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Intimate witnesses: writing lives and bodies at the limits of existence

> In every human society, the range of experiences that are socially acknowledged and named is always much narrower than the range of experiences that people actually have. By implication, no worldview ever encompasses or covers the plenitude of what is actually lived, felt, imagined and thought (Jackson 2013:23)

Introduction

It is perhaps impossible to disentangle the relationship between mortality, narrative and the act of storytelling. The ubiquitous metaphor of life as a journey that reaches its destination in death captures the time bound mortality of embodied existence. Freud's theory of the death drive also constructs an intertwining between narrative and mortality in the predestined goal written into the human organism of a movement towards death.

We are essentially displaced as the first authors of our stories because we are born into pre-existing narrative life worlds. These include family and cultural stories, religious stories, historical narratives, myths, literature, and fairy tales; as well as social scripts ordering and framing possible identities and selves. And because we have no conscious memory of earliest infancy (Freud 1963) it is parents and older siblings who tell the story of our beginnings however unreliable, partial, and fictional these will inevitably be. While children depend on parents to tell the story of their beginnings, it is generally the task of children and others to the tell the story of their parents' lives at their endings.

This paper has been prompted by the personal experience of witnessing my father's death and more recently, my mother's shift into the fourth age, the onset of dementia, and the gradual transformation of her life into a space of social confinement in a dementia unit. Interweaving this personal narrative of gradual social and corporeal dying, this paper focuses on the embodiments of dying brought to intimate representation in memoir. Key memoirs in this paper are Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death* (one of the earliest memoirs of dying and bereavement), the more recent memoir of dying by Australian author Cory Taylor titled *Dying: a memoir*, and the memoir by American writer Megan O'Rourke —*The Long Goodbye* — about her mother's gradual dying in and out of hospital, and finally, at home. These memoirs of inter-generational relationship span the geographies of France, USA, and Australia and come from lives of relative privilege in terms of the gendered and raced histories of their country of origin. This does not make them unworthy nor does it limit their potential for resonance and meaning amongst diverse reading audiences. All three memoirs are about the lives of women and the mother-daughter relationship so often excluded in the cultural dominance of men, their stories, and bonds of love and loss. Indeed, while de Beauvoir's relationship with her mother was difficult and marked by alienation, she nevertheless wrote about her mother's dying as a worthy literary subject (Kadish 636). This in itself is a feminist intervention into the literary canon of men's lives and tragedies (Kadish 1989: 636). Within their own specificities of culture, geography, time, place, and bonds of relationship, these memoirs show the way in which one's own dying or the dying of one's mother intensifies the work of memory and is able to open more complex and sympathetic readings of the lives of women. And like many dying and bereavement memoirs, these

memoirs have significant themes of the medicalisation of dying, loneliness, place of dying and death, memory, and the significance of the body in bonds of love and loss.

Situating the Paper

Working at the intersection between memoir and autoethnography, a fluid border between creative non-fiction and sociology, this paper aligns itself with sociologist Carolyn Ellis' work. As an early trail blazer of auto-ethnography, Ellis is an exponent of narratives which do not reproduce sociology's 'cold' methods of research where emotions are disciplined, stripped of effect. Ellis is committed to a sociology of evocative stories in which 'death and illness and other dramatic life experiences' (1997: 117) are regarded as intrinsic to the sociological imagination through the central positioning of personal narrative. For Ellis the autoethnographic voice and register provides a gateway into social stories that bring meaningful connection between people/readers/researchers by adding that essential humanity of "blood and tissue to the abstract bones of theoretical discourse" (1997: 117). There is thus an ethical imperative for Ellis to engage with the human condition of mortality through a particular aesthetic. I have also approached my research into death, grief and material culture through a creative, literary aesthetic. I described my book *Objects of the Dead*: *mourning and memory in everyday life* as a collective memoir in its weaving together of literature, memoir, and film with fragments of first-person narratives (including my own) from people I interviewed about sorting through and making decisions about the possessions of deceased loved ones. Another author whose work has influenced the form and method of this paper is Laura's Tanner extraordinary book *Lost bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death*. Tanner weaves her own bereavement experience with memoir, photography, film and literature. It is a richly textured work in which the vulnerability of human embodiment has narrative palpability.

