

HOARDING PARADISE: A narrative about a play about hoarding

by

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Abstract

This is a two part project: A play about the fictionalized life of Jean McLarty, a pillar of the community and a hoarder and; a paper that discusses Hoarding Disorder, the process of finding creative inspiration in the story of a hoarder, and the yearning for the sacred in the act of over-ritualizing. The play is in the form of lyrical prose where Jean tries to explain her actions and compulsive behaviour through a re-telling of her life's story. Just as Jean cannot escape from her behaviour, so too is the audience immersed in the wondrous madness that exists in her hoarded reality. The paper addresses the creation process for the play, with inspiration drawn from figures as theatre iconoclast Jerzy Grotowski, Psychologist & Hoarding Disorder specialist Randy Frost and Anthropologist Ian Tattersall. It is also the story behind the story of Jean and how the passion of her compulsions consumed her life.

Keywords: hoarding; play; Jean McLarty; creation; inspiration; ritual, sacred and; compulsion.

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Preface

I knew about the hoarding before I knew about the hoarding. For months, beautiful, haunting images had appeared on a friend's social media site but it had not really registered that he was somehow directly involved with a hoarder. It took me a while before I heard and fully understood the immensity of the story. Even then, although I enjoyed re-telling the story as people seemed endlessly fascinated by the topic, it was over a year later before I started to seriously contemplate writing a play about hoarding.

The creative process is rarely a linear process. It usually involves inspiration interspersed with the interruptions, welcome and otherwise, that life brings. I certainly would never have been able to predict when I first heard the story of Jean that I would still be talking about it years later, much less that I would have written a play for a thesis project about it. The fact that it did take years to develop also means that the narrative about the story about the play became necessarily more complex and layered. I have attempted in this paper to capture that complexity and sense of time by selecting a chronological narrative that actually interweaves three story lines: *In the Beginning* and *The End of In the Beginning* that introduces and concludes the paper; *Have we Told You about Jean?* Parts I, II, III that tells the story of the inspiration for the play, Jean McLarty, and the themes, writing process and synopsis of the play and; *Compulsive Hoarding Disorder*, Parts I, II III which speaks to the disorder and also brings in ideas from other GLS courses that provided fertile background materials for the play.

The thing about stories, about all stories, is that they have their own timeline, their own context, their own emotional landscape. My attempt to recreate some aspects of this process of the telling of this particular story is the central intent behind the paper. I have tried to reveal the myriad ideas that made up my writing process and, in doing so, speak to the relentless and transformative nature of that process. At the very least, I hope it sparks imaginations and ignite other stories, stories so captivating that everyone involved will never be the same after the telling. I know after living with Jean and her story for five years, I will never be the same.

HOARDING PARADISE

Or

In the Beginning

A play

Characters:

Jean

Boyling/Brother 1

Boyliing/Brother 2

Boyliing/Brother 3

Mother

Father/Papa/I am

Assorted suitors/others

Each of the characters shall remain on stage throughout the play and will insert themselves throughout the set. The characters, except for the character Jean, will act in their individual roles and various other voices as well as the chorus as needed. They will also provide the sound score for the play. All will wear white.

Set:

The seating is set up in the round, in a steep, tiered seating pattern where each section of the seating is pie shaped. The circular seating area will be divided by 4 entrances, with the main playing area in the centre. There is a screen that completely surrounds the seating area at the top of the tiered seating. Entrances will be made from each of the 4 entrances, as well as from the centre stage where a set piece and/or character will enter from the pit below the stage level and from in between various areas in and around the audience. The set and the audience area is white and completely empty as the audience enters. Each audience member will be given a white smock that encompasses them so in addition to white seating area. This is to allow projections to be projected onto the audience, onto the white of the set and onto the screens at the top of the tiered seating.

In this fashion the audience will become part of the 'set', co-conspirators in the action. This will allow for piles of possessions to come and go and for the audience to feel at times that they are sitting in the midst of Jean's hoarding. The atmosphere should feel and be claustrophobic.

Lighting:

The lighting will be as if cast in perpetual summer from joyous echoes of the longest days of June to the still humid nights of late July - broken only by the sound of cicadas - to the hazy, steamy imaginings of sweltering August afternoons, to the overblown dry, arid, brownness of early September as leaves slowly begin to assault the earth.

The Beginning:

The entire set is bathed blinding white light, as if looking through a white filmy haze in the middle of the room. A woman enters and seats herself on a single chair that appears like her in the middle of the stage. It should appear as if she has arisen from the haze and transported herself to this space and that she is hovering there before settling into the :space. As she begins to speak, the other characters will find their way to the stage and insinuate themselves throughout the set and audience. The woman and other characters are dressed in clothing that suggests the world of the 1920's.

Jean:

There is the beginning.

There is a beginning,

My beginning.

I remember the colour red, and the word go and the grasping of a hand around my throat.

I could not escape and yet escaped somehow to someplace that I've been wiggling towards my entire life.

I remember the cat blue, the eyes yellow and the hard light thrust into my eyes.

Everything shiny and metallic and clean

Vigorously clean

As if honed by the delicate strokes of a thousand, bazillion, trazillion cloths

Sloughing off the debris of a lifetime

For my lifetime.

But the moment of entry

The entirety of that feeling was encapsulated by a single word, a single function, a single belief

That everything, this thing was mine.

Clearly not yours

Never to be yours in my hands

My humble, supplicating hands.

The truth.

Mine.

I have roamed my territory searching for mine

Thinking it an object

A concrete something

An other-than,

Overlooked but determined to find its way into my possession.

Yet everything that I have taken in glee

In certainty

Has created a chasm deeper than the

Whole I thought to excavate, to eradicate,

To smooth out

Firmly,

Like it had never been there.

Magic.

Abracadabra.

Bewitched without the twitching nose

But with the righteousness of purpose.
I pity myself,
You,
Us,
To believe
So deeply in the simple act of exchange,
So deeply in love with some thing that
Never called my name in the darkest part of the endless night.

My papa believed.
My papa was a man of god,
A righteous man,
Repudiating faith in the absolute tyranny of certainty.
Faith seemed to be knitting together fears to create a truth
As if was too hard to believe,
Unable to be believed without the fragile weft of
Faith.

My father knew god like he knew the dew laden paths
Of our riotous island gardens.
Like the crisp taste of sour apples
Tartly singing in his mouth.
Like the rough stone
Of the dilapidated brick wall
That encapsulated the weathered clapboard house
Of his tiny kingdom.
My papa knew god.

For all intents and purposes

In the world

In my world

He and god were the same

And there was no

Beginning

And no end

To him.

My papa was a deacon in the church

Presbyterian in a sea of Anglican,

“Might as well be Catholic-ers,”

So said my papa.

To be an Anglican was to

Be a failed Catholic in his eyes.

“God can make anything anything.”

Blood and body of Christ from stale

Thin wafers?”

Well Jesus walked on water.

Transubstantiation seemed a whole bunch simpler.

I sat in the first pew

Ramrod,

Clean down to my unmentionables

And beyond

Way beyond

And watched the sweat drip down my father's face

Ramrod

in his good, grey, wool, suit

Clean down to his unmentionables.

And beyond

Way beyond.

Clearly

In the staccato silence

Of his realm

Where nothing existed

Beyond

The garden

And

The apples

And

The warmth of the uneven brick

No matter

What.

But this is about my beginning.

Mine.

I am speaking about what is mine.

I have littered.

I litter

My life with the detritus of a million life times.

Memories

Piled in specific order
An arrangement of meaning
That cycles through my heart
With the viewing.
Even now,
Even then,
On that small island
Surrounded by fresh tides
In the walled kingdom
Of that long forgotten garden
With the smell of Jesus emanating from the kitchen.
Ham.
And smoked bacon,
And new potatoes,
And spring peas
Roughly shod,
And bread baked,
With homemade apple pie
From fruit culled from
The imprisoned trees,
I collected beauty
Then ruthlessly organized
Then tearfully supervised
Their banishment
In case
Unruliness

Ruled
And god
Wept for my
Vanity.
My
Filth.
My
Soon to be
Eternal,
Fiery
Place to rest.
Consistent messages
That did little to curb my incessant
Desire for more.
This
That
And the other thing.
Always the other thing.

My mother said,

“Jean.”

My mother said,

“Jeanie.”

My mother said,

“Little missy”

And

“Miss know-it-all”

“Miss Jean Alison McLarty!

No good can come from this”

She said.

“Cleanliness is next to the great I am

I am is all and you nothing.

There is no room

In your room

For things

Other than what your father

Provided this household.

You are unbeautiful

But clean

And therefore

Must cultivate,

Originate within homeliness,

Skills,

Mad skills to refine

Your value before

The eyes of all men.

Plainly delivered:

You will provide

The miracle

I am intended

When

He made women

From the unnecessary

Parts of man

But for which

They always

Search.”

So it was said

And so it was done.

Mother

Miss, miss missed me to death.

Father

Spoke to me never

That was not

How

He

Schooled me.

It is the always that stuck with me,

The indisputable history that cannot be erased

Or eroded

Through sheer will power.

The power of one’s own thoughts,

Feelings,

Beliefs,

Mean nothing in the face of

The unrelenting

Unrelieved truth

Even when that truth
Has been moulded,
Shaped,
Historicized by someone else
Who themselves
Was historicized by another
Where questioning
Was dangerous,
Deadly
To any small measure of self left
Once the truth had
Passed over.

Like Krishna
Who reaped and sowed in the same field
Father signalled where we
Began and ended,
Face down in the dirt
Of the walled world
Where we all rotated around
His sun.
Father signalled what was
Sadness and happiness
All in the same minute,
Second,
Millisecond of existence.

Mother as much a creation as the

Four of us,

Three boylings

In his own image

And me.

All Pale Imitations

Never to be realized

And yet bred to purpose,

To a single minded purpose

Of his universe

For which we had no words.

Silent.

Always

Silent.

I gathered the three boylings around me

Imperfect though I was in this place.

Dirty and indirect

I gave them what they needed and

Took from everywhere

What would create

A force of experience

Shoving against

The force of Him.

Feeling...

Feeling...

While they fed from me in
Ways that fit
The quiet contagion
Of our love.
We did not end then.
We did not understand lines
Between ourselves.
They huddled like puppies
Around the circumference of my body
Melding into my being
In the darkness of the early morning hours,
Heat making up the chasm
Of expressed nothingness
That existed between us.
In the light of the
Weak morning sun filtering
Through the piles
Of memories that
Grew ever faster
Trying to encompass all,
Us.
No one knew but us.
And if I was coerced,
Or complicit,
Or slammed into
Being that which they needed,

Which we all needed,
It was still gentler,
Gentle,
Tender,
Next
To the brutal
Always
Of him
Who I never
Spoke to except
“Sir”
And
“Yes”
And on a sigh keenly suppressed,
“Yessir.”

In the filtered sunlight
Of the endless summer days
We hunted each other in
The stifling humidity
Of the overgrown
Overburdened garden.
Lush.
We were feral dogs
In the wilderness of
Full-bodied roses

Dripping carelessly
Onto the cluttered pathways
That wended around the house
That contained the god and father,
Speaking not at all.
We moved soundlessly through the
Undergrowth
Conducting our own wars
Encased in the cone of silence
Except for the laboured breathing
In the beaten air
Thick with mystery.
We behaved
Barely,
Sight unseen
Even when spoken to
By words
Disjointed
From the sagging porch
Where Mother crumpled
Limply,
Fanning herself indelicately
In the hopes of
Whipping up a breeze of
Change
Across her stifled body,

Into the gasping
Doorways
Of the overheated
Corridors and rooms
Of our family haven.
Among us
Father remained impervious,
Collar buttoned,
Tie straight,
As he drank his strongly brewed
Earl Grey
In the emptiness of his study,
A forbidden place
Marked by the heavy silence
Of disappointment
That brought to him unbidden
The cool certainty of ease.

