wild things
arranged in ornamental law,
carefully brought under closure of self,
contained by her human thought.
Later she showed her dad, told him
about our excursion, how we’d
stumbled across a skeleton on which
dark meat still hung on cornered parts,
melted under the sun’s heat,
cooked to a rubbery paste.
Its bone line only partially held,
its ribcage smashed in,
eye sockets exposed, devolved to an
almost meatless hull. I’d kicked it,
some kind of unchecked impulse
to disturb the carcass, bring myself into
physical contact with the dead thing.
Animal Axis

At the arboretum
the children monkeyed about,
climbed a tree.
There was a round knot
in the trunk,
folded cleavage of wood
with crinkled edges.
An erotic fissure, or
primal portal, going back
to animal familiars.
Later on, I tickled my
daughter’s tummy, and
poked at her nibbed
cornerstone, a stray piece
of animal relic
where blood perambulated,
fed nutrients from
my placental sac to her.
That wholesome stamp that
marks her mine, not mine,
seems to dream backwards
from a black-gull-of-earth
out of which she climbed.
Pirianda Gardens

We entered through an idyllic country gate
and our hearts talked to the scene, to a Red Maple,
its pantone green even tiers of leaf, arrowheads of calm.
We went down the hill and saw a Conifer
with a graceful bough out of which grew
evenly placed branches. Further down stood a
Grecian Strawberry tree with red spidery limbs and
across the way stood a Trident Maple with
harlequin green flowers, as if a congregation of
devoted clementine blossoms were gathered to it.
Bohemian-shape webs were strung up here and there,
a chaotic geometry of thread.
We ambled back up the hill and saw
Christmas flowers that smelled like lilies.
Chinese Dogwood blooms surprised us with their
stigma of apple green and white petals, they
seemed to lead us to a silent door nearby, so
we opened it, went through, discovered a
quiver of pink deciduous old Dog Rose dappled
by water droplets, inky veins of the Bird Briar, with
concentrated colour at the end of the petals, as if
rain had washed them to the edges.
It looked as though the stamens were filled up
with sun, stretching out their invisible fingers
of silk, reaching out, and the seedlings at the centre
threw off a prized scent of sweat gland and musk.
Then a magpie took ownership of the morning.
A Rainbow for Your Soul

My four year old daughter
told me that when I die
I’ll die back into myself.
I will become colour.
She seemed to know this
with certainty, she was
air born in speech
when she told me.
Our floating particles
of light unburden,
form a mellifluous spectrum.
A coloured unison of
outer red, inner violet,
the sequence between,
orange, yellow, green,
blue, indigo. In the end
our lives peel back toward
an unseen garden,
arch back, a bent law
of human filiation,
our dense archaic matter
freed in florid jubilance.
As we rise, held in
the spell of our truth,
we ascend airy domes,
catapult across daylight,
re-join a colour wheel of song.
Her Medallion

She held it out to me, but I
couldn’t bring myself to touch
that emblem of her tethered to her son,
which seemed to me a sacred thing,
something only she should handle.
Its colourings were faded browns,
reds tinged with yellow.
A brisket sculpted into a coil,
held out to me as evidence of
a syndical pathway from mother to infant.
A talisman to remind other mothers
of their first-rate work,
passing down good nutriment,
kind thoughts, labouring tirelessly
through day and night,
enduring pain, taken beyond meaning
to the brink of the animal.
Ridden to and ridden back on a wave
to hold her child in her arms.
All of that imprinted in Nadia’s
dried umbilical cord held out to me,
cupped in her hand, an unbroken face
on which the light seemed to pour,
perhaps to illuminate a strand
of exile, our struggle to become.
Side-by-Side

She on her tummy, he on his back,
having the look of a pair, one a complement
to the other, the fight dissolved for now,
for spiritual bathing. And all-of-the-world
is a somnambulist, lost in a whirlpool of
the idiosyncratic, individual, particular.
These two kin-skins hold the core of being;
a bidden glove, which tightens its grip on
ordinary folk, not on these two.
In the bath their repose is unified
having endured the squall they’ve become one
in ripple-less brine. Their calm uncomplicated face
looks at nothing. Until Gabriel,
whose head is slightly submerged,
shouts, ‘Marlene can you hear me?’
She doesn’t respond. Not even Gabriel’s
sudden break in the contour of reconciliation
can blunt the placatory atmosphere.
Reclining in soft as pillows aura liquid,
doused on God’s slipped blood, the
scented smell of a panacea, altogether healing.
Meteor Brain

There is a big brain on my wall,
a poster size pin-up of thought,
it hovers, a hemisphere of child-art.
A patchwork of song, our sacred vows,
travels down nerve-ends through
neuron charges to trace our symbolic path.
We made it together, Marlene, Gabe, and me,
a busy scrawling, or wild scribbling
charged with polymorphic colour.
It approximates an igloo or snail’s shell,
but really it is not a brain at all.
It’s meant to be a meteor bursting
into flame, travelling approximately
seventy km per second having entered
earth’s atmosphere, hurtling towards earth.
The children and I learnt about these
shooting stars in a documentary;
outer space rocks, or orbital brains
rotating in a belt around earth
thinking on our existence.
Her Bedtime Ritual