Painting, photography, documentary and fictional films, memoir, literature, and poetry can be where we are reminded most profoundly of our mortality (*memento mori*) and its impact on human bonds, bodies and psyches. And yet, as memoirs of dying and bereavement can reveal, we are never truly prepared for death and people can find themselves scrambling for narrative solace and meaning.

As a genre in the book publishing industry, dying and bereavement memoirs serve a need, one might suppose, to gain deeper insight, philosophical reflection, comfort, and support in matters of mortality. This is certainly in evidence when one reads the ratings and comments on sites such as Amazon of highly successful memoirs such as Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Megan O'Rourke writes about being sent a range of dying and grief memoirs to read during her mother's death such as C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* (126), while David Reiff in his memoir *Swimming in a Sea of Death* of his mother, Susan Sontag's dying, draws a comparison to Simone de Beauvoir's protective lying to her mother about her passage into dying (2008: 124-125). Memoirs are invariably by established authors or public intellectuals and thus have more privileged status in terms of public interest, commercial, and literary value. Memoirs of dying and bereavement are quite different kinds of autobiographical writing because they tend to provide an account not of the road to becoming something or someone but as Nancy K. Miller writes, "of an undoing, an unbecoming" (1992: 45).

The genre of dying and bereavement memoirs is part of a larger cultural shift in which boundaries between public and private life are constantly mediated and undone by everyday life writing on social media platforms. Social media is also where people commonly express grief with others and produce intimate portraits of mortal lives for public access. Between 2008 and early 2009 the UK reality television celebrity Jade Goody commercialised her dying for the financial benefit of her surviving children giving unprecedented media access to

her dying embodiment (Walter 2009; 2010). The 1970s television actress Farah Fawcett in 2008-2009 also allowed the public to see her declining, dying body from anal cancer through a documentary process recorded by her best friend. Pope John II (died in 2005) made a point of being seen as a mortal in a very visible public trajectory of dying. This was an unprecedented act in modern Church history in which ideas of Papal infallibility, a culture of mystique, and the belief in a transcendent immortal soul living beyond the body might have otherwise hidden such a worldly death. Renowned journalist and public intellectual in the English-speaking world, Christopher Hitchens' also made the trajectory of his dying public doing multiple, lengthy interviews on television and radio. As a committed public atheist, Hitchens' harnessed the existential pain of facing death with measured emotion and an intellectual stoicism. He did speak about weeping in anticipating separation from his children. He publicly demonstrated a way of dying consciously without the comforts of religion and god. All of these are examples of intimate publics of dying, documented for mediated access and witnessing. These contemporary publics of mediated dying have been most revolutionised by user generated media from Facebook live streams to YouTube vlogs. On YouTube people use their mobile phones or other devices recording themselves in hospital or at home and giving updates on current physical and mental states of well-being. Channel subscribers get automated notifications of when new vlogs are available and can thus follow each narrative phase of a dying trajectory. People are thus creating, sharing and responding to intimate stories through screen technologies connecting with people they will likely never meet beyond the screen. The element of spectacle inevitably situates social media spectacles of dying differently to the written text of a memoir and the intimacy of reading. In physical geographies of social contact, the rise of the death café movement internationally is also bringing strangers together and shows that people are creatively making pathways into social discourse and death literacy. These more face-to-face embodied connections can be important in making death less lonely, something that Taylor in her memoir of dying writes about. She joined the organisation Exit where she found a community which gave her conversational freedom:

> The chief benefit of these meetings to me is their spirit of camaraderie. It takes courage to contemplate one's own death, and, as I said before, it is inexpressibly lonely. To find companions who share your desire to know more, to take the initiative, and to laugh in the face of our shared mortality, is a fit. How different from the experience of the hospital waiting room, where you sit in a glum herd with overhead televisions blaring, guarding your dirty little secret until such time as your name is called (2016: 13).

So ubiquitous in medical spaces of all kinds (let alone other social spaces), Taylor characterises the television as a kind insidious lie in a psychology of distraction and normalisation. While mediated and representational culture is important and often profound, it is never quite as existentially affective as the specificity of one's own intimate life world of dying and bereavement experience. In drawing on memoirs of dying and bereavement, along with the personal narrative, this paper argues that our narrative and corporeal co-creation is often painfully exposed in dying and death. Death ruptures, exposes, and reconfigures our embodied life in place and in relation to others, both living and dead.