There were hours spent
Spying strategically on our father
from shadows cast by
Willow trees green, overrun with small caterpillars,
Our tails wagging slowly back and forth
In the lazy watchfulness of awe,
Fearful and hopeful
Lest he deign to bestow upon us

Anything of what he withheld
In the bright light of day.
Every turn of the papers strewn upon his desk
Every blot of the ink from the shallow well beside his elbow
Made for our deepest satisfaction and pain
As we gathered together the remnants of his
Controlled existence,
Perceiving love in the flick of his wrist
And the surreptitious dab
Of a starkly ironed handkerchief across his groomed moustache.
“Jean. Jean! Jeannie!!”
The moment broken
My mother’s gasping wail
Searching for me,
For us all
Though their names remained unused.
We were a pack, a gang,
Tared with my Christian moniker
Their insipient manhood unphased
By the femaleness of their leader.
We would slip away deeper into the abandoned growth of the ravenous garden,
Slip away from the polluted silence of the imagined realm
Canonized by parents
To the real time existence
Lushly framing our skinny frames.
Burnt by the sun,

Scratched by the world,

Finally, expansively, truly, dirty

And innocent of everything.

They were mine.

The boylings were mine.

And every

Gesture,

Bruise,

Kiss,

Kick,

Caress,

Punch,

Body,

Everybody was mine.

I let them use me as I needed to be used and they needed to use.

Innocence in every act.

Circling around and through and for each other

And only then understood

Love.

It was there in the uncontrolled silence of our wilderness

Lying in a tumble of arms and legs

Breathe undetectable in the weighted

Fluidity of the air surrounding us.

Collecting them unto me,

Beautiful boydom,

Unable to move,
That my hands grasped for more.
The curious shape of the rocks
Shining diamond-like in the late dew of morning,
Called first and soon had
The four of us scouring the pathways and beaches
of the island
For the most glistening,
The most shining,
For more.
Rocks piled up beneath my bed
Across my window sill
Along my bureau.
Next, flowers, dried, pressed, mounted
Found their way into every book opened,
Between objects pressed together,
Hanging from strings tossed over peeling railings.
Drawers abandoned clothes for the abandoned shells of
Turtles and snails and the delicate bones of small
Animals scavenged from the forest floor.
Categorized, systematized until the sheer act of collection took over all the
Daylight hours of our illusory existence.
Taking over the rooms of those brother creatures
Who slept anyway
At my feet,
Attached to me

Unfettered by the need for privacy.
While my things continued to grow
Surrounding us,
Containing us,
Defining the space,
Gifted to us by our father.
My mother,
Too,
Avoided always the encroaching
Array of items spilling forth
From room undefined by occupants.
Weeks could go by with no intervention
And we would be confident
In our caged palace,
Believing in the security of our mounting
Army of possessions,
Until
The moment we returned from our daily scavenging
To find
No thing
No Trace.
Silently standing in the doorways of our sleeping
Chambers
Ruthlessly denuded
And with the civilized trappings
Of the world

Laid out across our beds.
Starched petticoats,
Cotton undershirts,
Were just the beginnings of a process
Of re-orienting to our individuality
From our pack mentality.
Slowly we would creep
Into the starched universe of our parents
And slide,
Tightly laced, onto the latticed
Seats of the family table
Wordlessly becoming that which they decreed.
Mother nervously chattering about no thing.
“My the weather!”
“My the garden!”
“Who would have thought that she would...”
“He would...”
“What is the world coming to?”
All the while
Pleating ceaselessly the carefully ironed linens of our father’s mother.
Papa sitting
Saying no thing
His mouth opening only to
Take in the overcooked meat
Leftover from Sunday tea.
His eyes resting

Hawk-like on his carefully assembled offspring
Staring frozen at the crocheted trivets
That guarded the scarred dinner table.
Days would eke by in like fashion,
The relentless ticking of the hall clock
Counting out our sentences.
Sweaty in our ties and garters,
Wordlessly bickering over
A book,
A game,
A chair favoured by one
Or the other.
Waiting for mother to once again grace
the veranda with her presence,
cloaking herself in lassitude.
And father to firmly close the door to his den
And begin pouring over endless columns of numbers
Connected to the grown up world far beyond our ken.

In between, waiting.
Shoes stealthily falling to the floors.
Coats tossed over newel posts.
Stockings balled up and thrown under the plush cushions of the wine-stained davenport
in the front parlour.
Until, once again, we escaped,
Unwound from uniformity

To the cool dampness of the garden's unruly undergrowth

Laying gasping,

Fish-like,

Returned to the liquid domain of our ancestors.

And it,

Seeing it, touching it, having it.

All began again.

We were conspirators

The boylings and me

For as long as we could be.

Far longer than it could have been expected.

Even after my body began to change.

Even after their bodies began to change.

And words.

Big words.

Ugly words.

Were given to our practice of shared experiences.

We remained willing participants

In the pack

Believing,

Knowing,

That to do otherwise

Would be to lose love.

To do otherwise

Could only mean

That we were singular, alone
Un-guarded,
Vulnerable to the hostility of actions unknown
To each other,
The each other that we weren't willing to be,
That we never wanted to be.
As if there was a choice.
That's how young we were.
It was already too late by the time we struggled to keep the conspiracy alive.
It was always too late.

My mother had ignored the incipient rise of my breasts.
The subtle moulding of my body
From angles to curves.
The boys had only nestled tighter to me
Aligned to this renewed softness
Believing it to be for them.
What she couldn't,
I couldn't,
Ignore,
Was the blood streaming down my legs
And me screaming that I was dying.
Standing on the porch in my white shift,
Blood forming seductive patterns on the crumpled, dampness.
And my pack
Howling behind me, certain of the death of their leader.

It was the one time I remember my mother moving quickly.
Scooping up the crocheted blanket that she draped over herself
Even in the heat with one hand
And using it to envelop me in its scratchy wool embrace
While winding up for a slap with her other hand
That sent me to my knees
And my pack to silence.
My mother's laboured breathing
Was all that was left
In the vacuum shock left behind.
"Whore" the mother whispered.
"Whore" she repeated.
And left me in the puddle of blood and snot.
Never to return.
The cook,
Vaguely known,
Too new to the household to know,
Was sent
Bewildered to my side
Where the boylings mewled like frightened puppies
And I said no thing.
"holy mother of god"
I remember.
Gentle hands
I remember.
I remember all of this

And

Cleaned up and in bed

The boys banished from my bedroom

Our room,

Never to return.

It began then.

It was the beginning.

Two weeks, three weeks

Me, imprisoned in my bedroom

The boys, standing below my window

Discarded lovers.

When He appeared

He said nothing.

He never spoke.

He stared at me,

Through me

In my doorway

Smoking,

The scent of his cigars lingering in the air far after he was long gone.

I became used to finding him there,

Early or late,

Gradually easing himself closer

To my bed,

To me.

Finally sitting beside me,

Stroking my hair,
My arm,
Me.
And I was...
Grateful.
So lonely without my pack.
Believing the gentleness,
Believing the love,
A replacement,
A redemption from Eve's sin.
Not a whore. A daughter maybe. Finally.
And it was kind of like the pack's love.
And it was kind of like the sense of belonging.
And it was kind of good.
Until it wasn't.
But by then it was too late.
I was committed
For life
And still I collected all that was beautiful and unbeautiful and made it mine.

This other beginning.
This strange existence
of boredom
and restlessness
and loneliness
and other than, began.

Untethered

from the grounding of my brothers' dreams.

Living even as possibilities ended,

I evolved, endlessly hardened,

Shaped into

Something else

Visited upon me nightly in the hollow silence of my bedroom.

It was not pain

Or pleasure

Or anything felt

Yet all of that.

It was a desperate certainty of destiny

Meeting me on a dark, windswept night,

Tearing me away from all that was to all that was ever going to be.

Hours without voice spent

Staring, eyes burning through an unlit room

At fossils unearthed from lands visited in the island home of my childhood.

In those hours

Or minutes

Or seconds

I imagined

Other worlds,

Dramatic for other reasons,

Where I ran with purposed fate to another life.

In those worlds created by need I would flee

Until the grunts of The Visitor unbidden to my den

subsided

And I closed my ears to all but the slow, delicate beating of my heart.

Finally safe.

I knew

With certainty

Only with more could I be safe.

Fully rejected

By mothers and brothers,

I emerged

alone

and built my bunker.

Freedom was unsupervised yet restricted.

Allowing for the

Re-taking all that had been banished and more,

Re-gathering all that had been discarded,

Re-imagining all that had been lost,

Fearing the leaking of memory as I was

Shaped into a thing called daughter.

Trying to move every element of experience

of pack

To my bedroom and keep it there

As found.

Suspended time.

No human contact allowed

Except for Him who
Ignored,
Dismissed,
Behaved as always
Save for the deliberate tread in the hallway,
The light imperious tap,
Followed by the uncoiled hinges of
My door
Pushed open.
I was only for Him.
And for this privilege
Was left alone.
Beyond the cursory
Knee jerk of
'Stand up straight'
'Landsakes, you've got the grace of an elephant. Pick up those feet'
Or just
'Jean'
My mother ceased to exist
Disappearing permanently
into the chaise lounge of the summer porch.

Singular

In the seconds

Or minutes

Or hours

Compiling the evidence of my childhood.

Gathering it to me

As proof of an existence

Before this one.

I stacked my memories around me

Filling up all available space

With my past.

Every so often

On my scavenger hunts

Encountering a boyling

Arrested in their own universe.

Watching me

From away,

Always away from me

As if encountering an alien creature

Whose scent

Promised death.

Perhaps five,

Perhaps 10

Seconds

And they were off again,

The whisper of a wail

Sighing in their wake.

No one said anything to me

No one dared.

Ever.

And still I cleaved.

To the idea of what was.

To the was that couldn't be

Any more except in the exceptional

Rarities that I found

Hidden in places I discovered

While being denied everywhere.

I grew into the dresses

That used to stifle me by their very existence.

That were too hot

Or itchy

Or

But now sheltered my body,

The body once owned by the boylings,

Now their father,

But not by me.

I had no words anymore for the me

That rode the starched crinolines of my mother's world

Silent and sacrificed.

I had the only feeling that I could express:

Desire.

An unrestricted and relentless

Wanting for anything other than what I had.

Finding within the calamity of a trash heap,

The picked over remains of a yard sale,

The detritus of a Good Will donation,
The casual clutter consistent with lost buttons,
Handkerchiefs forgotten,
Scribbles of lists undone,
A beauty
That only I could catalogue.
Discover.
Treasure.
Embody.
In the shifting mountains of mine
Arranged carefully in the room
Where I owned
Everything about me.
There was no deliberation in my methods.
I had no plan.
No thought of the cruel symmetry of past lives scraping against skin
As I pass unaware through an empty creation.
I imagined instead
smooth walls of ever more polished beauty
My fingers trailing along the delicate curves of floor to ceiling pathways
Seemingly lit from within
Carrying within their composites pieces of the world I was weaving
With desire.
And yes, them being seen
Finally, absolutely,
The fragile eroticism of the objects embedded in the sculpture of experience

Where denial is impossible.

I desired that too.

Do you know what it is to want?

To try to not want but want more still?

I wanted.

Fiercely.

Feverishly.

With anguish when I couldn't hunt,

With anguish when I did.

There was no peace from the hairshirt.

Only a lessening of tension – possibly – in the moment of acquiring

That lasted as long as a slow exhale on a cold morning.

Seeing the breath float smokily upwards,

Charming, ephemeral but feeling solid

Until the next gasp of oxygen inwards

Hurts your lungs with the harshness of existence.

Hurt my lungs with the harshness of existence.

But that moment

Revealed my beauty to myself

Even though I knew

The next inhale would reveal only the

Long deliberate road to a final breath.

If that seems dramatic,

And it does,

It was.

Is.

Wanting.

It is that dramatic that expansive

And small enough to fit into whatever pocket

Is available.

