



# DIGGING FOR SPAIN

A Writer's Journey

PENELOPE TODD

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# 1

As any New Zealand child knows — once the globe of the world has been consulted and the fable about China discounted — if you dig straight through the earth you come out in Spain. Briefly you try it: scratch at the lawn with a trowel, wondering how worms negotiate the inch of black before the claggy yellow. The handle starts to bend from the blade and you sit back on your heels. Too hard.

Decades later you might pick up the fascination again and find yourself on the way there — by air this time. The ‘skybus’ the airline packs you into from Singapore to Amsterdam is so freighted with its four hundred passengers and their twenty-five kilos apiece of luggage, in the pit of your stomach you know that tunnelling still makes far more sense than going up.

Ecologically, we’re told, flying long-distance is the single most extravagant and damaging act most of us commit. That’s one reason why you decide you can’t be doing this often. The other is the sheer claustrophobic terror of squeezing yourself, late at night, into a seat between two large male strangers who fall straight to sleep with their arms hanging over yours while you, with the needle quivering across the gauge of your emotional tank from Full to Empty and back again, stare behind your closed eyelids all night towards Europe.

Try to think of the plane as a cocoon, the compression chamber easing you into another reality. *Breathe in, breathe out. Trust the life that brought you this far.*

February: Spain has been coming for some time. I've watched it appear in the distance like a heat ghost. Now each time I look up its outline is firmer. Details appear. I'm preparing to go out to meet it — for the whole of May, alone.

Family archives tell of a Valencian ancestor, Antonia, who married a Belgian lawyer. Their son Mamerta Gueritz married into our family and was appointed 'Priest of the Church of England Officiating Pro Tem' in Devon; a hundred and fifty years later, the family elders still attribute to these Gueritz our olive skin. I want to find out what else they might have given us.

As for Spain itself — its culture, history — I have only gleanings, grains in my pocket; as for the language, I've started this week — *la canción, las canciones* — and I find my tongue eager for its words and letters: the hoiked g, the hard g, the grip and release of the r, the double r.

I'm going at the end of April, to stay at an artists' and writers' residency forty-five kilometres out of Barcelona. I suppose that as there are known branches of Scottish, English, Irish and French in the family tree it would make more sense to check out those places where our history is retrievable. But it's not history I'm after. It's connection. I want to find out if Spain and I have anything to say to one another. I wonder if it's really my kind of place.

Memories and associations augment and shore up the myth of me and Spain. About six years ago I tried flamenco dancing, which has its origins in the south-west. I could manage the footwork. I could crack my heels down — *one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-one* — and snap my chin up; mine is that kind of chin. But bringing in the raised arms and those enticing, dismissive flicks of the wrist was always going to be tricky. I lost my dignity. 'We' probably come from the north-east, and that's where I'm going.

Also, I sent my protagonist Zillah to Spain at the end of the novel *Dark*, five years ago when I wrote the first draft. I gave no careful thought to this: Zillah had to go somewhere; Spain would do. I was shocked when she came back damaged in the sequel *Zillah*. I don't know what that's about. It means I'm going to keep alert in Spain. I'll be hoping she's lived out something I therefore don't have to: I've noticed the allusive, sometimes prescient, nature of what we write. We trace out the pattern of our psyches. We tell the same stories again and again. It doesn't matter if it's really happened, or it hasn't happened yet, if we dreamed about it or just 'made it up'; it's all (the life, the writing) coming up from the same well, with past, present and future the handrails we put up to steady ourselves in the fathomless element called time.

Perhaps I'm creating a mythology to suit my circumstances. But I like to think there's a story already sealed within each of us. Some of us take a long time to uncover, decipher and assent to it. We start our search when we find that the stories we've attached ourselves to prove no longer accurate, their themes too limited; when we grow suspicious of the roles in which we find ourselves, and the unconsciously created, acceptable personae with which we meet the world. I'm talking about the midlife quest we're invited on when all we've abandoned or ignored of our early impulses towards life begin to clamour for attention.

It's said that over any seven years our bodies renew themselves. Which means that by the time I reach Spain none of the cells will remain that started this journey with me — if I say, for the purposes of a tidy narrative, that it began at the start of the penultimate year of the old century.

I have a mental picture of Can Serrat, where I'm going. I see the courtyard where we'll eat our lunch out under the grapevines. Across the far side is the main art studio where a man in his fifties works long, hard hours. He's a little surly; he might be from Wales, and we'll only start talking properly when I've been there about twenty-eight of my thirty days. Until then we'll be wary, each investing the other with more kudos and creativity and mental flare than

we believe ourselves to possess. All the others will be kids, or kooky, kind and forthcoming. We'll have a good time once the thin ice of our first contact is broken.

There are two places for every one: the place we imagine and the one waiting for us when we get there. When I wrote *Peri* I was thinking of the house where I spent my first two years, in the heart of Christchurch. My great-great-grandfather had it built when he arrived from Devon in 1850. Since we lived there it's been cut in two with one half moved along the road, the other sold to the Girl Guides.

Although I hadn't ever revisited it, I reclaimed the old house and its grounds in that novel. Imaginatively I walked in and knew it, room by room. I described on the page the high arching ceilings, cavernous green bathroom, the long red dining room with its leadlight squares of window. I was disappointed a year or two later during a family reunion to find the real house large, but unexceptional. However, I have both now, forever.

I'll let you know what the other Can Serrat is like.

**I**t's a similar story when you grow desperate enough to go visiting at last the rooms of the self and find that none is quite as you'd come to believe. At midlife the house begins to creak.

I knew I was in some kind of trouble the day my finger started jumping. I was at work, trying to type on the keyboard while the finger flipped up and down of its own volition. Over the next months an array of symptoms visited me, along with terror. Many muscles joined the dance. At any one time there was likely to be a thigh muscle, toe, piece of cheek or shoulder tapping out its morse code. I had giddy spells, found myself listing to the left, took seconds to accommodate a change of surface underfoot. At night a tiny electric train sizzled up and down the nerves in my legs. By day the train departed, leaving them lead-heavy. My head was foggy and I forgot things, mostly words. My friend Claire wrote out for me Theodore Roethke's poem 'The Waking', from which I took strange comfort: 'This shaking keeps me steady.'

Although Body was acting up, I couldn't help suspecting that Psyche was choreographing the drama. At some level I knew that here was the opportunity to enter the knot of difficulty that each of us has at our heart, where there is confusion, great feeling, and great power — the place we don't want to go and the place we are drawn to again and again. More superficially, I thought I was going to die. But around the time I saw the neurologist (who told me that there is a tribe in New Guinea whose muscles twitch as mine were demonstrably doing) and went for an encephalogram, it was beginning to dawn on me that there was somebody living under my skin, trying to get out. The morse was saying, as it always did, SOS.

First the notion, then the reality. As with a visit to Spain, some notions take a long time to firm up. There are eight burnt matches on the windowsill beside me. That's the number of times I've sat out here in my new cubby, to write. I bought my friend Em a fat beeswax candle like mine. We'd discussed the trouble we have admitting to a need and then saying a wholehearted yes when it's met. We each have a new writing study. We are each snipping away at the clinging superstition that because the problem of space and quiet is now solved, we've cheated somebody somewhere. Fate perhaps. Fate that makes of us mothers who must attend first to every other family member, whether or not they know and wish for that attention. Beneath the skin of mother is a very greedy woman.

In my case, after years of making do at the kitchen table, the common computer, taking my turn, I finally shouted, and R heard and took it seriously. He began that hour to tear a corner off the garage, to haul jetsam from the basement, to measure and cut and nail in place, even though he had never done anything like it. I went along after him with the saw, the paint pots, the delight. My room is painted the gold you find inside a pumpkin-shell. There's a desk, a laptop, a chair, and the red kilim I brought back from Turkey in a backpack. The window faces north into the garden. There's room to lie down.

We burn our candles for entitlement and plain old joy.

Joy is elusive when you don't know what you want or need. I thought I might be seriously ill, and yet every symptom was sporadic, and for part of each day I felt entirely normal. I had panics, usually precipitated by some new oddity — my jaw went into painful spasms when I ate; I woke feeling vertiginous and mattress-heavy. Anxiety was the syringe-driver sending spurts of adrenaline to reactivate the symptoms. I felt stuck, with beliefs that didn't fit me, with swills of feeling I couldn't disentangle or articulate, with the defeating sense that even as I cast about for the *something more* I was sure life held in store, inertia and repetition would keep slinging me back to where I started.

Our three children were all in their second decade. I worked as a nurse for two or three sessions a week, at the emergency medical centre and sometimes at the hospice. I was writing when I could manage it — two teen novels set in inner city Christchurch: the first in the house where my children were tiny, the other in the old house where I lived as a baby. I was writing but was so hesitant to identify myself as an author that it took me all the courage I possessed to ring the publisher and discuss my first book, *Three's a Crowd*, which they were to publish.

I saw a man whom I knew to have newly diagnosed multiple sclerosis, out walking with his pale face and his dog, picking his way along the street. I wondered how he felt about his life and how conscious his illness had made him. I projected onto him my own dread and edgy alertness.

O n the back wall of my cubby I've started drawing a spider web with an HB pencil. Along with the candle-lighting, before I write a thing, each day I add a few strands. I've run out the main lines already, to the corners and edges of that wall (it's about three feet by seven), tying off the ends on the screws and impurities that punctuate the paintwork. I *still* need to remind myself that writing is to me — at least for now — as web-making is to a spider. I doubt if the spider has to remind herself that she has spinnerets, that she must spin, but

neither has she got herself so alienated in early life from what she needs to do. The spider would die if she didn't make webs and catch things. Whereas, we who forget what we need grow aslant, grow thin, make do, until we catch up with ourselves.

I'm visited by an insect. He looks like a large flying ant there on the wall above my computer screen. The gold shines through his wings, which are banded with black. He cleans himself up with the same efficiency the pet rat employs: front feet polishing his perfect round head, sweeping his antennae, one two, one two. Now on the shelf he lies on one 'shoulder' and bends his abdomen up, crossing back legs in a quick scissoring motion. He is as meticulous as he is fearless. Hasn't word got out about my spider web?

When you remember what you need and who you are becoming, you have interesting visitors. Spains come to meet you. Spain is the place you haven't been yet. If you were afraid of certain things as a child, timid of certain others as a teenager and adult, the certain things become Spains. Your adventures begin late but at least you're ready for them now. Your eyes are open. Travelling isn't always comfortable but it's exhilarating.

**B**yond the symptoms and the sense of stuckness, it was hard to see what was wrong. I come from a wholesome family, the five of us brought up according to our parents' principle of 'benign neglect'. We were given physical space and freedom to imagine, roam and play, along with educations that cost our parents most of the luxuries they might otherwise have enjoyed. But if we lacked for anything by current psychological lights, it was sustained, intimate interaction with adults, which can provide reflection — corrective or affirmative — to the developing sense of self. Mine remained nebulous. I was allowed to pursue my own thoughts, my own course.

Early on, though, I chose God and I set that God between myself and life. From the time I made a Christian commitment in my early teens, I tried to work out what God wanted of me, never believing that my own enthusiasms and attractions were reliable guides, rather that they were to be treated with

suspicion. If the heart of a person was wicked and in need of redemption, then it seemed likely that what I actually wanted was off the mark, and what God wanted a little harder to achieve. This kind of thwarting of the self, if carried out long enough and assiduously enough leads ... well, to the kind of place I now found myself. It's also a clever —if unconsciously chosen — ruse for the timid. That they were unlikely to be God's will became the pretext for not pursuing passions, job opportunities, rigorous academic study, or the kind of adventurous and bohemian living that secretly attracted me.

Useful things came from those years: safe, inclusive social groups; warm, brotherly friendships; plenty of grist in the Bible for me to mill in my own blinkered way; meeting saints and desperados; falling young into marriage-and-three children, no shilly-shallying.

This afternoon I'll have my second Spanish lesson with Maria from 'Tcheelay'. Coincidentally, just before the last one, Art sent me two of his poems translated into Spanish. One I knew well, the other I decided, for homework, to put back into English. I started out with my friend *el diccionario* but I got tired of having to consult him about every little detail so I launched out alone, relying on the smattering of Latin, splattering of French I can recall, and made 'a fair shot at it' as Art remarked. But I was wildly off the mark in a few instances. *Rio* isn't a laugh but a river, *sótano* not a wish or a dream but a cellar.

My neighbour Sue is sharing the lessons. When she moved next door, that made three of us writers with adjacent boundaries. We've wondered about this little literary hotspot; there's Graham up the road, too — poet, memoirist, biographer — and the house Sue moved from, across the street, is where Denis Glover lived as a child. No wonder, she's a poet. Please note the comma. Time here is pleated. For some reason our street attracts language-lovers, and that love hops across decades, and borders — from English into Spanish.

Can Serrat was set up by twelve Norwegian artists. They invite ‘creative souls’ to live there and work for a while on their projects. Up to fourteen creative souls can stay at a time. The photos online show Spanish-looking archways, thin trees, art studios, the mountain looming. It’s ten minutes’ walk from a small town, and set at the base of Montserrat, a limestone megalith frequented by rock climbers, and home to a monastery and to a ‘miracle-working’ statue of madonna and child, *La Moreneta* (little dark one). In my application for the one writer’s stipend offered annually, I said I was fascinated by the tradition of black madonnas, which is a little bit true. Having spent a large part of my teenage and young adulthood in church, I’m not in a rush to go back, except for music to weep to, or for the wax-smelling, inimitable silence of prayer-soaked spaces. But I’m looking from the corner of my eye at the rising interest globally in female deities. God-or-goddess knows the world can stand a more feminine approach to its affairs, one subtler and more moistly fecund than Bush’s threatened ‘untamed fires of liberty’. I wonder if something deep in the human psyche has already set that in motion in the physical realm, with the over-oestrogenising of our environment. We’re getting supergirls, and some say the last boy has already been born with the ‘normal’ balance of testosterone to oestrogen. By such weird underhand methods we engineer our salvation?

In response to my application, they offered me a part stipend. I’ve asked for a single room.

Back then, trying to diagnose the malaise, I found a woman I could see for ‘spiritual direction’, imagining that what I needed was a little tweaking of my belief system — or a little *further* tweaking of myself so I’d fit those beliefs more neatly. Rose’s house was on a windswept hillside with a view of coast, ocean and sky that went on to infinity. I cried there most visits, from relief, that at last I could tell the truth: that the Christianity I had worked at for so long was failing me, and I it. Rose talked about authenticity, about perceptions of God, about facing up to my true longings (yeah, right, whatever

they were). She talked of the need to be conscious of what was happening in my life now, to be on the lookout for sign and meaning.

Later in the day of my first session with her, I opened the car door in haste and caught a passing cyclist on the ankle, knocking him to a stop — an Asian man with no English who forced a smile but avoided my eyes as he turned and hobbled away, pushing his bike. It was a narrow, busy road and I felt sick, understanding the potential for harm if I wasn't wide enough awake.

**D**unedin was flooded last night — in a 'tropical' downpour. The sky warned us by gathering into black and palpable heaviness. I tried to concentrate on Spanish vocabulary. *Yo soy madre y escritora*. The first drops of rain fell huge and few. Then without roaring or fanfare except for distant thunder, they came faster and denser, exploding off the deck railings and bouncing a foot above the garage roof. Our flood-indicator is the set of concrete steps; yes, they were a multi-leap waterfall and the guttering spilled curtains. After fifteen minutes it was over. We only found out later about shoppers wading barefoot through the city; students swimming drains; Claire's studio deluged; and the sodden square metres of carpet in our downstairs bedroom.

It was the second flood in a month. The weather is challenging us all. We have to be flexible and reconsider the beneficence of sun as well as rain, however much we might enjoy the prospect of growing aubergines in Dunedin. We need sun hats, sea legs, open minds. We should keep towels handy, gutters clean, and the insurance paid up.

**I** dreamed of earthquakes, of sailing in wild seas, of losing a child. In waking life a young man kept coming in to the emergency medical centre. 'I fell over by a bonfire,' he told us. Over several nights he showed us the small round welts proliferating on his limbs, which although cleaned and dressed became infected. 'I backed into a hot poker.' 'The dressings got wet.' His excuses were progressively more implausible. He seemed to be surrounded by an almost

tangible darkness. The two nails he'd forced through each ear were crossed fingers. I was afraid of him and felt almost ill, cleaning and dressing the suppurating circular wounds. One night when he came in, begging for drugs for a headache, we kept him waiting while we rang for the emergency psychiatrist. He caught wind of it and slammed out into the night.

**A**s I write, a cicada has appeared. It's suspended from the eaves on a line of web, spinning helplessly in the breeze. I can't reach it with the foot-long ruler. Hold on, friend, I'm coming, I tell it. I pull the large cardboard casing from an unframed print. No! Here comes wasp, hovering, trying to land on and sting cicada. I've got one foot on the bed, one on the bookshelf, I'm stretched as far as I can go ... and it's enough. The card parts the two insects and cicada steps aboard. I bring her in and tease the web from her wings. She's damaged though. She flips onto her back and tizzies about. I right her and leave her on the windowsill. Shortly she's chattering her wings, so back I come and pull off another sticky thread. She walks towards me and for a long time we regard one another. I tell her what a beautiful green she is, her wings are like cathedral windows. I warn her to be careful how she leaves the sill. Several spiders are watching.

**D**espite the Catalan Romanesque style of *La Moreneta*, which would mark her origin as twelfth or thirteenth century, legend has it that she was carved in Jerusalem in the early days of the church. She was taken to Montserrat in 718, lost, and found again in 890 when shepherds tending their flocks one night (haven't we heard this story before?) saw lights and heard singing from the mountain. The priest, then the bishop, were sent for and came running. The statue was subsequently found in a cave and placed in the small church erected for her when, in the first of her miracles, she refused to budge from the mountain.

She is one of many black madonnas revered and visited by pilgrims throughout Europe. Most are reputed to be miracle-working. Some scholars argue that their dark-skinned depiction is residual from cross-pollination with earlier deities: Isis, or Ceres, becomes Mary, who takes from her predecessor an earthier, more chthonic character than the pale and celestially coloured — and flavoured — images we're accustomed to. But perhaps it hardly matters which particular mother and child this is — Isis with Horus, Mary with Jesus; they were tipped from the same archetypal mould as every mother-and child-that ever was. Each attests to the miraculous powers of generation, of dynamic connection and — if you will — of love.

As for *La Moreneta*, I look forward to getting the gossip first hand.



## 2

The breezes at dawn have secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep!

Rumi

March: Spain keeps hiding. I forget that I'm going. When I wake up tired and remember, I push it from me anyway. It's too hard. What if I hate Can Serrat, and the people are from my nightmares? And first, I have to keep myself together through those two huge flights, in the bewilderment of foreign airports. I will have to pull out all my own resources. I tend to drift and dream and let other people stay fully alert and pick up the bits I miss. I'm trying not to do that.

Karate helps. When you line up at the start of a session, sitting *sieza*, on your knees, fists on thighs, and the call comes, '*mokuso*', you close your eyes. These are the moments for gathering yourself, all your parts here on the wooden floor — then letting them all go, as if you are dropping into cool water and feeling it close up over legs, torso, face, hair. Then there is nothing but you and your body, mind on

the job, listening for the instruction, obeying as best you can. Every other concern — the anxious teen, the deadline, the problematic friendship — is gone for an hour. When you sit *sieza* again at the end, you realise with a surge of thankfulness that you are ready to take them back with a larger embrace. When you stand up, bow out and dress, you find you are walking a centimetre above the ground and you understand again that everything is possible if you can only become a capacious enough, elastic enough container for life's vagaries. Karate helps hold them all.

I'm gathering up small things I'll need for going away. I bought a black plastic thing the size of my thumb that can transfer documents from one computer to another. Friend Huberta dropped off a bag of travel accoutrements for me to take my pick from: wallets on belts, a blow-up round-the-neck pillow, a stretchy twisted line to hang wet knickers on — or perhaps to dance with. Once I've met a gadget, it's hard to believe I can manage without it. Last week an inflatable pillow hadn't occurred to me. Now I imagine I won't sleep a wink on the plane without one.

At the time of the muscle tics I arranged to go with six other women to Naseby in Central Otago for a weekend 'retreat' that was tailored towards my own ends — but we were all of an age, anticipating the second half of our lives. We spent one afternoon, each alone with the questions I'd come up with. At least I knew by now that when I raised the question, 'What do I think God wants of me this year?' that it had to be followed with, 'How do I feel about that?' I appended the questionnaire with an unsourced quotation: 'You come alive each time you dare to die; let go, move on, bid things good-bye.' The next morning we told each other what we could. Having those women around, open and receptive, was like crawling from the cold gloom towards a small fire. I told them how I dreaded learning that I had a dire illness (I was still waiting for the diagnostic tests) but also dreaded that if I didn't have an illness with its attendant sense of urgency, that I would slip back to half-awake and stuck.

It's less than a month now until I go. I'm struggling with the Spanish. It's hard to make time in the daily round for a new discipline. And the verbs! I suppose there are no more irregular verbs than in French, but I learned that over eight years when my mind was young and supple. This has been eight weeks and the drawers in my brain are not full by any means, but sticky, so I toss the new vocabulary into a jumbled pile beside them. There's only so much I can do at this stage — reading through notes out loud, writing again and again *yo doy, tu das, el da* ... which recalls to me our pipe-smoking Latin teacher who paced the room in the day's bizarre home-made outfit (we never saw her wear the same one twice) intoning *ambulo ambulas ambulat* ... then *decumbo* ... as she lowered her elderly self to the floor and lay, for emphasis, unspeakably long moments in the aisle between desks while twenty thirteen-year-old girls looked ceilingwards.

I've been watching the bathroom spider. The teenagers say, Mum, it's disgusting, take it down. But I won't — and they can't. She's made an elaborate mist-like web, a dense, almost invisible mesh that fills the two inches of airspace out from the window in its top right corner. As I brush my teeth I read the latest news on the web. Towards the base she has crane flies sucked clean of juices, desiccated and bundled, the limbs stacked wires. Tucked in the high corner was a tiny brown balloon mimicking the shape of her abdomen — she's a lithe-legged, bulbous-bellied brown — which I found about a week ago had spewed forth hundreds of tiny beige crumblets. Now the crumblets are crumbs but seem not to be moving yet, although limbs are faintly distinguishable from bodies, and the emptied egg sac lies among the discarded crane flies.

I foresee trouble. The babies are directly above the toothbrush mug. Once they're up and crawling, we're going to have to clear the windowsill of potentially harmful substances and implements.

I like to make, not too much, but a little, of the fact that my namesake Penelope was weaver extraordinaire. A spiderwoman. She used her art to avoid scrapes, to procrastinate — to keep the suitors at bay. By day she wove, by night she unpicked, but her daytime labours won out eventually and she was forced to face the houseful of men saying, choose me. The shawl for Laertes was subtle, ethereal, a gauzy membrane. It was exquisite; it was next to nothing. As an object of beauty it expressed some truth, but it couldn't save her; in the end she had to call on her own character and hope that the years of weaving had steeled it for life's demands.