First let her bounce on her bed,
a unicorn leaping in a folkloric forest,
then get her to lie down, tell her an
adventure story about flying house-ships;
or bubble gum balloons attached to
little girl’s mouths as they float in space,
or jelly planets made of revolting flavours,
or witches who live in volcanoes making toys
for cheeky children, or underwater caverns,
mermaid’s dens that lead to other worlds.
Then tell her about her day, its idiosyncrasies, but
always start with how she sprung out of bed
radiant and full of bounce, convey
the more obscure musings, work in a
moralistic strain, but don’t overstrain.
Tickle her back, kiss her forehead,
her cheeks, then close her face for sleep,
a gentle whisper of fingers down her face,
her eyes awash with the lull of an hypnotic ocean.
Nimbly tap her chin, trace her lips, softly draw
a finger down the bridge of her nose,
feel the brail of her eyebrows, close her lids,
delineate rosy spirals on her cheeks, pat her head.
Perhaps, a butterfly kiss when you let your
eyelashes flutter over hers, then that point
just before sleep when she looks at you tenderly,
says ‘Goodnight everybody, I love you all,
good night world,’ and she’ll go under then,
a diver with her diving bell, rigid chamber
taking her down the airy spindle.
She might resurface temporarily to disclose
the fact of her opalescent eyes,
their flash of duende, you’ll smile,
say something like ‘Goodnight darling, I love you,’ and then in mock exasperation ‘Now go to sleep!’ If she surfaces again for a last gasp of wakefulness, she’ll really be testing you, wanting to know if she can get up for a midnight snack, to which you must always say yes.
The Vegetable Patch

My first harvest, a magic trick,
from seed, from root, sailing into air,
lifting into scintillating life.

Billowing zephyr, curving, shuddering
silver beets in a row, burly dawn leaves,
wide open palms, or cut open sleeves

Of morning, bottle green, silvery white veined.
Broccoli standing to attention as open
frilled necks of summer now ending.

Abundant kale part eaten by snails,
dancing as can-can girls of end times, party done,
resilient, dusty-eyed, blindly looking on.

Aurelian bodies awakening, gearing up
for the light-taking, for drinking rain,
for eating earth’s story, with hope.
This evening I held Gabe close
while he howled, struggled up
brae of self, naming sadness all the way.
I just witnessed his babble of hurt
flow out, a locution of Gabriel.
I’d thoughtlessly laughed at his tantrum
in an effort to make light of it, but
tiredness swelled within him, until
collected injustices of recent days spilled.
Like yesterday when Noah pointed
at his crotch, laughed at him for
weeing his pants, this morning
when his father manhandled him,
forced him into his car seat,
this afternoon his sister bossed him,
wouldn’t let him touch her things.
As his body collapsed against mine
I felt the song start up, gritty pain
ripped from his lungs. He told me
everything I needed to know.
I read it. The act of reading made it
come steadier, unravel along a prophetic
line of birth, mine rediscovered.
On the Sherbrooke Road

On the Sherbrooke road we larked about
trying to catch falling leaves from Silver Birches, which
lined the path as far as the eye could travel.
We danced, struck up and down as marionettes
with invisible strings, fabled threads of a fairy tale
deftly manoeuvred, such that we became part of
the flocculent light, faintly orange, dipped in
hewn magic, flowed all around us.
The leaves kept sailing down on air drifts,
quivering on waves of late afternoon zephyr.
I watched a coruscating lemon leaf detach
from the branch so intently that my body
attached to it, a light craft, I anchored on
with my vision, smacked my hands together, and
snatched the prize to my chest after many failed attempts.
The leaf I caught was bug infested, part eaten away,
lilliputian lice clung to it, a few quickly darted onto my hand,
made it itch, so I absently crushed a few
having thought to press the leaf, frame it on a wall,
instead I let it feather down to the earth to decompose.
My daughter was the next one to catch a leaf,
determined through frolicking, gymnastic in her pursuit.
My son was more like a ram going at them,
jovially falling down, clowning about,
eventually managed to pluck one out of the air.
We’d simply had to stay until everyone had caught one,
it was unwritten law. Back at home I pressed
the children’s leaves in a thick volume of prose,
the leaves a sort of rhizome, in so far as they made
an interval between texts, as if to propose something else
like how to pay close attention to the drill of autumn,
procure a splendid moment in which to take life.
From the Coalface

The truth keeps me.
To think that from this
land of our domesticity
poetry springs from me
during kindergarten hours,
school hours, comes out
against all *reason* like
some insurgency of the blood.
To write, read, think, enquire,
after all a kind of cornucopia
from the coalface of motherhood.
I sing placatory skin of daughter,
of son, touching on me in the
early hours of morning,
-snuggles under covers,
sureness of love known as
birth rite, soul’s light,
kindred musings of morning
intermingled with cries of dispute
between children, interjections
from me, constant negotiation
over our animal boundaries.
From this *room of my own*
I keep up the discipline of
writing, of singing our
raw-awakened-state.
IV. Shape Shifter