I learned

Sitting immobile

Hampered by laces and stays and tight shoes

Upper chest breathing

Humidity clinging to my upper lip

Sliding lazily down my back

Pooling under my thighs.

Boylings unmoored

I sat bound to the needle-pointed cushions

Of the rattan furniture,

A book poised in one hand

A clean handkerchief folded neatly on my lap

As the offending hand,

Sometimes one errant finger,

Slid slowly, delicately along the

something in the pocket of my skirt,

Barely moving,

Outlining its shape.

While inside

All is white heat,

Panting in extremity,

Liquid fire,
Bursting along the joints and crevices of my being.
I became an expert at my parallel existences.
The night me.
The day me.
The unrelenting me.
All running at the same time,
All pistons firing
All pity and disinterest in the other 'me's'.
Reading my other selves as if they were
Articles in the paper,
Terribly distressing of course
But not to be thought of for long.

That is the way of love of course.
Losing or winning – we are obsessed.

It is of course love
That rattled through
The golden cages of my childhood,
Slithered through the ruined grass of summertime
Beaten to decay by the indifferent sun
And sweltering shade.

It is love of course
That nestled in the valleys of the threesome

That were my boys,
Brothers,
Suckling me dry,
Ferocious and scared,
Intent upon their needs
And making them mine.

It was love that visited me
In the damp decay of wilting evening,
Taking the last of what little I still
Believed to be mine
And desperately ruining it with
An iconic devotion.

It was love
That built the fortress of my memories,
Living tentacles that brushed up against me,
Burying a deep hunger in my searching hands
And grasping eyes.

It was love,
It is love
I am assured
Even when it feels like nothing.
When nothing is felt.
I know that the decade of my childhood

Kept time with the changing of the seasons.
I am certain that fall turned to winter, turned into spring,
Ending and beginning at summer.
I am certain that I felt the damp rains as leaves began to fall,
The sudden storm of a frigid snow
The swirling delight of an April wind
Blowing the dust of the past into the street and
Stinging my eyes with the stirring of an unsettled thought.
I am certain because I've been told.
I've seen the photos and mementos.
I packed away clothes meant for other than summer.
And yet I only believe in the summers of my youth,
The dry crackling of the leaves in the wilted afternoons,
The burnt noses and ears in the fresh exoticism of sun,
The lazy boredom of weeks spent fanning myself in the
Incontinent shade of the decaying porch,
Looking for an escape from the constipated immobility of
Mother,
The now suspicious eyes of the boylings
Surveying me from the lilac bushes
Pushing into the weathered sides of the genteel exhaustion
Of the sagging cottage.
Father oblivious to us all,
Still steaming in his den
Or fiercely on guard in the scratchy wool uniforms
De-rigueur for the sleepy island constabulary,

Seeking out and displacing the hapless imbiber
Drunk on the intoxicating combination of five cent gin
And relentless humidity.
Still life's, immobile on the rocky beaches
Sprawled to the great horror of maternity
And delight of childhood fantasies
Fleeing 'town' for country
Minutes by ferries
Snaking lazily away from urbanity.

Or at least that is what was said.
What Father said happened
In his absence from the ancestral home.
Not to us.
Never to us directly.
But by means of declarative sentences
The Great, "I am's"
Formed with no recipient in mind,
Conveying deep mindfulness of activity,
enormity of responsibility,
In a world gone awry
Where only he was
dutifully upholding the letter that is the law
We would sit
submissive
as he thumped

the table

or his lap

Or his hands

Quickly, emphatically, violently together

And shape for us the world at large

Far from the clapboard house fading in the harsh light of the August heat.

Mostly, though, he was just not present

And in his absence

We could each become more of what we were being shaped to be.

I had left behind the unfettered freedom of a youthful body

Now bound in the whale bone stays

That were hastening to keep my young body in check.

But as I slid from the veranda

Down the path

Outside the confines of a wall housing love,

I would jerk the rigid framework

Encapsulating my small figure

Loose

and run,

Hair tumbling down my back,

Haphazardly,

Ribbon torn from my head by the snapping branches of

Thorny blackberries

And dive headfirst into what I only named inside my head

Never speaking words to any effect,

as the treasure chest,
Defining every area outside the tumbled brick wall
Separating me from the island life.
Everything to me then was a possibility
My corset acting as a house for all my memories collected
I filled the space between my skin and its structured surround
With all things of beauty and brightness and delight,
Especially those ugly enough to be mine completely.
Over the course of many afternoons
I altered my appearance from a mere slip-of-a-girl
With hungry eyes
To a sated house frau, grown large with comfort,
Living testimony to my adventures
stuffed conspicuously between my skin
And the stiff projection of my gilded cage.
Struggling to keep it all intact so I could once again reach my room and
Through a process of discrimination and random discovery,
Lay to rest each piece, delicately, interring it in my bedroom.
Hours spent in the sensual examination of each
Object of my affection.
Inadvertently weaving inorganic with manmade,
Reassembling the tidal shifts of people's picnic leavings,
Or a fisherman's discarded net,
Or a detail of a broken bottle smashed heavily against the rocky outcrop on a sandy
beach,
Shining tranquilly,

Its sharp edges causing small pricks of blood
To run down my torso
And mingle with the ever growing mosaic clinging to the small mounds of my breasts.
I would think for hours about how to display my menagerie,
The individual placement of each molecule and
Yet would feel the abandonment,
The certainty of artistry
In the chaotic placement
Selected at a second's whim
That soothed the ever restless,
Ruthless language of my soul.
It was only in this relationship to things re-found
that I found sustenance
Admiration,
Devotion,
All words that had no meaning for me in the human
Construct called family.

And in the deep cavity of the morning,
A witching hour devoted to torment,
When a known stranger came and took my
Body in a bed that creaked steadily in open windows,
I imagined.
Fully.
Realizing each childhood fantasy in the careless
Beam of moonlight

Creepily reflective in the panes
Angled for the coolness of the possibility of
any air movement,
I believed in the world that I had assembled.
The handsomeness of the things
Encircling the iron bedstead
Where I was imprisoned
While the Great I am gobbled me up
Piece by piece.
There, surveying my landfill
it was possible to dream
Of redemption,
Of belonging,
Of happiness.
And as He dug his fingers into my thighs and spread me open
to the wind
I felt safe,
That nothing more could happen
Than what happened,
Only an accumulation of the same,
Only more,
Soothing me.
Bringing in the acquiring,
The artistry of placement,
The exquisite beauty
Of ownership.

Peace.

Stasis of course is impossible

Even with the unwitting participation

Of all resigned to the drama of our family.

Boys grow.

Parent's age.

Clothes shrink to the ever changing demands of

Adolescent sprawl.

I waged a silent war with my body

As it transformed into adult,

Trying to push my amended form

Still into the remnants of my

Island childhood.

I refused to try on new clothes.

Refused to rid my closets

Of worn through garments.

Believing that I had escaped the next

Lugubrious leap to additional aging

Only to have my room raided,

Clothes loved gone,

New things hanging in their place.

No word.

No warning.

Just the brittle emptiness of loss

Of parts of one of the me's

Excised.

And the tingling excitement of a new
Item to fill its place,
Slowly moulding to the ecology of my space.
Before they arrived I could not imagine parting with one thread of my youth,
Feeling their departure
As a death of a loved one
Bringing only uncontrolled weeping
And fierce opposition.
After they arrived I could not imagine the feeling of the old
For the indescribable sensation of the new.
The starchy cottons and soft wools
Pouring through my hands,
Puddling around me,
Delicious,
Vibrant,
Alive.
My lustful gaze
Falling on them from across my bedroom
And seeing them as one more thing
That could be cultivated into submission amongst the glowing debris of mine.
But the memory of that assimilation
Could not be fostered beyond the relief
Of the transition.
The body shock of all change
As roots were ripped from
My body quivering

Were revisited always and I saw only destruction,

Opportunity for something to be taken away

Harvested from the fields of my memories.

I could not,

Did not remember

The other feelings.

Anticipation,

Self-important satisfaction

That came along with the new.

Every time was like the first time:

A rebirth of pain

Until a gradual realization of

Ecstatic complacency

Visited by a second's serenity

Before plunging

Down

Into scarcity

Needing satiation

Once again.

All of it,

All,

Was never spoken.

My feelings swirled around me

Oozing out of my pores in their intensity,

But remained voiceless.

I do not recall

A voice raised in anguish or joy,

A discussion more important than

Platitudes exchanged

And yet

I understood the nuances

Of the whisper of my name in the dark.

What was expected of me,

What to expect of myself.

And yet all my hunger

All my beautiful array,

The best of myself,

Was never discussed,

Or inquired after,

Or thought of.

My well-turned world of possessions

Was firmly ignored

With righteousness fuelled by

Heavenly hosts.

And I believed that it was ordained.

“There is only one rule,” said the Father.

“Only one.”

And said no more.

To which the Mother nodded.

Allowing a small, “Hmmm”, to escape her lips

A mere buzz of emotion permitted.
I am did not have to say anything more.
It was known, the rule
Golden by his standards
By each one of us at the table dining
sitting on our hands,
Squeezing our response between our thighs
And the punitive wood of the chair
With no possibility of parole.
Clarity was there in the silence of acquiescence.
We, the boylings, I, became co-conspirators
In the gospel of our father.
Everything was how he wished it to be,
How he believed it should be,
How it was.
And to go against him
By even the twitch of a thought
Sliding across our faces
Was a treasonable offence.

We had no way of knowing otherwise.
Papa was our authority
And THE authority
That governed the island.
A theocracy of one
Starting his day in blue serge

Climbing precisely onto his bi-pedaled carriage
And wheeling himself
To the greyness of his workaday life,
Dispensing law and order to the jumble of inhabitants
He ruled over.
There was no intervention from a higher power.
Peace reigned
Fisted in Glove.
Therefore, He reigned.
It was as the universe intended and would always be.
The smaller satellite of home deserved even more attention to achieve
Serenity forged from power absolute.
Preparation for citizen-hood.
Preparation for responsibility.
Preparation for life.
Remember that.
And we did.
Hearts in throat.

On the 7th day,
Numbed by hours sweating publicly on knees bruised from slate floors,
Gathered around the stark expanse of the oak dining table,
We slunk towards his shadowed countenance,
Singularly,
For reports of transgressions,
Betraying ourselves for a promise unrewarded.

I am asked
And he received
The fear tainted confessions of all,
His unrelenting regard
Responsible for the
Regurgitating of all information, great and small
While he sat motionless,
Inflicting punishment by his presence
and we, eager to name names,
Hoping
To feel the hands of the father on us,
His punishing caress
Delivering love.
Broken,
Skint to the bone,
Flayed open,
Our names calling us
Each in our own time to the destiny He proscribed.

Impossible to deny,
I built a shield
Of what was mine.
Flattened beauty from my waist to my heart.
A delicate web of impervious possessions
Creating an intricate design on skin
Residing in the tightly laced universe of whalebone stays,

And waited

For the hum of my name on His lips,

Birth order leaving me to the last.

I sidled into the shadowed room,

Easing myself into place,

Ready to make my confession.

The recitation of misdeeds

Spoken to the scarred wooden table

Inherited along matrilineal lines

were as if waking from a dream

trying to remember details of incongruity

Sensical only moments before.

The distant words fell monosyllabic into the stifling closure of the room

Feeling only the scratchy embossing of

Objects into my flesh,

Shallow breathing to allow containment

Of precious artifacts

Holding me upright,

Until stuttering to a stop

I would stand

Swaying,

Light headed by my too tight stays

Squeezing my life to me.

Silence Descended

As I tottered to and fro

Waiting indelicately
For my permission to continue.
“Oh God,” he would say
Finally,
Talking to himself.
“Oh God”, he would intone
Infer,
Assemble in those two words,
A heavenly host of angels
Swooping down to
Pluck me from the earth to
The fiery pits where all that are unclean are washed pure.
Oh God.
Just that and no more.
While in a ledger
Neatly written
Flourishes implied
Rules broken were recorded
Never to be forgotten,
A permanent testament
But for which there is no memory.
All my beliefs
Tied to the uncomfortable art
Impaling themselves in my flesh
Keeping me
sometimes

Sane.