Writing's exactly like that. Why labour here, conjuring, synthesising vocabulary and concepts into airy hammocks that may or may not hold the weight of a single solid fact? Because the rewards come when you get up from a morning's writing — leave those skeins of grey across the screen — and emerge blinking into the day, where every solid object is solidier by a fraction than it used to be; the bird in the birch sings more piercingly sweetly; your children look more miraculously discrete, and less like products of the family mixing bowl. The world draws itself up, distinct from you, but you are also part of it and readier now to take your full place.

As for the name, Penelope, my parents intended for me the whole mouthful but inevitably, with a family roll-call of five and the baby-booming world teeming with sacs-ful of kids, it was shortened to Penny. And there it stuck for forty years. A few years ago, a strange phenomenon — *Penny* began to sound like two sticks rapped together, a no-name, as brown and obsolete as the coin. With that alteration came the dreadful realisation: my true name was Penelope — I could no longer use the diminutive chosen by the careless collective. *Dreadful* because I would have to ask for it back. For somebody who didn't ask for anything, who'd weep as a kid if she finally had to approach the teacher with a maths problem, who as an adult read, listened, tried to find out later, hinted, but would not ask, this was difficult. Also, there was my surname: Huber. Austrian. My father-in-law's name, and my husband's.

Nothing to do with who I really was. After deliberations that ranged from taking my grandmother's maiden name to stabbing the phone book, I plumped for my own — again.

Girding myself for the transition, I practised in my head.

'Ah, I've changed, no, reclaimed ... I mean I want to be called ...'

In reality, I was blunt and people felt hurt; some were indignant, thought me arrogant, that I was trying to make something of myself. And that was part of the truth. But it was hard to hear them properly in the blundering, embarrassed need to get it over with:

—Penny ...

—Penelope.

—What?

—My name. I'm not using that one now...

—Why?

The answers to this were as various as the people asking. From 'It's a long story', to the whole story. From 'I'm bigger now', to 'I just am'.

Some understood perfectly — my closest friends knew instinctively what it was about. My parents were both miffed and glad. My siblings stumbled but came through in the end. Some few people never did and never intend to. They became the penny people and always set my teeth on edge. It doesn't hurt the teeth, though. It serves to remind me that every truth is multiple. Yes, I'm growing up, but I also carry with me the snotty kid who bawls when she doesn't get what she wants. It's just I've learned to talk to her now.

But I asked, and I got there and now Penny Huber is the funny, deflated, souvenired egg case that held Penelope Todd.

Only three and a half weeks until I go. Our daughter Sophie in Lyon says that spring has arrived, suddenly and unmistakably. Warm-blooded Kiwi girl, she finds herself an oddity going about in a sleeveless top while French women are still in jackets and scarves. 'Don't bring any woollies, Mum. If it gets cold, we can share mine, then you'll have room to take them home for me.' The

colonisation of mother never ends — you can borrow her body, her suitcase, her trip to visit you. And she will never cease to be concerned for you, you can always bend her towards your cause (she is already bent), however little it has to do with her.

But I need to be alone for a time, too. Sophie wants to come with me to Can Serrat, to see me into my new home, to see Barcelona — and that'll be fun. But will she know when it's time to leave me there? Or will I have to practise my tender skills at asking?

I chose to dive inward — even though I felt often like a plumply buoyant child, floundering to go beneath the surface of my days. I would pay attention to my life, to my dreams, to my own feelings, small and glimmering as they were between the vague malaises, little understood happinesses and outbursts of emotion.

One evening, because they were bothering the bees in the hive under our bedroom window, I followed wasps into the neighbours' garden where I parted the dusty green of a conifer and found their nest welded against the trunk. Something about its dense intricacy and potentially destructive inhabitants — buzzing, pupating, *emerging* — made me queasy. It seemed a ghastly metaphor for what I was likely to uncover in myself. A few months later I came upon another nest, in the museum. It was huge, the work of a single season, empty of wasps and beautiful: sheened paper aswirl with many hues of brown. It was as fine as tissue and as crushable.

Each night I seem to be fending off the flu that struck down the teens this month; I'm not sleeping well and by day I'm alternately irritable and silently stoical — which latter state I regress to when I'm sick. Many things have the potential to undermine me now. In my e-discussions with Art, I 'hear' him say that sooner or later I'll write a real novel — and that *this* memoir will pre-empt the need for me to make the observably personal first novel that so many

women manage, or more usually mismanage, to write. This he says as if I haven't learned something of the craft, writing eight novels. But they're ostensibly about teenage experience so in his book they don't count. *El bastardo*.

You write what you need to write. There's a potential freedom in adolescent scenarios that is absent from the everyday of homemaker, mortgage-holder, parent, worker — 'mature adult' and the kind of person, as Art seems to be telling me, I will one day grow up and choose to write for. But I don't want to join that tribe if it means a smaller imaginative realm to plunder, if it means believing you can have the world pocketed, sewn-up and made finite.

Part of me seems forever fourteen, eighteen, twenty — whatever ages I've lived where there was so much grist to mill I didn't get through it all. So when, at forty-odd, the same issues came to revisit me, I got on with the job via psychoanalysis and fiction-writing. But the time loop — forty overlaying fourteen — means the two ages are somehow meshed and the scenarios of one lived out in the other. My teen protagonists explore existential dilemmas; as a forty-year-old I ingest marijuana for the first (and, please, the only) time.

Let me face the possibility that I write about adolescence because I'm afraid of growing up. It may be, as I've suggested, because the unconquered obstacles of my youth take me back again and again — and may do so for the rest of my life. Something takes me there imaginatively and I have no desire yet to write a purely adults'-view drama about the kind of nuclear family I'm actually part of — possibly because it would seem too ordinary, too banal; or far too close to the bone.

Something's happened in the bathroom web. The brown spider has hauled the old sac back up to the corner where she sits beside it, disconsolate, as I can't help reading into the close folding of her limbs. This might be because, suddenly, where there were a hundred babies, a cloud of unmoving crumbs in

the home corner, now they're gone, all but half a dozen. Has something eaten them?

I'm trying out that paste that's supposed to bleach the tea stains off your teeth. You coat your canines and incisors and pull your lips back for a minute. So I'm leering shinily into the web, counting under my breath ... *ocho, nueve, diez, once* ... when I see them — one here, one there, at six or eight-inch intervals around the window frame, each now king or queen of its own miniature webdom, each tiny monarch about an eighth the size of a silver pinhead.

It's a tricky time, when your kids are leaving, and coming back, and leaving again. It's hard to let yourself off the hook of active motherhood; it's difficult staying on it. You have a taste now of the carefree life you gave up before you'd ever really claimed it, but you know it will never be simply that again. There's change once, twice, three times a year in the living arrangements — in who's at home, who intends to be, who is but doesn't want to be. And it's sometimes hard to believe that the ones who stick so close will ever swing out on their own little spinnerets and set up independent fiefdoms. You don't want them to go before they're ready to, but you're scared they never will be.

**B**ack then, a cocoon appeared above the kitchen window: a rough bark-like twig that wriggled against the white paint, ugly and odd — disguised for waiting. The next day it had moved across to the other side of the narrow ceiling. It kept changing position at night, in the dark, then in the daytime it was still. I was tempted to hem it in, to keep it where I could watch it. After a bit, it disappeared, and I missed it for its silent, improbable optimism.

I dreamed I was looking at a satellite map of Tristan da Cunha, and someone was explaining that they have twenty spiralling thunderstorms per day over the town; then I was down there on the ground, watching light aircraft, spindly as spiders, circling above. When I looked in the atlas next day,

I found this remotest island on earth, mid way between South America and South Africa, right on the 'Equatorial Limit for Icebergs'.

It's tempting to try and crack dreams open and split apart the kernel. But they might be best appreciated entire — walked around, observed, drawn, written — blown upon as you'd blow on a bubble to watch it swirl and reflect. Dreams hint at life's unseen currents and movements but won't survive the seizing fist.

I found Sue Monk Kidd's *When the Heart Waits* enormously helpful; it's the story of her own midlife transition from orthodox Christian pastor's wife to someone with purposes of her own. She described being 'caught between the "now" and the "not yet" of our identity'. And although ordinary family life went on, and I was part of it, this was a time of frequent despair. When I needed to, and every morning when I'd recorded my dreams, I would try to let myself sink down. I pictured an egg in my hands, pondered its yolky blandness becoming the tight-coiled chick with every feather and leg-scale in place. Life went on, but I was also sunk in the night of the egg. Waiting: for medical tests, for the sharp, clear longings that would point me the way, for my own authentic life to start hatching. Most keenly I felt this life — a sense of conviction; a flow of energy — when I wrote: this one act that involved no one's will but my own, and that brought something into being that wouldn't exist unless I dipped in and pulled it out.



### 3

Along which secret aqueduct,  
Oh water, are you coming to me,  
water of a new life  
that I have never drunk?

Antonio Machado

Nine days to go now. Sophie calls, saying the trees in Lyon wear new green. I've had a day of intense anxiety, projecting my fears onto the son who vomited through one night, the daughter who hadn't come home next morning, the friend who grows distant. You can fall into a strange state when you haven't had enough sleep but it's a state you shouldn't dismiss; some things you can only see clearly through tears, can only apprehend fully when your skin is thinned. I've had a tough skin, as Spain draws nearer: another regression — to my less-feeling state, which is safer. I went to the Michael Parmenter retrospective this week which was beautiful; I could see that much. The dancers' bodies described states of desire, terror, ecstasy, sorrow. 'Altering,' said my companions after the standing ovation. But 'unaltered' was the verdict I drew for myself.

Over the last few days a kind of silence has been closing up around me. I have nothing to say. I don't want to speculate about what a fabulous time

Spain will be. It will be its own sort of time. I hope I can write something worthwhile. I hope I find a friend there. This morning Claire comes to eat porridge with me in my cubby. I throw open the window on the green garden, clear sky and blue hills. The grapes are hard and tiny, the birch wears its first yellow medals. When I return, there will be only a few shabby black grapeskins, the trees will be bare. We're quiet together; we manage a little muttering about cameras, a little pooling of the history of Spain — we come up with the Armada, the civil war, the Catalan separation but about the dates and significance of these we are hazy.

Today's visitor is a moth: slim, silvery-grey and as unprepossessing as my days just now. It sits awhile on the bookshelf strut, then when I decide I have nothing to write about it, it flies down and scuttles across my laptop screen. It touches on Claire's sketch, 'A gesture to a given space', and goes on out into the bright day.

What should we notice, where fix our attention? And a little moth shall lead them? Should I worry about the much I don't know when I can enjoy the simplicity of sharing a few contemplative moments with an insect? In Spain I want to resist the temptation to race about busily. 'You'd be mad not to see everything, go everywhere you can while you're there,' is the accepted dictum. But what is it that will furnish my inner walls once I'm home? Perhaps the few art works fathomed, a few choice meetings with people I wouldn't otherwise meet, the body's immersion in the flavours, colours, smells and sounds of this other country, however subtly they appear.

It's not easy, though, to trust silence, stillness and inwardness. You don't always have evidence for yourself that anything is happening, that you're not simply lazy and dull, a blank space. And certainly the world favours the bustling, the brash, the outer production. I choose to trust that this quiet is the silence of the soil, silently teeming.

**T**here was another women's retreat coming up, with Joy Cowley as facilitator. I rang the organiser; there was one bed left for the weekend, however it was

hard finding a replacement at work and I almost gave up trying. Simultaneously I received a brochure about ‘inservice education’ that made my spirits sink further. What was I doing nursing? Although I’d done a good enough job, and had rich and privileged experiences over the years, the role of nurse was just that — a role I played, or like a piece of equipment I’d learned to wield with care and respect, but left plugged in at my place of work. I had little enthusiasm for ‘upskilling’. I had been two years older than my classmates in the hospital-based programme I entered at nineteen, but I’d been resolved, after a year at university, to do something idealistically practical so I could be of use to ‘the world’, meaning the poor, knowledge-deprived, suffering, third world. It takes a long time to draw these early sympathies inward and address the arid regions of the heart.

The weekend with Joy was a trial, and possibly a kick-start. I found myself diffident from the outset, and when on the first evening she asked us to say what we’d learned about being a woman, I was furious at the cute question and at having to produce something from the privacy of my own thoughts for a large group of strangers. However I said in my turn that as women we each did many things that could be done as easily and as well by another. ‘But only I could have produced “my” children; and only I can create what I create.’

In the sessions that followed Joy made assertions and suggestions to threaten the evangelical in me. Her open-ended theology challenged my own precious notions and seemed to come at me with the bewildering force of sudden violence. No dissenting voices were raised, and I was too uncertain of my own to speak up. I teetered between rage, and willingness to find and discard whatever long-cherished beliefs were of no use to me now. Nauseated much of the time from the foul-tasting pills I’d swallowed for a lingering bowel complaint, I suffered also malaise of the spirit.

For the final session we were asked to share what we were being called to; what was our gift? Again, I was horrified, but I knew by now the answer to the question. I mumbled that I was being called out of hiding, to give up the habit of withholding; and that would be my gift — ‘to God, to others, to myself’.

Later I wondered if it was the result of the disgusting medication, the weekend's assaults, or simply coincidence, but my head cleared after that weekend and most of the other symptoms abated.

I've never seen the air so full of insects. It may be the angle of the sun this early autumn morning as I sit on the floor in my cubby drinking coffee with the window wide. Wasps and bees pass and eddy and kiss the high tips of the birch. Smaller flies shimmer by, blurs of sun-caught white. And above them, up in the sun's corona, web threads drift this way and that. What a thrilling way to meet your fate! There's a spider on each of those ribbons. Somewhere it let go of the ground/leaf/windowsill it knew and let the air take it, unfurling the silver ripcord of its own substance — that will snatch hold, somewhere or other, sooner or later. On a day like this with no wind, only currents to there and back again, it may return to the place of its birth. Or it may drift across spider-worlds and stitch itself an entirely new set-up in a place it's never seen before.

The Sunday before I leave, Pam and Claire and I lunch together. Pam hands me a brooch from South America — silver with a green, stone centre — of what we choose to believe is a quetzal bird, which dies if it is caged. I'll wear it to Spain; my friends will each take it on their travels later in the year.

We met with friends every Friday we could manage it — two other couples exploring their own spiritual aspirations. For the first two or three years, before we became fireside and whisky friends who simply updated each other weekly on our actual lives, we set ourselves exercises before supper. Although I understood the principle of grace, and sometimes felt set about by grace itself, I couldn't hold the stance for long. One night I wrote, 'I've believed in a God who may or may not want me when it comes to the crunch: a God who is present to the joyful and to enthusiasts, to those who get out of bed early and who make a triumph of everything, but not often to me. I've believed in a

God who comes to the diligent-enough, the suffering-enough, the simple-enough — which I haven't been — to those who evangelise, foster children, lead Bible studies or commit gross sins. I don't cut it. I've believed in a God created in the image of the right attitude: a God I can't seem to find.'

As I pass the neighbours' gate this morning, I hear laughter and the children tumble out, giggling, packs on backs ready for school. 'A pear fell on Ruby's head,' they tell me. Wow, had she knocked the tree? I ask. No. Had lots of pears fallen already? No, they think it was the first. We walk on for a way together. 'Did you know,' says Oscar, 'that you're more likely to be hit on the head by a falling coconut than to be bitten by a shark?'

I imagine, however, that you're more likely to be bitten by a shark than to receive the first-pear-of-the-season blessing. When we part, I think about the precipitating factors. Rain was involved. It started to fall just before I set off, a minute before the children did. The pear, beginning to sever stalk from stem, must have taken on the critical burden of water. It was poised, trembling above the garden. Out came the children, Ruby first, passing under the tree on her way to the gate. The last one out slammed the door ... Bull's-eye.

The bathroom spider — which the teens warn me will be 'tidied away' in my absence — has kicked a wasp corpse down the web. She spent a day or two attached by the jaws to this terrifying meal. I presume that, although the wasp looks entire, it is now hollow. Spider harbours no souvenirs or sentimentality. The remnant is cleared off to join the crane flies — rusting car bodies at the bottom of a garden. The front porch is clean and welcoming, in the feng shui of the web.

## JOURNAL:

Tomorrow I leave home for two months. Thankfully, I've been sleeping well but I carry with me a little ball of anxiety that feeds off everything.

Sophie emails the first French phrase I'll need: *Je voudrais un billet pour la navette*, and rings later: bring the oatmeal, after all, if you can.

Hair appointment; I go out to the garage. He's taken the car! *And* he's absentmindedly drunk my tea, the last two cups. There ain't room here for the both of us.

I go to change money. \$395 becomes 200 euros and 20 Singapore dollars. It feels odd to consider putting away this journal — all my journals — and travelling off with no record of my past. But later Claire and I drink gin and she gives me a set of delicious 'travelling moleskins' to jot and sketch in.

**M**y nights were churned through with dreams: men shot at or shooting; earth falling; I lost sons and cars to water; green waves teetered; dark theatres awaited the crack of gunfire; a plucked chicken bloated in a bag, too sick to be eaten — and I emerged full of wonder, impressed and uncertain.

One night, on holiday at my parents' place, I woke to find myself up on the bed, shaking at the window and fighting for an exit, trying to make sense of what I thought I saw.



## 4

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.

Gospel of Thomas

### JOURNAL:

Flying over Cook Strait, I'm on my way — north! When R and I walked outside at Christchurch airport this morning after I'd checked my bags through (so simple, so reassuring; at least half the anxiety is carted off with the luggage), the sun and two red and orange hot air balloons were aloft in the early haze — lovely heralds, of buoyancy.

I'm always uneasy before flights, although I should be right at home at thirty thousand feet. Apparently I have five Air out of a possible complement of nine of the four elements.

Astronomy. Astrology. I always have to pause and recall which I mean. I see they both come from the Greek (adjective) *astronomos* which means 'star-arranging'. I suppose astronomers like to arrange the stars; astrologers consent to being arranged by them.

An experiment: draw converging lines from the stars down to Earth. Date the point where they meet — for example twelfth October, 1958. Swivel the globe until Christchurch, New Zealand lies beneath the point. Ask your mother what time you appeared. Half past eight, she'll say, recalling for you that it was whitebait season, that lilacs were flowering, that your father baked shortbread. Also how placid you were. A little Libran, of course. Why shouldn't it be so?

Feed these details to a reputable astrologer and he will chase through his tomes and in eight pages more or less tell you how you conform to the pattern of your star sign, also how you don't. It seems anything is possible, contradictions are multiple. A few things will offend you (you have no Earth, an excess of Air — this in spite of the way you've always favoured the 'earthy' look, never trusted your intelligence), others will stun you with their accuracy (he suggests you try karate — a strenuous martial art, 'to temper that haughty Mars energy' — and you're surprised to find in it exactly the right formula).

Astrologers tend to be open-minded, and reaching as they do, upwards, outwards, *beyond*, are probably going to draw you a map that's a rough fit so far — but bigger and bolder than anything you'd envisaged for yourself.

‘**W**hat is the source of our first suffering?’ asked philosopher Gaston Bachelard. ‘It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us.’

I began in childhood to horde my silent things. To be precise, I started my collection the September just before I turned seven — when I lost my mother. She went to hospital and gave birth. Oh, she survived all right. She made as good a fist of that baby as she did of me and my three brothers. But. There's a photo of me in my smocked dress, white socks and sandals, spring bedecking the cherry tree overhead. We've been to hospital to fetch the baby. My arms hang limp, my mouth is a crescent of accusation. I scowl up at my tired, radiant mother, at the white knitted shawl in her arms.

My sister.

My mother had betrayed me by bringing home a girl.

They say I was garrulous until then. I trailed my mother, jabber-jabber-jabber. When there were no questions left to ask, I kept on asking. My mother wrote this one down: 'Did you do that later on a long time ago again?'

But when my sister arrived I stopped. Or, was stopped, stoppered. I imagine I had a go at expressing my fury over being Queen Bee dispossessed (at my fall from the madonna's lap). But the expression of rage or outrage was discouraged in our family — an old story. It's only in these psychologically enlightened times that we feel we must let children stamp their feet and roar. Back then, a good girl was a nice girl and could be taught how.

So angry and cranky burrowed off underground and sulky took their place. And sulky was as bad as cranky. 'If you're going to sulk, we don't want you at the dinner table.' Well, who would? So sulky went off to spawn her silent children who clamped the mouths of all my feelings. Anger, shame, delight or passion I kept to myself. This proved effective. After a bit my responses were so bland they were barely discernible one from the other. They troubled me hardly at all.

Terror was the exception. All the stymied emotions banked up behind terror — of nuclear war, that the house would burn down, that my teeth were loosening and would soon fall out. Eventually — usually in the dead of night after I'd coddled the fear for months — I would have to speak or implode. I crept to my mother's bedside, taking advantage of the dark to disembodify my own tattling voice.

Such stunting twists and turns in the early life are not necessarily disastrous — are intrinsic to the whole. As a child I took to watching, listening and bearing up, speaking little or seldom. And in fact, how else is a writer made, but by being sealed inside her own skin, fed and fuelled by impressions from within and without, the heat turned up by slow degrees until she is nicely done?

Of course it's seductively simple to wrap the life up like this, in tidy packages of cause and effect. There's always more than one version of the story. This one serves the larger narrative for now. Little in the final pattern

can be judged ‘bad’ but things can start to feel that way when your life is ready to assume a new shape.

## JOURNAL:

Amsterdam airport. I feel less than solid, and so tired. I haven’t let my thoughts track down dark pathways, am simply trying to observe what is. Any fright is in my own head. Outside, fleets of huge blue KLM planes await the dawn that comes softly, greyly — like the dawning fact that I’m here. Except for its orderliness, this place looks like anywhere, and with its myriad smokers smells the way pubs in NZ did until recently.

**I**n Lyon I enjoy watching Sophie with her friends. The New Zealanders are so strapping and good-heartedly stropic, clustered here around the tiny table eating crepes scraped from a buckled frying pan. The Swedish room-mate is petite, creamy — all her possessions are pink and white — but I’m convinced she has a will as steely as any among this clutch of firstborn girls.

Sophie has picked up a life here with equanimity. She’s weathered the biting winter and homesickness and become proficient at French. She’s made rich friendships, has borne the demands of French bureaucracy, done her studies well, and enjoyed all she can of the arts. She introduces me to her world as twenty-two years ago I began to show her mine.

Back in New Zealand, Alex, the second-born, takes a more experimental approach to her life, but I’m just as proud (though a little more anxious) of her in her spinnings and explorations, observing, as I do, from the distance of the mother-web.

One night, a week into my time away, I try to call home but the number’s unreachable and I still haven’t had emails from the people who profess most ardently to love me. Sinking into the absent room-mate’s bed, I ponder that I came here alone, to learn to be alone. I can’t lean on others as I’ve leaned on Sophie this week. Soon I’ll have to take full responsibility for what happens to me.

## EMAIL:

Dear Sue, I thought of you this evening because I had to ring Spain and say, *¿Hable inglese?* and she said, *Non, espagnole*, and I said gulp, reading the phrase page in the back of the Rough Guide, *Quiero un habitación para una persona*. And she said no and whatever we're full-up is. More Spanish practice awaits me on Friday but meanwhile I found a place to stay for a dangerously cheap sum: no problem said the *mujere* who didn't even want my name.