Red-Witch-Bull-Moth Dancing

A dwarf butterfly of virulent red with all of her chthonic sensibilities called up presses out and out, but is held in and in oh so terribly unable to escape. So, she goes on tittering at the glass, jangling like my son when he needs to pee. It was her brilliant red that drew me, as if she could tell me something about the pure buzzing stem of my hope. She keeps up the tarantella like a Voodoo High Priestess agitating to split late afternoon into halves: the sacred and the profane, her bid to escape our domesticity. I could be that red-witch-bull-moth searching at the stretched out labium of glass. What am I searching for? What strict conduit of luminosity do I seek? What moral strain? Caught in my marital ritual, my childrearing. This morning I yelled at the children having vowed never to again. While angered I saw myself as a labyrinthine bull, unable to find my own thread, rearing up, snorting, salivating spittle, all of my inner explosions seeping out. I chased the children to their bedrooms, made them stay there, put them underground. I was head of the coven, a red-witch-bull-moth dancing at the lip of happiness veering into abyss, dancing in my red ballet shoes unable to stop riding the tongue of life, as though
every month an animal truth comes upon me.
Then I speak more harshly than I should.
My burning eyes look into the souls of children,
run them back to their headquarters,
to their beds, there to stay a while until
I’ve ridden the radiant vermillion wave.
A red-witch-bull-moth periodically
performing a strange torpor dance, just like
this flittering subject beating her brains
against the pane of glass, held against
the light, trying to escape the labyrinth.
Ape-Woman

My family a breeding ground of quasi-criminals, butchers, seamstresses, deep thinkers, gypsy poets. Perhaps I am a last fragment and boldest strain of DNA to tie back to hairy mammalian type. My furry armpit stabs of sharp-edged-grass, my side-burns surprise, my chin-witch-prickles offend, dare I mention those fine black nuisances on my nose. A beast by relation, the downy hair of my legs, arms. I’ll be closest living relative of wildeor, cohabiter of archaic plateaus, forests, marshes flush with buffalo, elephants, hippopotamuses, monkeys, ancestral antelopes, streams packed full of fish, turtles, crocodiles. My voice a grunting-bass-prose of our forebears, vicissitude of becoming human.
The Lizard Brain

Sitting in the library reading I hear
an unhinged scream coming from a
woman nearby the entrance wearing
a helmet and rollerblades, following
a man who tells her to
‘Come on’ and ‘Keep up.’
Apprentice academics posing in our seats,
abstracting thought from our frontal lobes,
confronted, sealed into the now
strange room, vibratory orb of her
sending out animal catharsis,
making jarring almost formed noises:
grunting, cackling, coupled with an
intermittent movement, as if
casting herself around the space.
I wince at her father’s treatment of her, and yet
I walk right past her on my way upstairs,
merely make eye contact. She goes quiet,
as if no one ever looks at her.
She the Medusa, whereby to look
upon her face can petrify your brain,
turn it primal into a lizard brain.
I wonder how she experiences the world,
if she craves intimacy, social contact.
Let out on weekends to tail her father,
his nerves frayed, tired of the freak show.
I want to ask her if she is ok, but just
smile benignly, go look for my books.
As I stand by the elevator I watch her
dart from side to side, make her noises,
sense her seamless self, that other
hemisphere sunk, a lower brain, which
maybe could operate on anyone,
stretch its influence, break taboo.
Huntsman

It emerged on the windshield
released from the dark enfolding of car.
A cavernous membrane darting up
moving toward me, I shrieked, but
kept driving. Its perfect iris, rotund, strange,
seemed to spindle around a seamless centre.
It made me feel like I was
under surveillance by a fleck of God
when suddenly Jon flicked the wipers on, and
the spider pirouetted upwards,
struggled for the black sheath of car,
managed to hold, scurried down the hard body,
went underneath to hide, enmesh itself
in the meat of my bones, my iron-hull.
That doe-eyed monster travelled
along the unfurling tongue of my breath,
going back to where it came from, a
hidden nest-space, an enclosed compartment
of pure-drive, settled there on a source.
Voodoo Chanter

Sprawl of bushland on both sides, jagged tooth darkness. A hook bird hunts, fearless in flight. Lands on the black tar near still white lines. Flashes its white chest medicine God at me. Driving down the wavering line toward it. A voodoo chanter at the hinge of consciousness. Its anaesthetic eyes startle. My heart palpitates with a howl of Athena.
A Kafkaesque Bug

It crawls out from an enfolded haven
of brushed cotton, a relic; a polished miniature
crab-rhinoceros, a tiny dinosaur.
Reminds me of childhood when
earwigs would appear in the bathtub,
wriggle out the plughole after bath at night.
Nocturnal insects with miniscule rear claws,
forceps pincers that could pinch you,
who knew what else, perhaps pull you down the drain
amidst droplets of old bath water,
strands of hair, human sediment.
But, that tiny gleaming bronze statuette
on our bed tonight signals another kind of plughole,
the one we are facing my love.
As you come into the bedroom ready
to jump into bed, perhaps first sit up in bed,
a Kafkaesque bug, I pick up the earwig,
take it outside where it wanders off into
some other plughole of the mind.
Since you’ve been dragging around that cripple claw,
cutting into our memories, I see plugholes everywhere.
But look, oh horror, I’ve sprung up in bed
a Kafkaesque bug too, skin wings enfolded,
forceps pincers aching at my rear bit
ready to slash at the abundant prospect
of our companionship, a parasite of metamorphosis.
Oh quick love, turn the light off.
Butterfly Tarantella

Paper-thin, lithe eccentric flowers
float on air waves, shunt into flight,
a daily flight pattern free of thought,
desire-less, centring on a tarantella.
Upper registry of intricate wings
blood inflated, excrete ink, excess fluids
to write a formless word across the sky.
Of egg, larva, pupa, adult, all *my* forms, yet
I walk the bitumen road alone, in the
upper stupor of mind, flightless,
loaded down with desire, a grid of
sediment beside me, the tide having
drifted out to reveal viscid earth.
Two teenage girls lark about in the muck,
laugh with gaiety. I smile.
The cloche of butterflies, bell-shaped,
chime of *Papilionoidea* continues to depart.
Blood pumps, wings engorge,
tongues clack, chatter in love with
the world, drift away into heirlooms of light.
Carnivorous Music

(After Angela Carter’s ‘The Company of Wolves’).