I declared in those hours

Standing on guard

A stream of consciousness,

A deep unbridled faith in my failings

Like I am's in the

Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Who were but

Visitors in my imagination

To my eternal damnation,

Delighting as the flames

Grew ever higher.

I spoke a testimony of intricate

Spider lies

Weaving platitudes and

Everyday happenings into a long

Heroic battle of good vs. Evil,

Dark vs. Light,

Where I was always lost.

Rambling forward,

Eyes glued to the scratching

Of the pen

Sliding over dry pages,

Embellishments flowed quickly,

Lithe, exacting, fantastic

In their breadth of deception

And implausibility,
Stunning in their ignorance,
Yet all annotated with care
By the silent gliding of my Father's hands across a parchment desert.
I wanted to go on forever.
I tried to go on forever.
But I failed.
I failed each time
to save us.

The boylings and I were not the same,
Our burdens unequal to each other.
Boylings were made to suffer
So saith the father.
The boylings were made
To suffer,
Blooded weekly at His pleasure.
Belts across naked arses,
Bent over cruel chairs
Allowing for no sounds
From 'smart mouths',
"Lest you want ten more.
Do you want ten more my lad?
You'll take it like a man,
No nonsense now.
Your sister will keep count.

Aloud Jean, Count out loud so your brother can hear your

The Lord was in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights

We'll start there shall we?"

And the slap of leather on skin

My eyes fixed on the bodily fluids

Pooling at the feet of boys

Biting down on a stale crust of bread

A bullet being unavailable.

Losing themselves,

Letting go of everything

Except my hand

Tightly woven with theirs.

Our only physical contact now

In our island paradise.

Later,

Unable to enter rooms marked as other,

I sat outside the door tightly shut

Softly singing songs from days spent

On forest floors.

Leaving treasures to be savoured in beautiful

Entanglement along the eternal

Corridor from their rooms

To mine

Never to be trespassed against,

World without end,

Amen.

If you believe in that sort of thing.

Through doors whispered shut

In days we took the measure of each other

All ways.

B3: Jean Jeannie Jean

J: What...Yes? Is that you?

B3: Yes, o' course. Who else then. You're awake?

J: Now I am.

...

B3: Whatcha doing?

J: Huh?

B3: Whatcha...

J: Well I was sleeping...stop giggling you're gonna wake up...

B3: Ok sure...

...

J: What are you doing?

B3: Couldn't sleep...He's crying still..

J: Oh...does he need another cloth 'cause...

B3: Could ya? And leave it outside...

J: Do you need one too?

...

J: Do you?

...

J: I'm gonna bring fresh ones for everyone ok. Make sure...

B3: Yeah...thanks...we're kind of hungry too...

J: I'll see what... I'll bring something...

B3: Could you bring the marbles too? Can't sleep.

J: Are they in the...?

B3: Yeah.

J: Ok...

...

B3: Hey you know what?

J: What?

B3: My arse looks like a pimple ready to pop, it's that red.

J: Shhhhh. Don't make me... Stop laughing...Go to bed stupid. Ok...Go. I'll be there soon..

B3: Ok Jean, Jeannie, Jean.

J: Ok.

Drifting silently along empty hallways,
The certitude of parental authority
Routines accomplished
Allowing for undisturbed sleep,
I ferreted out food unaccounted for
And cool water and soft cloths
To lay over fevered skin
And distractions
To be played out on hands and knees
Or cradled in hands

Eager for thoughts
Of distance lands and faraway adventures.
My eternal penance for
Lacking the gift of words
To keep the Father
All to myself.

This then was Eden.
Our Eden.
Different from any other
Bonded over bloodletting
Counted but unsummarized.
And it went on forever.
A lifetime of forevers
Seemingly
Immortalized
In the undeclared new world
Order of my room.
I knew no other place,
No other garden to fill with my imagination,
No other people to inhabit my being
And could not
Re-story my life
Despite the relentlessness of adolescent hormones
Or castles of things rising swiftly
Under the subdued, wilting wallpaper

Of my bedroom.

It was all I could think.

It was all I could believe.

All I had.

All that could not last.

The end came tumbling towards us swiftly,

Unfathomable.

We were undisturbed by the process

Of Island life altering,

The outside colliding with a pace of life

That could never keep up.

Family homes sold to developers

Seeking sun and sand for those

Newly rich or wanting to be,

Creating an island of summer visitors

Unsuited to a year-round man in serge

Looking to throw out the drunks.

Buying cheaply the coastal expanse,

Until it settled

Lightly on the back of

Our peeling back porch

With the same vague idealization of

Urban living and all the mod-cons.

Money for college.

Money for travel.

Money for the kind of life

They were buying from us.

They wanted

The exact same thing

That never existed

But desire for coats your mouth

With.

If only.

Is that the story I'm going to tell you?

It's not without truth

Of a sort,

Truth being a tricky business,

Truth is,

Truth is.

Fervent did I am become,

Choosing carefully

From among his brood

The straggler,

The weakling,

The heart,

The whisperer in hallways at night,

The watcher of sisters in trees.

Diligent in his attentions,

Reveling in his pound of flesh

As job and home slipped from reach.

But there is nothing
No-thing
That would have persuaded
I am to move,
To be removed,
Except the stirring
Hand of the angry god
Worshipped carelessly,
Fervently,
Implacably,
From Sundays
Onwards.
In all things was he declared righteous.
In all things did we worship him.
In all ways.
Always.
We coveted no other god before us
And still we were unsaved.
A door is closed,
A window opened
To despair,
Crawling towards us slowly.

B3: Jean, Jeannie, Jean...

J: Huh? ... What? ... Oh, it's you.

B3: Jeannie...

J: What? I'm tired. Why aren't you asleep?

B3: I can't sleep. I was waiting.

J: Waiting for what? Do you need...?

B3: For him to go.

...

J: For who to go?

B3: 'Cause I wanted to say...

J: For who to go? What do you mean?

B3: I mean, I wanted to remember, that day...

J: What?

B3: That day, remember we found the bird.

J: What? ...You mean the bones...

B3: Yeah, yes I mean the bones on the beach...Remember how white they were...bleached.

J: Yeah, yes, ok yeah I remember that day.

B3: It was so white, everything that day. The sand and the beach and the bones and the sun... hot and white.

J: Yeah, we kept on throwing ourselves off the dock, trying to keep cool.

B3: We kept throwing you off, you mean.

J: Yes you kept throwing me off.

B3: That was so ... fun. Good.

J: It was a good day.

...

B3: I remember how white I felt, you know, like the sun was baking my bones, cleaning them, picking them dry. I felt ... I felt...

J: Yes.

B3: Peaceful. Done. I think I was happy.

J: Oh.

B3: ...I think about that day a lot. You know, just lying down, stopping and the sun bleaching my bones. How pure. Complete. Do you ever think about that?

J: Not quite that. But sometimes. At night sometimes, I think about not thinking...

B3: Yeah. Not thinking. (pause) I'm sorry.

J: What?

B3: I'm sorry I haven't been...

J: What?

B3: Couldn't stop...

J: Don't.

B3: Because I wanted to, because...

J: No don't say anything, please don't say anything.

...

B3: ... I just wanted...I love you.

J: What?

B3: Good-bye,

J: What?

Opened to a corridor empty,
A bed empty,
Never to be filled.
Days spent looking
For what was long ago lost,
Sacrificed
To the higher power.

Weeks later a hand found
Lying bleached in the sand
Incandescent in its purity.
And then there were three.
Shadows of the fourth
Filling in the space where he wasn't.
For myself,
Stealing away that
Which had been his
That now joined my fortress
Of all things beloved.
Comic books.
Aggies.
Toothbrush.
Hair.
Harvested and placed
Carefully,
Honourably,
Fingers running through strands compressed
In the darkest moments
Of the stillest nights
With the creak of floorboards
Betraying my secret to
Anyone
Who was not there to listen.
I wonder.

I wonder sometimes.
Is that the story he would have told
Our missing link?
Is that the story that needs to be told?
Or is it just that I need to tell it?
Is that the same thing in the end?
Some thing always stays
When some thing goes.
There's just no telling what that's going to be.

I dream.
I dream that
I wander down those island paths
In his wake
Over-fragrant with dying roses
Snagging his clothes
Scratching at him carelessly
Hastening him on.
He runs full out
Sure of this future
Of his vision of cleanliness.
His face,
I see it only in the half light
Of a waning moon
Except for the moment,
Arriving on the cooling sand

Of an August night,
He turns
So quickly towards me
That I stumble backwards.
Because his face
Is lit up from within
White, glowing.
Happy.
So beautiful.
So beautiful, I whisper it.
So beautiful, I keep whispering,
So, so beautiful
Echoing around me,
Taunting me
As he leaves me.
Unsaved.
Is that a dream or is that just what stayed?

My mother swooned.
My mother swooned and we de-islanded ourselves.
It was inevitable from the moment I was born.
Pre-determined,
Destined,
But like mother,
Languid in its arrival.
Last heard,

She languished on the chaise lounge,
Desultory remarks about the weather,
Fanning herself vociferously.

Last heard,

She slapped me

Into womanhood,

Strapping me into

Bones that bit into skin, soft.

Last heard,

There were no

Sideways glances

Only deep sighs of Disappointment

Gasped from prone positions.

Last heard,

Third boy discarded,

She wandered

The hallways

Endlessly.

Her hands restlessly,

Ruthlessly,

Dividing and conquering

Any object in her path.

Unpredictable,

Feral,

She roamed the house

Searching for disorder

In the order.
She did not cry.
We did not cry
When fingers clawing
She brought us to heel beside her
As we crept wraithlike around her
Trying to steal from the house.
Panting,
Clutching us,
Unwashed body pressed to ours,
Eyes glassy with needs unspoken,
We stood immobile,
Faces averted
Until she could bear to let us go
Never.
Until we pried our arms
From her grasp
And scuttled quickly
Away from her,
Escaping her embrace.
Doctor's came
And went
Leaving nothing in her wake.
Empty,
On a lounge, picking apart ceaselessly
Endlessly,

Restlessly,
Ruthlessly,
Dividing and conquering,
The threads
Of the needle pointed pillows,
Adorning withered rattan.
She swooned then.
My mother swooned.

And He
And I
Continued.
Using each other now,
Blaming viciously.
Hating,
Familiar,
Family,
Pater.
The last remnants of our idyll
Waiting on escrow and
Fall's beginning
To end it finally.
Clinging to the last second of pain.
Scenting the walls with memories
Ugly,
Ours,

Of children lost forever,
The remnants of the pack
Mewling nightly at my door.

I packed my treasures,
My beauties,
Gathered more evidence to believe me.
Cradling them in crates
And boxes
And bins
Run 'round with twine.
Secured.
Writing
Only with the lost boy's pastels.
Mine.
Mine.
Mine.

We flocked together,
Edging each other out
At the deserted rail,
Gazing as the island retreated.
Hemmed in by my pack,
My parents at my back,
We removed ourselves from our ideal,
Skipping lazily over waves

White with winds forced northward.
My things,
And all that belonged to we,
Were captured on the lower deck,
Fiercely shackled
With no hope of escape.
I remember the sun,
The rain,
The wind.
Devastating.
Consuming.
Altering our course not
From the mainland that drew closer as we drew further from us.
I remember boylings
Crushing my hands,
Plaid coats so close to mine
Creating Jacob's coat of many colours
Seamless and bleeding from the sutures.
And I am,
He,
Breathing heavily,
Gulping,
On the back of my neck
Hair rising
Acclimatizing to what was going
And what was coming.

She

Humming tunelessly

'Camptown ladies sing this song do da do da'.