I began to read books about Jungian psychology, of which I couldn't always make sense. However the sometimes weird concepts sent through me lurches of excitement and promise, so when a new friend and Rose, the spiritual director, both suggested Frances, a Jungian analyst, I overcame my resistances to make an appointment.

Beyond my church attendance and a certain unworldliness, I may not have looked from the outside like a fanatical devotee of JC but I had wrestled inwardly for years to make myself measure up to the large and rigid framework I constructed, or allowed others to construct, on his account, in my head. Basic to this set-up were concepts of redemption, goodness and eternity that held me frozen, anticipating, should I venture forth, everlasting bleakness, evil, fear and regret.

I'd clung to the 'Daddy' of this arrangement way beyond childhood; now, although I didn't yet grasp it in these terms, I was impelled to find a way to leave home. Seeing Frances was the portal I chose, but wedded as I was to duality, and suspicious of a subtler or metaphorical approach to spirituality, I was sighingly apprehensive. Was I was being called by God, or lured away by a malevolent power?

A night or so before I was to see Frances, I woke suddenly in the early hours, oppressed by the dark, my body contracted with fear over the question. Was it possible that the two were one, and that darkness and light co-dwelt in God (but not in the one I'd tried to serve)? I could think of no one to call on

for help since I hadn't yet met Frances who might as likely be advocate for the devil. Something momentous was happening and the scariest thing, I wrote, was that *no one* else could tell me what was true. Meanwhile, I'd been watching a monarch chrysalis form and darken on the swan plant in the garden. I was clutched by dread at its plight: before the wings, liquefaction.

## JOURNAL:

Today I go to Barcelona. I wake with the realisation like a sudden cold whack! to the soles of my feet. Pam's emailed that when she and Claire meet for gin-and-tonics this evening (that's about now, or a short while ago, or soon?), they'll accompany me, helping carry a handle each of my luggage. What a shot of comfort, to read that.

After two weeks together in France, Sophie and I part in Aix-en-Provence. France has been a perpetual astonishment and delight, a country touched with a magic paintbrush that leaves in everything flecks of gold, hints of music. Here are bluest sea, greenest fields, loveliest lilacs, highest 'vault of heaven', then there's Paris!

Waiting on my own for the train, I see a huge winged grasshopper, the size of an apple corer, slap against a boy who doesn't flinch, then it thuds into the big glass window. Its abdomen strains as it slides to the ground, scrabbling against the hard 'air'. *Le pauvre*. I want to pick it up and put it out but am constrained by my wish not to draw attention to myself. If it clutches at my hand or bites me, I can't predict how I'll react. I hate this cowardice, am relieved when the difficult insect disappears.

## JOURNAL:

Here I am, alone! At three p.m. in Avignon where a TGV roars by in a flash and I buy an *eau citron* from the vending machine and sit down, shirt off, under the glary wave of glass that serves as a roof. I can be peaceful; nothing

need be too hard or too rushed — I can find my way from one platform to another and then ... Well, I'll take it as it comes.

Now on the train to Barcelona; compared to the TGV, that seamless cross-country glider, this is a *real* train with stained seat covers and brown curtains and it's beginning to move. When I sat down at first I wanted to cry with relief. So much has happened in two weeks that's been wonderful but, with so many impressions coming from the outside and so little time to absorb them, still not my own true life — which resumes here, now, on this — is it really red? — train.

**B**eyond my reading, I was ignorant of the language or ambience of psychoanalysis. I didn't know what to expect. At my first visit I was surprised to find Frances not the Amazon I'd anticipated. She and her home were small and unprepossessing. She invited me to sit in an armchair opposite hers. At her request, I told her why I'd come, recapping on the last year, revealing the tenacious hold I had on my beliefs — beliefs via which I expected to apprehend God and God's will for my life. I gave her the potted story of my forty years and said that what I wanted most was to write.

I was already writing, and published, by the time I saw Frances and yet I resisted giving it pre-eminence. It troubled me that the God I was sure I believed in refused to be written into my fiction. (Nor could I write 'Him' into convincing non-fiction, unless I was expressing my perplexity.) Anyway, I wasn't convinced that cranking out works of imagination was a sound investment of a life — of mine, at least. I wasn't sure it was God's will.

It took me a while to realise that writing and the 'inner journey' make a two-fold cord; they enhance and inform one another. Although my first novel languished with rejection letters in a drawer, I saw later how it marked out, fore and aft — as subsequent fiction would do — the process I was embarked upon. The teacher of a small country school is cracking up. The seventeen pupils surmise that the school, endangered by its size, will be closed if they don't keep the madman hidden for the last few days of term. There's a sharply

observant boy, the disintegrating male principal, and his artistic but absent wife with whose paintings and sculptures he replaces all the furnishings in their house; then there's a gaggle of kids.

The God I'd fixed for myself was coming apart; my creative element had been kept at bay but was nonetheless making her presence felt; the demands I made on my own life were multiple and conflicting.

In the end there's a fire that razes the big hedge behind the school; the backdrop is removed, light comes in. The school's closing anyway, and the pupils must move on. The artist comes home, to see what she can make of this altered scenario.

Crossing the border from France there seems to be a lot of mucking about as the train stops and starts. The PA announces in French that soon we will be switching languages, and indeed, shortly afterwards I find the dining car props have been subtly altered; they're no longer selling *l'eau* but *la agua*, not *frites* or *chips*, but *patatas fritas*.

We nose into a tunnel, crinkle to a halt. It's blackout, the air is dense. Here is another squeezing birth canal, the tight passage into Spain that, when we come to it, is bathed in a fiery late evening sun.

It's dark by the time we reach Barcelona and by dint of another train, a friendly Irish woman and a benevolent Philipina, I find my way to the heart of the city, and am led across the Plaça Catalunya to the top of Las Ramblas and the Hotel de Canaletas. I lug my twenty-two kilo bag up five flights of stairs to the clean, faded bedroom.

The first sign of life on the Can Serrat driveway as I walk down in the heat of the following day, dragging the wheels of my overloaded suitcase through the dusty gravel, is a snake, greeny brown and probably eighteen inches long, that winds languidly back on itself and glides into the blackberry.

I had no idea in advance how I'd pay for the sessions with Frances, but that week I was offered additional work from two sources and one boss encouraged me to take my entitlement to fourteen days' annual leave payment. A professed need for psychoanalysis has become a banality, but the process is endlessly fascinating to its subject. Why else would a person pay seventy-five dollars every week for years? But fascination alone can't justify a woman stealing so much from a modest family budget — and yet somehow there was always enough. Now I say that of course it was worth all I spent and more, to add another wing, or storey, to the house of the self.

This is what happens if all goes well: you talk as you've never talked in your life, particularly if you've made a specialty of silence. You inspect your memories as they appear and you talk about what matters most right now. You get angry, you cry, you hide and you try to come out of hiding. You dream and tell your dreams. You write them down, draw them, and watch their symbols appear in real time. You see things come about that to you are entirely new — but exactly right. You don't know how it happens. It happens by itself — and with your consent. You watch your true shape emerging month by month, as a photographic image emerges from a chemical bath.

The house is a rambling whitewashed villa that's been resurrected and added to over the last twenty years — it had been the *casa* or farmhouse on a wealthy wine-maker's estate. The well in the garden was dug over a thousand years ago, although the original part of this homestead was built around 1650. To open the huge worm-eaten double doors you have to lean into them with your full weight. The sleepy-looking young adults outside have indicated that I should enter. Inside it's marvellously cool. I find Petra, our Norwegian host, herself an artist, writing me a letter saying they're all going to the beach and my room is first right, up the stairs past the bathroom. They go and I have the whole silent place to myself. The cook has prepared enough lunch for

everyone but only I am here to eat it. I take out into the shade a plate with fried sprats, mushroom frittata and soggy potato wedges.

Later I hang some clothes to dry and poke around the garden which is pockets of dry lawn and sculpture-studded alcoves retrieved from the blackberry that rings the house. I walk on up the bank to a sudden almond orchard. Mimicking the fuzzy green fruit and glimpsed between trees are the fat rock fingers of Montserrat; I want to say of Mommaserrat; there's nothing stridently male about these obelisks that 'serrate' the skyline. If they're phallic, they're old men's penises, well-intentioned, endearingly blunt. I'm overwhelmed by ... the *goodness* of this landscape and yet in the heat of the day it's harsh enough. Three pigeons swoop through the pines, a swallow wheels overhead, a pale-blue-headed finch is singing its heart out in the nearest almond, then we catch each other's eye and it darts to the next tree. I crouch on the edge of the orchard and sob.

I don't know if I will ever call myself a Christian again. I clung early to belief, perhaps because my parents refused to be dogmatic about anything — my father in reaction to his own fiercely opinionated father. And my terrors required belief, in something ultimate and fair. You may hold beliefs, but after a while, they hold you. The structure in your head becomes a thought-enclosing scaffold that goes on building itself until it resembles a fortress. There were realms of thought where I had never ventured, simply because I knew they would threaten the edifice. You may feel safe in a fortress, up to a point, but claustrophobia can set in. In starting psychoanalysis I faced my greatest known fear: the dismantling of the faith that put order into my world, that had seemed to offer the means of keeping that world bright-side up and coherent — but which was by now far too limited.

Over the next months the scaffolding fell away, proving itself as light and lacking in substance as a child's plastic simulacrum. I wasn't in a fort, but rather on the edge of a wide airy plain that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Didrik appears and offers to walk me up to the village of El Bruc, which is smart, quaint, a medieval restoration job, with new houses built on and visibly integrating the remains of the old. Didrik, it turns out, is messed-up, befuddled, a gay ex-junky. He's the dark piece of soul we're all trying to lose and are dismayed to keep coming across. One of the women here later confesses she can't even talk to him; to her he is her drunken brother. For another he represents the terror of failed aspiration. To me, with his substance-afflicted brain that runs in relentless grooves, he recalls a stuck place I don't wish to return to, ever. He is awfully sweet, terribly in need of love — and for now he is also helpful: you must go to this grocery shop; they cheat you at the other. (This, I find, is true. They bewitch you also, I realise, as I leave the shop one day with a handful of fruit for which I have paid seven euros — about fourteen dollars.)

At night, all night, Didrik's feet race — up and down the stairs, along the corridor and back. At the outdoor table, when he thinks no one is watching his mouth falls open in a silent wail over the beer can always in one hand, the cigarette in the other.

The wake-up, the unsticking, the emergence of my wants, feelings and will *may* have happened anyway, but I doubt they would have cost less. They may, without my full heed (we value what we pay for), have taken something catastrophic to achieve. Psychoanalysis was like cooking with gas — with the full circle of reliable blue jets firing under the pot — rather than with the pack of matches and damp wood it seemed I'd been fiddling around with until now.

A collection of inner figures appeared in dreams and daydreams, who seemed to require my attention. Among others there was a sinewy, grimy woman with strong bright teeth who knew how to make things happen; a living shape like a seahorse which reminded me of the child I'd miscarried at half-term; a dark, gross, hardened man who didn't care if he lived or died.

There was my own child self, and a little Chinese woman who, like a buddha settled fatly on the earth, had, she informed me, ‘a deep history of knowing about her life’.

I was writing *Peri*, and seeing — retrospectively — how her journey in chapter one was my own. She had left the familiar and travelled through the night, along the restless passage between sea and mountains, into the wider spaces of a new province; into a city peopled, like my own inner world, with strangers.

For the first few days at Can Serrat I’m not sure I can stay. The welcome isn’t warm, the inhabitants seem stressed. The internet is down and I don’t yet have an international phone card. I can’t even call home. I mull the alternatives: finding a cheap hotel in the city; setting off on a tour of Spain, youth hostelling; returning to civilised France, perhaps to the safe little spa town of Gréoux-les-Bains whose elderly visitors are all in bed by ten.

In the kitchen full of cigarette smoke and hostile vibes, bent in half looking for a frying pan, I’m seized by the need to flee to my room for a good howl. But there are new people suddenly entering, wanting to greet me and shake my hand. I straighten, smile (that warning grimace), blinking hard, and get on with preparing my meal. A few years ago I would have been undone by now, but have learned something at last about holding on, and waiting for the change that inevitably comes. This is the perfect place to do a little more growing up.

My room is ochre roughcast with a purply earth-coloured ceiling and a small chaste bed with ornate, free-standing headboard. It has a skylight, red flagstone floor, a fireplace I could climb into and one small window that gives onto a weedy bank. There are three large mirrors, two on the cupboard doors and one above the dresser. Wherever I turn, they remind me I am here with myself.



## JOURNAL:

Emotionally I'm everywhere today. I have moments of thinking, this is so funny, and what a cast of characters. But now I'm wobbling again as I deal with the dislocation, the realisation that this is not what I expected. I'm being thrown on my own resources and the environment can offer only so much distraction. Although Barcelona itself might be fascinating, it'd be sad to stay there alone, while here 'at home' I need to be more open than I've ever been; not to judge, not to shut down, not to let myself take offence or protect myself unnecessarily.

The place has been under siege. That's why the air of chaos, a certain sullenness. Twenty-three fine-arts students from Norway came here for a month, ostensibly to make art, but that's not compulsory and their supervisor, only briefly in attendance, is a notorious drunk. Can Serrat is set up with adults in mind. It becomes discombobulated when twenty adult-sized kids set out to have a good time with all-day, all-night dope parties and too much free wine and delicious babes ripening around them in the Spanish sun. The place has no rules to enforce beyond the menial: put your linen HERE when you leave, don't empty dirty water down THIS sink, use THAT phone for

outgoing calls. By the time I arrive, fifteen students have gone home already, two sent early on: one for unrelieved drunkenness, the other suffering a possibly drug-induced episode of mental disorder.

Mental disorder is what I also suffer in a strange country after being kept awake all night by sporadic bursts outside my door of footfalls or laughter, shouts or sobbing from kids who have lost track of time and reality. It's exacerbated when I get up in the early morning silence-at-last and find the common kitchen full of smeared plates and empty bottles, with cigarette butts clogging the sink and my Private Supplies taken from the fridge by the two blissed-out girls lolling on the swing bridge. When the director, whom I haven't met until now, turns up and says, 'Hello, how's it going?' my reply and its delivery disturb us both.

Sometimes when I sat down wearily, warily, in the chair opposite Frances, waiting for her to smile and blink at me, inviting me to begin, I'd feel as if I'd brought nothing along but a scruffy handbag with scraps of tissue, a stubby pencil, old receipts. But I would fish around for the memorable events of the week, for anything I'd felt, if not strongly then *some* way about, I'd tell the latest dreams, and one telling led to another. Sometimes I hated this woman who witnessed the uncovering of my nerves, who tried to make the best response, and occasionally failed — if anything in that weekly serendipity other than one of us leaving before the hour was up could be deemed failure. Sometimes I felt obsessively attached to her. Sometimes I went away singing.

The remaining eight students are now compelled by twinges of urgency to produce art, usually between midnight and five, then they leave — one today, another tomorrow — and as older writers and artists take their place, the air clears, the nights grow calmer, and the kitchen benches occasionally gleam.

While the atmosphere is still dishevelled, though, I'm relieved to find Vonnie, a fellow writer. She's sharp, funny and hyperthyroid — I suppose

because she's from New York. We take the bus together to the next town, Esparraguera. (Yes, we are in the asparagus centre of the world; it grows wild on the rocky hills, which makes you wonder whether the accepted wisdom that you must dig a six-foot-deep sandpit for it to grow well is a vicious old gardeners' myth.) Here, to pander to my sensual hankerings, I do the best I can, buying candles, incense, a cake of good-smelling soap. We have a drink in a small pub where Vonnice comments that this feels more like the authentic Spanish experience than Can Serrat with its house full of Norwegians. Later, I reflect that, authentic or not, disconcerting or otherwise, this Spain I'm experiencing feels entirely normal, as if, after being transported through the magical quaintness of France, I've been tipped fully back into my own skin.

Didrik comes walking with me. He brings his beer can. His hands are oedematous, his arms scarred with what I presume are old attempts to get at the veins. Usually he rises late then sits all day at the outside table, drinking and scrawling in his journal. As a fee-paying resident, he didn't have to establish his credentials; he's undecided yet if water-painting or writing is his *métier*. Now, out on the little track we follow through the orchard and into the pines, he's like a child, bending to pick up each cone within reach, marvelling at its beauty. We take turns whacking the ground with a stick to warn the snakes we're coming. In the late afternoon heat, Didrik's face beads with sweat and he staggers a little on the uneven ground. He wants to walk up the mountain one day, but it won't be with me unless he's stone cold sober. We follow a procession one Sunday, out of the churchyard and through the village, accompanied by a brass band, and a drum band of school children. A giant king, queen and courtiers glide along with their weirdly immobile papier mache faces staring straight ahead, pausing now and then to perform a swirling, stately dance. A short-legged asparagus spear the green of the canned stuff nips between the royal gowns, which billow up to reveal jeans and trainers. When there's a pause in the dancing, men pop out from under the skirts for fresh air. In the village square anyone is welcome to join the growing circle of Catalan dancers, but the footwork is intricate needlepoint that looks as if it has been learned from infancy.

Instead, half a dozen of us find a restaurant courtyard where red roses overarch a fine view of the mountain. Lunch is fish, duck, rabbit — the last of which Moniek foreswears, her son's pet having died yesterday — and unnameable foodstuffs. It's as well the table tilts. Oil separates out and pools on the south side of the plates. We have lime mousse and too much wine — no, the perfect amount of wine when afterwards we have only to roll back down the hill to home.

I began to grasp, and not just in my head, that it was time to give up old reactions, to stop cutting the world up into fragments, and to abandon the notion that people were either like me and mine or they were *other*. I had to start recognising and trusting my own responses to life, to re-discover that knowledge comes from within and that the bridges to others begin in the heart.

Even though I had always cherished a private inner world, for too long I'd let others formulate for me the religion, ethos and attitudes that were proper or becoming. 'You're not a child,' Frances rebuked me when I revealed my cringing attitude towards someone whom I was afraid of offending with my newly self-determined course.

Psychoanalysis was the removals van that carried me and my goods from the drylands of theory to the green garden of experience. Until now I had looked always for a code to live by, for the simplified exhortation I could use to steer myself through a chaos of possibilities. I looked outside of myself — at the Bible and, too often, at its interpretation by ascetics and fanatics. As a teenager and young adult, I fed myself challenges that flew in the face of the instinct for experimentation and experience.

Married at twenty-three, with three children by twenty-nine, I read and briefly tested the domestic principles enshrined in *Superwoman* (the keeping up of appearances), shying just short of the kind of 'ideals' that would surface later in *The Surrendered Wife* (have his 'supper' ready, consider a bunny suit). As an idealist, I was ready for extremism if I could find a cause, a way of being

that worked. So if I was a wife, let me merge; I took his name, expected him to know what I didn't, hoped he would take a lead. If I was a mother, let me immerse myself, in tubs of playdough, trailing my children, being available always, meeting needs as they arose. If I was a Christian, let me be given up to the Lord, turning to Him in everything, sharing my heart with the one who loved me unconditionally. I wanted *someone* to take this life and do something useful with it.

For all my availability, though, there was a maverick survivalist in me, unprepared to lay herself down, and I knew that I was seldom entirely present, to man, child or God. With satisfaction elusive or fleeting, instead of getting angry I got guilty. I had to try harder, try again ... try 'resting in the Lord', try yielding, try to let go of the self I hardly knew.

The theory was always relatively simple. But being a wife by the theoretical mode was disappointing, conflictual and lonely. R and I have always been compatible and companionable but romantic love slunk swiftly away. I had theories of how love should be, but I didn't feel a lot. Our children were gorgeous but so much of mothering was so dull. So repetitive. So confined and lulling. I fell asleep on the job. As a Christian, I fell by the wayside, but that took a painfully long time to accomplish.

Although heeding Frances' admonition to 'stop being a child' in my deference on the opinions of others, by the time I finished seeing her I would be in Experiential Playcentre, down on my hands and knees exploring the dirt, in the sandpit and the water-tub, testing the texture, the weight, the taste of everything that caught my attention. I was learning to admit what felt good and worked, what felt bad and didn't. I began to approach books and people and new situations like a bee flitting through flowers, sipping, latching on where the flavour appealed, led by fascination and not by ought. When tempted to judge situations by the old yardsticks, when I could manage it, I watched and waited instead.

If I have any kind of routine here at Can Serrat, it goes like this: I wake just before seven and lie a moment trying to retrieve my dreams but, unusually, I've been able to recollect only one properly since I came ten days ago — an astonishing, jolting story about the transformative power of love.

I go down to the kitchen, which is almost always silent so early. While waiting for the jug to boil I enter the adjacent room, which is empty and the perfect size for *kata*. As I slide through the dance-like fighting sequences, my bare soles make a satisfying *shiff-shiff* on the flagstones. I take tea and toast with jam up to the common room where I can plug my laptop into the internet. It's delicious, knowing friends and family have been awake and writing while I've slept. It adds nuance to the words ascribed to Catalanian Salvador Dali: 'When we are asleep in this world, we are awake in another.'

Back in my bedroom, I open my work — this work — and begin to circle it. I look back at what I've written, I shuffle pieces around, I wonder what else I need to say, but I never know until I take hold of something, anything, and begin.

At about nine-thirty I'm back down in the kitchen, shaking coffee into the percolator, screwing it down hard and lighting the gas ring. While it heats, I put away dishes from the steamer and scour the benches with ancient Ajax, first flicking off the ants. This work is communal but it's been neglected lately because no one wanted to clean up after students who chose not to clean up after themselves. Breakfast proper is prepared with food from the Private Supplies fridge: yoghurt over chopped fruit with a sprinkling of muesli. The coffee I don't drink I pour into a blue thermos jug for the next person seeking distraction.

I'd planned to revise and learn more Spanish but I haven't yet opened my notes. We don't speak it here at the residence where English is the common tongue. In El Bruc and Barcelona they speak Catalan which is another tricky departure from Spanish, being as close to French. *Si us plau* says please. So, I've scheduled it in but manage to be absent from my books whenever the hour for Spanish comes around.

My first book came out, *Three's a Crowd*. The night before the launch I dreamed I put my hands up into a tree and bit the huge fat plum that hung over my path. The story marks out the first stirrings of the adolescent quest for identity.

Only after you've been at it for a while do you become aware of what you're doing when you write fiction, where you're being propelled and how flush your characters sit with the recesses of your own psyche. Via fiction, via the explorations and quandaries of my characters, I began to write out the most basic premises of personhood. Who am I? What am I doing here? Which way am I facing? Which way is up — or should I go down instead? What has life given me, with which I might navigate?

My first novel about teenagers came onto the page like a rope pulled in hand over hand. There were no major hold-ups, the plot and ending revealed themselves as needed, the tension maintained itself like fresh elastic threaded evenly through the text. The editorial process was straightforward. Beginner's blessedness. It has never been so simple again. Something drives the work towards increasing complexity, richer textures, deeper shadings. You find the same characters appearing in different guises but they become more nuanced; stereotypes diminish; paradox is rife.