Dying in and out of place

In the socio-economic context of medicalised end-of-life care, research suggests that overwhelming most people want to die at home as a meaningful place of personal belonging

(Stajduhar 2001; Gomes et.al. 2013, 2015; Tan et.al 2015; MacArtney 2016 et. al, Mogan et.al 2018). Home can have very specific cultural meanings and sensitivities in terms of spiritual preparation in ancestor mortuary traditions (See Siew Tzuh Tang 2000; and Stefan Timmermans 2005). However, studies around the world also indicate that most people end up dying in hospital particularly when there are acute or complex conditions requiring intensive care and support technologies (Gomes et.al 2015; Tzuh Tang 2000; Tan et.al 2015; Mogan et.al 2018, Thorpe 1993)). While dying at 'home' is regarded as 'the gold standard' of a 'good death' (Stajduhar and Davies 1998) palliative care at home is not always possible or synonymous with a good death (Brown and Colton 2001; Collier, Phillips, and Ledema 2015).

Recently my mother contracted pneumonia and the attending doctor where she was hospitalised raised the question of her dying. The doctor suggested that it would be better for her to die 'at home'. But in this instance, home was just another institution in a trajectory of her increased confinement in institutions of care. Nevertheless, hospitals and end-life-care professionals increasingly support people's wish to die at home through early discharge with medical supports in place. Cultural awareness and sensitivities to meanings of home, migration complexities (documented and undocumented residents, intergenerational differences in attachments to heritage based homelands), homelessness, familial capacity to support end of life care, are all subjects in what is effectively a transdisciplinary research space that includes migration studies; social, cultural, and medical geographies; palliative care and more (See Brown and Colton 2001; Stajduhar 2003; Bravo 2017; Liasenchko et.al. 2011; Stevenson et.al. 2017; Webb 2015).

Dying at home is not synonymous with living outside an institutional setting. People can be dying in their own home but not necessarily feel that this is their true home. Our sense of home can encompass multiple social, cultural, and personal geographies of embodied and storied connections to houses, people and place, lost and displaced from migrations and other life course mobilities. For example, a recent Australian case study of a dying Japanese woman who lived outside Japan for 30 years living in Australia for 20 of those years found that she wanted to return to Japan to die in order to reconnect with traditional food, language, land, and death rituals (Shimoinaba, Lee and Johnson 2019: 13). She wanted the pleasure of simple well-prepared Japanese food, to feel linguistically and culturally at home. This dying woman also wished for her ashes to be placed at her parents' graves. Her home care support workers didn't initially understand that her innermost sense of home was not in the house she was currently living with her son but her original homeland. This more wholistic, existential sense of home is about deep embodied histories of belonging to encompass a phenomenology of the senses. In the end, she died in Australia partly due to financial and logistical difficulties in arranging adequate care in Japan, and also because she knew dying in Japan would exclude the possibility of her son being at her bedside. Dying in place then can be fluid and multidimensional and may not just be about a physical geography but also about relationship to others. People can be forms of home to others.

In deciding to sell the 'family' home in Kyogle in Northern New South Wales, Australia, five or so years after my father's death in 2001 and auctioning most of the furniture and other objects, so that material memories were lost in the process, my mother had, in effect, made a decision about where she was *not* going to die. All mobilities, particularly when they are conscious and based on having a choice (a significant marker of circumstantial difference and socio-economic inequalities globally), shift the biographical landscape of where we live our mortality in our relationships. My mother chose relationship to family - being geographically close to two of her children and her grandchildren - over place with established friends. However, the town of Kyogle was not her original home. Like most women of her generation, she moved to my father's home town after marriage. As my mother's decision to

leave Kyogle got around the town, a few friends reminded her that she would be coming back eventually, referring to the cemetery plot next to my father. Her ending already has a geography in place. Cory Taylor writes about how her mother lived a life in exile in her life-long uprooting from place. This extended into her death where Taylor felt that her mother has no resting place, no real belonging place (84). Taylor understands that her own sense of a lost home has greater claim and pathos in the context of indigenous peoples of Australia and the legacy of dispossession of country. Along with her sisters, Taylor's mother, like many daughters of that generation, was excluded by a patriarchal system of farm inheritance with the Beaconsfield family going to their brother. She carried this dispossession and the material trace of this original home with her:

> Mum kept her bottle of Beaconsfield dust for many years and through many moves, until it was finally tossed out or lost, then forgotten along with everything else she had ever held dear. I don't know if she had any concept of home by the time she died. She talked obsessively about going there, begging me to take her home every time I saw her. But I wasn't sure where she meant. She had made some many homes by then, more than twenty. Some she had loved, some she hadn't. She certainly didn't mean the nursing home where she lived out her last days (2016:74-75).