If the wolf leers on the outskirts of town in the mist, it’s his company she seeks, his howling has brought her to him. Her Granny’s cottage is surrounded by wolf-kin quietly snarling, seducing her to come in. Her wolf is so handsome. It makes her blood erupt in gentle flows, the flowering of her kindness. She’s held by the desire to fulfil herself, so she lies down with the wolf-man who has ‘a compass in his pocket, needle faces north, cardinal point, to the left of the rising sun.’ A woman must know pleasure, raw honest mateship, an un-picked union of a woman, a man, all combinations of love rendered genderless. The wolf has long since eaten Granny, but Red isn’t scared. He’s got a faint trace of blood on his chin, so she wipes it off with her handkerchief. The old woman’s bones are rattling underneath the bed, even while they make love she hears them through her ecstasy, their ‘terrible clattering,’ a carnivorous music, which seems to sing along the dark edge of her happiness. Later she wakes up, her wolf-man is nearby watching, waiting for the shift. He has made her become something animal, her fingers start to twitch, her crotch
flesh hardens, hair follicles raise, and
her teeth grow long. She hastily leaves
granny’s cottage to run through the forest.
Thumelina’s Hiding Place

Tinned light, candy array of sun,
almost fluorescent, feathered down
on wet grass under plumage.
Starry faced flowers, nape eyes,
velvet lips, emotive, devotional,
with crystalline centres. An orgy of
wet dying living things alive with copulation,
with wet throats of unreason.
The girl walked among the height of
perennial inflorescence, drawn like
a drone to the undercurrent of scent,
to those tricky prisms; extraction
of ragweed, antigen, dander, and
the love born toothsome, so sweet.
Oh the longed for flowers danced
in their maze of fructification, as
she bent to smell, perhaps kiss one,
to become engulfed in the unfettered light
of archangels, whose heads turned up,
kaleidoscopic. Instead she found a
fledgling thing, person, half winged,
crouched in the mist of pollen,
no bigger than a thumb, a miniature,
a psalm of unease. Oh her holy face,
almond eyes, olive soap skin,
bequeathed in antique lace dress.
The girl gently lifted her, put her up
to her warm breath, to really look at the
doll of the pompon, of encrusted violet,
to make her into her special plaything.
IV. Animal

Owl – Woman – Thing

‘For art sings of God, and ultimately belongs to him.’
Patti Smith, Just Kids.

An owl just hooted. Raven’s ark’s gone quiet.
Lying on my bed reading Patti Smith’s Just Kids again,
thinking on her totem, maybe that dark angel who
stalks my front garden by daylight hours beneath the colossal gumtree.
I’ve no Salvador Dali moment like Patti, in which
he strode into The Chelsea Hotel, put his hand on Patti’s head,
told her she’s like a raven, to match the dead taxidermy one
set down next to her in the foyer, her unofficial workplace
where she wrote down stuff with a lore of magic
resounding within its cloisters, heavy with vigils,
Rimbaud rituals, epistles to him, and planned
Ethiopian pilgrimages to unearth his lost letters.
Oh Patti’s gothic punk rock un-humility and raven ways.
Owl hoots again magisterially, a perfect vowel, so that
everything here sits in its place, perhaps
a ghostly sister of raven come for divining rites.
Owl’s voice shoals over night, seems to coincide with
the raising of my voice through reading Patti.
This place that I came to with an embryo already
sewn with silvery stitches into my womb,
signed a contract to own a home above bevelled forest, in which
powerful owls perch attentively waiting for the hunt.
Here I’ve become a mother, entered a pact unbreakable,
a blood line through tenderness, all is seemliness of
resounding silence that owl puts into night
through its spare chant, sits somewhere on a ledge
not far off from my bed, sings a euphony of the caliginous after hours.
So, I take up my journal and pen, write in owl-ink,
record the womb-lip dropping over night,
drawing its heavy shudder eye over longing,
closing, closing, closing the blinds on God.
The dream door is opening, something pure is
about to spring from the totemic self,
musing about a life entrusted to raven’s and owls to barter over,
to prize out the head, bring out the body,
its scrawly legs, its fierce claws, until another species of bird
less scavenger than raven, more fuelled by daylight than owl, bursts out.
It seems owls partially won, somehow an owl-woman-thing
emerges no longer human bound, rather guided
by her own principals of stealth, no surrender,
equipoise in flight and modesty of voice, not shouting, rather
gathering steads of emptied out sun, tying them
back together in an apprenticeship of letters.
Moth Queen at Winter Solstice