I'd kept diaries and journals, thirty-five years' worth. But publication was new. Fiction was new — the plunge into deep water where it takes some time to realise that the pale limbs following you around are your own, that the sunken ship, as Adrienne Rich has it in her poem 'Diving into the Wreck', is also yours. The words are the means of finding out 'the damage that was done/and the treasures that prevail.'

This ship holds all you pushed under all your life, now sea-changed treasure. All the currency you need. The jewellery you were too young to wear before; the ship's logs; strange food sealed in old tins and still edible.

There is no water at Can Serrat except from the taps. There is the cool indoors, insulated by the foot-thick walls, and there is the outdoors, where the air is usually dry and the sun too hot by early afternoon for sitting in. The creek along the bottom of the garden is also dry, although I'm told that once it flooded so violently with rain washed off the unabsorbent mountain, that it carried a car from one end of the garden to the other.

Around midday I go downstairs again and chat with whoever's at the big outdoor table, eating or taking 'Spanish breakfast' of coffee and cigarettes. From now on we're hanging out for two o'clock and lunch, the main meal of the day, which is prepared by Inga, another Norwegian, married to a Catalanian and living in the village.

The other thing I work into the day is a walk to the village for supplies — mostly protein, or oil-busting foodstuffs like mild onions to eat raw with vinegar, fruit, nuts, nibbles and bottled water since that from the taps is so rich in calcite it white-furs the element in the hot water jug after just a couple of boilings. There's only so much of a limestone mountain you want to ingest per day, no matter how much you love it.

I have fallen in love with Montserrat. Returning on the bus from the city, my heart goes *ba-doom* when it floats into sight, always subtly altered since the last viewing. I'm not the first to feel this way. Goethe said, 'Nowhere but in his own Montserrat will a man find happiness and peace.' (I wonder if it ever crossed his mind that a woman might in hers.) The other day clouds massed and towered into the blue in the astonishing way I'd only ever seen in Paris ten days earlier. By the time I was on the bus to the city they'd been crushed to a dense slate on which Montserrat's bulbous crenellations were painted in smoky pink. So, to crown my day as with flowers, I walk up through the almond orchard, over the desiccated herbs, under the pines, until I have a clear view of the mountain and if I can find a good thing to sit on — that isn't prickly or puffy with dust or en route to the ant colony — I go down and adore.

**I**n my hours with Frances, I touched again and again on the roles I'd taken up with so little insight. Although as a nurse I'd found the intimate admission to others' lives and vulnerabilities privileged and rewarding — as well as discomfiting — I was increasingly disenchanted of playing 'handmaiden', and with the lack of autonomy implicit in the name of nurse. I attended a workshop where the facilitator called for a role play — something I would normally avoid. She asked, 'Who wants to be the doctor?' I was shocked by my instantaneous, visceral response. 'I will!' I almost leaped from my chair. In reality I didn't want to be a doctor, but I was sick of playing nurse to those who did. One of my final 'statements' at the medical centre was (at last, at last!) a ferocious argument with a doctor. It felt terrific.

But all this took time.

**O**ur host, Petra, tells us one night that a disproportionate number of mad people live in the towns around the mountain. Despite her warning hints, it's fun to float in the twilight realm of possibility. I like the idea that what we're attracted to is also attracted to us. We draw each other. Of course the mountain cannot come to me but who's to say it didn't send out messages on the global network: I choose that one; I want her feet on my ancient paths, I want her eyes roaming my flanks, I want her to lose her way trying to reach my heart ... but, losing my way — I'll come to that.

Dutch playwright Moniek's husband turns up with a big three-litre rental car. We sink into the back seat and grin. After buses, trams, the metro, grubby trains and grubbier feet, this is luxury. We ask for music. We ask for cognac and cigars. We get what we want which is a trip around Montserrat to the monastery. Here, despite the plethora of buses collecting and disgorging tourists, all hype and bustle evaporates on contact with the air. We walk the wide silent street, gazing down on villages among limestone hills and gorges, and scan the mountain's sheer buttresses for pathways, shrines, minor

monasteries. Doves coo and the bell for vespers rings as though from out of the rock.

Inside, the church is gothic: black and gold-flecked. There's too much to look at. Where would you find God? We sit down among the visitors, heads swivelling, and it's minutes before I realise with a shock that straight ahead, high up and seated in the doorway of her own fantastic cupboard, is the famous black madonna, baby Jesus plunked between her open knees. Scientists have recently proven that she was once as wan as any pure-hearted woman, but that her face has been dyed by smoke from centuries of candles. The smoke sought her face, or she sought a certain obscurity? It happened, and now she is black and all the better loved because of it.

The choirboys sing; the hair stands, as it should, on our necks and they, as boys should, dig each other in the ribs and scratch their noses, nonchalantly flinging over us this arc of pure sound.

Afterwards we check out the burning bushes of candles — banked red, purple, yellow and green in their plastic jars and giving off heat like flaming gas. I buy a yellow one to take back to my room. Then suddenly we're in the lost property storeroom. Heavens, the things people leave in church! There are packets of pills, booties, full sets of clothing pinned to the walls, hand-written letters, a pair of crutches... It dawns on us that this is the thanks-fest to the virgin. These baskets of discarded heart medication, babies' dummies, hanks of hair, helmet, prosthetic infant-sized limbs, have been left by the healed, the altered, those whose prayers have been answered. As for the shiny pavlova wedding dress ballooning from the wall, is it saying, *Gracias a Madre Maria*, I didn't have to marry him?



## 6

Your vision will become clear only when  
you can look into your own heart.

Who looks outside, dreams.

Who looks inside, awakens.

C. G. Jung

I moved gradually — from the sense that my life impacted little on others, and that I could slip around unnoticed — to a saner estimation of my worth, and fuller engagement.

I dreamed I met Yehudi Menuhin in Russia. He played his violin in the snow then held my hand as if I were an old friend, and we walked and talked. Although it was our first meeting, we knew one another. Pondering this dream made me sad because of the sense it gave, as I wrote then, that ‘I’ve been asleep so long. I wake and it’s forty years later and I haven’t felt until now the weight or the glory of things, nor of my own life — its gravity or its levity. A voice comes from the dream place, reassuring me that even so, nothing is lost — that waking is everything.’

At last I was able to abandon the terrible division that my Christianity called for — between the saved and the unsaved, between those who lived in

grace and those who hung out in graceless murk. Much of the Christian ethos helps one live well and thoughtfully, but this is something I still find hard to digest, that as a teen and young adult I couldn't give myself fully to a friendship with a non-believer, that my relationships with them had to be angled towards their salvation (later, I abandoned attempts to proselytise but a small rift necessarily remained) which meant, in the baldest terms, finding a way to share the three or five or seven steps to faith, towards that magic moment when the sinner stepped over the threshold into eternity. And until that point was reached, the friend was inwardly held at bay with prayers and efforts and anxiety, the ever-alertness for a chance to share which, when it came, I nevertheless entered reluctantly. I always felt fraudulent trying to talk about Jesus; my own beliefs were so internalised that, coming from my mouth, the salvation package sounded insincere and unconvincing, but that didn't stop me trying to convince myself. I tried to discount such small unhappinesses.

I did have a relationship with God; I nurtured it for years — but it was directed towards God out there, much as I prayed in the silence of my heart. God was learned from without; God was Other. Now I was confronted with the possibility that if God *was*, he/she was to be found in my own person, no more or less than God was to be found in every person. Oh the relief of letting the barriers fall. The relief!

At last I could simply be a human being, living this one life here and now among fellow beings — with all the free choice and consequence that involved. I would start to carry my own (and, after all, familiar) burdens of badness, gracelessness, unbelief! instead of projecting them out onto others.

## EMAIL:

I think the 'mañana' way of being is gradually stealing over me (or is it the cheap red wine?) and I've stopped trying to add up what everything costs in dollars, and whether I'll manage to see enough before I go, or if I can figure out some big reason for my being here. The wonder of this place is seeping out of the ground, whereas in Paris it proclaimed itself from the rooftops. I have

never felt ungrounded here — nothing seems truly strange or 'other', even though I understand almost nothing of the language flowing around me on the buses and streets.

I'm very glad to be here, dear friend, although I miss my loved people, now and then badly, but there's nothing mystical or out of the ordinary about it. I don't mean to make it smaller than it is, but as I've said, it's somehow real in a way I haven't experienced in a foreign country. I have moments of great elation and of contentment, fewer of disgruntlement, but mostly I'm simply living, here instead of there. Does that make sense/sound foolish/as if I should be trying to wring more out of it?

**A**lthough changes were happening, there was work yet to do. I saw myself in the Ulanovs' *The Witch and the Clown*, where the twelve dancing princesses are described:

They call to mind ... women who have lived in a daze, in a frozen state, paradoxically both present and absent to others, involved in actions but detached as well, with their feelings and thoughts fully available neither to themselves nor to those closest ... (their) egos do not work effectively...

(The ego might be the brass section of the orchestra — certainly not the composer, nor the main body. Its strident claims are sometimes shocking, when it draws attention to itself; it wants what others have, and more. But if you can keep it busy and well-tuned and apply now and then the Brasso of praise, it goes on doing its job. Honoured but cultivated, not thwarted, it will survive and learn from its inevitable clashes with the egos of others.)

It is my ongoing job and will probably take me forever: to pay attention to the sneakier feelings and let them come up for air when they first appear. It's frustrating to find myself drumming up excitement over good news, for example — my own or others' — and having little spontaneous access to grief or anger. They tend to show their faces after the appropriate time is past,

which is confusing for everyone. But I'm on the lookout, at least, and the feeling tone of my life is a rainbow now compared with its former grey mistiness.

Having Sophie at Can Serrat for three days helps me break through a couple of barriers I might have taken longer to dismantle on my own. The first morning we put sandwiches, water and sunscreen in our packs and set off without a map but following the green sign just beyond the village: Monestir de Montserrat 4 Hr. We're out walking for seven hours and find later that we haven't come within sniff or chime of the monastery.

However we have picked our way beneath the mountain's limestone knobs via a red earth track rubbly with marbleised stones. We've seen the stone woman who dived into the hillside and stuck at the hips, her full thighs and rump framing the black rhomboid vulva that makes an open invitation. We've taken a short cut through the scrub and come out smelling of crushed thyme and rosemary. Faced with bifurcations in the trail we have taken the higher, more intriguing path — the kind that Kiwis and pigs favour and about the time we had hoped to be knelled into the basilica to hear the famed boys' *Escolania* sing, we are perched anxiously on a stony spit, dedicating ourselves to our cheese and onion sandwiches so that our next decision will be informed by bodies whose basic needs have been met.

The track, marked by splashes of yellow paint on the conglomerate, grows narrower and steeper; it looks unlikely to lead us where we mean to go. We decide to retrace our path — except that the pig-rootings we must have traversed half an hour before have erased it. We go back, forth, in a circle and finally down into a dry stream bed. *Follow the water course* is the piece of wisdom that comes to me. I've dismissed instantly *stay put*. We're almost out of water and no one knows where we are. But Sophie doesn't like this scramble through deep crispy-topped leaf mulch and flood debris. She can't help thinking of snakes. And I can't help thinking of how the next limestone

bowl this sometime river plunges through will be inaccessibly deep and sheer, and how we'll have to climb back up into the thrumming heat.

My daughter has a deft recall of features in the landscape even though we're seeing them now from their back sides. 'That egg — I took a photo from its base, of that hook on the next ridge.' We head for the egg, through the scratchy scrub — every plant here is hard or sharp, survivalists all — and over bare stone outcrops. Our mouths are dry with anxiety and thirst but lo and behold, soon we traverse a track, our track, and it shows us the way home.

So, no monastery, but we see rock climbers like blue insects inching up a sun-beaten face, Iberian wall lizards twitching away off the heated track, a Benoli's eagle overhead with the press of stone-warmed air beneath its wings. Its head is sunlit cream and we know it's watching us back. There's a thirteenth century church, more hot marbly track, olive groves, the village, water!, schnitzel left over from lunch, strawberries and a long foot-soak in a bucket of cold water with a cup of tea in the last sun.

After weeks of travelling, observing, listening, and trying to understand, it has been wonderful to be fully engaged, our bodies with the mountain. It doesn't matter that we didn't reach our goal. We found what we needed.

Frances rejoiced when I told her about the organic house that was taking shape in my head; it was made of ochre clay, its living room as round as a womb with a bulbous fireplace, spiral staircase and the bath set under glass and starlight, among ferns. It didn't seem to need any other rooms; it was mine alone.

However change doesn't come easily or graciously. I was visited and revisited by old catastrophising fears. Although my earlier tests had been clear and the initiating malaise was gone, I periodically developed other symptoms and would become convinced I was dying — of a brain tumour, of bowel cancer. The symptoms were evident enough and taken seriously enough to be checked out by specialists and machines, but as the 'talking cure' progressed, the dis-eases and the terrors found little purchase in the flow of new life.

I swung back and forth — into the new territory where I knew that everything I needed was within me, and back to the old sense that I had lost hold of everything that would keep me safe. Reading Jungian literature with its talk of symbol and alchemy, archetypes and individuation, I would be alternately flushed with hope and excitement on my hidden way, and struck by terror of the dark, the unknown, the unconscious — in the exploration of which Jung himself had almost lost his sanity.

The process itself is vaporous; you think you see something happening in the inner air but draw near and put out your hand — it can't be grasped. It's only much later you see what's changed. You seem, at least to yourself, to be stiller and less brittly reactive — but more responsive. There's been a spring thaw.

When Sophie goes back to France, I realise I've been here a week already. Spain is running through my fingers. I hope it'll leave them a little stained.

Another writer, Dorothy of Utah, has arrived. With a name like that, I expected mousey, late fifties, timid. But she is blonde, lean and tanned, my age, with an open face. She has recently been in New Zealand and I find her playing her red accordion on an upturned bucket in the almond orchard. She spells her name Dorothee, which evidently makes all the difference.

We go walking together up behind the *casa*, on the mountain's toes. Dorothee's pretty good at interrogation. She hasn't my deference when it comes to asking the direct question. She probably intuits that I won't be able to withhold the direct answer. As she says, we writers are like black market salesmen, or flashers. We open our coats to complete strangers if we realise we've got a story they want. What did I get from psychoanalysis is about the fourth question in. She's good. She got here very fast. But I don't have a tidy answer ready yet. This is what I'm writing about, I tell her, I'm finding out via the keyboard.

There's a discretely ruthless streak in the women here who have known themselves as creative types, perhaps from childhood. They've shunned certain

pursuits or attachments, for the sake of their art. They know how and when to say when. And they know how to glean. Together we have moments of sudden, intense intimacy and then nothing, possibly for days, but you may hear something a little smart or derogatory from one about another and you say to yourself, be careful how much you divulge to that one.

A Spanish spider: its body is a thistle seed, its long legs fine as down. You can't see its web at all — just the delicate plunge of its digesting parts towards an invisible disturbance, the resettling of its limbs, its pale barely-presence: such is the discretion of the toilet spider. We pretend we haven't been watching each other.

There's an illustration used in Christian salvation literature — of an abyss between the two land masses where humans and God respectively reside. Spanning it neatly is the cross of Christ.

Sometimes, pondering dreams, or before I began work for the day, I let pictures come to mind, often in answer to a question. When I asked, What is the piece that would unlock the puzzle of my life? I saw the ground open and up from the fissure, grinning and roaring, came a dragon that seized the cliff-edges in its claws and straddled the abyss. This dragon was red, hot and viscous as melted wax, 'furiously alive', as I wrote — and seemed to represent life's intensities and desires, all I had avoided. Blasphemously, it offered passage to the other side of *my* life. I had little idea what this meant in practice, but I began, imaginatively, to scabble up the nearest toenail.

I began to see situations of discomfort no longer as places to avoid, but as points of choice, as doorways. Not all had to be opened, but some, long-locked, could now be entered.

There's an insect here that I mistook for a hummingbird. It's furry and hovering, held by the blur of its wings beside the crimson Jupiter's Beard where it licks like an electric toothbrush over the flower head. Its proboscis

unfurls and plunges into the tiny trumpets. It has animal eyes, ringed with yellow, but it is so taken with its joyous task it doesn't mind my coming close. I see one in bellbird green, around its middle a mahogany band that is reflected in the iridescent shimmer of its wings. Its feathery feelers are night blue. Another is silver and grey.

Hot and cold: it's snowing in May: white fluff from the big tree above the garden swirls through our lunch, catching on roast artichoke hearts, calamari rings, lips of glasses, and drifts against walls. We inhale it, follow it with our eyes, take allopathic doses in our coffee. It makes some of us sneeze, others wheeze. We're the tableau inside a constantly shaken paperweight.

Just before bed I burn my thumb on the lid of the pot Dorothee used to fill her hot water bottle. It throbs. I poke a euro into the machine in the bathroom and down thunks a litre and a half of chilled water. I screw the lid tight and lay it beside me in bed with my thumb pressed to it — my comforting cold water bottle.

My first trip back to Barcelona is difficult. Later I can hardly bear to recall a day so disappointing — such slogging through the noisy streets, hunting for a Deutsche bank which, when I finally find it, is closed. After much consulting of the map I reach the Sagrada Familia. I'm holding my breath as I approach, knowing it will burst upon me as I turn the corner...

Oh. It's smaller than I thought, drabber in the dirty air, surrounded by cranes and scaffolding and buses. But I pay my eight euros (dearer than any art museum so far) and queue for the spires. For perhaps an hour and a half I climb winding steps as the crowd of fellow climbers allows, peer through chinks and crannies, weep a little at the white marble doves on the cypresses, the bare stone feet in ecstatic flight — lovely glimpses — but there are also scaffolding rods, workmen, yellow cranes — taller than the spires — manoeuvring concrete slabs, and when I return to earth the interior is filled with the sound of machinery ack-acking where one day (ever?) there will be blessed silence, invocations, song... From beyond the slimy green pond over

the road, I look back at the whole ‘melting’ edifice then resume walking ... and walking ... losing my way on the dirty, wearying streets, turning in a wide circle. I grow too tired, too hungry, can’t make sense of the map, can’t decide even how to buy food. I’m overwhelmed, disappointed with everything but chiefly with myself. I can’t *feel* the beauty of Gaudi’s strange houses, am lonely and brimming — I nose into an empty vehicle entrance on the busy *avinguda* and sob. Again. What a kid. I pull myself together, put on sunglasses and, just as I feel myself dissolving again, come upon an information centre where I can shut myself in the cubicle to pee and weep.

I keep thinking of what Moniek of Amsterdam said about meeting your resistances, one after the other, each a little deeper, until you come to the place where YOU are, and you can be settled with yourself.

Onwards, then! Perhaps one day I’ll reach it.

It’s so lovely to be back. Can Serrat grows more beautiful. I start to see it now. Its beauty is not startling, not glossed; it is what it is and takes longer to reveal itself, but tonight the mountain is sacred, home, the garden green and peaceful.

**D**reams and the writing kept providing me with clues and encouragements that I was on the right tack. In a waking dream, a builder’s apron appeared, pink and stiff in the newness of its leather. Its many pockets contained between them a single tool: a pen with its potent seed of ink.

I’d just begun to write the first novel of my *Watermark* trilogy where Zillah’s first visit to the West Coast is beset by storm and flood and extravagant events. I understood only later how I was charting there the topography and weather of my own psyche; the deluge was toppling old constructions, swinging the river onto a new course, while its characters were helping Zillah *and* me adjust to the wilderness.

Another day, another trip to the city. A rainstorm has marched through Barcelona, dissolving the haze, leaving the streets washed, rinsed, and propped up to dry in startling transformation. The flowering trees smell sweet; on apartment balconies profusions of potted plants swagger and gleam; from Montjuïc, the hills and the Sagrada Família are crisp and close. Outside the National Museum of Catalan Art where we've pored over Celtic wooden church decorations from the 13th century, we look down on a strange display in the old part of the city — spanking new Toyota SUVs drive up a steep ramp and down the other side. What grip! What style! As we walk along the marina, sea and sky turn pink. The white boats are crockery-clean and a huge bronze crayfish waves its claws at the restaurants lit in gaudy welcome — where its fleshier kin await their fate in fish tanks.

By next morning the haze has seeped back into the city, erasing its edges and the sea.

Barcelona is big and biggering, spilling out into the erstwhile countryside, suckering 'dormitory' towns for its commuters. The kilometres of city apartment blocks are for the rank and file. If you have the money you live somewhere like our local town of El Bruc, or you make a statement buying an old casa like Can Serrat.

Catalonian art at the National Gallery is a revelation. I've never seen, never heard of this astonishing twentieth-century work which asserts the quiet staunchness of the Catalan people and of their artists whose work was repressed under Franco. Here it burns from the walls, expressing the creative heat that you sense bubbles just beneath the undramatic surface of everything. The female statues lack the glamorous — and by comparison the eroticised — aura of French statuary. They seem to declare, I am what I am, in emphatic, comfortable womanhood.

Everyone is astonished by Gaudí's designs and yet they emulate, as he says, the patterns of nature. Something similar happens when you make a doodle that takes on its own organic entity; feminine forms are allowed to emerge and flourish with their softened edges, nooks, flowers, incidentals. In Gaudí's Park

Güell old kitchen crockery is used among the tiles, broken things are made part of the whole, trees incorporated and left where they stand, and people accommodated in the fullest sense. What should be so strange about that?



## 7

It's not easy to find things out here. Our host is an artist who is not getting enough time at her art. Sometimes she seethes with frustration but, as a new guest, it takes you a while to learn to read the vibes before you approach her.

—Petra, where can I find a fresh towel?

—What? I'm not on duty today.

[Still innocently] —I can't find Bonnie. Do you know what time she leaves, Petra?

[Mouth like a drawstringed purse] —She'd know better than I would.

—Petra, sorry to bother you, but I'm just wondering what happened to the clothes you said you'd wash with yours, because I need those trousers and I put them in the laundry two days ago and the door's been locked since.

[Not looking up] —Haven't washed them yet. There are too many people leaving, the dirty linen's piling up.

[Bitterly] —Petra, can you tell me when you're next open for questions?

[Smiling] —Oh, what do you want to know? [Jumping up] Sure, I'll go and get the pool timetable right now, and you can borrow my swimming cap.

One night at a tapas bar in Barcelona four of us women writers share family tales of incipient madness, alcoholism, suicide, credulity, extreme intelligence, mafia connections, and Jewishness with all that implied in the last century. Well, three of them do. I listen. My story might be a little bland custard in a pale bowl.

What's intriguing is that each of us has consciously done the psychological work that got us to this table, to the point where we take our writing seriously enough and are able, more often than not, to leave behind neurotic or sabotaging patterns of behaviour in order to produce rich and consistently deepening work.

We're not so determined when it comes to dancing. We want to; it seems important to dance in Spain, even though some of us haven't boogied seriously in decades. When we get up from our table, the discos, cheek-by-jowl at the waterfront, are just coming to life. From each wide entrance pumping out its own decibels, young men solicit girls passing by, eager to set them dancing so that, as in a game of chain tag, they'll draw others in and before you know it, hey, see who's having the most fun. But as we scan, we're not convinced it's our kind of fun after all: easing our jaded, fading midnight selves among lithe blondes with tight, golden tummies, and lycra-clad sailors gyrating around bar-top poles. Anyway, no one's soliciting for character, psychological chutzpah and tired hair in *their* club.