Cory Taylor writes about the idea of a mother's life: "To become a mother is to die to oneself in some essential way. After I had children, I was no long an individual separate from other individuals. I leaked into everyone else" (2016: 48). In all three memoirs, the mother-daughter relation frames, and is framed by, a larger socio-cultural history of women's lives intergenerationally — their possibilities and limitations, fulfillments and disappointments. In reflecting on the life of her mother as she is dying Simone de Beauvoir conveys the tragedy of a woman who "lived against herself". This is a woman whose life was profoundly constrained by Catholicism and patriarchal culture:

> She had appetites in plenty: she spent all her strength in repressing them and she underwent this denial in anger. In her childhood her body, her heart and her mind had been squeezed into an armour of principles and prohibitions. She had been taught to pull the laces hard and tight herself. A full-blooded, spirited woman lived on inside her, but a stranger to herself, deformed and mutilated (1965: 42-43).

Sympathetic to her mother's life, she understood that patriarchy in its religious, familial and cultural formations made her mother the agent of her own imprisonment. It cheated her of a more fully formed subjectivity and sexuality just as it cheated her and her sister Poupette of each relating to the other as subjects with intellect, acknowledged sexuality and personal agency. De Beauvoir's mother Françoise was a woman of religious faith who, like many religious women, does the biding of patriarchy in controlling the subjectivities, sexualities, and bodies of daughters. This was Simone de Beauvoir's predicament and it creates a memoir that has many textures of emotions, rarely simple; and full of contradiction. Her memoir insists on the tragedy of women's lives so often unseen, unaccounted for, and rarely even imagined or elevated to the realm of the tragic as this would put patriarchy on trial. De Beauvoir's memoir is a complex, layered work of mourning. It mourns the life of a woman who was not able to realise her potential. It is the mourning of a mother-daughter relationship that was divided by patriarchy and patriarchal religion. It is the mourning of her own deeply embodied attachment to her mother whose body in all its human vulnerability is slipping into death and permanent absence: "When I said to myself 'She is of an age to die' the words

were devoid of meaning, as so many words are. For the first time I saw her as a dead body under suspended sentence" (20).

Simone de Beauvoir finds a way back to her dying mother through care and tenderness. De Beauvoir's is not a story of reconciliation in which alienation is overcome through idealisation, erasures of conflict and ambivalence— this would be a false note and a betrayal of truth. But it is story in which a daughter finds a way to reflect upon her mother's life in its many shades: "Her life had always been turned towards the outward world and I found it very moving to see her suddenly lost within herself. She no longer liked to be distracted" (78-79). It is only in dying that De Beauvoir hears her mother expressing wishes that would formerly have been repressed. The daughter's perspective on her mother also takes a reflective turn in Megan O'Rourke's memoir. Of a very different era and with its own distinct specificity which is of course true for all lives and relationships, O'Rourke also finds her perspective on her mother wanting:

> In that moment I could see her as more than my mother, I could see her as a daughter, a person who'd had to make her own way, who'd had to learn to speak in public, to command authority—things she did now with such ease you'd never guess that once they struck her nearly mute with fear. And so as I write this, I am hit by a feeling of error, a sense that during my twenties, when I thought my mother never quite understood me, it was I who saw her incompletely (62).

Cory Taylor was living overseas in Japan when her mother died and so in her own dying has no witnessing experience. This absence of inter-generational witnessing is not un-common in the mobilities of contemporary life. Geographical distances, different time zones and financial issues can be prohibitive. This means, in turn, that people can face their own death without any kind of intergenerational experience in real life dying and dead body witnessing. This must inevitably play into the de-realization of death as something set apart rather than already in life as part of all human embodiment. In her memoir Taylor writes about how little prepared she was for death as a reality that marks her days:

> It was as if I had stumbled out of a land of make-believe into the realm of the real. That is why I started writing this book. Things are not as they should be. For so many of us, death has become the unmentionable thing, a monstrous silence. But this is no help to the dying, who are probably lonelier now than they have ever been. As least this is how it feels to me (9).