She sticks rigidly to the glass,
queen of winter, bat moth, unclassified
deathly still, nocturnal Lepidoptera.
Spherical black mirrored pin end eyes,
antennae touching on cold glass outside
looking in at us looking back.
She exists by auxiliary tint of the sun,
the sun’s light sucked in under her skin
woven golden, a massage of blood and silk.
Her three-angled shape, planes of meaning,
abdomen tense, hind wings still, forewings drawn
into herself, frozen minute work undergoing,
process, making her furiness. Spinning
a white beard to hang her wise thoughts on;
perhaps the pain of a dense furry mass,
the making of an archaic silt coat
down the length of her inner sheath
to protect against coming winter.
As children bash on glass to arrest her,
her winter coat almost, but not quite woven,
I make them stop to grasp instead
her tireless craft at winter solstice.
A Disambiguation of Butterflies

Butterflies all of a sudden,
their obedient dazzling wings cutting up,
sharing out the last opals of light
before sunset, little fractions of meaning.
The last portions of sun hidden
under their wing tips to keep safe until
tomorrow: glints of femur gold,
triumphant last arrowed-rays. Maybe
an omen of a lit path, a passage of hope.
As if a glimpse of those agitated fairies
bestows a blessing of caramel veils,
sienna headdresses straddled atop
their fluttering purpose, so close, almost
touching my face. I walk the track
captivated by their enthusiasm for life,
now brandishing away into bushland.
But, for at least one hundred metres
I was enveloped by a whirlwind of silent birth,
of tissue lips that kissed at my air-lit tendrils,
pounced on the last émigrés of
spooky opacity before closeted night.
Now they’ve transmogrified into bats and
drape across the air in a swoon of evil-velvet.
They’re hiding under a veil of catcall-night,
a mess of creature entangled in a sage’s text.
Or perhaps they’ve only just glided away,
elegant machines going over darkness.
A Bumblebee Working

We were walking back from the forest, you were dawdling, occasionally stopped to suck your thumb. I couldn’t pick you up even though I wanted to, my torn disc. You were tired, so I enticed you with observations: the schoolyard filled with children playing, which only made you long to join them on the climbing frame. The road to cross, your sticky hand cupped in mine, pressed in, our fates connecting on the palm made cushioned walls of contentment rise up around my heart. That’s when I saw it, golden black orb working as if a cherubim suckling; a bumblebee foraged nectar with wild dedication. It stuck its proboscis into the stamin, penetrating at the sharp end, its phallic backend a throbbing thumb; a blow-glower blowing, a suck-absorber suckling nutrients. Its limbs stuck to the pollen, collecting immense seedlike discharge, until all of the bee was working. The flower had lilac lace petals, threw off pheromones invisibly; a silent desiccated stink. The bee’s concentration was absolute, hypnotised me, its full-bodied effort, every organ worked to lift off scent, thrilled into pollen, to get at unsweet burnt orange, pithy stain seed, to convert to honey. But you weren’t that interested, pulled at my arm impatiently, ready to return to the hive.
Christmas Beetle

We were admiring you oval prince
as you lay on your back, rubbed
your legs against one another,
made a clickety-clacking sound,
a twitchy-thought sonata.
I wanted to hear you sing your
Scarabaeidae song of ancient wanderers
crawling along the filament,
the dry clay earth of oracle ravines.
Your tiny face was a monster’s with
eyes on the side, your pale wooden bamboo
hard-shell grooved by the wind,
your six-legs musing on the
unwritten prose of the outside.
We listened with concentration, then
I flipped you onto your tummy
as a peace declaration, your
thoughtful fingers darted off.
But, you stopped short, covered
yourself with a leaf to protect yourself
from the two-legged bulbous heads
hovering above, trying to relearn
their animal selves, corroborate.
Ode to a Fly

Keep rhythm with your
delicate fingers that
touch on everything,
the feelers of existence.
Splendid death eater
look on with
black magnificence.
Make a home out of
our inner debris.
Give birth to slithering coils,
silk wormed sheaths.
Make hot lava sing.
Close-up your wings are
netted desire fields,
prophecy laden, dirt proofed.
Owl of the insects.
Stick Insect

Splinter of bamboo;
a splendid spear,
thin wooded insect.
A *Phasmid* with horns,
spine, lobes, elongated legs,
charged with fertility.
Its silvery transparent
glossy eggs within are
swelling circles of love.
Doing it to herself
the blinding-mating-stuff;
resting on a wide domain
of self spilled, with
no need of a male mate.
A race of all female beauty,
like those laid out bodies
in magazines: lithe, irregular
celebrated in repose,
beauty as an object of desire.
Their coal eyes, nude lips tinted,
long necks, legs to the hilt
of nexus sex un-hidden.
Predatory *and* vulnerable,
on-show as aestheticised
waxen dolls, cut like silk.
We celebrate an erotic
fertility cult of the stick insect.
**Two King Moths**

Two king moths –
one on the front door motionless,
the other at the back door
threading along the wire.
Looking as meaty as pinecones,
folded cleavage patterned with
caramel coloured markings.
A warlock species:
furry, dusty bodies
with sienna diamond eyes,
antennae curved over,
splashing out honey-licks.
Our story unfolding along
the silvery brown hinge
of a dowager empress and
her emperor presiding over us,
at book ends of the house.
Between them invisible ink trails
where formless words meet
already formed words.
To trace the chrysalis
between two mothered eyes
of our domesticity, woven
from counterpoint to counterpoint
in melodic contentment.
Living under this arc of light
drawn between two ancient bards.
Petal Wonderland