At two a.m. on the way home from the city, we drive through a potato. Sure smells like it. Mohammed tells us the factory is close by where they boil up the potatoes, mash, dry and bag them: hundreds of tons are converted into thousands of ounces of flakes. There's obviously a market for the condensed version, but Catalanian potatoes are perfect as they are: big red-skinned obelisks which, when baked, have yellow melting hearts whose taste is essence of spud.

**O**n my inner screen a red-haired lioness of a woman appeared, green-eyed and fanged. She didn't know the meaning of meek or dutiful. 'Outward community,' writes Thomas Moore in *The Care of the Soul*,

flourishes when we are in touch with the inner persons who crowd our dreams and waking thoughts... To admit who I am is to admit these people into life, so that the inner community serves as a start for a sense of belonging in life.

I sought out this feline woman sometimes when I didn't know my own mind. She always knew emphatically what she wanted and whom she favoured, and intended that I be among others on equal terms and not solely on theirs, as I'd made a habit. She wouldn't tolerate me wimping out or dithering. I didn't always want her around,

Frances discussed with me the compensatory nature of dreams. One might be over-optimistic about a situation, she said, and have a dream expressing awful pessimism. I dreamt I was looking from a white bedroom (taking an innocent view, perhaps) onto a storm-trammelled beach (where life was seen as dangerous and eroding). When in a dream I stared in a distorting mirror, I gained divergent impressions of myself — bruisingly voluptuous and flimsily frumpy. Reality, says psychoanalysis, is forged between the two — between the extremes with which we judge and measure ourselves and the world.

One of Jung's patients expressed an ideal that I tried when I could to observe:

By keeping quiet, repressing nothing, remaining attentive, and by accepting reality — taking things as they are, not as I want them to be — by doing all this, unusual knowledge has come to me, and unusual powers as well ... it is only by accepting [things] that one can assume an attitude towards them.

It was a long, slow process, to give up judging and categorising my own and others' responses and behaviour into bad, good, better or worse, but I was able

to write at the end of the first year seeing Frances, 'I seem to travel through emotions now, instead of getting stuck in them; I'm able to acknowledge and note them, but they don't last as long as they used to.' Without my rigid frameworks, without so many shoulds and oughts I was enjoying a more fluid existence.

All night, lightning flashes through the skylight and thunder cracks its head on the mountain. I notice, because my laptop plug stops glowing, that the power goes off some time in the night, that it comes back on, then by six is off again. Six is when I get up because we're going to France for lunch, Dorothee and I. We need a candle to light the way to the bathroom which receives no natural light. At least we can heat water on the gas ring for a cup of tea.

I've been woken intermittently in the night, not only by the storm but also by the last of the students who are leaving today. They've traipsed about, stoned, talking immoderately and laughing. When I go in to their room to say good-bye at seven, they show unprecedented and indiscriminate affection.

Dorothee has hired a small submarine in which we plough for three hours through astonishing quantities of rain into France where, in the charming seaside town of Collioure, her German uncle shouts us splendid *fruits du mer*, *tartine*, cheeses and old wines. Rain leaps from the guttering and beyond the stacked beach chairs, boats and debris wash about in the bay.

Moniek is going back to Amsterdam. We line up in a row for hugs and good-byes. Turning away, she wails, 'My heart is breaking!' She opens the car door to get in, and cackles, '*Just for a minute.*' She pumps the air — 'I get to leave!'

Up the back in a dry stream bed one hot afternoon I find a low shrub with tiny fragrant white flowers hung about with bees. They have gold legs, furry thoraxes, and look friendly in spite of their wasp-stripes. They're unperturbed when I pull them towards me; some clamber about; some look as if they've fallen asleep on the job. It occurs to me they're drunk.

Early in the next year I began to strain at the traces, wanting to escape from nursing but still unsure if that was wishful thinking, or a deeper conviction. One night I had to call on an extra doctor, but it was hard to decide which one. In a Hobson's choice, I phoned the only one, the wrong one. Pleasantly enough, she agreed to come, but arrived with guns blazing. How dare I call her when the other should have been called first; like a terrier she dug in and came at me yapping, on and on, until I snapped and let her have it. With consternation and delight, I heard my own voice hammering back at her. I wasn't buckling, I was growing, full of old rage and indignation. It was a stand-off, each of us agreeing in the end that we'd be having words with the manager. I was shocked and elated.

A few days later, as I grovelled under a doctor's desk, scratching up tongue depressors and waxy earpieces that had missed the rubbish bin, I thought, 'Time's nearly up for this lark.'

I resigned from the hospice's 'casual' list — work towards which I was anxiously compelled, but to go on doing it well required extra training time for which I wasn't willing to give up writing. Not knowing how better to earn money, I continued at the emergency centre and sometimes at a local health centre.

Church, when I went back after a long absence, I found discomfiting and dismaying. The old injunctions and reiterations washed over me. What, truly, were the people around me thinking and feeling? I tried and failed to engage with what was going on. I clung to the name of Yahweh: I am that I am. Let God go on being God and I'd get on with finding out who I was.

Spain is teaching me about paths. How to be on them, what to do when you lose them. When I first walked into the hills here, I panicked easily. I was still busy-headed, and a little anxious about snakes, about whom I might meet out there, about getting lost. Small tracks petered out and I'd find myself in

blackberry, holly, or a snagging vine like bush lawyer but with deceptive heart-shaped leaves. With my pulse ga-donging round my ears, I'd push on, only to be spun back by hooks in the shins, or flummoxed by gorse. Bush-bashing hurt and even if I found a track, soon I was lost again.

A couple of weeks later, I find myself travelling differently — I'm slower and quietly scanning. I still get lost in the tangle of little paths but I'm no longer being snagged or stabbed. If you keep looking, there's always another groove in the undergrowth, possibly just a wild pig's night track to the nearest compost heap, but distinct enough for someone who isn't in a hurry to use to keep moving forwards, and a small track sooner or later meets a larger.

I have the lesson underscored the day I climb San Jeroni, the highest peak on the Montserrat massif. For two hours I follow the well-marked track to the old St Joan monastery which is empty now, its three storeys and wide stairway vandalised, their flagstone floors shattered and sagging. The main room, with its windows busted open onto the huge view towards Barcelona, is strewn with steel kitchen units. I can't tell if they're fridges, freezers or bain maries — and certainly not how they got here with no road in sight — but there are half a dozen on their sides on a floor that is stippled with clots of dirty toilet paper. I *pick* my way through and out the other side — which lets onto a tiny ledge running around the rock face. I hang onto the rusted piece of handrail, avoid looking down, and creep. I pass a pool of fresh water in a hole like a pizza oven. Ahead, a shredded set of steps runs up a cleft between two pinnacles. It looks dicey; I'll go back through the building...

A dialogue starts up in my head:

—That's right. Don't take risks; nobody knows you're here.

—But when the path appears ahead of you, you should take it.

—Hardly a path. It's disintegrating.

—A path nonetheless. As long as it's there, take it.

I take it. Its brick steps were made for small and nimble monks' feet. I have to turn mine sideways to sneak between the megaliths. On the other side, the path doubles back through trees then crests a hill to reveal, between rocks far below, the rooftops and cypresses of the main monastery. I tread cautiously

on down — till I hear voices — and find myself just above a paved track. I step onto it as two young men come by, wound about with climbing ropes. ‘Is this the path to San Jeroni?’ I ask. ‘The only one.’ ‘Are you climbing here?’ They point to an impossibly sheer aiguille just up ahead. ‘Paradise,’ they say.

From here on the path is wide, and peopled this Saturday with fathers and sons, husbands and wives, and large groups of boys. I’m the only woman I’ve seen going about on her own on the country tracks and roads. The mountain’s highest peak at almost twelve hundred metres is attained via a long flight of steps, and crowned by a concrete platform set about with handrails. You couldn’t miss it if you tried. But there’s an adjacent peaklet that I can’t resist scrambling up; it has just a couple of rusting iron standards stuck in the rock. I creep to the farthest one and cling, crouched, to look down the giddy fall to a dim place so far below it might be the mountain’s ankle.

When I stopped to squat in the bushes on the way up, I noticed a hand-painted sign saying Vinya Nova, a restaurant at the base of the mountain, half an hour’s walk from Can Serrat. Coming down, I decide to follow it, and hope it’s not marking one of those difficult, petering routes. After about half an hour when I see not another soul, the track twists trickily on a ridge and I find myself heading back into the mountain, following red, instead of white splashes of paint. I backtrack and run in puppy circles, sniffing and anxious. Then an angel appears, in the white shirt that angels wear. I pant and yap happily at him, and he shows me by example where to rejoin the white path. He stops once, to check I’m going where I mean to, and again to ask if I have a car at the bottom (‘No, I walked here,’ is my innocent reply), then he ploughs on and is soon well ahead.

Before long I hear a phone ring. My angel is talking in Catalan on his cell, straddling the path. I halt, waiting for him to move aside, surely he can see me. He can but he doesn’t. I shuffle in the stones. Nothing. ‘Excuse me,’ I say and he steps reluctantly back so I can pass. His eyes flick over me. Soon he passes me again. Soon the phone rings again. We play the passing game, and after his conversation, he overtakes once more. I recall two painted buskers on Las Ramblas in Barcelona: white angel plays red devil at chess. Who’s winning

in this guy? He's big and fit, about forty, and the next time he slows, I'm running through my options. I'm not in the mood for karate — anyway, I haven't got up to sparring yet. My legs are tired and I turned my ankle earlier; I couldn't run if I tried on this steep, rubbly path — up or down. A full bladder doesn't help the mix. He's just in front of me again. I slow until he's turned a corner, then walk back up a few metres until I'm well enough hidden to pee.

As I carry on down, I hear a chink, chink from the rocks above the track. When the view is clear of trees, I pick out climbers on a face, well within shouting distance. The man's seen me looking up. He doesn't bother stopping again. Down by the restaurant, he is milling about in the car park, watching me. I give him a nonchalant wave and stride away over the olive orchard towards home.

I was writing and had no intention of stopping but I was still trying out the guise of 'writer'. I was asked to take part in a writers' festival — the schools' part — to chair a session with three well-known men, then share a book-signing session. However minor, this was a role that not long before I could only have dreamt up in a wild moment, this being counted as a writer among writers. Outwardly I was calm enough. Inwardly I was keyed-up and overwrought. On the first day I smashed off someone's tail light, trying to park. I locked my keys in the car, had to walk home for the spares, was issued a parking ticket meanwhile. With the other writers whom I didn't know, I felt discombobulated, and had strange, jarring conversations. Next day I backed the car with a horrible crunch up onto a concrete bollard, and had to hail some passing students to help lift it off. I was a touch unhinged, and dangerous. I felt like the inflated plastic muscle man I saw in a *Mad* magazine. The public role had blown me up, making me feel huge and odd. Back at home, I consoled myself in a journal: 'We are all capable *and* awkward, charming *and* cold, bold *and* scared, remarkable *and* ordinary' — but in the sense I had of myself I was often sliding wildly between the extremes.

This was the in-between place where I was no longer Penny, but not yet Penelope. Often I felt melted down, not yet re-formed, my truth the wafer-crust I walked on over another reality which was chaos. I suffered bursts of giddiness, weakness and nausea but understood that, again, the symptoms pointed the way — they were the way — through the chinks in my own defences.

Already I'm halfway through my stay at Can Serrat. I've found no glamour here, no romance. Exotic and erotic are close, a friend points out in an email. Has the experience been either of those things?

No, Spain is about ordinary real life — happening in Spain: getting along with people, or not; negotiating my own boundaries, or failing to; sometimes spilling too exuberantly to another a concept or idea I'm still coming to in myself. A practical example is the compost heap. It irks me that there isn't one when we're tipping so much food into the rubbish bin. I discuss it with the newly arrived, voluble Pascal who is all enthusiasm for building one. But immediately I realise that we have very different ideas of what constitutes a compost heap, and of how much energy or money should be put into it.

As it turns out, during his brief stay, Dorothee harnesses the attention of this multi-talented, Majorcan-based, Swiss-French acupuncturist with the photographic memory, getting him to translate for her a seventeenth-century French text concerning the sensual effects of music on the human body.

I dream of gifts. One I'm especially happy to receive, wrapped in brown paper with my name penned on, is the size of two closed fists. It's like the gift of this place — which hasn't the shape or content I expected. It's helping me let go of illusions and unhelpful fantasies. There is no erotic exoticism. There's no watchful man across the courtyard, waiting for me to turn up, no startling beauty or instant recognition. There's no thrumming guitar here in Spain; no timid, then convinced, then passionate dance. There's no dance as I usually

conceive of it. This is the gift: myself, care of this address; here and now in my own two hands. I want to pay attention.



## 8

What in me is dark  
Illumine

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, line 22

After the reserve and sometimes haughtiness of the French, so sleek and *mince*, I find Catalonians refreshingly varieform (and hooray, the women have hips and thighs; I can find trousers here that fit). A busload of them looks pretty much like a busload of New Zealanders. But they sound like a busload of mutual friends. Conversation on the El Bruc to city run flashes up and down the aisles; laughter draws in those of us bereft of language.

One afternoon a team of soccer players climbs aboard — boys of about fifteen. The first can't contain himself. He stands up front, stalling the queue as he addresses the entire bus in the slithering, singing tones of Catalan. He looks so happy, so high on life, it's tempting to suspect ADD. This could be a long, noisy trip. But when he's finished he sits down beside his companion and takes on the sober, intent bearing of intimate, listening friend. I haven't seen a truly sullen-looking teenager here. They seem, from observation, able to express freely what they need to — not in the overexcitable way that's ascribed stereotypically to Latins, but letting impulses pass through them, unrestrained.

For example, I notice a young woman at a bus stop. There's a loud bang; she jumps and cries out; hands and mouth fly open. I heard the bang too; it gave me a fright but I am trained — by my upbringing? my culture? my own inhibiting self? — to absorb the noise in my body and to give away nothing.

On the street and at public gatherings, fathers play with their daughters' hair, take sons on their laps — even when the daughter or son is no longer entirely child, and kiss the babies in their friends' arms. I am moved to see it, imagining how the emotional texture of a child might be enriched if a father feels free to massage his or her shoulders in an idle moment, to make plain his admiration, to hug the child. But if no one did that for a father when he was a boy, it's terribly hard for him to change the pattern.

I gave thought to the old silences, and the powerlessness I'd felt as a child to change the situations imposed on me, for example the primary school teacher locking onto me for his own repetitive, stymied, sexual acting-out. Silence bred silence. When you didn't talk about what mattered to you, nor did you know where it fit in the wider picture. When baffling things happened, you couldn't name or digest them, so they stuck there, lumpen, obscure anomalies that yet left their mark on you.

I dreamed that a young mother came and hung her children's wet coats on the backs of my chairs. I wrote that I seemed, myself, to be strung out like a clothes line, providing space for the people and activities that filled my life — but still waiting for the main event which seemed far off, like a mirage.

I was surprised, writing *Watermark*, when a man meeting Zillah for the first time summed her up: lady-in-waiting. She responded with indignation, then comprehension. Ouch. I let it stand.

## EMAIL:

You wondered what I was doing as you wrote. I was out walking under the mountain, sitting down beneath a pine tree to see what insects might appear. In fact just a shiny slim green beetle that seemed to like my shirt and had

hitched a ride from the house. Then I came back for the late lunch — today roast artichoke hearts and cannelloni filled with — some say fish, some say pork — something that once ran or swam or possibly flew but got caught and chemically altered and pushed into a tube of pasta, oh dear. There were also pale lettuce and huge potatoes. Helped down with sunwarmed wine and, if we but knew it, the last of the water.

Tonight there is no running water so the dishes are piled and toppling over the benches and no one who can avoid doing so is using the toilet. We hear that up in town contractors have chopped through a pipe on the main street. I clean my teeth under a trickle of hot and wipe my feet with a face-cleansing towellette. Early bed seems a sensible option and when we wake up we will find out what else has happened.

In the morning it's chaotic downstairs. Still no water. The town has been connected back up but all the sludge ran down to the last property — ours — and the pipes are clogged. I make tea with bottled water but find back in my room that a builder with power tools is fixing the adjacent bedroom. Instead of working, I settle for a long phone call home, and a walk to the village's roadside cafe with Vonnie. We agree it's just about as rewarding to talk about writing as to do it, especially when the coffee and custardy croissants are this good.

As a nurse and a mother I'd become pragmatic, responsible, and good at attending to the surface details. Now I tended to approach fiction writing as simply another (albeit very rewarding) practice. When I wrote it was as though one hand hid what the other produced, and I made little connection between the stories and my inner world. I was surprised when Frances described me as creative. She said that this process we were engaged in together — attending to dreams, memories and feelings — helped a person hang out in the place where

creativity arises. The energy we usually *put out* in our jobs and activities, is the energy the writer needs to *take inwards*.

It took a while to sink in, the role of the imagination (which I'd considered a curious and optional extra; a childhood relic and means of escape from the real) — not simply to create fiction, but to lay out the ground ahead; to realise new ways of being, both in a story's characters, and in one's own life. To go forward truthfully requires more courage than you think you have. It's one thing to write a difficult scene — you tell yourself you can erase it before publication — but usually those are the very scenes you may not delete if you are to enlarge your boundaries. Hidden matters come to light and demand to be named. Then you must stand by them.

In fiction you enter new countries, you wrestle with situations and people you never thought you wanted to meet, but the stories insist, then in real life it starts to happen: you enter new countries. You're made to wrestle with situations and people you never thought you wanted to meet but your soul — if you believe in a soul — has insisted.

I loved my characters in *Watermark*: Hep and Joss, 'natives' of the West Coast bush, animated, animating figures moving about in my self via the story I worked on. I was perturbed by some of their behaviour, by their ritual in the muddy creek, but it seemed necessary to give outward form to protagonist Zillah's initiation into her own new territories.

I attended a conference on Psyche and the Arts. The young Māori woman speaker made the hairs stand on my neck when she said, of the Māori-Pakeha relationship, stamping her foot for emphasis, 'It's no coincidence that the two *tau iwi* (travelling people) landed on this one piece of land; our destinies are entwined.' And it was borne in on me that, as in the culture, so in the psyche; nothing need be seen as accidental as I gathered up the parts of my life. Synthesising and amalgamating was the way forward — the *good* way — for this time.

It seemed, from observation of my dreams, writing, and daily reality, that I was drawing closer to ‘the native’, to what was instinctive in me, and ignored at my peril. But Frances pointed out how inclined I was still to ‘bite off the feelings’ — snuffing them out before I fully identified their source or purpose.

We talked of embers, darkness, shadow — and I recalled as a child, poring over Ronald Searle’s caricatured St Trinians girls in all their lascivious, cruel witchiness. How terrifying I had found them. What if one of them were to turn up in a novel of mine? Frances asked. Horrors. But the seed was sown, and in the fullness of time, in *Dark*, Flea appeared — sharp, rancorous, self-serving — Zillah’s other shadow. Or my own. But at first I balked at bringing in a girl who was, as I wrote then, ‘foul-mouthed, trashy, soiled goods’.

Up in the orchard I find an upturned plastic bin where I can sit and watch ants race along the track worn by their earnest scurrying. They hurry forth from the colony, and stagger back wielding grains, insect bodies and leaf lances that snag on overhanging grass, forcing about-turns, sideways manoeuvring and phenomenal perseverance. When they have something really big to manage — a beetle — several seem to be working together, but after watching a bit, you realise they’re scrapping over it, until one takes possession by mischance — falling with the carcass right off the track. Ant hauls its booty back up over grit the size of boulders, and under ‘branches’ of grass. There are setbacks and scuffles but such determination! And what’s the reward, you wonder. Applause? The first bite at the winter feast? Congratulatory high fives from the oncoming line of fellow ants?

We at Can Serrat are a colony of sorts but our goals are not primarily communal. Yes, we’ll do what we need to to create a harmonious living arrangement, and yes, we want to enjoy one another’s company — to make friends, and most seem not averse to the possibility of lovers — but we artists and writers are solitary creatures, too. We hoard up our own treasures in our hearts, minds and notebooks. We are affable until our own power to choose is threatened. For some of us, particularly for mothers, this ‘power’ has been

hard won, wrestled back and untangled from the Public Property Box of family life. For others who have known their creative calling from infancy and have not tried to mix it in with child-rearing or other largely nurturing roles, the right to choose is warp and weft of their personality. The fact is that by forty or fifty years of age most of the women here have formidably strong wills. Some are just better at disguising it.

**I**t dawned on me slowly how conventional or unconsidered activities can ransack and whip away what they will of a woman's potency; she lets her energies be dissipated, and herself used up rather than valued for what she might uniquely bring forth. It's not easy to reset the boundaries, to pare back commitments and exempt herself from the joining of groups, from playing hostess, helper, fixer, nurse — lady-in-waiting. To write means wresting time away from collective purposes, and making space in herself for the work's incubation and growth.

I hurt people dear to me in my sometimes-awkward setting up of limits — with the perfunctory announcement of a plan for self-preservation that had been brewing silently in me for a while. 'Oh, did I say, I'm going to sleep downstairs this week?'

My second and third novels were accepted for publication. 'Twins!' shrieked dear friend Pam. I enjoyed the quietly growing validation 'out there' of what went on within.

I went on tour with two of the country's brightest young novelists. I was first anxious, then delighted at how merrily we got along. When they locked heads, though, talking 'lit crit' as if in native tongue, I shrank away and had to give myself a talking to. I had reason to mistrust my intellectual development, but knew that my path as a writer, via the mud of the rough self, was yet valid. I was a wobbly doll — easily knocked aslant but, weighted at the base, almost impossible to overturn.

I've said I'll climb the mountain with Mari-Lou, as far as the monastery. She's a petite, vivacious city 'girl', a poet with flame-coloured hair, thoroughbred feet and red-painted toenails. Beside her, I'm a peasant, but peasants are good on hills. As soon as we leave the gravel road and flat orchards for the steepening rock trail, Mari-Lou starts her stopping — to take off a top; drink water; take photos; apply sunscreen; change into shorts; exclaim. I'm simmering with impatience. My legs want to stride out; my blood doesn't need glucose top-ups every half hour. Like the lizards we hear darting into the scrub as we pass, I find this late spring heat invigorating. But it's old stuff raising its head, too. There's a competitive and independent streak in me that I thought I'd subdued. Back home I've enjoyed Sunday walks with friends at the kind of leisurely pace that allows for conversations to grow rich and as memorable as the landscape we're traversing. But at Can Serrat I've noticed my child-self reasserting itself. It's been like those long summer holidays when you got up each morning and the entire day was yours to while away. I haven't enjoyed this kind of freedom since years before I married; now I feel myself slipping effortlessly into that way of being. I put on sandals, splash my face with water and step into the day to go where I will, at my own pace.

Now, much as I like her, and appreciate her sensuous delight in the outing, Mari-Lou's presence is inhibiting. I feel responsible for her and hate waiting and dithering about. Nonetheless, being up high is always exhilarating, and we both revel in that. In three and a half hours we're there (although it would have taken me an hour less on my own, I am churlish enough to reckon).