A single line

Repeated in an endless loop,

Plaiting the fringed end of a shawl

Swaddling her diminishing figure.

Me,

Swarmed by them,

Willing each breath.

In and out.

In and out.

Hearing no thing

Convincing me that

Life was for the taking.

Pressed against rusty rails,

Bruising hips

Thinned by grief

Narrowed by uncertainty,

Hollow.

Vaguely feeling a need

To fly homeward

Released forever.

Needing something to end,

I vaulted up from the ferry's splintered planks

Balancing precariously at the top railing,

Held down only by the grubby clasp
Of boydom
Howling in horror
Laughing hyena-like
At impossible freedom.
Later I learned
He dragged me down.
Later I recalled
He slapped me down.
Later I dreamed
Boy 1 and 2
Holding me down,
Strangling all hope.
But then for a brief
Beauteous gasp
I was gone.
Sacrosanct.
Beatified.
That moment.
The moment from one heart beat to the next.
Remember that?
Sometimes I think
I believe,
I have lived in the hope of that one moment
That belief,
Stuck

Like Winnie the Pooh in the Honey Jar

So close.

So far

Away,

From all my living.

We settled.

They settled.

I settled into

Routine,

God of all that is possible.

School and work and school and work and school and work and school and work

In a house half the size,

With brick front and peeling porches,

A reminder of calamities

Past all that mattered.

I am farmed out to domestic labour

His services no longer desired.

Her, desultory flapping of fans unfurled

In spite of weather

Languid, languishing.

Boys tumbling out of

Whiskey and rye highs

In my retreat to sanity

Carefully woven.

3 ams came regularly

With sharp taps on the windows
And the faint calls of
'Jean, Jeannie, Jean'
And me,
Woe's me,
Hauling stinking drunk wastrels
Through small windows,
Shoving them into beds rumped
And dreaming of
Places that I would never go.
Places that I would never go again.

All the while
Humming, 'shhhhhhhhhhhhh.'
'Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh'
'Don't laugh'
'Stop that'
'Come with me'
'You stink'
B2 or B1: '*You stink*'
'Shut up'
'SHUT UP'
Hissed through teeth clenched.

As boys grappled for my love
Like a twisted rag between warring dogs.

Pulling so hard
I was rent in two,
separate and incomplete
but functional,
the filthy prize
Discarded when necessary.

Barricading my room with the
Monumental collection of my desires.
Snug.
Safe beyond the pale
Orbit of disobedient sons
And
Crazy mothers.
Fathers are of course a different story.

I am: I know...

J:

I am: I know...

J: ...

I am: Letting them...

J:...

I am: Crawl into your bed...

J: ...

I am: Letting them...

J: ...

I am: touch you...

J: ...

I am: I know...

J: ...

I am: And if you think,

J: ...

I am: If they think...

J: ...

I am: for a moment...

J: ...

I am: A breath....

J: ...

I am: that you...

J: ...

I am: Remember ... you can't leave...

J: ...

I am: This doesn't end...

J: ...

I am: Ever.

Clawing at me

With words incomplete

Strangling the truth

For the betterment of us all,

I stood before the Father

And announced my sins

Lying through my teeth
Silently.
Deflecting reality
Once again.
Demerits recorded
Logged in for his eternity
And dreamt of islands
And blue eyes
And skeletal fingers
Reaching for me.
Taunting me,
Pushing me to make it all better.

I kept myself dead,
Unlived in the world,
Responding only to the violence
Of demands
Whispered in the dark
Always capturing me unawares,
Nonsensical to what was hurtling
Towards me
A moment of discovery
to
A depravity unsung
In my furthest imaginings.
It began

As it always begins
With the taint of innocence,
Slowly.
A chance meeting of
The selling off of lives.
Belongings strewn down the
Makeshift aisles of alley ways,
Behind houses sold for taxes,
Boxed in lots,
Lots of lots.
Glass that lurked in the shadows of cardboard,
Unbeautiful like me
Until the light stumbled upon them
Through trees dappled.
Imbuing them with the secrets of previous owners.
I felt,
Slowly walking down the lane
Fingers trailing along the
Weakened tops of boxes repurposed,
I felt
Inhaling the heady fragrance of
Musty sweat and dust,
I felt
And knew I must go on feeling
This.
Everything.

This.

Everything.

This

Everything.

And could not stop.

Remember the moment,

The day

The week,

The second,

Walking into a room

Or a restaurant

Or on a bus

And you meet

The eyes of your lover

And everything is different.

What was once

A game, a sensual practice

An escape

Became all

That was possible.

You became for

A second all

That was possible.

Remember that?

Me neither.

And yet I believe it happens.

Happened.

A version of same

In the preciousness

Of objects

Saturated

With feelings not mine,

Calling me home.

They entered gently

Into the realm of

The Father's kingdom.

Wrapped plainly

In brown packages,

Cardboard boxes,

Unstamped with labels,

Screaming secrets.

I stacked them silently

In damp garages

And basement hallways

Longing for unity.

My wealth

Scattered randomly,

Meaningfully

Re-shaping the room

Where I slept

Never.

Ear to ground

For stumbling ingrates

Unshriven,

Calling themselves

Family.

Love.

Mine.

Knowing

All that was mine

Remained unopened,

Undiscovered,

Lusted after.

I knew

Better.

Clutching objects

On street cars

Destined for corners unseen

In the house

Inhabited

But not mine.

I knew

In

The sweet delirium of acquisition,

Heated gaze

Sliding over coloured beings
Encased in
Non-description.
I knew in the
Beating of my pulse
Delicately rapid,
The sting of desire
Riding the fine edge
Before release.
I knew
In early morning half-sleep
My hands sliding sleepily between
Legs spread
Hanging onto dreams
Of damp pungency,
Revelation.
A coming-to-Jesus of belief,
Of belonging to something
Greater than myself
acquiring what was needed to make
Me something other
Than what I was.
I knew.
And I tried anyway
Is that better or worse?

Suitor 1: Oh Jeannie you're making me crazy.

J: Ok.

Suitor 1: I love your body, Jesus your tits... fuck you are making me so...

J: Ummm...

Suitor 1: Just let me, I want to make this good for you baby...

J: Sure.

Suitor 1: Oh, I'm getting close, so close... are you there...? Are you with me?

J: Uh huh.

Suitor 1: Oh my god, oh god, oh god oooohhh gooooood...

J...

Suitor 1: that was, you are so ...baby...wow...

J: (pause) Thank you?

Is that better or worse?

To know what you are

And try anyway?

Doesn't everyone,

Shouldn't we all

Get to try anyway?

Even if it means

Lying in the dark

Thinking of others.

Even it means lying to yourself.

Especially if it means lying to yourself.

Suitor 2: Ah Jeannie, lovely, tell me what's wrong.

J: Nothing. It's ... fine

Suitor 2: I can feel... it doesn't seem fine Jean. You don't seem fine.

J: And yet I am. I'm fine.

Suitor 2: Am I doing something... or not doing something..?

J: No. You're...

Suitor 2: Please don't say fine.

J: Well you are and this is.

Suitor 2: Jesus Christ.

J: What?

Suitor 2: I just...I'm trying to make love to you and you're...

J: What? I'm what.

Suitor 2: Not here.

J: Oh. Sorry.

Suitor 2: Look, is there something I can do or try or...something that you...want?

J: ...

Suitor 2: Really, Jeannie, love, I would do anything, anything I can...to make this, I don't know, better, for you...?

J: No, there is nothing. Nothing at all.

Is that better or worse?

To know and to try anyway?

Shouldn't we all get to

Know and to try anyway?

To lie,

Yet want to say

That it is my silence,

That's where you need
To listen.
The reverberations along
My spine that you are caressing,
The pain that is rushing
Through my veins,
Running through this
Body you are stroking
Desiring only relief
From questions
Desiring to be known.
To never speak
Of early morning visits,
Of brother 3,
Of an island,
Where time stood still,
Where love was laid to rest,
In a garden overgrown.
I would come,
If you could do that.
I would come
Screaming,
Calling your name
In the silence
Of your knowing.
Is that true?

Or is it
That no matter
The beloved
I had been claimed
By a serpent
Long before
And He was a jealous master
Insinuating himself
Between me and
All things.
That no thing
Could be more
Insidious
As he curled his long
Body around my heart
Like a disease
That would never let go.

Or it is
A puzzle
A missing piece
That only responds to
The worst of what is offered.
Lost brothers,
Mothers insane,
The leavings of others,

Rather than the
Languorous delight of a lover's
Desire.

Or is it every thing and no thing.
That is seen and the unseen
One in being with the Father
Through him all things were made
Or acquired.
The sacred mystery
Consuming us all.

I tremble at the thought
I tremble.

They faded away
All of them
Until I could barely
Perceive them in the light of day.
All that mattered is what burned.
The two boylings remaining
Tied to nothing
Stopped whispering my name
In the dark.
Or I stopped hearing
Their sighs

Breathing on the panes
Of my windows.
Soon they moved
To others
More suited to
Hearing their muted cries,
Slipping from my possession.
And I
Surrounded by what
I wanted,
What I knew to be true,
Floor to ceiling
Of desire
Remodelled to my specifications,
Having vanquished
The past
To a haphazard pile
Meticulously cultivated.
I tell myself that.
I tell myself that all the time.

B1 & B2: Jean Jeanie Jean...

J: ...

B1 & B2: Jeannie, Jeannie, hey...

J: What?

B1 & B2: What? What?

J: I have to work tomorrow.

B1 & B2: You have to work tomorrow.

J: Shut up!

B1 & B2: Hey come on. Yeah come on...

J: What.

B1 & B2: We're going.

J: Yeah.

B1 & B2: No really going.

J: Yeah.

B1 & B2: We enlisted.

J: What? Enlisted in the army? Together?

B1 & B2: Yeah.

J: You don't even like each other... do you?

B1 & B2: So.

J: Oh. Uh when...?

B1 & B2: Now. Tonight. Now.

J: Oh. Well...do you need...?

B1 & B2: do you have some...?

J: Yes. Yeah, sure.

B1 & B2: Thanks. We'll...

J: When you get...

B1 & B2: Yeah, when we're there...

J: ...

B1 & B2: ...

(They climb into her arms, circle her like puppies and collapse against her in sleep).

Sometimes
The dark awakes me
And my piles
Of nothing
Become once again
The youth I recall.
Running,
Gasping,
Down fragrant paths.
Scatched,
Scratching,
Peeling like onions,
The sun
Glancing off our bodies
As
Tongues lolling
We raced away
From our gardened fortress
Embracing the salty roughness
Of sand
Stones
Left unturned
Cutting sharply
Into feet
Hardened through escape.
Ignoring the pain,

Taunting
With nimble fingers
The sweet softness
Of forearms
And in between toes
And thighs
Rubbing together.
I see the beautiful three,
The ugly trio,
Them,
Shouting at me
'Go faster'
'Baby. Stupid baby'
'Girl cooties'
'Jean Jean Jean Jean'.
Words of love
Strung together
In the ordinariness
Of timelessness.
And wish,
Long
For forgetfulness.
And know
Feel
The heavy weight
Of unforgiving.

They left.
I stayed.
Never to return.
I stayed.
Sentinel-like.
Warrior still.
Creating our world
In my own image.
I am hovering against
edges
Sharp with the boxes
Of other people's lives.
Desperate to retain
The one,
The only,
The chimera
Who slithered
Into the weight of the world,
Coming back
To service the false idol.
His queen
Forsaken long ago,
Abandoned to the wormhole
Linking the outside
To the inside
Whose morphing shapes

Captured her,
Surrounded her,
Anchoring her to the
Smallest
Of the smallest
Spheres,
Unable to resist
This new becoming.