Deep attachments to place are often tenaciously inscribed in our bodies as minds and minds as bodies so that we take our homes with us and visit in imagination. I often travel back in my mind to the house of my childhood (my father's childhood home), visiting rooms and recollecting images of myself and family members at various stages of life. These imaginative practices produce a sense of narrative continuity across a discontinuous life course. My father had a deep sense of belonging in a largely uninterrupted narrative of home. My father lived and died in the place of his birth and the house his parents built where he grew up with five siblings. This kind of continuous life narrative in a single place called home is more unusual in the intense mobilities of modernity and globalisation. He also died in the hospital of his home town and was thoughtfully given a room facing a window where he could look out to the small mountain, whimsically called Fairymount. It was there before his birth, and there at his death. He had walked up and down Fairymount many times from his youth to adulthood, with his brother John, and with his own children into their adulthood. Walking up and down Fairymount is thus an inter-generational and inter-corporeal history

which embraces the town of Kyogle and all its lives embedded in its landscape. I have fond memories of this place and of the small mountain that sits behind, overlooking the town like a guardian.

During the period of my father's dying, and depending on his strength, he was once or twice a week transported from the local hospital by ambulance and brought to the family home so he could lie in his own bed, look out through the bedroom doors to the garden beyond, and look in the direction of the rainforest in the far distance. Sometimes they would leave him on the ambulance gurney on the front verandah so that he could have those elemental experiences of smelling fresh air, feeling light, warmth and breeze on his skin. My father was able have a good death because he was in a meaningful place—the sensory, relational, and visual world in which he drew most of his life's breath. Megan O'Rourke's mother lived her dying where she wanted to be which was the family home. This home place of dying was more than just the house of attachment and memory with family, it encompassed that strange comforting solace of nature's a-synchronicity and indifference to human life/time:

> The hospital bed has been set up in the living room, and now she divides her days between the couch and the den and the bed in the living room. A bright, open room painted a pale blue with a picture window looking onto the lawn and the pond and the tall stand of pines. (I want to be near things that are much older than I am, she'd told me in the hospital, things that will be here after I'm gone (2012:107).

Bodies in and out of place

In the medical monitoring of health and illness there is significant control and capacity to avoid dying out of place – randomly on the street, on buses, at work and other spaces that would disrupt these everyday life spaces as death free zones. But, as Cory Taylor, writes:

> … if cancer teaches you one thing, it is that we are dying in our droves, all the time. Just go into the oncology department of any major hospital and sit in the packed waiting-room. All around you are people dying. See most of them on the street, and you'd never know it, but here they are lined up, waiting for the latest results of their scans, to discover if they've beaten the odds this month (2016:8-9).

Perhaps more often than realised, we are imperceptibly or unconsciously witnessing people experiencing imminent dying every day and in everyday spaces. However, the age of a person probably matters in terms of how they might be perceptible as dying bodies. Relatively safe countries, and communities, have highly organised systems which have normalised an expectation of psychic comfort from death's possibility and nearness. Bodies of the fourth age are probably the most confronting social bodies in public spaces because they embody the nearness of death. In first world economies and localities, these bodies are often sequestered into social geographies/institutions of literal and symbolic containment. When and where do we see bodies of the fourth age in public spaces? I certainly see people in this stage of life in my local area, a suburb outside the city centre but rarely, if ever, would I see this generation on public transport or in the centre of the city – the hub of business and shopping. And yet unusually my mother traversed this geography by daily catching a train into the city of Brisbane and its central street of Queen Street Mall. My sister tells the story of a young man walking up and asking our mother if he could take a photograph. Politely, but pointedly, he communicated surprise at seeing a person of her age

in this part of city and wanted to document it. She consented to this image wherever it may now be.