When we've checked out the church — packed to the gun's with tourists — and heard the boys sing into their muffling effect, Mari-Lou suggests we catch the funicular down the mountain. I am bursting with frustration and say in a wobbly voice, no, that I'm walking home, am happy to do it alone, hoping she'll catch a hint. She reads into my tone fragility over the problem at home that I'd mentioned to her earlier.

We set out together, taking a steeper gully rubbly with marbles. It's slow going for both of us and I'm settling down by the time we reach the town at the bottom. I agree to a beer, but when Mari-Lou talks of digging in here for a meal, then catching a taxi, I'm offering to leave her again. However she's as tenacious as she is wilful. She sticks with me for the last flat haul where she also takes off her boots, puts them back on, takes them off, tries jandals, puts the boots on again when we have to bash through scrub...

'We walked the mountain, eighteen, maybe nineteen kilometres!' she crows to anyone within hearing, as we descend from the orchard.

If I imagined that, like a fish escaping the net, I'd swum into a new freedom, now and then it would seem that the filaments of internalised Christian argument were still arrayed about me, and running every way my mind ran. What if I'd taken the wrong course? What if I'd been lured into my own sinful heart and was not really swimming, but drowning?

Fact, faith, feeling. The old evangelical train chugged along in that order. With the Bible the engine of fact, and faith in it the leading carriage, you were on track. Flibbertygibbet feelings were coupled on behind, where, over time, they would settle into line — but they were in no way to be relied upon.

Now I was busy deconstructing the train. In the new heretical process I learned to find and trust my feelings and long-neglected murmurs of intuition, to have faith in them. To sort out my own facts.

Newcomers: Eion, a thirty-year-old artist from Dublin — a wiry tea-drinker with a dry wit; another Scandinavian artist with her hair wound up on top and blue, blue eyes is called Heidi, and comes straight off the pages of the illustrated version. Also, the Norwegian translator of a famous writer has joined us for a few days. 'Noisy and macho,' one writer pronounces him, but on first meetings I find him scurryingly diffident. He resembles photos of the

handsome writer. Over lunch there's a chance to hear him speak — in brash outbursts of language. YES INDEED! AND HOW IS THE WRITING TODAY?! PASS THE POTATOES, IF YOU PLEASE! Owen Meany? Or a ferocious cover for debilitating shyness?

After lunch I walk across orchards and through scrub, heading for a gap in the mountain's chain of rock. As usual, there's no one to be seen, but a big yellow helicopter is flying to the cliff and back my way, there and back again. Now it roars overhead and, turning, sweeps straight at me, making dust and leaves erupt from the ground. This is too like a movie. What could they possibly suspect me of? My heart is rotor blades, hammering.

The chopper stops well short; people spill out and they seem to be tending someone. A van comes tearing along the farm track, lights flashing. It's blood-red: surely not the ambulance?

Walking deeper into the gully, where the helicopter had hovered, I see two ropes dangling empty against the rock face. Across the way and undeterred, other climbers call to each other, exclaim, swear — whatever it takes to flinch their way up to the next minute hold.

When I get back I've been gone perhaps three hours but no one's noticed my absence.

We are worried, though, about the Irish poet. He hasn't appeared for the meal. No one's talked with him in ages, and he's been spending most days immobilised on his bed. There's no reply from his room. Where is he? His lovely poems are full of rain and Irish gloom. Early this morning I sneaked past him in the common bathroom where he was doing his ablutions — pretending not to see him, as I like others to pretend when I'm at the mirror with my toothbrush. But what if he took offence which, added to other offences and the relentless ache in his back, has driven him to — ? With a gaggle of anxious, delighted women urging me on (I *was* a nurse; I should cope with whatever I find), I go up to his bedroom and knock. Nothing. 'Hello?' Silence. Heart in mouth, I open the door. Phew. Nobody — just the musty, musky smell of a room too long inhabited by clothes too long inhabited. I check under the bed, just in case.

Frances was excited. I'd related the dream of a black-haired, four-winged woman on a poster in a room set aside for women's rituals. I'd crawled in there and whacked the poster with the blue paddle provided for the job. This sounded, she said, as if I was approaching an image of 'the Self' — crudely, like an infant wielding its first spoon. She encouraged me to draw the figure and sit with it. Made apparent in crayon and paint, this woman, named in the dream as Black Spider Woman, was electric blue and feathered, with an impartial, all-seeing gaze.

Wary as I now was over anything smacking of religiosity, I nevertheless found that when distressed I could if I wished shut my eyes and back in amongst the soft feathers beneath her breast, to catch my breath and my courage.

One day, heading for Barcelona, I board the wrong bus, the curly bus. It takes me a while to twig because I'm engrossed in my book, and it's only after an hour and a half that I realise we're back at the mountain. I jump out in Esparraguera, half inclined to flag my trip to the city, but once I've lit a candle at the local church for a friend in trouble, checked out the shop selling fifty lime-green dresses, and flashed my bus timetable at the chemist and her customers, someone has taken me under her wing and I'm back on track. We cross the road to stand companionably, side by side, at the bus stop.

Ah, the patient waiting of the locals. They arrive before time and settle in. Most stand and stare into their own thoughts. No one fidgets or frets; only I do. Then, getting off the bus, they're ready well beforehand, books tucked away, coats folded — there's no last-minute omigawd-we're-here rush.

Now, we let two or three buses depart without us then, suddenly, here's ours and there's a hubbub of discussion with the driver — about me. Come, come, my keeper indicates but no! you don't pay. I smile, shrug, say *gracias* and find my seat. But not for long. Come, come, get off here; she waves me

after her. We're at the other end of the main street. But I want Barcelona. She shakes her head in frustration. It's easier just to pinch my sleeve and pull me — down off this bus, and up onto the next. This time I get to pay.

Because the day started inauspiciously, the good fairy takes pity and whisks me into shopping zen. This happens to me perhaps every ten years and there's nothing for it but to buy my way out. Pretty gifts suggest themselves and I say yes; the one pair of trousers I try on has been measured for me by the tailor of Gloucester; the beggar who sidles up at the lights is selling the *pañuelos* I need for a nose drip (while the next whining beside me at the ATM sees my card rejected and gives it up). In Happy Books I photograph a friend's novel in Spanish translation — shelved erroneously but comfortably between Steinbeck and Stendahl, and buy the English version of *Don Quixote*. When I wilt, just there, beckoning, is the one shop in Europe, I think, that makes tea with *leaves*, in a ceramic *teapot* with a *lid*, to be poured into a *generous* fine china cup with *cold* milk.

I'm the woman in the corner, bags at her feet, smiling benignly over her teacup.

I sighed as I walked each week up Frances's concrete path, past the roses and marigolds, and again as I stood beside the giant gumboots on the doorstep and rang the bell, looking away over the kowhai to the hills beyond. The green door opened and we murmured our hellos and I sighed as I passed through the dim hallway with its familiar smells, its mottled cat. I said to myself, here we go again, as I entered the room and pulled my chair back two centimetres and sat and stared at the bars of the heater. I glanced at her, then fixed on the spindly tree in the window behind her. Oh, hell, now what?



## 9

Our real lives hold within them our royal lives  
Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*

With a bottle of wine and a bowl of olives between us, we pore over a brochure that turned up at the residence, advertising — as far as we can decode the Catalan — a ‘terribly sensual’ dance performance along in Esparraguera. We’re in the mood, all right. Mari-Lou, Dorothee and I take the bus and make vague arrangements for a pick-up afterwards.

In the theatre La Passió we are swept away — from each other, from ourselves — into the heart of a passionate dialogue: four dancers enact a marriage — its desire and distractions, its transitions, infidelities, follies, reconciliations; its patience, impatience, forgiveness, old age, and death. Two dancers our age simmer, roil and eddy terribly sensuously over bed, sofa and the ambiguous safety of the kitchen table; the younger two, a superbly androgynous pairing, enact the life force, compulsions and complexes of the soul with all their potent inevitability, and attendant grace.

When it’s over, we clap until our hands feel bruised.

Dazed still, at having stumbled across such exquisite evocation of our own lovely, difficult, paradoxical relationships, we wander into town and sit at an outside café. Whisky seems called for. The waiter brings tall glasses with ice, and the bottle. He pours ... singles ... no, doubles ... no, triples ... 'Stop!'

We talk about marriage, partnerships, soulmates — about those who will always be home base, for whom we're home base in return — if we're lucky — no matter what else befalls us.

I received a writing grant that meant I could drop nursing over the summer — then found out I'd been awarded the children's writing fellowship at the Dunedin College of Education, for six months in 2001, starting in April. I resigned my jobs.

Occasionally I would wonder if nursing was a rich strand in my life that I'd surrendered too readily, but in fact I didn't miss it. I drove past my former work places with, variously, relief, sadness and anxious memories, but *no regrets*.

Sometimes I had the fleeting notion that everything was convention except this thing which sprang up. This writing.

We have to call Petra for a ride home from Esparraguera. She's been drinking so she gets her visitor to drive the battered Can Serrat van. He and his friends are heading to the first big disco of the season at the Bora Bora Hotel, 'just up the hill' from the residence. It's late but we haven't danced yet in Spain and we want to. 'Okay, we'll come.' We collect another three guys and squeeze up in the van for the erratic, lurching drive. We have to park and walk the last half kilometre along a grassy track. As there is only a wan moon, someone flicks a torch back and forth.

Uh-oh. The queue. It's two in the morning but the dance is just warming up and thousands of Barcelona kids the age of mine mill on the hillside above the throbbing bowl of noise. We walk the hundred metres to the back of the

line. I've climbed the mountain today, and this evening have viscerally, imaginatively, revisited the recent half of my life. We were already a little nutty from the whisky when one of the women passed around her pipe for a toke before we set out. Now I'm still coughing from my single inhalation, footsore, eye-sore, bone-tired and the queue's merely creeping. Even if we hadn't given our systems a workout already, it'd feel like body-abuse to go deeper into the amped-up noise and jostle.

We agree to end our day here. We break ranks and walk the two kilometres home, glad for the brief experience, glad we know when to say 'enough'. Linking arms, we sing a little in the empty streets. It's three in the morning but there's a bird somewhere up in the trees, singing back.

A handful of times I went back to church, just to check the temperature, to see if I'd been too hasty in leaving. One time, as we entered, we were each given a pink cardboard body part which the speaker referred to in his address, before asking us to get into groups to discuss what it meant to be part of the body of Christ. We fingered the clean little legs, arms, ears; but where were the scrotum, breasts, liver? If I had any part in this collection, I identified with some unmentionable tract of bowel, digesting dark, untalked-of things.

In *Dark*, which I was writing at the time, Joss was lost in the murk of his disturbed psyche, but giving expression to primitive, and ultimately revivifying, impulses. Protagonist Zillah, as his helper, was struggling to walk the trembling ground between retreat and the chaos that his breakdown represented.

Life has gone on dealing tricky cards at Can Serrat: to the newcomer, Alf from California, an artist in his late sixties, missing luggage. There's been no word of it from the airline for two days now. To the Irish poet, ongoing, debilitating back pain. To the other three women here, at six yesterday morning, a young local man forcing their doors, pulling back sheets and

begging for sex. It was the first night I hadn't locked my door so I wonder if I dealt with him in my sleep or if my angel stung him with a wing-tip as he reached for the handle. The young man was drunk and we'd met him earlier in the night, on the way to the disco-that-didn't. Later in the morning the police were called and charges are to be laid.

I've been struggling to approve — no, not struggling, although I understand it — the women's response. Yes, it was a horrible experience for each of them, and they will have to work out how to feel safe again in their own rooms. Now the big main doors will be bolted at night. But the indignation! The horror at what might have been!

However we're not in America now. Nor are we any longer children. I know no one was 'asking for it' or anything remotely resembling it. But no one mentions the culpability of women from sexually emancipated countries, living in an art centre where our predecessors have been adventurous, who think they can live as at home, only having more fun than at home, and not be now and then misconstrued. We choose to be here without our men or children; we wish to walk alone in the hills; or to attend a disco at two a.m. and immerse ourselves for a couple of hours in that boiling hormonal soup then come home to our own little beds (— unless of course we meet *him* there, then we'll go to his).

I don't know enough about Spanish sexual mores to speculate on the constraints a man accepts in a small town like El Bruc, but his imaginative picture of the American woman — or the New Zealander — may be considerably more lurid than the one he allows for the women he meets each day and has known from childhood. And when that 'bad' already-drunk man finds himself in a van full of women eager for a good time away from home and husbands, and one of them lands soft in his lap and his warm hand is not repulsed, is it surprising that an idea fixes itself in his head, in his groins, an idea that hours of sexually charged dancing and alcohol and dope and his limited imagination fail to dislodge?

We writers have talked and talked about subtle things, for one about how this place works mysteriously in the psyche, as does any 'away-from-home'

time. We are open; writing itself has taught us to go on opening and saying yes to what draws us. We want experiences. But the experiences that come to us are seldom the ones we expect, and if they're difficult then how quickly we can lose the subtlety. Help! Call the police! Punish him.

He has done wrong and must face the consequences — but should they be police charges?

'This is not the way they would do it in the village,' Petra says. 'You should tell his parents, and they will deal with him.' Here is another path that the victims could choose, but it would require a leap in point-of-view, an about-turn. It would take talking and negotiation. Ambiguities and subtexts would unfold and probably the perpetrator would not be punished as severely as if the police were involved. But he might still be shamed and ashamed; the young women of the town would get to hear of it. The victims' indignation would meet its target and the whole experience could deepen understanding and trust between Can Serrat and the village — or it could all go wrong and do the opposite — but by pulling in the police, loss of trust seems inevitable.

However, I see myself going all theoretical. I who was unmolested have no right to an opinion here; I don't want to judge the women who are doing what they need to in order to keep their equilibrium.

I took up my position at the teachers' college where nothing was expected of me except that I write, and now and then address a class about the writing life. The work went ahead, although no faster than at home, and I wrote as if through a sheet of Perspex. I wasn't sure if it was the outcome of working in an office among other offices housing busy people, but I seemed to have no emotional link with what I was setting down on the screen. However, I wrote the first draft of *Zillah*, and it was a novelty to be known and referred to as a writer. It began to seem true.

Fiction writing led me on, into what I hadn't known I knew. As a believer I'd imagined I would write books about ultimate truths: about God; but the god I'd shaped, or allowed others to shape for me, wasn't up to it. Durable stories,

like houses, cannot be constructed from cardboard, cheap cuts or straw. Any unsound material has to go. My god had to go. I don't know if there will be another. Half-cocked theories about life had to go; judgements; oppositions and divisions in the mind. My hands were being prised open.

Ah, but the plot thickens — of course. Although the big doors were bolted overnight, next morning, early, a couple of us find a ladder stacked against a balcony, and a door open to the bedroom wing. The police warned the women yesterday to take care until their man is arrested today, in case he or his friends, anticipating the arrest, went looking for revenge.

The ladder is alarming. Is everyone still in bed having a nice sleep-in, or are they bleeding onto the red flagstone floors? When our cook arrives with fresh bread, she says she thinks the ladder was put there by the painter the other day.

She is shocked to receive her first news of the weekend's events. She's friends with the mother of the perpetrator whom she's known since he was 'this high'. You can see from her face that this will be hard for her to digest. But she wants to give us a morsel too. 'I don't like his father,' she says. He is a 'constructor' who is buying up the village. If a house comes up for sale, you find he has bought it already. He is friends 'with city hall, with how do you say in English, the mayor'.

Ah, so I find my sympathy swinging. We have a greedy father. It's likely the son is a greedy young man. Perhaps a criminal prosecution will serve them both right.

With the rest of the country we woke to the incredible news and the re-replayed scenes of the twin towers smitten and falling; of violence being meted out at last in the first world. As scary was George W-for-War Bush responding with the rhetoric of revenge, never of introspection. 'We'll pass this test!' not, 'How have we offended?'

I found an unsourced line by James Thurber: ‘Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness.’ Was that a better response? Or an ineffectual one? The world seems to want a man of action. The thoughtful ones have their heads down writing or making art or pursuing their own peculiar fascinations. Looking, mulling, recording ... is there any use in that? We let madmen take the helm.

In the face of mass slaughter, how relevant was the microcosmic inspection of one’s inner world? Did this new global development make of it an obscene obsession, or was it still the one task I could not afford to abandon?

The following day, as I lay on the floor after a yoga class, a wave of ennui washed over me, with the question, What’s the point in living? It was a question so foreign to my conscious attitude at the time, that I wondered, momentarily, if I’d entered the slipstream of the collective psyche, wondering with all the world, What becomes of us now?

I find myself avoiding the women who went to the police. I don’t want to be around all that self-important, suffering indignation. I hope it’s not pique on my part — that I’ve been left out of the drama. When Dorothee asks me what I’ve worked on this morning I dodge the question. I’ve been writing about them. Later in the day we walk together and I blurt all my pent-up thoughts — which have warped in the claustrophobic heat of my own head. Dorothee says she’s grateful for my honesty, says she wishes I’d raised all this when they were still deciding how to act; then she tells of her own conviction that they’ve done the right thing. How many women had to suffer damage in Spain before laws were made to prosecute this kind of behaviour? she asks. I feel a little ashamed.

After pondering again and again what to do for a job when my time at the teachers’ college came to an end, I dreamed of cycling around a steep coastal hillside on a road that narrowed and crumbled until it petered out. Ahead, a

simple sheep-track ran away around the grassy hill. Had I taken a wrong turn? It was the same question. Was I really called to writing and inwardness, which life can seem shabby and near-invisible when friends and contemporaries are out doing exploits?

Discussing the dream, Frances pointed out that the green track veered left, towards the unconscious where the writing comes from, and suggested that I needed to go ahead also and pull up the long dream-line of strange fish that I had waiting in the bay below.

I wrote letters to three women who might have editing work to offer.

I've been out for an early walk. The storm is clearing off the mountain whose stone figures — today old sages leaning together, listening hard toward the east — are emerging one by one from rags of mist. The ploughed earth through the orchards is soft and fresh pig tracks flank the almonds. Along the road there's a break in the red-brown expanse of turned soil: a field planted in some green and downy crop, and blanket-stitched with cypresses. Almost home, I'm alone on the open road when suddenly a crowd of swifts trills and darts around me. In pairs, as if daring one another, they swoop by so close I can feel the brush of air.

The evening work-sharing session is in English, which disadvantages those who write first in another language. Jacob, for example, does a running translation from Norwegian to English of his esoteric poem, which does not attract him a new readership. Readings are funny things. Everyone is more or less anxious before they read; their appreciation of others' work is tempered before and after by the fact of their own performance — but we are kind to one another's obtuse stories and challenging poems. The translator hangs onto his beer. He makes some gibe about his own writing. Failed writers translate, he says gruffly.

It's easier to pay attention to the art works-in-progress we're shown on a tour of the studios — Haris's twenty-metre-long abstract rendition of the labyrinthine innards of the mountain, Petra's huge papier-mâché head-pieces, to be worn at local 'giant' parades, Eion's lovely light-dappled nudes among the rocks of Montserrat; he is the nude. We keep our gazes steady.

The others have gone up to the village for drinks. It's Vonnie's last night so I should be there but I want to be quiet and, conveniently, the vertigo that occasionally appears when I'm overtired, brings on its familiar twinges of nausea and the imperative to keep still. Satisfied with my apology, I lie and listen to a smoky old recording of Menuhin playing a Bach cantata.

Flashes come through the skylight, there are far-off, clattering rumbles. Rain falls in fitful, constipated drops on the plastic skylight then splashes hectically, briefly, outside my window. For a while there is silence and sustained glimmerings then a gentler rain settles in. As I fall asleep it seems the house is full of talking, walking, comings and goings, through doors, up steps and down.

**B**y the end of my third year seeing Frances, my dreams hinted that I was ready to finish up: the analyst was moving freely around the house, cooking things up in the kitchen, and answering my questions.

I dreamed of the old home that was pulled down after we moved out of it when I was thirteen. That marked the end of my childhood, and to some extent the life of my imagination, as Frances points out. The life that I was reviving now. There was another dream that I pondered, of a huge tree, cut down, but with every part of it except the resprouting stump worked back into the soil or made into books, shelves, houses. It gave the sense of nothing having been wasted in one's life, but all of it holding the potential for reworking, regrowth or renewal.

We seem to have erased the possibility of intruders or danger. Spain takes care of everything. *Mañana* works fore and aft. It dissolves past as well as future. After a few days, nobody locks any doors and we've forgotten why you'd want to anyway.



## 10

I reckon Mohammed is the true heart of Can Serrat. He was here from the outset. When the original twelve Norwegian art students bought the crumbling *casa* back in 1988, they needed a bricklayer immediately, to start shoring it up. Mohammed, their man for the job, was from a humble farming family in Morocco. When he'd finished at Can Serrat, and was heading off for a new job in Tangiers, someone at the residency cemented a lock of his hair into a brick wall to ensure his return. The hair did its work: the new job fell through, and Mohammed has been drawn back again and again.

As a young boy he took the family's produce to market in the donkey cart. Noted for his intelligence and aptitude, he was trained from youth as a muezzin. A couple of times we cajole him into singing the call to prayer. The resonant wailing, the glottal stops where silence pours in, and the sense of ancient authority reverberating from such a slight body, make the hair stir on our scalps.

Back in Catalonia a second time, Mohammed ran a small organic farm and a popular café in Barcelona. Now he lives in the local village, fixing from scratch an old shop into a café restaurant where he'll serve the wholesome vegetarian food for which he's famed.

He turns up most days at Can Serrat, often with a basket of his handmade organic bread: dense, moist bricks with a hint of aniseed flavour that he sells for two euros apiece. He sits and talks with anyone who's around, and makes himself available as taxi driver for which he won't often accept payment. When we return from a visit to the saltpetre caves one afternoon, he flits home and brings back a chicken that he cooks up in an earthenware tagine pot on the gas ring with garlic, chickpeas, raisins and cinnamon. This late lunch on a sun-drenched balcony is preceded by chilled melon, and served with unshucked basmati rice and strips of roasted peppers and aubergine. Mellowed by sun, wine and his own superb food, Mohammed tells how much he enjoys his weekly stints with the mentally handicapped at a psychiatric hospital in the city. We take another serving of chicken. This guy is unbelievable.

**B**efore I had a definite reply about work, the new year started and I was waiting, writing fiction and doing a little freelance writing.

Needing a regular income, I responded to a newspaper ad for a nurse eight hours a week. The IHC home was just along the hill. I walked with sinking heart into the smell of soiled floors and stewing food. As we talked in the big kitchen the manager pulled a bone from the wrecked roast on the table and chewed on it absent-mindedly. She took me through to meet the patients. One was dying in her bed in the dining room; a sixty-year-old woman crawled round among the Labradors; another screamed blue murder from the shower cubicle where a nurse murmured back. I could tell these people were loved but the atmosphere was laid-back in the extreme. In the end I said no; it felt too haphazard and I too diffident. An acquaintance rang to offer me work at her rest home...

I enquired about a job in a bookshop. I was well disposed to the proprietor when I saw he had both my books on display — then he told me the rate of pay was \$8.75 an hour. I decided to wait until the end of the month before deciding — no matter how convenient a job offer seemed. I was grateful to R that he wasn't pressuring me to work, yet.