All looked well.
I looked well.
I finished what I started.
School.
Teaching.
I taught.
I standardized for others.
I measured out facts
Pouring them into
Slack jawed faces
Pillow-creased,
Stumbling to school
To catch credits
Before being released live
Into a bigger pond of duties.
Dullness overtook me,
Standing briskly whisking an egg

Shifting silently from
Foot to foot
Seeing not me
Not my boylings
In visages shaggy with
Complacency.
I carried on sergeant –like,
Screaming daily
In rooms unoccupied
By higher feelings.

I longed,
I yearned,
For what could never be
Never was,
Zealous
In my need to achieve
What never existed.
Buried in other's treasures,
Believing
Religiously
That I could be saved.
Manufactured Faith was all that was required
In the endless
Quest
For what was lost.

Paper thin
I am pushed himself
Through clutter,
Shaking hands
Unable to hold back
The tide of my lust.
Perhaps he spoke.
Perhaps he decreed.
Perhaps he loved,
Me,
Or them or
Some one else entirely.
But I couldn't hear
Him
Anymore.
Wanting to believe,
Childlike,
Yet island girl no more.
Abandoned to my
Sins.
My acquisitions.
My morphing.
My endless sifting
Of things
From one pile to the next
From one place to another,

I was consumed
And unlovely
Hands digging deeply,
Fingers grasping firmly,
Pulling the fabric
Of my obsessions
Around me.
Delicious.
The ungodly trinity was gone
From me,
From us,
Replaced
By more of something else
Entirely.
I was not good.
I was true.
Is it possible to be both?
More?
I always wanted to be more.

Mother
Unravelling fully.
Head turned,
Listening
For homecomings unrealized.
Breath rasping

Clawing to escape.
Her body still,
Not even raising her hand
To swirl the air
Hoping for a breeze to break the fetid air.
She simply existed
For something else,
The eternal lassitude of my youth
Yawning into rigid alertness,
Tension emanating,
Fibres twitching,
Eyes burning to see through
Walls bursting with clutter.
For the pack to howl at the window.
For Life to enter.
But that is not what happened.
I don't believe that's what happened.

I am: Jeannie...

J: ...

I am: Jeannie your mother...

J: ...

I am: She's ... your mother is...gone.

J: ...

I am: Passed. She's gone. (starts crying)

J: ...

I am: She's gone. Gone. What are we going to do? What am I going to do?
Jeannie...

J: ...

I am: Did you hear me girl? Your mother...

J: ... I heard you.

Or something like that.

It is usually something like that.

Death.

Something banal,

Separate,

Breathtaking in its

Sameness.

Heightening my need for attainment

Of something.

Feeling time

Slipping,

Oozing down goat paths

Sullied

By the rubbing of human skin

Sliding through drifts of

Compartmentalized memories.

I don't know

I don't know

I don't know

What happened next.

I don't know

I don't know

I don't know

When it happened.

But it did

It happened.

And when it did

It was like,

It was as if

Everything I collected,

All the evidence

Against His life

Simply,

Eventually

Pushed Him

Out.

Conspired to crowd

Even the monotonous

Droning

Of his organs

Oiling his ravaged body,

Squeezing him

Out.

Like He had never
Been
There.
All that remained
Was more space
To be filled on my command.
Hardly to be remarked upon
A month,
A week,
A day,
Later.

J: Hey.

I am:

J: Hey I have dinner...

I am:

J: You, do you want it...

I am:

J: There?

I am:

J: Or...?

I am:

J: Or? Where?

I am:

J: Father

I am:

J: Father

I am:

J: Oh...Oh

I am:

J: Father.... Father..... Father...papa, papa, papa, papa, papa, papa, PAPA!

I am not good

But I am true.

True enough.

You can only be one or the other.

I made my choice.

Choices were made for me,

Conspiracies agreed to

Long before

'And that is as it is.

Right my girl, as it always is

Can't run, can't hide

Not from yourself.

Or your... Papa.'

Can't run, can't hide.

Wouldn't if I could.

Wouldn't if I could.

And I couldn't, ever.

But I'm pretty sure I tried.

Wouldn't you say I tried?

Or not really?

I dream sometimes
Of the endless
Summer on island time
The boylings have escaped to torment our neighbour's cats
Yowling in the distance.
Mama remains ensconced on the Veranda
Ice tea spiked with Gin
Reading the latest torrid romance
Behind a Good Housekeeping magazine.
Not that I know that.
I know I hope it to be true.
Papa is at his desk
Perusing columns of numbers
Unmoving in the summer humidity.
I sit,
For once quietly,
Cross legged beneath his desk,
Scuttled against the back
Believing I am invisible.
I see the cuff of his pants,
The polish of his brogues
And watch as my small fingers
Loop and unloop the end of his shoelaces,
Careful to touch nothing.
Thinking I've touched nothing.

Sleepily leaning towards the
Curve of my papa's legs,
I curl my arms around his calf,
Press my forehead to his thigh
And fall asleep against him.

Waking to

A large hand stroking my head
And the smell of tobacco
Circling my head.

I never want to move.

From this place,

This moment.

And then it is gone.

I am here.

I am fully here.

Gasping,

Breathing

Surrounded by things

Resembling other things.

Police Officer: Ms. McLarty?

I don't believe in the resurrection.

I don't believe in second chances

I don't believe.

But if I were going to believe,

If I were going to believe,
I'd believe something
That doesn't exist,
That hasn't been found
Verbalized,
Formalized,
Ravished,
Mediocratized.
Unknowable but longed for in every gaze
I meet on the street.
In the tingling of my blood
Moving between possessions
Longing to be possessed.
In those moments
I am no thing.
No thing more than the contents of the box
In front of me.
In the stare of the stranger gliding over me
And I feel.
I feel.
My skin expanding to make sense
Of what is nonsensical.
All of this must mean some thing.
The Desire.
The Hunt.
The Acquisition.

The Cataloguing.

The Need

If I feel it.

It must mean some thing.

PO: Ms. McLarty. It's not safe...

J: What.

PO: This place, it's not safe, you're not safe

J: What?

PO: We have to...do you understand who I am?

J: I'm Jean, Jean McLarty

PO...yes, yes we know and we're moving.

J: This isn't Saturday.

PO: Christ.

J: I'd like you to leave now

PO: Ms. McLarty?

J: I will call the police young ... I will, I will call...

PO: I am the police Ms. McLarty, calm down now, we're just concerned...

J: Do you know my papa? You must. Everyone knows papa.

PO: I, ...no I don't...Ms. McLarty..?

J: Would you like to see some photos? I have wonderful photos...Just let me... did you move my photos?

PO: No, ma'am.

J: They were right here. They were all right here. You must have moved them...

I retain some things
Fragments of knowing
And other things
That come swiftly towards me
And leave as rapidly
I feel my beginnings
Wrapping themselves
Umbilical-like
Around my circumference
That threatens
An end of some sort
Memory choking me
Brothers 3 say to me
You are just like him
My mother says to me
You will never be anything like him
I say
I say
I am
I am her
I am them
I am the beginning middle and end of if all
And it doesn't matter
It doesn't matter at all
Except
Except

when it absolutely does.

And they find me

They keep on finding me

I am

Gobbled up

Swallowed whole

Still

By love.

I continue

For my sins

I continue

All: Jean

HOARDING PARADISE: A narrative about a play about hoarding

IN THE BEGINNING

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

Thomas King, *The Truth about stories: a Native Narrative*.¹

I began my GLS program in the fall of 2009 and over the course of the first two fairly intense semesters one of my foremost questions was why we as a human species needed to create gods, either celestial or earthbound, to project onto our deepest fears and our most profound sentiments. Gods to me seemed to be everything from an actual idealized non-corporeal version, to football stars, to money, to sex, to love - anything that placed power outside of ourselves. We are so committed to sacredness to help explain our finite existence that even in the face of unfathomable cruelty and despair; we are as likely to turn towards divinity as we are to rail at the random cruelty of a religiously defined universe.

In the spring of 2011, I took a class with Professor Stebner and was introduced to Richard Rubenstein and his book *After Auschwitz* in which he attempts to confront this complex reality questioning the existence of a merciful, monotheist god in the face of the death of millions, whose religious and cultural identification was the direct cause of their extermination. If "Our greatest need is the need to know who we are"² then what occurs when through the logic of our own beliefs we are seemingly complicit in our own culture's attempted annihilation? If who we, or rather who we are perceived as, brings us to the brink of extinction, then who are we? Especially if it is considered god's will, a part

¹ King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi Press Inc: Toronto. 2003.

² Rubenstein, Richard L. *After Auschwitz*. John Hopkins UP: Chicago. 1966. p. 26.

of a larger transcendent mystery that is unavailable for understanding? Does that make us culpable in our own demise, guilty by association with the cruelty of a recognized deity?

For Rubenstein, it was repugnant to believe that the question of the Shoah may be answered in the creation of the modern state Israel, that the suffering or essentially the death of his scapegoated culture resulted in a radicalized Zionist movement and the formation of the much longed for return home.

I was especially intolerant of the men and women within my own religious tradition who could not or would not understand the difficulties in affirming the traditional God of covenant and election after Auschwitz.
(Rubenstein 293)

His answer was to affirm the “death of god” as a “cultural event experienced by men and women many of whom remain faithful members of their religious communities.”³ The God of the Torah has become a “no-thing” god unable to be defined by human understanding and therefore nothing that can be determined by human experience other than in the direct actions of being human in the world. God is the dark, unnameable Abyss⁴ and meaning is therefore derived not from our direct relationship with a transcendent god but with the awareness of our own death and our moral choices in the face of that awareness.

This necessary and unrelenting need for sacredness even in the face of a systemized cultural extermination may be embedded within the complex neuro pathways of our brain and the complicated development of symbols that arose to shape this evolutionary process, manifested to shield us from the immutable truth of our finiteness. In this, we have perhaps tried to fill this unthinkable but inevitable knowledge with our own assurance of continuity, a continuity that must exist beyond the boundaries of our bodily limitations.

³ Rubenstein. *After Auschwitz*, p. 294

⁴ Rubenstein. *After Auschwitz*, p. 298

Rubenstein of course was continuing two hundred years of a philosophical tradition examining the existence of god in the face of contextual evidence that may suggest at least a vacating or re-purposing of that divine mystery. Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of god in the 19th century⁵ but in his declaration also questioned what may arise from the demise of god, the question already begging the conclusion that some-thing must arise. Indeed Rubenstein, by constituting god a no-thing, was in fact constituting in the death of god that every-thing contains the possibility of god without the certainty of redemption. A democratization of divinity if you will, making the sacred, profane. However, if the need for sacred externalizations exists perhaps as an evolutionary directive, then its absence must be filled with devotion to some other purposed divinity, whatever we may call it.

There is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved. (Freud, 34)

I confess that for me the meta-narrative of artistic creation has long framed my discussion of a god or at least for a supra-rationale state of haptic bliss that I have had rare glimpses of through my writing or performing. I admit to imposing the notion of sacred or idealizing some spirit of divination in those practiced moments of unintentional symbiosis. For me, there is something about live performance, where anything can happen, time ceases to exist, or seems to lengthen out interminably, such is its power.

It is an addictive cycle the process of creation yet for the most part this is an addiction that is played out internally, or at the very least within a structured system that has cultural acceptance. I am perceived, more I perceive myself, as contributing to something, to giving something back, to responding to and reflecting a species need. In my truth, or in my addiction, I argue there is a beauty, an opportunity for transformation or at least to witness or be a means of experiencing the transformative experience. But perhaps really I am merely a vessel for a kind of learned compulsivity that has been codified in a theatrical sphere what might instead be called technique or artistic practice.

⁵ Nietzsche, Frederick. *The Gay Science*. Translator: Walter Kaufman. Section 125.1882.