An elderly couple living up the street where I live, have walked together most afternoons to the bottom of street which opens onto a large, expansive park. I have witnessed this daily ritual many times for something like 10 years, saying "hello" when walking past them or waving from my car window. But in the last year or so a noticeable change has taken place. The man has been walking with a walking stick and the woman in the relationship started to become less agile and he now transports her down to the park in a wheelchair. The wheelchair is a substitute for his walking stick and keeps him upright. She sits in the wheelchair bent over, head down. Her body reminds me of my mother's as she too can no longer walk. My mother sits for some of her day in a wheelchair facing the television in the common room of a dementia ward sometimes slumped over in sleep. This couple's ritual of visiting the park and adapting to change is a mutual and loving testament to our inter-corporeal existence. They are holding on to each other. I feel a sense of privilege in witnessing this fourth age life in transition in my local community. I admire and appreciate their visibility, and the way they are creating (intentionally or not) a community of witnesses observing the poignancy of their mortality.

But the capacity to live one's visible dying communally and publicly is not always welcome, possible or desirable. This recognition was a precursor to Tanner's book *Lost Bodies*. In the opening pages she tells the story of her father attending her brother's wedding and reception, where he was wheeled into both celebrations in the makeshift transport of an office chair. He was gravely ill at the time, and probably, she says, in pain, but still very much in character as a personable man. They didn't know at the time that he would die only two weeks later. Her father's presence at the wedding reception created unease. She describes many members of family and friends coming up to his table to say hello but shuffling off quickly with talk of not wanting to tire him. These were family and friends who had been avoiding house visits. She describes furtive looks at her father's body and the experience of witnessing the transformation of his self through the eyes of others in which he became a body put out of place:

> His embodied presence unsettled the large room. Sitting by his side, I would catch his friends and relatives—at the next table or on the dance floor or across the room—trying to slide out of a gaze that had snagged on his familiar, unfamiliar form: the harsh angles of bony shoulders under his good jacket, the dark circles around his eyes, the gaunt hollows under his cheekbones. The unease in that crowded room circled around a body rendered so abject by the process of dying that it transformed the familiar subject into an unfamiliar object. My father's body registered his impending death; in turning away from it, they would turn away not from him but from the anticipation of his loss and their own implied mortality (2006: 1).

Tanner is writing of death's uncanniness that is palpably felt when dying is brought close to those who do not want to be witnesses to its facticity. Tanner is capturing a scene in which there is strange hovering animal sense of mortality's presence that is met with a communal form of psychological self-preservation. She writes about her own experience in this scene:

> As I was neither the subject nor the object of that uncomfortable gaze, my own position in the room was less clearly marked. My chair pulled close to my father's, I lacked both the distance required to register the shock of his changed appearance and the intimacy necessary to experience his dying body as my own (2006: 2)

Our bodies are the bearers of mortality and while a young body is barely perceivable as mortal - and to perceive it as such might seem perverse or morbid — deeply old bodies carry the visibility of an ending. This is a symbolic burden in a society bent on looking younger at all costs. Women's bodies are especially trapped in a symbolic system where their sexual currency, social and economic relevance creates a burden of working against the embodiment of time in aging. And how convenient for the social body that very old bodies are shut away — a normalising systemic practice in many parts of the world which Fletcher characterises as a form "gerontological hygiene" (2016: 170). My mother not that long ago, was very public in her advanced aging. Physically hunched over, desperately thin, and walking with a walker in the central shopping street (Queen Street Mall) of the city of Brisbane, Australia, she was a spatial-social-cultural anathema. Making a large part of her daily life in that part of the city where people are walking fast wearing suits and professional clothes, larger crowds shopping and eating out is quite a different spatial geography to a fourth age person in their local suburb or small town. My mother got used to being told by ambulance paramedics, nurses or doctors that perhaps she should review her habits of walking around the city after falls and a hip replacement operation. This was advice she summarily ignored for as long as she could.

Over time my mother's body could have been interpreted by some people as a body out of place from the busy city space she traversed on a daily basis. And yet, to her, this was the life she had made. Her vulnerable body was risked and publicly brought to witness in a culture which tends to place safety before freedom, sequestering or circumscribing embodiments like my mother's into protected zones of sociality or the more hidden spaces of institutional care. The reality that my mother might die from an accident in public, on transport or in the busy central city district she travelled most days was a real possibility and a source of regular conversation with siblings. But it was a risk chosen by her while she was able to remain mobile. We didn't want to crush her spirit and force her out of doing the thing that gave her pleasure and purpose. And so we, her adult children, tried to respect her choice despite social pressure internally and externally to do otherwise. My mother was very resistant to carers coming to take her out and spent many a day, leaving her apartment before they arrived, ignoring them if they went with her into the city, and one time, she tricked a carer getting out of train at an earlier stop, waving them off.