I sit on a taupe brown chair
in my back garden.
A winged leaf beats, a
blind drum thumps.
Butterfly touches my skin,
perches atop my nose.
Flitters away to trace
sunlight open-faced.
Declares a pathway
through ritual movement.
Dances on air lobes, near the
light web’s patched thread.
Skitters around marvels of
summery poured happiness.
Its hymnal beauty awakens
inner-layered laws of light.
Snail

I

The little muscular foot stretches;
a fleshy flower making phallic gestures to
the other side. It gets on the pathway,
itself smooth fungus fans, leaves silvery tears
behind; womb-shed-stuff, the trace.
Beneath its spiralling chignon-shell
vaginal-like membranes quiver together.
I pick it up and it retreats into its
sea fossil shape; a fathomless-inner-world,
in which it contemplates death.
I am sorry to have planted this death-thought
in its membrane. Don’t go taut with fear,
don’t crawl up into ether, oh come back
little troubadour, scrawling away from me now,
antennae sucker-pucker set to
vibrations of interfere, to measly human.
You are slow, delicately cushioning along
on florid tails, oh emigrating across
gigantic precipices at a delightful pace,
you want not for speed. Making for
the gateway to your kingdom of wild
reproductive suckling, oozing, and
making love as an hermaphrodite.
I’ve told her that we try not to harm other living beings. She was experimenting I guess and she transgressed a limit. Now confronted by what she did, she is pained. We watched the snail slide along the concrete, excrete its silver ink, its muscle-limb-stray, reptilian-like, now shell-less. I thought I’m a bit like that self-lubricating mollusc. My intricate patterned lineage is written on my skin, not meant to be seen. I plunge forward toward dirt-frayed-paths, naked, script myself in trails behind.
Beyond Moth

I kept thrashing on the wire
with my finger, tried to penetrate
your brown bottle eyes,
hoped you would skate away
on air-trails, a preordained pathway
to the moon, beyond
to other stars, going back,
a maniac of the light.
Pirouetting into summer, a
perfectly turned flower dancing
into the sensual world; a
silvery brown haemorrhaging of life.
You didn’t move.
You just hung on the threadbare wire,
your carapace strung up,
leaf-wings laced, limp with death.
Then my son opened the door
and you went airily to the ground.
No blood or guts, or life stuffs
to make you thump.
I crushed you with my foot.
Your dust body glided over asphalt,
shimmered, wing pieces, antennae,
lava stuffs long since dried up
spread out, a veil on the earth.
The Meaning Witches

Up close you are rainbow reptilian, naked as the moon is in the night sky, shell-less, with your antennae pointing upwards toward an unseen world. Moon-guff oozes out of you; juiced bluish insides with a phosphorescent halo around. It is as if a network of ideas has been put to death as you go sliding through my toes. Your gluey death-lava smears onto my in-betweens. Your dolloped raw guts sing all the way to the afterlife; an internal humming of end-truth. Your shimmer of slug-logic will never reveal again, although another one hides in the kitchen near the sink, leaks its snotty nose, its meaning-witch, preparing to cross over the floorboards.
Jelly Dogs of Night

Awake at 3am, head downstairs
for a cup of hot milk, on the kitchen floor
a jelly dog of night. I see it, startle.

A slug on the hunt for food, fat, lucid,
on the bathroom tile too.
I throw them out the back window
into a spirit land of herb garden.

From within this hour of silent repetition
nothing new seems to happen.
I listen to the bowels humming,
hear almost nothing, only
intestines whirring, the world
from within itself getting ready
to speak the thread of something
that refuses to break, strophe of the soul,
brave haunted passage, as ungraspable
as heaven, first strain of human waking.
Worm Sightings

First sighting: thin, nipple-headed, bestial-blind, benign in the earth.  
As we go about digging up dirt we try not to cause a severing.  
Little wiggler flails about, deeply unsettled by probing hands of children intruding on its dirt domain.  
Second sighting: dark blubber one, a phallic-threat, flurrying away from intrusion, slithering into an earth loom, away from unthinking fingers tearing up its vital stuffs.  
Third sighting: a throbbing thumb of plucked gooseflesh, a squeeze box of exposed elongated membrane squished, the thin skin of tissue, running along the inside a blood trickle amidst clear resin of jelly-glop.  
Last sighting: an engorged goddess fat and bent, juiced up, blood spooling, a turret with head thrust into guts of earth.
Order of Birds

First ones allowed to pull out the light
are Kookaburras, merrily tipping sun into
a saucer of rare algid earth, into ghostly looms
of morning, slipping an anti-opiate into our
sleeping mouths, as the dream world thrashes
out scenarios of human desire, of subjugation,
subsides to the libertarian musings of birds
bidding for dawn. The constant access
of thrush to diminutive rehearsed rhythms,
heard balancing over first light, another unknown
bird rocks the ledge, picks the lock, a
sort of wood peck: rat-a-tat-tats.
Magpie’s next, one clear chorus circulates.
Kookaburra gathers again, starts up its winding machine,
a contraption spitting, fitting, starting.
All the while that anonymous bird persistently
cracks open the disc of fractious light,
gains access to the wet throat of morning.
Cockatoos are last, come screeching over the
crush of warmth as if to stifle back God
whose opened throat has now discharging
un-numbered wonders; coition of the elements.
Again this unknown bird like a mirror sounds,
clinks far away, dips its hot needle, its
unending thread into the light-pool, stitches
its patina over earth, an extinguished gold;
rusted lint. The morning is opened.
Another chortle from Magpie confirms it,
oh gaily, so gaily bending song, divining the day.
Life/Death of a Songbird