It is a categorization of actions set out to create a specific goal for performative action and it is in that act of repetition a belief in transcendence. I am in many ways the child of physical theatre revolutionaries like Jerzy Grotowski whose work produced the seminal theatre text, *Towards a Poor Theatre* and whose idea of theatre was "...a vehicle, a means for self-study, a means for self-study, self-exploration, a possibility of salvation."⁶

Beginning in the 1950's in Poland, Grotowski attempted to codify this heightened ritualization of the creative experience and helped to re-define the late 20th Century theatrical landscape. What was unique about Grotowski was that he grounded his work in a series of ritualized actions resulting in an actor creating a physical score – similar to the concept of a musician who uses a musical score for performance.⁷ So evocative is this idea, and so useful, that 30 years after my theatre studies, I still visualize the work I read and the work I create broken down in this way, a physical manifestation of the writing or performance in which I become engaged. This emphasis on a ritualized physical experience would find focus in Grotowski's work as he travelled the world for 25 years integrating other cultural rites and ritualized physical practices into his ever evolving systems of technique for actors. These phases of experimentation are defined as Theatre of Productions, Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources and Objective Drama⁸ and this continual change in Grotowski's focus through the various phases of experimentation meant each of the artists involved in those phases came to understand a still evolving series of actions as "Grotowskian". Their personal experience became the basis for a public understanding of his, for lack of a more accurate term, technique. In other words, each was having a personal experience, an individuation of the sacred within the context of their participation in each phase of Grotowski's research. Richard Schechner in his paper "Grotowski and the Grotowskian" indicates that because of these continual changes in the shaping of the technique it was difficult to say "... exactly what

⁶ Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre, a text by Jerzy Grotowski with a forward by Peter Brook*. New York: NY. 1968. p. 2.

⁷ Grotowski. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. p. 212-213.

⁸ Schechner, Richard. "Grotowski and the Grotowskian". *TDR: The Drama Review*, 52:2, (T198) (Summer 2008), 7-13.

'Grotowskian' means. The stereotype includes "rituals combining materials" researched from cultural "archetypes" merged with one's own "deepest" personal experiences."⁹

As Grotowski moved through different development phases, his rhetoric became more abstract when describing the process in which he engaged his actors as did the descriptions of those archiving, participating and critiquing the process. It seemed only in the experience of a ritual physicality of Grotowski's "body of essence" where, "matter and spirit no longer fight each other and the body submits to the total control of the spirit"¹⁰ that it could be understood. Words have failed and only metaphor is left, for what is unable to be described and only can be felt, "the infinite in the midst of the finite and to be eternal in a moment"¹¹. It is no-thing that can be described, an essential, primal vision that abjures the possibility of complete knowledge and is content in that knowledge.

Margaret Visser asserts that we are "primarily an addicted society"¹². If so, our need to enact our addictions, shopping or drugs or food or art, may be in part be the search for this biologically based transcendence, a search for our own personal, ecstatic, embodied religion, rather than an escape from an unpleasant reality or rather not entirely an escape from an unpleasant reality. It is the irony of our corporeal reality that leaves us seeking relationship with our belief systems within the experience of our physical selves even as we long to break free of the physical limitations of our existence, to transcend our finite reality. But even those that ostensibly seek to transcend their physical natures must do so in the manifest reality of their own biology and their own complex storied histories.

⁹ Schechner. "Grotowski and the Grotowskian". p.11.

¹⁰ Amankolor, J. Kdukaku. "Jerzy Grotowski's Divination Consultation: Objective Drama Seminar at U.C. Irvine". *TDR: The Drama Review*, 35:1, (Spring 1991), 155-164.

¹¹ Schleiermacher, Frederick. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*. Translated and Edited by Richard Crouter. Cambridge UP: Cambridge. 1988 &1996. p.54.

¹² Visser, Margaret. *Beyond Fate*. House of Anansi: Toronto. 2002. p. 82.

HAVE WE TOLD YOU ABOUT JEAN? I

I was at a conference in Toronto in the fall of 2010 when Jean's story, as it were, fell into my lap. I regularly stay in Toronto with my friends Andy and Jamie who live in a 100 + year old townhouse. Their home has been in various stages of renovation for almost 15 years but somehow they manage to make even the stripped and ancient bead board of their evolving kitchen look inviting and hospitable. Andy is also a collector of everything from 'Fiesta Ware' to 50's kitsch memorabilia, most of which is stored in open cabinetry in their kitchen and cellar and he is ruthless in his arrangement of these collections. Everything is put away promptly and is finessed daily so seeing any kind of thing detached from its appropriate storage space sticks out immediately. However, on this visit, I was immediately greeted by what can only be described as uncanny disarray when I came upon stacks of crystal, china, glass ware, linens and silverware on their dining room table and floor. I fell silent, overwhelmed with the sheer cacophony of things, and Jamie laughed at my expression and said, 'Oh, I guess we haven't told you about Jean.'

Jean McLarty is a retired home economics teacher and a long-time acquaintance of Jamie's mother Dot. One day when Jean was 80 and Dot was 88, Jean arrived on Dot's doorstep, declared there was a problem with her pipes that was preventing Jean from staying in her home and asked if she could stay with Dot. Dot was a widow who needed a roommate and took Jean in thus beginning their symbiotic relationship (i.e. Jean had a car and Dot needed someone to drive her; Dot had mobility issues and Jean was still spry) that continued until Dot's death. Jean remained with Dot for the next 10 years living a solitary existence around the periphery of Jamie's family and, in that time, neither Jean or family or friends expressed overt concerns about the state of the pipes or her house. This speaks as much to Jean's isolation as it does to the very Upper-Canada-ness of Jamie's family. It wasn't until Jean cornered Jamie at a family dinner at Dot's, saying she was confused about a letter from the municipality where her house resided, that the issue of the house and its pipes re-surfaced. Jamie read the letter only to find out that the municipality was threatening legal action if she did not clean up her property at the house. Jamie went onto find a stack of similar letters in Jean's jam-packed bedroom all from this same municipality spanning over 10 years requesting the

clean-up of the house and yard. He very quickly came to realize from the vagueness of Jean's replies and from the state of her room that she was experiencing what would eventually be diagnosed as advancing Alzheimer's. Her declining mental capacity was cemented not long afterwards when Jean's car burst into flames when the weight of all the things she was 'collecting' in the car caused the shock absorbers to fail and the tires to catch on fire – it wasn't a burning bush but it was clear something had to be done.

Jamie went to work trying to resolve the legal fracas with the municipality and eventually acquired Power of Attorney as no one else was willing or able to take on the task and found himself a few weeks later driving with his partner Andy and Jean to this unseen house with the pipe issues. The house is situated in a toney part of Mississauga where houses easily go for up to \$1,000,000 and are usually well maintained. Given that, it was easy to understand why Jean's house stood out and invited complaints from both the neighbours and the municipality. The boys arrived at Jean's house, a flat roofed two story 'modern' house that Jean had built for herself in the early 1970's, only to find it hidden behind a neglected yard and a fence that, rather than enclosing the entirety of the ¼ acre property, instead ran around the circumference of the house in an attempt to obscure an accumulation of random items stacked in and around and against the house's crumbling brick façade.

Jamie and Andy were able to pry open the garage but were physically barred from entering by the mounds of mouldy debris piled to the rafters. They were finally able to break open a side door into the house. Garbage was piled up to waist level in the dark entrance to the house and the two middle-aged men and one agile octogenarian had to climb up on the three foot pile of decomposing garbage and shimmy down a filthy, dark corridor guided by the light of a single flashlight. There was evidence of both animal and human occupation as they gingerly traversed the hallway and it was with some relief that they reached the living room - a kind of great room with high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows - where they were able to stand up. Andy noted that when he stood up on top of the mouldering stacks of compacted items that the stacks were high enough that they were in fact standing level with the top of the back couch barely discernable in the dim light of the long abandoned building. They slowly made a careful circuit of the house, at one point even gingerly accessing the roof to ascertain its state of decay. It turned out

upon further investigation that when Jean said that there was something wrong with her pipes, what she meant was that, due to an accumulation of dog feces on her roof deck where she had allowed her dogs to defecate, the downspouts had been clogged, had overflowed, and had caused damage to the brick exterior which, in turn, caused flooding to the interior of the house. Jean had hoarded herself out of her own home.

COMPULSIVE HOARDING DISORDER I

It's a philosophical question of course. To resolve the constant tension between the spiritual and the material would be to learn how to live. You have to be soulless not to grapple with it, once in a while, especially in a society like ours, where after an unthinkable national tragedy, our leaders instruct us to shop.¹³

Compulsive Hoarding Disorder or Hoarding Disorder (HD) has been referenced in writings by Plato, Aristotle, and Dante and in characters created by Dickens, Balzac and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The Russian author Nicholai Gogol created such an apt description of a person who hoards with the comic character Plyushkin in his 1842 novel *Dead Souls* that the word "Plyushkin" is used in Russia to describe someone who collects useless objects.¹⁴ Hoarding crosses all cultural boundaries having been found to exist on all continents save Antarctica, varying only in the amount and types of items hoarded. In the past few years, there have been countless television shows that have sprung up in North America alone devoted to hoarders including A&E's "Hoarding", TLC's "Hoarding: Buried Alive"& "Hoarding: Animal Hoarders", Animal Planet's "Confessions: Animal Hoarders" and their adjunct behavioural shows, TLC's "Storage Wars" & "Extreme Couponing". There is even a horror movie called "The Hoarder" which will be released in 2015 about the nefarious goings on in a rental storage facility. Categorization is one of the crucial fundamental developmental stages for a child that

¹³ Chocano, Carino, "Under Every Hoarder is a Normal Person Waiting to be Dug Out". *New York Times*. New York Times, 19 Nov. 2011.

¹⁴ Frost, Randy O. & Steketee, Gail. *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York. 2010. p.62.

usually rears its head between the ages of 5-8 and may result in a habitual collection of some childhood fetish but when that changes into an extreme such as hoarding is very much open for debate.¹⁵

Hoarding Disorder, and shows about HD, have that heightened effect of watching an accident happen in front the viewer. We want to look away from the chaos but its own propulsion forward causes an unutterable inability to tear our gaze away from the inevitable violence. These are shows that stir our deepest fears, repulsions and desires as we too find ourselves pulled into the mountains, mounds, minutia – a geographical terrain whose tentacles speak to our addictions for something that can never be expressed, perhaps the desire for something linked to a shared cultural or genetic memory, it feels that primal. We project onto these individuals and their piles of trash our own hoards, collections piled up in our own dusty corners whether literal or figurative, having our own exits from lives that take us from our own heart and hearth.

It is clear that we within Western culture have invested in an obsession of this voyeurism towards an act of acquisition and, as important, retention of such meaningful items as newspaper flyers or 100 boxes of Kraft dinner. At least, we can assert as we sit on our couch we bought on credit, watching these shows with horrified fascination, that it is someone else engaging in this behaviour, not us. It is, of course, us, just heightened to such an extent that we can self-righteously proclaim moral superiority for at least as long as the television program lasts. However, whether we are extending into our already extensive debt or watching a person forced out of her home due to the extreme amount of trash she's collected, "a void is suggested".¹⁶

Hoarding Disorder (HD) is thought to affect between 2% and 5% of the population or 6-15 million people in the United States alone. It is often linked with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) a complex behavioural disorder characterized by highly repetitive and often bizarre actions stemming from feelings of extreme and

¹⁵ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 58.

¹⁶ Chocano. "Under Every Hoarder".

paralyzing anxiety and thoughts of impending doom. Interestingly, OCD and its accompanying pathology is thought to represent approximately 1% and HD studies report that only about ¼ of people who hoard have OCD.¹⁷ As of 2013, the two disorders have been granted separate definitions within the DSM-V¹⁸ speaking to the concomitant but separate pathologies of the two disorders.

A person with OCD utilizes ritualized actions as a physical enactment of a kind of magical thinking whereby the number of times each action is repeated, leads to a lessening of anxiety and overall sense of danger. This kind of thinking is a more overt example of the kinds of childish systems of beliefs that seek to impose both control and an awesome sense of responsibility on the person engaging in the actions. For example, “step on a crack, break your mother’s back” is a well-known childhood game and rhyme that at once gives the illusion of immense power – the ability to directly affect the adult world that controls the child – and the terrible tension arising from the possibility of causing a mother’s injury or death by not paying attention to the rules of the game.