My daughter and I walked with her one day close to the last time she occupied this part of the city. With her dementia she was starting to get a bit lost and confused. And on this day, her favourite café Aromas, which she frequented for nearly 8 years, was closing down. It was the end of an era. Today, every time I walk past, its boarded window I think of my mother and feel her absence. As we walked in the city on that day of endings, curious looks passed over us and I wondered if she was being perceived as a body out of place. This could well be my projection — perhaps she was admired rather than perceived as unusual and out of place. Perhaps three generations of women walking together in this city-space was the thing that caught peoples' attention. I cannot know. I documented in photographs my mother eating her last café meal, posing next to the staff. Strangely my mother was not particularly sentimental or emotional but perhaps this was just her way of coping with an ending.

One day as I drove home from work, getting closer to my home street (which is very close to where my mother was then living in an aged care facility where she was free to come and go) I saw my mother in the distance on the pathway back to her place. At first, I thought, 'that can't be mum can it?' and then I suppose I recognised something familiar. I was sitting in the car behind a queue of cars edging forward as it was peak hour. Looking ahead at all the cars I could see that everyone had their eyes fixed on this body walking with such determination at a snail's pace. She was pushing herself along with her walker, desperately thin and visually mortal. I saw that she had stopped, opened up the seat of her walker which doubles as small storage basket. She had got out one of her favourite biscuits (melting moments) which I knew she had bought from the local bakery that she passed after getting off from the train from the city centre. Taking a few energy bites, she put the rest of biscuit back and continued her journey 'home'. This action was characteristically my mother. It was strange looking at her through the front window of my car knowing that everyone else in front me was doing the same but without my bond of love.

I was also keenly aware that I was witnessing a fleeting moment of uncanniness caused by a collision of converging mobilities –my mother's, my own and those people in their cars on that very road at that very time. I wondered, "would she be mentioned in stranger's conversations". 'Today I saw this elderly woman….'? Would she remind them of their own mothers? Their own mortality? This witnessing created a wave of melancholy that echoed a guilty memory of sitting in café with a friend in Melbourne when I looked up to see my mother walking past the window, like a shadow, totally unware of my presence on the other side of the glass. I was in Melbourne for a conference and my mother came with me knowing that she would have to occupy herself during the conference dates. She had wanted to come to the café with us (she knew my friend), but I wanted the privacy of being with a friend I had not seen and spoken to for a long time.

The window that separated us in that Melbourne café gave me a strange experience of alienation as if, somehow, I had access to experiencing my mother as other, out of reach, not existing for or towards me or anyone else in the world. She looked lost and her facial expression was completely unfamiliar. She was truly embodying the figure of the stranger in the city and thus the demeanour of a person not anticipating recognising or being recognised by others —so central to small-town life. This fleeting experience through the café window has left a palpable memory trace which returned in that experience of other people looking at my mother through car windows. The reality of my mother's mortality is embodied in these stories. And so, as I edged closer to her in the car that day, and she to me in her walking (but without her knowing this), I put the side window down and called out to her – 'Hello Mum it's me'.

Dying bodies

In C.S Lewis's memoir *A Grief Observed*, the struggle to represent the intimacies of grieving his beloved wife H produces a style of narrative that is dedicated to telling a story that does not flinch from painful truths. Indeed, Lewis's writing is an exercise in harsh self-scrutiny as he doesn't quite trust himself as a flawed self-serving human being who can truly account for his grief in all its raw, exposing devastation. This is demonstrated in the way his memoir often redoubles upon itself going back to correct a characterisation and thereby re-mark upon an account that he believes is not quite right. It is not that he is assuming that he can write a perfectly truthful account that hits the mark but rather that he wants to show in the writing rather than hide the responsibility to come as close as possible the capturing of existential condition of his profound mourning. His is a devastating account of loss and like many memoirs of grief, exposes to witness the extremities of emotion that are often hidden behind closed doors, secreted in the private, interior life worlds of the grieving. Lewis's memoir also scrutinises his own investment in survival set against a recognition that his body is a living, felt presence of her absence:

> Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. But no, that is not quite accurate. There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H's lover. Now it's like an empty house. But don't let me deceive myself. This body would become important to me and pretty quickly, if I thought there was anything wrong with it (12).