Travelling home from Daylesford
we hit a magpie as it hopped across the road.
I felt my own creature un-harness.
An omen hung onto the prickled light,
a last slow medicine trickle.
‘Why didn’t you swerve?’ I asked,
‘You should never swerve for an animal,
you risk losing control of the car,’ you replied.
But, to make a creature bend like that
with the wind, enter unmeaning,
affected me. You were unflinching,
straight on metal grill in the mouth
of a songbird, a yin-yang prayer maker,
whose black white feathers were crushed
to mindless sleep. Later, at home
dense with the feeling of loss
I pledged to send it to spirit,
lit incense, blessed its departure
for a creature collective beyond.
New Moon Raven

Death-bird you have noble regret
stuck on your talons; a dark red stab
into meaning. Your piercing sarcophagus
of sound is a barren ark, harpy-like.
You flew into the undercarriage of life,
took from a source penned letters, and
put their lexicon into your
solid-skull-case, made mother-tongues.
You flew back to teach your throaty song
of white iris, burnt hackles,
grey base feathers, shiny black coat.
You return to me now when the moon
disappears. I hear you when the
blind wind blows the blood gate open.
The Zoo Exhibits

That time three kookaburras
stood on the rail of the balcony,
stared in at us from their side,
we stared back hypnotised
by those tiger patterned birds.
They were silvery-tailed, charcoal billed
with river-cut-eyes, sang choral strands
of the late afternoon parable time.
The open imprint of their voices
burst full-neck on the air, it
ushered in the soft enclosure of night.
We wished to learn to speak their
language of stray shafts of light
bending to the caliginous sky,
all of the elements holding for the shift,
a bristle of stars in composition.
Perhaps, in some wider orb of
creaturely tongue we knew their
well of sound, as they stood there laughing
at us on the wrong side of the glass.
Peacock Girl

I knew a girl once, seemed my double.
She lived down the street, almost
married one man, but defected to another.
She wore brightly coloured dresses,
had affectations, painted pictures of the
dense archaic symbolism of her dreams, which
bore the dark shamanic lilt of the peacock.
That night she came over for dinner
we had an Elizabethan feast with
an animal carcass on the table.
Her hand held her chalice-glass,
eased red wine down her throat.
She wore a multi-coloured sequin top,
her feathers raised, and she courted my husband.
I have read of an old Elizabethan superstition
whereby letting a peacock feather
into your house could bring about a curse.
I said I needed to go to bed, but
she wanted to go on drinking cognac.
As I bid her farewell I looked into her
brown eyes: crushed earth, quicksand,
plasma-dirt, and an animal vulnerability there too.
My grey-blue-green eyes: suffused with
turquoise, spun round emphatic
magnetic pupils, know the animal truth.
**White Faced Herons**

We descended a steep wooden staircase towards the beach below.  
We could see black rock pools covered by the tide as the rain fell in fat droplets.  
At the bottom of the stairs we entered foliage and intermittent tree skeletons.  
We sat under a stringy bark, ate sandwiches, waited for the weather to fine up. But, impatiently we sprang up, dashed onto the sand, chased one another along the length of coast, built sandcastles, traced lines with sticks, collected seaweeds; white Christmas frond, elongated octopus-legged sponge, mermaid hair of antique ruby, sienna, burgundy, threaded beads, delicate flat entrails, bulbous heads of mossy green, and carp of corn silk white tinged salmon.  
Then we saw three dead birds, maybe White Faced Herons, the rib cage exposed on one, a beak protruding from another, and yet another’s feathered oiled mass was exposed. Their sand-burial-sleep startled us.  
I looked out to sea and saw a Heron perched on a rock looking back at me.
Sheep Speak the Truth

Marlene whinged from the beginning. Threw herself onto the damp ground and conjured up fiery wound words, called me a bad mother for making her walk.

Further down the dirt road a sheep startled us, stopped us on our path. It looked statuesque, almost real, innocent, made of the landscape of morning fog. We approached, offered carrots meant for the horses. It shied away in uneven leaps and watched as we wandered off to the horses.

Its inchoate voice whispered as if earth mist commingled with otherworldly drifts as if to say: Be patient with the child.

Later driving through Lysterfield sheep looked up expressionless from a paddock of plentiful grass, watching me drive along

nodded, perhaps offering a blessing, or bestowing a rite of passage through these regions of the soul.
Carrots

I went to my sacred post, sat on
an uneven flat rock beside
a gumtree bleeding sap.
My fox terrier tied to a nearby gate
kept barking, desperate to
get on the scent of a rabbit.
She drew the attention of a white horse
fenced in across from us, grazing on long grass.
The smell of coming rain was on the wind,
maybe even a day away.
I stood up, went over to the fence,
petted the horse, his hair grey with dirt,
his eyes polished mirrors of hurt.
The hallow, or smooth cut of tear duct
at the edge, an indent of God,
where sadness dwelt
in the darkest brown breach.
He went off again, turned his back on me
to make me nothing to him.
I waited until he came back again
saddled with his restlessness.
My even stroke on his muzzle
gave some comfort, though soon
it was my turn to walk away with
the promise of a return bearing gifts.
Possum Song

Elegant tightrope walkers
astride a wire, lit against
the half moon
inch toward one another
in arabesque calligraphy.
Their paws touch
with tender knowledge.