I dreamed that my little tame dog eviscerated a wilder black one — which latter seemed to represent the ‘wilder’, growing edge of my life that was constantly threatened by self-imposed domestic concerns. However the ‘shoulds’ and idealism hadn’t released their hold on me. If I refused work that included giving enemas to the handicapped, did that mean I was also rejecting something dismal and difficult in myself? Yet I knew that as long as I was nursing and odd-jobbing, my energy was scattered, taking ages each time to recover and draw back into the writing.

Talking with Claire I was relieved when she reiterated the imperative of knowing and doing one’s ‘true work’. I was holding out for that.

**A**n ant turns in circles, dragging, pushing, bearing aloft a mass its own size of twisted green iridescence which might be another insect, crushed like a car body and extricated from the scrapyard to furnish the nest. I envy the ants that have no doubts about what they do. This morning I’ve brought my tea and toast up to the orchard but fresh tyre tracks, the scent of insecticide and wet drops shining on the leaves steal away the joy.

Later I drink coffee at the big outdoor table with Didrik who has seemed to be ‘dry’ the last few days but is now shaking and twitching and downing vodka in his fizz. As I wash undies in a bucket on the step outside, I notice a baby-green beetle with four translucent green wings and a fat grub’s body. I’ve seen several insects here that look too bulky for their stubby, whirring wings.

There’s a giant yucca in the garden, its flower-stalk smoky green, the probing tip suffused with red. It’s said that the yucca flowers once, usually at about fourteen years, only to die. The one up the back, lush with creamy blooms, is surrounded by comrade plants, witness to its glorious expiry and learning by proximity how it’s done.

Jerry’s luggage turns up; the cook performs feng shui on the Irish poet’s back, and he’s giving me the Look but I leave it hanging in the fluff-filled air.

I tried out tutoring from home: would-be writers studying creative fiction by correspondence. The students paid plenty for their year's course but were unvetted for aptitude. It was obvious from each first piece of work which few had it, and which had been cruelly misled. After a few months I couldn't bear the trickery I was called on to perform in making positive responses to the work. I resigned, but by now I had made enough satisfactory readers' reports for a publisher to invite me to work at the office two days a week, editing. I've been doing it ever since — this almost perfect adjunct to one's own work: the constant assessment in another's writing of what works, what doesn't and why.

Usually I could forget I'd ever been a nurse but one spring lunch hour I was returning to work through the Octagon. A man lay on the footpath and a small crowd had gathered near the ambulance. Three paramedics worked on him with CPR and equipment. I went to walk past, couldn't, and doubled back. 'I'm a nurse; do you want a hand?' The reply was swift. 'You could pull on some gloves and take over here.' Kneeling on the asphalt, I set my clasped hands and shoulders in a vertical line above the unbuttoned shirt, and began the rhythmic press and release, amazed as ever by the give and the resilience in the human rib cage.

Our patient was about seventy, comfortably dressed in cords and checked shirt with earth under his fingernails. He might have been digging that morning in his garden. The monitor to which he'd been connected showed that his heart was still flurrying so a couple of shocks were jolted through his chest. With no change on the screen, I carried on: *press* and *press* and *press*. Sweat formed on my lip. In the gloves my hands grew wet. I glanced around for anyone who might know him; it seemed no one did. A doctor turned up and, kneeling beside me, took over the struggle to intubate. After twenty minutes and no sign of life, I pulled off the gloves and walked away, back to work — shocked at last.

When I rang the police next day, they couldn't tell me who he'd been. To deal with my own reverberating thoughts, I took sprigs of lilac and dropped them as I passed on the place where he'd lain.

## EMAIL:

It's nice to find myself feeling so much about so many things but it's also exhausting and I fall into bed at night, splat like a beheaded sardine, and melt there, with no dreams or thoughts till I put my head back on in the morning. There's so much to sift through every day of ordinary and odd riches. And today there was Miró, omigawd. I tried to pretend it's natural to weep a little in an artspace, and that I wasn't using my jacket for a mouchoir. Have you seen his three-piece 'L'espoir du condamné à mort?' Three lines, three sizzles of coloured 'wool', a bit of grass and he performs heart surgery there in the gallery.

Anyway, I took Alf to town. Yes, I think that's the way to put it. He is vague and deafish so I had to be *forte* if I chose to venture information — which was never sought. 'OH, YES, I HAVE A DOG, TOO.' Addressing me, he first had to open a couple of glass doors in his head and step out ... I'm not sure he knows my name but I had to use his a few times: Alf! Mind that speeding bus! No, don't get off yet! I'm over here! Apart from that, he was an easy enough companion, uncomplaining except about walking (why is it so hard to find someone in Europe who'll not try to take every elevator/metro/tin can possible?) or the time I took staring at Miró's 'Woman with a car for a head...'

In the pet market: a black scorpion toys with its food: a baby snake.

Back at the ranch Sue offers pot to anyone who's interested. Or would we rather LSD? She has a few tabs she doesn't want to take back on the plane with her. Oh, my little life, aren't your eyes wide?

Part and parcel of the midlife transition is experimentation — at the mild end, with physical exploits (I took part in the Masters' Games, kayaking: three races; four participants; three bronze medals), with hair, with ways of dressing beyond the habitual — behind all of which is the question of who I really am; how does the outer form express the inner attitude?

For those of us who have lived timidly in some respects there are other curiosities to satisfy; among them, what happens if you get stoned? I tried that with two friends one weekend away, an experience that left me deeply grateful I hadn't done so as a youngster. Under the influence I swung in and out of paranoid terror where I felt I was on the brink of mental disintegration. I gained new respect for timidity itself, that had helped keep my younger personality intact.

Since they had been forbidden to me as a Christian, I visited an astrologer; a clairvoyant; a man who flayed my back with his clever, rough hands and who laid a line of stones along my torso and covered me with a patchwork blanket before leaving me a while to chuckle and weep at the accuracy of what he'd told me. (After a bit you realise that these intuitive people tell you nothing that you're unable to ferret out for yourself from your own knowing; nothing that time itself cannot impart. But they may help you see truths sooner, more sharply. Sometimes they seem to be telling you a load of bollocks. It's important to heed any unease, and to keep your own judgement as final arbiter.)

Dorothee will write to me later about the quest to maintain a certain level of intensity in the life — once everything's been tried and tried again. I reply that I can't imagine life running out of tricks to intrigue and mystify but then, I'm probably more placid, and I was a late starter. There are many states of mind and body, many countries of the world and the psyche, yet to be visited and known.

**I**n the shop where I buy earrings that look like the bull's-eye sweets my grandmother used to keep for us in a lidded ceramic jar, I pick a rolled-up poem from an open bowl. It's unattributed but with the dictionary I work on a translation.

My lines tell me again and again  
that this is more than I can resist;

how powerless I feel  
seeing how fiercely  
my heart submits to you.

Our rooms here are dimly lit; all the lighting in the house is soft, including that over the bathroom mirrors. It makes lovely moths of us; it makes us younger than we are, and careless. Alf has to alert me to the toothpaste smear on my chin before I get on the bus for town. I cut my own hair, which I wouldn't do at home. Here, in a glass, darkly, it looks good as gold, and no one's going to tell me otherwise.

## JOURNAL:

I feel so RICH as I write tonight in my room. Sting's singing on the laptop; four candles burn — red, orange, yellow and pink; there's incense coiling in the fireplace. I've exchanged my grey duvet cover for the one with red swirls and hearts. On the wall are photos of my loves and a waking cupid, 'L'amour reveille', Picasso's doves and Miró's 'Woman in the night time' kneeling in red and yellow under a star with her little seeing bird head. I'm full, after pork bones, potato salad and red wine.

Art wrote this morning, observing some new intensity or brightness of tone in my letters. How good for me this difficult friendship has been. How stretching and how rich.

When you spend enough time in the inner world (and these days writing and mulling carry on where psychoanalysis left off), the future and the past release their tyranny over you. I used to find it hard to face a day with nothing in it out of the ordinary; I would be always looking forward — to this or that event where I could be enlivened by the energies of others — but in going, by the gods' grace, beneath the surface of everyday, you find that little any more is ordinary. Things bear messages — of their own life or essence, of some small, joyous connection with your own. Even when a difficult mood falls, the

possibility of some perverse or vivid meaning to it is never entirely absent, and helps you to bear it, to watch and wait.

I walk up behind the house where the mountain is nudging into the clouds so that the rows of rocks which are its strange fruit slip in and out of sight. Is it true that objects respond when beheld? Does the mountain care, do its particles agitate by the tiniest fraction of a micrometre when my eyes blur with tears at its weird perfection?

Petra says that people with incipient back or leg problems often have them flare up in Spain because every surface underfoot is so hard: baked earth, rock paths, pavement, flagstone floors. Bed feels good.

After weeks 'alone' I long for hands and skin — I'd hardly care whose as long as they smelled right. Is that shocking? I'm no longer sure what shocks me, or more to the point, what would shock me if I followed through on it. But I don't. I touch no one. I fall into bed, grateful that here in Can Serrat sleep comes round almost immediately and shovels you into its soft bag, and keeps the top knotted for seven or eight hours at a stretch.

Over here, on the upside, northside of the world, I look back at some of my fiction with dismay. It seems so subterranean, as if ploughed into shape underground and never lugged fully to the surface. It's as I imagine moles to be when they come up: awkward and light-shy. Here I enjoy writing what is, as it appears. There's no diving down, no creeping with a guttering candle along the murky passageways of the imagination. But perhaps I can only do this now because I did that then. You do what you can, the best way you can with the handful of tools you're given: that past with its psychological grist, these present circumstances with their limitations, this aesthetic, this intelligence, these capacities for work or imagination, this temperament, that fascination — all of which, being bendy and slippery and hard to hold, conspire to make your work as flawed as you are, but also as rich and multiple. You are always assessing, sharpening, dismantling and putting back together

your tools, trying to improve them. Comparing them to the tools of others is seldom helpful.

The impulses are contradictory: to remain hidden; to come out as escort to your writing. The writer's life is a strange dance between the two. You write in long seclusion, knowing that what comes onto the page is a mix of bone and viscera, tough and tender; writing you're proud of and writing that has the potential to shame you; then the work is ready and you can choose to herald it with a bold bragadaccio, walk coyly or proudly at its side, or be dragged in its wake. I've found myself alternating between the last two approaches, suspecting always that the flame of joy, unhooded, will invite the snuffer.

When the work isn't perfect — and it never is — you are braced for every kind of ridicule. Sometimes there seems to be too much riding on it all and you reckon you'd rather sell confectionery or deliver mail for a living.

However, I recently found out that a family motto from my father's side was *Portet Vive*. It behoves us to live. I choose a magnificent over a mundane interpretation. It behoves us to live *well: richly, broadly, deeply and intricately* — which adverbs, for me, describe the route that writing seems to take.

Three of us meet up in the kitchen to pool resources for a meal. Petra has been cleaning out the fridges and sits down for a cigarette. I open the window. 'Don't let the fluff in,' she complains. 'It gets over everything.' Icily I tell her that I'm more averse to smoke wafting around my food. In silence, she stubs out the cigarette.

The electric jug is broken so we boil water on the gas element which takes about five times as long as the jug. We grumble but when Petra goes off to shop at Ikea she returns with the real household essentials: new rubbish bins and cushions for chairs no one sits in. They're the wrong size, too. Why won't she go and do her painting?

Today I arrive in the kitchen earlier than I should. The lunch clams have put out their tongues and are pulling themselves across their platter, towards the sink. Outside, the grapevine over the table has failed to leaf up properly. The drought is blamed but it means it's getting too hot to eat outside; soon the cook will start coming in the evening instead. Meanwhile we don sunglasses, cover our necks and sweat a little over our paella. The poet with the bad back has been unable to wash his clothes for some time. Their ripeness is peaking out here in the sun.

**I**t takes a while to build up the so-called masculine capacities, which is a woman's job in the second half of life if she hasn't done it already: learning to act on the world, not merely adapting and yielding to it, as she's practised all her life. I came across an article in which a critic upbraided YA writers for not giving their female protagonists enough 'agency', warning that such conservative texts, left uncriticised, 'have a powerful didactic potential'. In my response, I wondered whether YA novels should carry health warnings if their protagonists had yet to fully self-realise. But I wanted to yell, 'We're getting there!' I said that solid inner change is the potential outcome of creative endeavour such as fiction-writing, and that authentically powerful girls will grow from the pen of a writer who is aware of her task. But you 'won't find that strong, wilful, eccentric and wonderful girl in her totality until she's finally and fully born in the writer.

'Or maybe' (acknowledging the anticipatory nature of fiction) 'a year or two before.'

**S**ome of us plan to meet up in a cafe in town. Somehow, the Irish poet and I arrive well before the others and after some pevarication order two courses each, sitting across from one another at a narrow table. I enjoy the tasty *sopa de pescatora* but our conversation flounders in the shallows. Between silences we talk about our children, our living situations — but nothing we can really seize

on or laugh over. I ponder my own social deficiencies. Or does the fault lie with both of us? We writers are too full of possibilities — and of hopelessness at following them through, except on the page. He looks at me in a way that seems to invite ... something that he then pushes away, as if reminding himself of his own innate pessimism. Also, I'm an aesthete when it comes to intimacy and am deterred by grubby cuffs, a certain unkempt quality. And just as well.

Next day the power goes off in my room. Stefan has a good look but can't figure it out. In the end he runs an extension cord with multi-plug out the window of the empty room next door and in through mine. A couple of days later the other room is tenanted and the inexplicable plug tossed out the window. Petra and I hatch a plan. We run the extension cord from my window, along the back of the house, up under the eaves of the boiler house and plug it in there where no one visits in summer.

Much of what comes to pass in these middle years is simply the outcome of growing up and growing older: the chipping away by circumstances at the personality; the abrasive filing of new realisations and perspectives gained; the sandpaper rub of close relationships. But it seems we're offered a further element of choice, in how we apprehend our lives, in how much attention we pay to their unseen hints and movements. I found myself writing a parable at the start of *Box*, which says what I mean.

Dorothee and I trek up to the aiguilles around the Refuge St Vincent Barbi. I can't walk these old pilgrim tracks without being aware of what I've read: that during Napoleon's ransacking of the monasteries on Montserrat, his soldiers were given licence to hunt the mountain's hermits 'like chamois along the cliffs', and to kill them.

We meet Pan today, a brown billy-goat with huge conical horns half the mass again of his body. He stares defiantly back at us across his gully. We're

alert from here on to his musky presence in the forest air. We sit in the late afternoon sun eating honeyed peanuts and sardines on bread, discussing the question of how much passion a person needs in her life or, more to the point, how much she can manage to live without if doors have been opened in the heart that can't easily be shut again.

It's difficult when you find yourself attracted to people it's not convenient to love. You try to resist it — but you don't want to; you joke about it; it drives you nearly mad. It's helpful though, not quite so unHINGING, to play with the notion that these attractions are signs of life, and of the self's quest to fulfil and complete itself. You may need to acquaint yourself with the actual person who fascinates you; it's vital that you figure out what they hold of your own missing life.

As Rosemary Sullivan writes in *Labyrinth of Desire*, 'there is another story lying just beneath the ostensible story. It has nothing to do with the other person but has everything to do with oneself.'



Like a fish which swims calmly in deep water,  
 I felt all about me the secure supporting pressure  
 of my own life. Ragged, inglorious, and apparently  
 purposeless, but my own.  
 Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*

I meet the madonna. It's the day Dorothee and I circumnavigate the mountain. In the basilica I join the small queue that files up beneath the high altar and crosses in front of the black virgin in her perspex bubble. Only the fingers of her right hand and the globe she holds in it are exposed to the pilgrims who have polished them to amber with their touching. But I've forgotten to think of what, for an experiment, to ask her for. A general blessing will have to do.

I step up into her cupboard and touch my fingers to the ball. She looks like one who sees thoroughly and judges not. But he, the boy Jesus on her knee, is a bit of a mischief. There's a twinkle about him that seems to say, Oh yes, life is going to get very interesting for you!

It's a long walk, all the way around the mountain. We refill our bottles at the monastery fountain, buy cakes of fig with almonds to help us on our way (such food as pilgrims always ate; figs grow from the mountain's crevices) and hoist our umbrellas which are much kinder than stuffy sunhats in the fierce heat. A group of middle-aged trampers confuse us, with their French and their map; for a while we're not sure we're on the right track, but to carry on walking is the only option and we're home without mishap by sundown.

Later I hear that Barca, the football team, visits the Virgin of Montserrat the day before each game, to ask for her help.

**I**t's not easy to know exactly what we need — what to ask a Virgin for — although what we want provides a rough indication. What we actually get we have to deal with as best we can. I'd never given birth in a dream before, so I was alert and curious after one in which the lump of blood I'd passed woke up and bellowed — a vigorous, strapping, shouting, baby boy. Apgars 10/10. Some new development in the life — I knew that's what the dream handbooks would say.

I'd managed without Frances for a year or more when I slunk back for a session in her chair. Something very difficult was happening. I had fallen in love and it was torture.

**A**fter a month of being with ourselves and our sisterly/brotherly companions, finally we are sent the Perfect Man. He is German and shatters our stereotypes: he is funny, warm, self-deprecating, a little macho, pretty sensitive, a touch wild, a rich conversationalist, artistic, fun-loving, athletic, romantically inclined, blue-eyed, brown-eyed, green-eyed ... His names are Roland, Ecki, Heinz and Alfred who blow in like a storm of clean autumn leaves for us to play in. We tidy up for mealtimes and go down for coffee a little more often. They organise a night out at the Vinya Nova restaurant away across the orchards, under the mountain. Delicious Catalan food is served

among candles and glassware. Roland shows us how to prepare the entrée from the ingredients provided: cut a clove of garlic in half lengthways and scratch it over a slice of toast. Next, rub over that the other half of your neighbour's fresh sun-ripened tomato. Drizzle on olive oil. Flick with salt. Eat.

Over the table, around the table there are wistful looks, intense looks, challenging and forlorn looks. There's chemistry and innocence, the exchange of email addresses and recipes for pumpkin soup.

Next morning they're gone.

Disillusioned with his lover and Barcelona, Didrik's also getting ready to leave for home. He's smoking without cease, vodka and orange in hand. No! he protests, he's not nervous — as off he skitters like a pony with the wind in its ears.

The old Norwegian is stumping about with his ski-pole; he seemed to be talking to his mate upstairs most of the night. Every time I woke I heard him. There's a terrible feeling of ennui. We're left with ourselves again. Now what?

Mostly I've revelled in being with myself here. It's been like an extended playtime — like a long summer nor'west evening in childhood where you heard other children playing, calling, but not too near. The smell of cut grass hung on the air and lemony light was squeezed from a green sky. Your parents were in the sunroom, murmuring, content as ever to let you be, and you drifted away through the long grass and the trees, dreaming, scheming as slow dusk fell.

This might be why people seem unusually drawn to me here; I've become like a child, and have dropped the watchful, guarded adult persona that is my usual shield.

Always I had been barricaded against the cataclysm of love. My longing had directed itself at unattainable types — rogues, demigods or married men, people with whom I had almost no contact; boys interested in me were never as fascinating. When R and I fell for one another there was a sense of

inevitability about it — joy and no hesitation — and we were quickly married. But that is a very different game.

I told Frances I had had an encounter with someone who had seen into my soul (or had seemed to, which amounted to the same thing) and in a strange town, afterwards, I lay awake all night on the rack, while my heart (what else could it have been, burning under my ribs?) was a fist that opened and opened. Outside on the street, headlights swung across the windows and trucks changed down as they turned the corner, and groaned away. I was seen and loved. I was incredulous, credulous, already altered.

My ‘heart’ had been a triple-bolted, sealed vault, but now its locks were melted off and the door was ajar. In a dream I saw blue borage, which bees love, thrusting up through a crack in a concrete wall.

Piece by piece I acknowledged my attraction to the fascinating other and released my lifelong hold on the safety rail of No which is the refusal to turn and face what one desires. There were problems, though, that I hardly needed to spell out to Frances. I was married; mindful of the marriage; and love was proving a very rough ride.

Frances smiled, she laughed. Wasn’t this about *feeling* — and exactly what my life required?

It’s my penultimate day. Eion, Dorothee and I have walked up the most direct track I’ve found yet to the summit of Montserrat. On the way Eion tells us how last night he came upon Jacob, an intense young Norwegian novelist, in the bathroom, filling with water a blue pipe that he stuck up his nose before inhaling noisily. He breathed out hard through the other nostril — some kind of yogic cleansing ritual. ‘You want to see the colour of the water when it comes out?’ Jacob offered. Eion tried not to gag onto his toothbrush.

We’re all fit as fleas and pleased with ourselves at the top since we’d come out ‘just for a look’, ‘for an hour or so’, ‘okay, just to the next ridge, I’ve got work to do’. We eat peanut butter sandwiches looking east to the Pyrénées then scuttle down via another rubbly track.

We return full of beans to wolf down corn and egg pie with spaghetti. Across the table Jacob waves his book at me. 'You are very fresh, like Paul Auster's story. There's something of wildness in you.'

What can a girl say? Pass me the pie.

When you look into it, you realise what parts the people whom you've attracted into your life, who have attracted you into theirs, have to play: the parts in the inner production. You see how you're drawn to those who live out the potentialities of your own life; and if you're lucky the reverse is also true, so friendships grow doubly rich. Of my closest friends, one is an artist full of fiery, catalytic energy; another has a huge intelligent heart, and an inspiring capacity to embrace people and projects. Now I was fascinated with someone, some of whose attributes I shared, at least in part, but had yet to claim and inhabit comfortably: a finely honed writerly aesthetic, a steely will, confidence in his own work and sensibilities. Of course love and friendships are crucial for their own sakes but are all the more valuable, and sustainable, if you work to take into yourself the qualities you've attributed only to the other. (Oh, she has such flare, he's so incisive...) Or to recognise that the qualities we find bruising in our friends are probably also our own. (He's too touchy, too sure he's right, she doesn't make enough time for me...)

At Can Serrat, just when you think life has gone all mellow on you, expect a sharp blast. Peder and Ivar are Norwegians who've been here a couple of days. One of them said they were married (to each other) but none of us knows if this is true. It is unimaginable. Later, one of them protests, 'But that wass a choke!' Ivar is round: round spectacles, round face, round figure. We assume he is as placid as he is silent. He recently gave up his landscaping business to study history. At Can Serrat he wears the same green T-shirt for days on end. It has *Heart* written many times around the chest, marking out a huge heart-shaped absence.

Peder is a little older, perhaps seventy. He's craggy, bow-legged, progressively unkempt and unshaven. He talks at anyone who crosses his path and if no one does he talks at his companion. He believes in doing a little of everything, and that creativity requires a lot of doing nothing. But these two are not doing nothing. They have been drinking, steadily, doggedly and cheaply — the good local wine that's available at under two euros a bottle. They have taken over the tables with their bottles, glasses and cigarettes — outside since lunch, then this evening in the kitchen.

We women have been avoiding them. First, Peder talks too much, too much nonsense, repeatedly, but also he has begun on innuendo and tonight got angry when Mari-Lou — who had perched for a few minutes with them, to be hospitable — refused to give him a copy of the poem she read the other night for him to use in his own private publication.