The idea that we are inter-corporeal beings – made through and embedded in the bodies of significant others is a key part of Lewis' memoir tinged with a recognition that self-preservation is a resilient element to our animal survival. Interestingly, Lewis writes his body as if it is a home for his deceased wife but one which feels empty and abandoned. The idea that we are folded into each other's bodies is beautifully explored in Mark Doty's elegiac memoir *Heaven's Coast* about his partner's dying:

> Wally is in my body; my body is in this text; this text is light on my computer screen, electronic impulse, soon to be print, soon to be in the reader's body, yours—remembered or forgotten, picked up or set aside, it nonetheless acquires a strange sort of physical permanence…(2011: 9).

De Beauvoir witnesses her mother's face turn into a death mask as she sleeps open mouthed. I too have seen this mouth on my own mother. Moved by her mother's unawareness of what her body has now become, she writes: "my despair escaped from my control: someone other than myself was weeping in me" (31). Returning from the hospital, she talks to her partner Jean Paul Sartre about this witnessing of her mother's body, her mouth, and Sartre in turn witnesses in De Beauvoir a transfiguration of her body into her mother's face: "I had put Maman's mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements. Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there, and compassion wrung my heart" (31). The mother's body is our first home. Her mortal condition and actual death is thus a profound existential marker of a lost, absent origin which exposes us, as human subjects, to an existential groundlessness. However, patriarchal religion in the form of the Christian story of salvation is about overcoming that feared groundlessness through the figure of God-the-father as saviour/rescuer who promises heavenly immortality. The sacrificial murder of women is at

the heart of the patriarchal symbolic order founded upon and living off (profiting from) the remains of the feminine and women's bodies (Irigaray 1993a and 1993b). Through the idea of original sin Christianity ultimately appropriates the original debt to the mother transferring it to the father thereby substituting and overcoming the mortality of motherhood and the place of the mother with God-the-father's immortality (Gibson 2001). And while Christianity may pay homage to mothers by putting them on pedestals (aligning them with the Virgin Mary) such an idealisation undercuts their agency as subjects because it is about women transcending their corporeal sexuality — even negating their bodies. This patriarchal moral economy sets a limit on the capacity to mourn the mother because it is about saving "us" from her mortal body. This in turn means that the debt of origin owing to her is never truly given its due. Simone de Beauvoir and her sister Poupette did not facilitate their mother receiving the last rites —something they were chastised for by their mother's friends and relatives. It is not that they deliberately denied her this ritual but rather that their mother never asked for a priest and resoundingly rebelled against the very idea of dying right to the last (88). They did not wish to impose the reality of death on her by summoning a priest. In the absence of this ritual preparation for the soul's confession and preparation for Father-God, Françoise de Beauvoir died a very worldly death in the company of her daughters. In sorting through her mother's things after her death, Simone de Beauvoir finds a note written by her mother to a nun which reads: "'Of course I should like to go to Heaven: but not all alone, not without my daughters.'" (104). I understand and identify with the story de Beauvoir tells of her mother's life because there are many similarities to that of my own mother's life profoundly shaped by Catholic morality and patriarchal authority in conjunction with the normalisations and surveillances of country town life. My mother too had communicated on a few occasions her disappointment and worry that my lack of faith would mean our eternal separation.

In moving to the city my mother took life into her own hands and into new geographies, embracing the anonymity of the city and finding community amongst strangers. She embodied the fourth age as a narrative presence in a spatial geography in which bodies like hers usually have no place. Her story was written into the streets that she walked but it is a story that has now ended as a daily practice of her own making and witnessing. I mourn my mother's former life, her resistance to conventional geographies of ageing, and the way she frustrated as long as she could ageing with dementia in safe, fixed, and confined spaces of care and surveillance. I know where she is at all times now and there is something sad about this for there will no more chance encounters on the street or sightings through car and café windows. However, I find myself keeping her presence alive in unguarded moments of half expecting to see her in spaces where she made her own way of life.

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