Aerial gymnasts with
gargoyle faces,
pointy raw end noses,
dark absorbing spheres,
pretend not to see me as they
go about their night
of practised intimacy.
Dead Mouse at the Back Door

We stepped over its dulled scar-body, fur oiled with blood, mouth crippled, eyes glass-vaults, muscles stiffened temporarily under *rigor mortis*. The children stared at it a while, their brains alerted to its death. I saw their eyes turn a backward dial in their skulls, cross a line to fathom demise. Travelling back to before there was presence, a sarcophagus of spirit place not fully grasped, inter-space of God and comfort. But, as soon as the children got past the husk of mouse they bounded into the garden.

No doubt killed by the cat, it was another gift from the outlands. I left it there. Normally I would get tissues, pick it up by its tail of deep-space sparkle grey, a hint of brown, cord-like, throw it into the dark sienna earth to rot. For some reason I kept not attending to it, so that flies came and laid their lava in the guts of it. Pretty soon maggots were born into the primal flesh as furry parts became scarce, bone exposed, first the skull, later the ribcage, the spinal cord, all on display. The corpse, as Baudelaire revealed, a carriage of death that comes for us all.
Baby Ray

The car ferry berthed at the island. We drove off to explore, stopped at a picturesque seaside spot. A baby-stingray lay beached, pebble grey thick skin all spread, wide-set-eyes set open, as if caught in an airy dome, perhaps having awakened to its predicament: too close to shore when the tide pulled out? I wasn’t sure. I turned it over with a stick, its mouth already closed with finality, its gills raw from grasping air, skin translucent pink with stark white stretches too, on which lightly veined blood traversed, as if to prove death. Then I noticed a swollen circular nub mid-way down, maybe the point of attachment of the yolk stalk to mother’s yolk sac? I wondered. Its short tail arrowed toward the sea, perhaps pointed toward a stillborn moment.
Lost the Race

Along the trail a bumblebee hummed, an ant walked over my shoe, a frog gulped nearby, a butterfly cut shapes in the wind. Suddenly a deer nearby sniffed at the earth dew, drew its hoof back and forth, indented a shape in the ground, perhaps a fate line. That time years ago the clairvoyant brushed her hand over my palm, splaying it open and pointed at the blind crease, said ‘Second life.’ Deer stood still, then went off to the side of the track to watch me, its antlers camouflaged by branches, roots of Eros, bony fingers rising. Recently culled in this forest by contracted hunters, apparently for destroying the natural habitat. This one looked motherless, still young, alone, wandering through a foreign land, unsure of itself, a little transfixed, perhaps curious about my human-ness. Then my dog shot down into the bush, gave chase. I bellowed down the slope for the dog to retreat, but Bassie was thrilling down the hill in the grip of the chase. It took ages to coax her back up. I wondered what order of human life favours dog over deer, such that deer can be named pest in these parts, while dog remains close friend of man, a particular order of species made to stand in for all other animals. Stood there at first fire light when man made fire and dog tricked him into thinking he was his friend, only wanting to keep warm a while, chew the bones of the kill. All of these years later still tricking humans into thinking they’re inner animal can be housebroken. Deer knew, had looked into my eyes, its
refraining brown eyes putting a surveillance
on our species. My unkempt strain freed itself on
sighting that deer, as if second sight were awakening.
Eagle Sighting at Hairpin Bend

On the way to work yesterday you reported
two eagles drifting across the sky circling one another,
riding the fulgent morning at the hairpin bend.
You were driving down the mountain to work,
took the sighting as an omen, as if we were
those obeisant wedge-tailed eagles, or eaglehawks,
coasting along the air lit by the golden aubade
performing a theatrical aerial display.
Reminded me of that afternoon at school pickup
when I stood mesmerised, couldn’t take my eyes off
eaglehawk circling, parading on a wave of current,
shifting up and down, coasting along an unbroken line
of chiaroscuro, when suddenly cosmos
pressed downwards, a rush of Cimmerian shade
as clouds smudged the sun, made an absorbing backdrop
for the huntress receding to nearby forest
searching for prey from a great height. I just stood there,
couldn’t take my eyes off the prospect of eaglehawk.
It made me wonder if as each of us independently
watched those heartily boned birds of prey soaring –
were we both thinking about whether our love
has staying power to brace against cold currents,
to withstand shifting cycles of light and brio?
Together we’ve been living on God’s-edge-of-equipoise,
our bond an ancient twine, refuses to let loose,
our invisible silver thread a wind beaten strand
of affection, of familial hope. We keep up
a flight pattern, you circling me, netting back,
forth, lattice of open winged resistance and joy,
me circling you, soaring, gliding, falling again.
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• Shuttle, Penelope and Redgrove, Peter, 2005. The Wise Wound; Menstruation and Everywoman. London: Marion Boyars.
Appendix


Appendix 14.

Appendix 15.

Appendix 16.
Author/s: Dyer, Natalie Rose

Title: The menstrual imaginary and ‘The Butcher's Daughter’

Date: 2016

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/123209

File Description: The Menstrual Imaginary

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