However, I know nothing of this. These two have barely acknowledged me; I like to think they can see it's wise not to tangle with me. But I'm still thinking of Mohammed's little speech the other night, urging us to be inclusive. Didrik has felt hurt at being excluded from outings. (And yet this is not an alcoholics' refuge; this is trying to be a workers' residency, or have we got it wrong?) So, as a group of us leave the house to walk up to the village for a farewell drink (two of us leave tomorrow) I poke my head into the kitchen and tell them what we're doing, in case they want to come. 'You are very kind to us,' Ivar replies.

I suppose I was a madwoman for a while and I suppose a degree of insanity is inevitable when a person's interior is being renovated: walls come down and light strikes in at new angles and into hidden corners; power tools roar in to cut, wrench, jack-hammer; there's the scream of nails leaving wood, the crack of boards, plaster falling, a fog of dust...

Indeed, this love made me feel things I'd never felt: such astonishment, terror, joy, agony, rage, tenderness, affirmation. It was hard to tell if I was being sucked towards life or death — by combustion; drowning; burial; by

wild flight. I went back to Frances a second time, months later, to say, Help, how do I get out of this? I'd already tried, and failed, to give love up.

'This' was the trauma of being stretched taut between belief and disbelief (in the beloved and the whole State of Love — *he* loves me; he loves *me*; he *loves* me; *I, love, him!*); of being dropped in the vat of desire while a capricious cook twiddled the gas beneath it from Hi to Lo and back again; of the ongoing negotiations within our marriage.

Patience, was the counsel: as long as the tension held, as long as reality was being faced, and nothing was being suppressed, denied or forced, a solution was forming itself from the raw ingredients of the lives involved.

We hung on.

**I**n the restaurant courtyard we talk about the mountain and its attendant myths. I've told them of Goethe's recipe for happiness — in finding your inner Montserrat. Jacob has read a study which concurs with what Petra has said — that there's a larger than usual concentration of mad people living around the mountain. 'Why do you think you keep getting pulled up there?' Petra asks me. 'It has a big energy.'

After a wine or two, and a slab of cheese for Dutch courage, Jacob catches my eye and asks, for all to hear, 'Pene-lope, will you be my Montserrat?' There's a pregnant silence before Dorothee points out that I'm twisting my napkin over and over on my knee. But I can't help it. As Theresa of Avila is reputed to have said, 'I have no defence against affection. I could be bribed with a sardine.' Give me a compliment, a whiff of desire and I'm unstrung, strung up, ready for the plucking — but only for a moment. I laugh and wave him away with the cloth.

Still, I haven't the wit to tell him he's missed the whole point of Goethe's epithet. Jacob is all of twenty-five.

We are inclined to believe that love experienced outside the marriage (as long as there is a marriage) is necessarily destructive — and often it is. But I entertained the notion, then grew convinced, that love is also purposeful and that its purposes are vital, and revitalising. But it's not a quick process, and you can't leap any of the necessary steps.

The glass blower takes her plug of molten sand from the crucible (two thousand degrees Celcius), and as she works and reworks it, plunges it in and out of the second furnace, or glory hole, before cooling the created piece over hours or days in the third kiln, the annealer — all operations that are fraught, delicate, hot and potentially destructive — but when light, colour and form enter the glass, what beauty is obtained.

Love teases the participants into new awareness — of themselves as apprehended in the beloved, and of a morality that operates beyond the field of convention and which implies both privilege and its incumbent responsibilities.

Rumi speaks of the irresistible urge towards reconfiguration:

This that is tormented and very tired,  
tortured with restraints like a madman,  
this heart.  
Still you keep breaking the shell  
to get the taste of its kernel!

We've been up at the restaurant about half an hour when we see two plaid shirts approaching through the mulberries of the courtyard. They are tall men and tower above our chairs as silent Ivar finds his voice. It booms, 'You left us! You came here and you never told us. I have never in my life met such rudeness. In the village where I come from in the north of Norway never would we do such a thing! You are horrible people!'

We exchange looks and try to speak over the harangue. I tell Ivar my version of our brief kitchen exchange.

‘No, you *never* told me. Such rudeness. YOU can go straight back to New Zealand. In the village where I come from in the north ...’

Peder slumps onto a chair. His hearing aid sags from his ear. It’s hard to read his expression — something also close to sagging. But Ivar is gathering force. He berates petite, fiery-haired Mari-Lou for her failure of generosity regarding her poetry. She protests, unheard.

‘I hate your face!’ he bellows. ‘It is a horrible face!’

Peder cranks himself straighter on the chair and helps his friend. ‘You think you are a star! You’re not a star.’

On and on it goes. It’s banal, really. This is how drunk people behave. They don’t know how to stop. Our pacifist, liberal-type fellow-men (one is built like a boxer, another studies tae-kwon-do) sidle to our defence and murmur at them — in English, in Norwegian, in Irish brogue.

Eventually Ivar also sits. The rest of us try to resume our conversations, to brush this off. The ‘odd couple’ sit and glower. They find they can’t eat or drink now, after all. They stand and leave.

Sympathy for belligerent drunks doesn’t come easily. Sad drunk, Didrik, provides a subtler reminder our own tendencies towards addiction, of our own weaknesses.

**D**espite the difficulties and what might be judged selfish, self-indulgent, callous, cavalier (pick your own adjective) behaviour, grace was strangely attendant on this experiment in love, along with my immense gratefulness.

Still, resistance after resistance has to be broached (you spit and fight, try to run away, accuse the other of getting it/you/everything wrong) until you can finally *be*, like a child hiccuping, chastened, relieved and cleansed after storms of tears or rage, and say, Yes: I am loved. I am lovable. I am ready to love. Only then can you hope to be let off the hook of compulsion or

obsession. Freed from the worst excesses of neediness, you're almost ready to have free choice returned to you.

Taking up with the other was never an option and even seeing him was a rare event; the relationship was never ground beneath the heel of everyday, but always I was aware of the traces in myself of love's work. I continued to experience the new, rich palette of feeling; a fresh objectivity entered my writing, and I understood and claimed as my own some of the qualities I'd admired (also those I'd disavowed) in him.

**R** had never worn a wedding ring. Twenty years married, we got a jeweller to melt down my gold one and work it into two new rings: two strips of gold encased in silver bands. Handing us the finished articles, he pointed out on the inside of mine how he'd been unable to perfectly fuse the two ends of gold fibre. A permanent tiny rupture on the underside of the ring was the price we paid for the conversion.

**O**n the last morning, I move slowly around my room, making paper piles, folding clothes into my suitcase. There seems no need to make grand gestures, like taking a last fling on the mountain. Yesterday I dropped my sunglasses somewhere on its paths, so Montserrat has something of mine. I have a few of its stones. I photographed and left lying by the path where it caught my eye the fist-sized rock with two sad eyes and wide downturned mouth.

On the rock wall of the toilet, among the other tinfoil figures — pinched into shape by previous residents — who climb, dance, perch or huddle there, I hang a foil girl upside down on a cotton-thread swing. She sends her love to Can Serrat from the downside up of the world.

I copy from the bedroom wall the unscribed words in Catalan: *Lluita pel dret d'una existència sense sentit*, and take them to Inga in the kitchen. I'm bemused by her translation: 'Fight for the right to an existence without meaning.' For a moment I'm seized by the dizzying concept of a meaningless

existence (opposing a life of belief with its implications of enmeshment, embeddedness), where each moment is provisional, unlinked to every other, where one might be free to step in any direction, dancing over a spinning globe on feet like pins. But I can't hold the stance. Soon enough I'm flat-footed again, wading about happily in my own agglomerating web of connection.

I'm not unaware of the pain I caused in our marriage, but believe that if one partner violates the contract, she does not act in isolation. The necessity is not hers alone, but she acts for both. The old order cannot hold the new dynamic which is ready to enter if provision can be made for it. The cold, shocking moments of truth-telling and the fraught nights of discussion forged new veins in the river of our mutual understanding. Some trust was sacrificed (his of me), but taking the other for granted is no longer an option, for either of us. R was fully alert by now, making his own assessment of the altered contours in our relationship, and his own agile excursions into new terrain. Humour reappeared after a long absence, a fresh sense of companionship, and hard-won respect. Oh yes, and love.

The poet calls in to say goodbye and hug me. He's tripping over words in his anxiety to say what he means to: he wants to find my books for his daughter, he liked the poem I read last night, take care ... he's sorry he's been more of a 'back patient' than a writer. But, actually, he's been a lovely, gentle, if lugubrious, presence with a cracking dry wit. He hugs me again and this morning he smells fresh as a daisy — which has no smell at all.

There are other goodbyes as soon as lunch is over; I ask Petra to email when she can sell me one of her exquisite two-minute dancer sketches; I've paid my bill which someone has made out at last, and have said, as we all say, that one day I'll return. I've shaken hands with the two Norwegian pests, who

have been meekly seeking pardons this morning. I hope Ivar is chastened when I announce, 'I *am* going back to New Zealand.'

Mohammed has turned up in his usual timely fashion and insists on driving me and my luggage to the top of the driveway. I wave to Mari-Lou, waving back beneath her geranium hair from the balcony. A few of us wait up on the road for the bus: Dorothee to see me off with a last hug and both our promises to meet again — next time in Utah.

From the bus I look back again and again at the mountain, until its mass breaks free of the earth ... it becomes a floating blue haze ... it disappears.



## 12

Fresh snow sugars Dunedin's Maungatua hills and frost glints on the asphalt. At the baggage claim I wait under the big, ineffective blow heater. R is coming to collect me after a meeting. Our car turns up and I am through the door by the time he climbs out and sees me. He jumps, waving both hands, and runs...

Back home there's the usual jetlag: sailing along fine one day/one moment, and capsized the next. I take small, comforting remedies: hot baths, a cleaning rag into recently unmolested corners of the kitchen, bowls of soup. I try to ignore the piping, anxious voice that asks if I've really been away and if I have, how come it doesn't feel like it? What's changed? What was it all about?

Outside my cubby — which is still warm enough to use in late June as long as there's no wind to seep beneath the curtain-door, as long as I wear a dark jersey to absorb heat from the sun which must of course be shining through the window — the grapevine has been pruned back hard; the bare gooseberry awaits the long-handled shears; a waxeye sneaks between its thorns and snatches insects from a rogue raspberry that's still in leaf, crying between mouthfuls for its friends to come. The compost heap overflows with winter tidying.

Two weeks after I'm home, I get back to karate. I've dreaded it a little. It's hard to tear yourself from the cosy house late in the winter afternoon, to take your shoes off in that chilly change-room, to tie the cold *gi* against your skin, contemplating the stretch and tug on muscles that for two months have been fed croissants and yoghurt, potatoes and aioli and that have only practised when they felt like it which was seldom.

But the others seem glad to see me back and I am full of admiration for them, as I have always been: for their focus and dedication, their generosity of spirit. Karate makes remarkable kids — or perhaps remarkable kids make karate. And doing it together, we share our energy and willpower to get through the clusters of press-ups and ab-crunchers; we shout or *kiai* over our high-kneed kicks; patiently or admiringly, we do sequences with white belts, yellow belts, brown belts.

We watch the three green belts perform a *kata* we haven't learned yet. Its slow, forceful movements are accompanied by the noisy *ibuki* breath used to control the release of energy from the solar plexus.

'What does this *kata*'s name imply,' asks *Sempei*, "'Dismantling the Large Fortress"?'

'Getting past obstacles?' someone ventures.

That's it. Rather than being knocked back or oppressed by failure, or the fear of failure, it's about going on through, taking down the defences, piece by piece, till you're where you want to be.

Why has it taken me so long to see how to approach my life?

When I started karate, I thought I'd just try it out for a year or so. I don't have a strong track history with novelty hobbies: piano or flute lessons; ballroom dancing, flamenco; Maori, Spanish, German; embroidery, sketching, yoga — I've dabbled in them all, and stuck with none. But now I see how like writing karate is. You turn up. You gird your loins and get down to it, you push past the sticky places, and incrementally you improve. I imagined I might manage a blue belt by the time I gave it up, brown or black being

unthinkable. But, two years in, I have my yellow belt; green is only two gradings away if I apply myself. Each level requires firmer commitment, greater fitness and flexibility, and mastery of more complex sequences than the last. But step by step, these qualities can be attained by the person who keeps turning up.

Winter. We're past the shortest day, just, but the coldest are up ahead. This morning the bare trees are black with rain. In the glimmer of late morning sun, fat drops on birch twigs gleam gold against a slate sky. Jonathan cleans out the rat's cage, complaining, unusually, of the smell, the stickiness, the mischief. 'I think I might be getting flu, Mum,' he comes to tell me.

'Shut the door,' I say, 'and keep warm. I'll see you at lunch time.' Meanwhile I'm keeping my head down, writing, because flu, if what he says is true, means days ahead when Writer will once more be given the shove by Mother.

I no longer pray — consciously. I send out thoughts or wishes for my children, for those I love, for those whose need and distress are made apparent in newspapers or on TV. If I'm very anxious, I find myself instinctively sidling up to that blue motherish figure who roosts somewhere in my head, or heart. I seek out her cool compassion, her wisdom.

A day after writing this I have a call from someone dear to me. They've enjoyed a spiritually refreshing Christian camp; they feel set on their feet for the new year, having bathed in words of love and wisdom, having been prayed for and encouraged in their 'walk with Christ'. And I feel a pang of loss. Christians are such altruists; they know how to seek out the sweetness in people, how to set their own interests aside in order to attend to another — a rare thing in this world and not to be sneezed at, especially when it comes embodied in a person whose faith has been tempered and realised over decades.

They say the human mechanism is wired for deities, that there is a god-centre in the brain. I imagine this is true; that into it we project all the mystery and wonder and joy and hope that seem barely containable by flesh and blood. In my god-centre there is all that, and a feathered woman. On a long sabbatical from religion, I'm not trying these days to see who or what else might fit there.

This week has accommodated fire and toothache. The fire ate up a building a hundred metres from our workplace. It was impossible to sit and edit as long as it raged. Greeny-yellow smoke was extruded from holes in the iron roof. Flames licked up after the smoke and soon a torrent of fire was pouring from its reservoir in the lower two storeys, greying and tilting the iron sheets, chewing out the roof beams. Incandescent fireballs floated on the orange river.

Dental pain has a similarly molten quality, I'm discovering, the way it flits and licks through the joists and crossbeams of your face. Like fire, it abandons its source after a bit and goes exploring. It grips the base of your incisors, perches on a cheek bone, pulsates in a gap, becoming a phantom molar. It's interesting, at night, to lie and follow its darting progress; it's delicious to swallow a couple of pills and quell it to warm silence. My teeth have come of age; I'm booked for my first root canal filling.

First of August and I'm out in my cubby, wearing a down vest, turning on the heater intermittently. I don't know what to work on: fiction or this. I go back to two 'teen' stories but I'm not sure what they're about any more, or what it would take to complete them. I feel as out of place with my own work as the 'camouflaged' moth that's pressed itself into the seam between two matt gold walls, while the moth itself is furry, mottled green and brown. It would be invisible on the tree it's adapted to, but here it is too gorgeous to be safe. I tickle the tip of its wing: nothing. When I touch its head the moth falls off into my hand. In profile its furry snout, chocolate eyes, plumed head and

velvet robe give it a comical dignity. As I go to place it on the desk, it grips my finger, so I ease it onto the leather paperweight where it shifts around then falls again on its side. Okay, I get it. My little furry moth-writer is playing dead. Give it time.

The heart. Should I have written it up in the paragraph on fire and toothache? At midlife, it begins to twinge and pang over its long neglect. It says, give me the pain of love so I can heal myself. Bring on the drill. In my puritanical youth I recall urging a friend not to get physically involved with her boyfriend — and I meant even at a most innocent level. Kissing. Clinging. Love-and-sex were like voracious fire, I warned. I'd read it, of course, in some Christian youth tract, but I believed it, too. I didn't even keep matches in the house back then. But fire is one of the lively elements of which our world is composed. Can I expect to embrace three and shun the other? Can I expect to strike just a little flame — to warm the writing — and never be scorched? If you want to avoid fire, don't look for a creative life; don't delve into your own make-up; don't let yourself come fully awake.

Love is dangerous, of course. As an experiment (which you cannot instigate but with which you may choose to cooperate) it will seldom, if ever, be 'in hand'. Your test tubes and petrie dishes are bound to prove inadequate for the volatile and lively substances you are trying to contain — but it will be seen in retrospect that necessity pushed you into it in the first place.

Life itself is a terrible experiment, with death the one certain outcome, but I remain curious about what else love and life have in store before the whole laboratory makes its final flare in the cremating fire.

It's a raggedy, grey day; the shabby end of a winter that hasn't been quite harsh enough to kill off the old world; there's still green enough in the garden that spring will have to put on a darned good show if it's to make an

impression. Perhaps we could still do with a fat dump of snow to mark the transition and to make us ache for what we don't yet have.

Dorothee emails from Utah that she had a phone call at four in the morning — from Peder in Norway. How do you spell 'harmonica', he wanted to know, undeterred by her protestations about the hour. 'H-a-r ...' She tried several times but he just wasn't getting it. She said goodbye and hung up and next morning — now — writes to us Can Serrat sisters with the news. Look out! I warn her. He's making preliminary negotiations for his next holiday, his and Ivar's, in Salt Lake City.

I've heard from Moniek, too. She makes me laugh with her precisely mangled English. 'I was almost over tensed, and had completely enough of this fucking writing business, but I think I will survive, working on my comeback...'

**I**n the bathroom a beautiful moth has settled on the windowsill — thick-bodied with a regal black curlicues about his head, and a golden stamp upon each deep-brown wing. Next day I wish I'd flicked him out the window. The spider has him halfway up the web and is sucking out his insides.

The bathroom spider hasn't been cleared away, and she's done it again: made herself a brown balloon which is tucked up with her in the high corner, against her matching belly. So, does this mean she's had a visit from a male spider recently, or has the fertilisation earlier in the year tided her over to this season? The web's become grimy over the months; there are stray limbs and leftovers of moths.

**I** still find it hard to bar the door against my family — even though they're all old enough and ready enough to accept that being alone for hours is what I need for what I do.

It's not easy to figure out, as a writer with family obligations, how many hours you need alone, or how many should be spent writing. You seldom have

deadlines to bolster your case. But when you haven't written for a while and the blue fog falls on you and you doubt everything you do and everything you are; when it seems that every turn you've made might have been false, and that you have failed everyone including yourself — you must take yourself off to the web. You must write and spin all that emotion and residue and trouble into fresh and limber walkways, or a handsome silk shroud for a dying fly. Then after a bit — after quite a bit — you straighten up and run your fingers through your hair, stretch, check in the mirror that you're still the person they're expecting upstairs, and return to your family. You might even find the grace to say sorry for having forgotten what kind of creature you are, for having neglected your duty.

It's summer. A new year. We've eaten gooseberries, are harvesting currants, the grapes are bunches of green pins on the vine. Wondering about the need to publish, and in this case to publish directly personal information, I reflect how the currant's fruit and leaves smack of the same taste and scent. Fruit, flower or leaves; the life, truth or fiction — they're all of a part. Is this what art is? To produce from the common earth, via the shrub of one's own life the fruit peculiar to it.

Simple, extraordinary and, at least in part, beyond ego.

I have enjoyed good health again this year — but this is not something I take for granted. Too many women, friends and acquaintances just a few years older than I, are grappling this summer with cancer. Through the process of paying attention, writing, and waking up, I have left behind for now neurotic health complaints. The creature who kicked beneath my skin seven years ago has been born and she is not exactly who I thought I was. Hers is a more ambiguous personality; she is full of paradoxical possibilities. In her 'bad' and 'good' are not clearly demarcated; she is determined to live through her experiences and let the pattern emerge in due course. But she has a sense of

wellness which she hopes will tide her, if need be, through any actual illness, no matter what its outcome.

Ambiguity abounds, too, in this summer's weather. Today fresh wind and sun clear away the traces of last night's hail-and-thunder storm. The bees in our garden make furious sorties in the fine gaps of the day — gold pebbles flicked from the hive.

The bathroom spider's late winter egg sac came to nothing but a second one appeared beside it a few days ago, and suddenly, again, there is a strew of beige in the corner. She, the mother, is poised two inches away, alert to danger, scanning the air, awaiting the bounce-and-quiver that is the next food-drop.

On the other side of the window frame is one of last year's daughters, set up now in her own flat. Her limbs are bright and shiny brown compared with her mother's more faded translucence. She throws sly glances back to the family web. How do we do this thing?

A week or so later, in February again, I survey the bathroom webs. Oh — where is my spider? Her home is shabby with dust and filamentous limbs; the babies have all gone. And then I see her, off to the side, suspended by one leg, spinning slowly, her substance drawn tight into the brown seed of her abdomen. She is dead.

Absurdly sad, I step back, scanning, and notice that there in the other corner the daughter, sharp with life, is crouched over her own egg sac.

One desultory afternoon I take out the Spanish bags: the *gasaleo jeans* bag, the paper carry-bag from the Fundacio Joan Miró shop. In them are museum tickets, brochures, receipts, unsent postcards, maps of small towns, maps of cities. I flick through the 'travelling moleskins' — the little black books Claire gave me in which I wrote my expenditures until I lost heart for it, in which I sketched my room, the garden sculptures, the black and white moth that fixed itself to the bright blue kitchen window frame past which the tree-fluff

drifted... All these papers smell of incense, of my bedroom at Can Serrat; they smell of the music I played there, of the daily memories I pored over as I wrote, of the weedy bank outside, the red hearts on the bedspread and the ochre walls, the three mirrors, in which I saw myself in Spain — in front and behind me the rest of the world, awaiting my return.

I'd like to make some kind of metaphor of Spain, however it's not always possible to tie this object to that meaning. Spain may not stand for anything except itself. But it's a place I visited, that was new to me — in much the same way I've visited and tested some of my own capacities these last few years. And I was pleased with what I found. There was nothing fancy about Spain; there I experienced a range of emotions; there I met people and art and nature and a mountain, which expanded and enriched my inner world.

When I think of the ongoing process — of growth, really — I think of a skin between a person and her world being endlessly stretched, like paper folded and snipped into then opened out and snipped again, until the whole becomes porous, lets in more light and more of what's out there; it also contains more. In the end it might be as fine and ethereal as a web. Which side is the spider's? Which belongs to the rest of the world?

I am the person I always was. Most people have probably noted little change in me, besides the greying, the lines, the switch in occupation, over these past seven years. The alteration is in the way I see: as if from the other side of the world, as well as from the side where I live. And it's in the way I've learned to pay attention, to carry my life in both hands, to try and give it my full cooperation. I watch with fascination and grateful awe as it unfolds.



## A DEDICATION, ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND THANK YOU:

There are stories embedded in the stories I've told, but because they belong also to others, I haven't written them here. Our three children have been living illustration of the miracles of metamorphosis, and have let me know through the joys and pain that children visit on parents, that my deepest feelings never truly deserted me. There are love and friendships, rich and catalytic, that have sustained me beyond imagining or deserving. And there's been R, bemused, occasionally thrown, but making his own creative adjustments to the alterations. Home base, after all.

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