OCD is instead perhaps overly-zealous ritualizing and an attempt to “to stabilize a person threatened by disintegration”.¹⁹ These rituals are, despite the very real disruption of daily life and the time needed to perform them, and the social suffering that accompanies them, not attempts to disconnect from the world, but an incomplete and perhaps even synaptic impulse to re-connect ritual to an evolutionary source. Carl Jung speaks to this dislocation of ritual in myth in his description of archetypes “. . . mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual’s own life and seem to be aboriginal, innate and inherited shapes of the human mind. Just as the human body represents a whole museum of organs, each with a long evolutionary

¹⁷ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 121.

¹⁸ DSM-V, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

¹⁹ Plaut, A. “Where Have All the Rituals Gone? Observations on the transforming function of rituals and the proliferation of psychotherapies”. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 20:1, (1974), 174-182.

history . . . (because) like, instincts, collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited.”²⁰

According to British psychologist A. Plaut, OCD may then be an extreme example of a certain kind of instinctual neurological hard wiring or, along Jungian thought, a kind of dream state or altered state that allows for the unfiltered and mostly unwanted little voices that urge the participants on in some inward numerical sequence of repeated actions. Most of us have the experience of a ‘little voice’, an inward thought that we are unable to shake. Those voices make an appearance as a nagging feeling that something isn’t right or complete in our sphere of influence but we are either able to ignore those voices or move on with daily life despite those feelings. This is not the case for the person with OCD because the ritual subsumes all their emotional and intellectual resources.

It is pleasure that separates HD from OCD. People who are hoarders enjoy the hunt, the ritual as it were, of acquisition. In fact the process of acquisition may be so pleasurable that the person may actually experience an altered state, where the ritual wipes out all thought of the very real consequences of excessive acquisition. They ‘track’ down their treasures, be it clothes or cardboard boxes or telephone books, and immediately these items take on an association and meaning that far outweighs the value of the item. Frost & Steketee state that this feeling of pleasure is so strong that “In Hoarding, we see . . . positive emotions propelling acquisition and saving . . . we see negative emotions as well . . . but these arise from attempts to get rid of possessions and to avoid acquiring new ones. The mixture of pleasure and pain hoarding provides distinguishes it from all of the anxiety and mood disorders.”²¹

It could be argued that people who hoard are merely engaging in an activity that millions of collectors do every day. It is only in the extremity of their collections, both in emotional weight, types of items accumulated and their retention that they vary from the

²⁰ Jung, Carl. *Man and His Symbols*. Edited and with an Introduction by Carl Jung. Dell: New York. 1968. p.64.

²¹ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p.13.

ardent philatelist or bibliophile. There are after all over 20 million philatelists in the United States alone²² and their compulsions are considered normal. Walter Benjamin likened his collection of antique books to a “rebirth”²³ every time he added to his collection. It is this ritual of renewal that haunts the person with HD as they seek to extend the feeling of pleasure even at the expense of their own wellbeing.

Psychologists Gilliam and Tolin in their 2001 article, “Compulsive Hoarding”, identify four main components of Hoarding Disorder: 1) Excessive Acquiring; 2) Failure to discard possessions; 3) Clutter that precludes activities for which living spaces are designed and; 4) Significant distress or impairment in functioning.²⁴ Interestingly, there is significant cross over in theologian Carl Seaquist’s description of the “General Features of Ritual”: 1) Compulsion; 2) Rigidity; 3) Goal Demotion, where the performance is divorced from observable goals; 4) Internal repetition and redundancy and; 5) a restricted range to themes²⁵. All this to indicate that the cognitive systems that define the ways in which we find satisfaction in ritual may only vary in the degree of compulsion or impulse between normative and dysfunctional or deviant behaviour.

Therefore, the ritual of hoarding may be perceived as an attempt at connection for the person with HD however it may look to an outside observer. Anthropologist Barbara J. King concludes that “ritual is the social act that is basic to humanity. Ritual does not just contract the sacred; it creates the sacred. In this way, ritual transforms human actions”²⁶. Frost and Steketee believe that through the acquiring of things, even things that are cast-offs, people who have HD are actually seeking to weave together a shared history, an experience with others through these possessions, in effect create and control their world through a ritualized acquisition. People with HD acquire an

²² Shepard, Paul. *The Others: How Animals Make Us Human*. Island Press: Chicago.1996.

²³ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hanna Arendt. Schocken Books Inc: New York. 1968. p.62.

²⁴ Gilliam, C.M. & Tolin, D.F. “Compulsive Hoarding”. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 74:2, (Spring 2010), 93-121.

²⁵ Seaquist, Carl. “Ritual Individuation and Ritual Change”. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 21, (2009), 240-360.

²⁶ King, Barbara J. *Evolving God: A Provocative View of the Origins of Religion*. Doubleday: New York. 2007. p.104.

identity in relationship to their possessions and it is this deeply felt sense of identification that made it exceedingly difficult for anyone with HD to let go of any of their possessions as it means in a very concrete way that they are letting go of a part of themselves.

A person with HD will, for example, decide to commit to the process of clearing out a room or area only to find themselves in a process called “churning” whereby each piece of paper, each thing, has such connections to a person or an event or news item or even a potential ‘road not taken’ that, rather than releasing any of their possessions, they will only be moving the location or order of a stack of items, churning or turning over the items, rather than actually throwing anything away. This seemingly impossible to understand sense of over-identification may actually be an “extraordinary ability”²⁷ to visually categorize and appreciate the items that they hoard in ways that to the rest of us may seem random or even possibly repulsive but may be a physical representation of memory. The hoarder may be creating a visual representation of their own personal histories, a ritualized environment that is recalled every time their gaze passes over the sheer enormity of their manifested obsession. Or even a ritualized artistic practice that resonates on a different level for the person with HD. Frost describes his own observations of the homes of some of his patients: “The darkness of the houses . . . struck me; they were practically caves. To me, they seemed dreary and menacing but many hoarders . . . view their homes very differently. It’s possible that people who hoard, prefer small enclosed spaces – almost the opposite of claustrophobia. Perhaps they close in their living spaces to achieve a cocoon-like feeling of comfort and safety”.²⁸

This womb-like existence calling to something primal in the person with HD may be an attempt to connect to others by literally attempting to possess their possessions, as suggested by Frost and Steketee. It also speaks to a literal wall of things that is built between those with HD and the rest of the world. They are safe, protected in their realized fortress, a fortress that continues to grow and evolve around them. Interestingly, people with HD are not necessarily less likely to form romantic relationships, but the person with HD leaves less room for another person to co-exist in

²⁷ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 77..

²⁸ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 85.

their cluttered environment, and it is usual that hoarding is cited as the reason for relationship breakdowns. More, people with HD develop what is referred to as “clutter-blindness” and are only brought to awareness of their hoarding by the presence of another person in their homes, as if the person with HD is seeing through the eyes for the stranger in their midst. Frost and Steketee state that so deep is the denial of people with HD that they literally no longer see their environments and forget until reminded, or until they are shown photos of their house, that they have had to carve out “goat-paths” to traverse their own homes²⁹. It is as if they develop a form of dysmorphic relationship with the shape of their houses, even to the extent that when asked to draw their homes, they draw the wall where the wall of garbage is rather than at the structural wall that forms the house itself. It is in the act of hoarding, of bringing new items into this sacred space, and by extension new ideas and possibilities into their homes, that they are constantly re-drawing & re-creating the boundaries of their own imagined worlds.

HAVE WE TOLD YOU ABOUT JEAN? PART II

Jean’s dementia meant she could no longer answer questions about how her house had come to be in this state. In fact, Jean was as genuinely dismayed at the state of the house as if she too was seeing it for the first time and had had no part in its deterioration. Andy and Jamie tried to involve her in emptying her house in preparation for selling, but quickly realized that Jean could not participate because, despite her rapidly escaping past, she became upset at the idea that anything would be removed. The moment that one item was taken from the home, the still spry 88 year old would immediately dumpster-dive and agitatedly remove the removal, with equal dismay given to a discarded supermarket flyer as to a damaged photo album.

Upon being named Power of Attorney for Jean, Jamie had tracked down another house that Jean owned but had never inhabited. It had remained unoccupied since one of her now deceased brothers had moved from the residence over 25 years before. She

²⁹ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 163.

had simply found someone to mow the lawn and keep an eye on the place and allowed it to disintegrate. It was eventually purchased by the church next door to the house and they tore down the dilapidated house to expand their parking lot. Jamie also discovered a number of un-cashed dividend and pension cheques in the disordered clutter of Jean's bedroom at Dot's house and amongst the accumulated debris at her own house; these finds involved great patience and tenacity in picking through piles of disintegrating paper to find any item of value. Jamie had to go back to have many of the cheques re-issued as they had expired years before. I was present for one sorting session when more cheques were discovered in a few boxes yet to be sorted in Jamie and Andy's cellar. I will never forget the smell of the deteriorating boxes and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the lack of priority of objects in Jean's collections. Jean had also accumulated all the letters from all of her family members from the last 50 years and as they had died, she had added their possessions to her piles, tangibly merging their memories to hers.

Jamie and Andy worked for six months and removed 20 metric tons of garbage from the house, even finding the original architect and the original blueprints of the house to try to guide their way through the process. They shoveled their way through the home, looking for anything of value amidst the overwhelming filth and debris that filled the home, and found amongst other things, three organs (Jean did not play the piano or the organ), collectible designer chairs from the 60's, closets filled with clothes sealed in time from whenever Jean had been unable to access them anymore due to her hoarding habits, and boxes and boxes of estate sale items that Jean had compulsively purchased, only to bring home and discard upon another forgotten pile of possessions. Jean was collecting other people's artifacts and histories and amalgamating those items with her and her family's own hoarding narrative. It is both sad and ironic that she couldn't remember the history of the purchases of the piled items much less the history of the original owners. These, then, were some of the items that had been residing on the dining room table of Jamie and Andy when I arrived on their doorstep - reclaimed objects waiting for an antique dealer to come and assess their value. Andy and Jamie had created a systematized sorting and washing station in the cellar of their townhouse; there were several tubs of washed items that they were still carefully sorting 10 months after the last bin full of garbage had left Jean's property.

I became privy to correspondence that filled in some of the gaps about the immediate and extended family that helped explain Jean's own isolation. It came as little surprise that the relationships were layered and complicated and at times disturbing, as when it was revealed that Jean had stolen jewellery of a beloved maternal aunt as her aunt lay on her deathbed. The correspondence took place between Jean and a niece that the aunt was living with at the time of the aunt's death. The niece expressed both dismay and understanding at Jean's actions as apparently the ring had been in Jean's mother's family and Jean believed it should be returned to her upon the aunt's death. I insert this story for two reasons: to show that what Jean collected was not the accumulation of wealth but rather the control of the accumulation and fear of its loss and; to provide perhaps a small reason why Jean had become so isolated over the later years in her life as she made may have made choices that emphasized her relationship with things over any other kind of relationship.

Andy is a graphic artist and photographer and meticulously detailed every step of the clean-up process, up to, and including, the moment they were able to reveal the beauty of the original mahogany built-ins in Jean's house. These photos included a spiral staircase that looked like a DNA helix as diluted light coming in through the floor to ceiling windows in the now cleared great room fell upon its now uncovered balustrade. They hadn't even known the staircase existed when they first arrived at the house as it was completely covered in garbage. It was only when they found the original floor plans when they were extracting the main floor from debris that they knew then that the spiral staircase existed and from that point on took it as a point of faith that it would eventually appear as the house was emptied.

COMPULSIVE HOARDING DISORDER II

The pathologizing and inevitable categorization and quantification of HD cannot, and perhaps should not, entirely define the experience. Scott Herring in his work *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture* traces the origin of the modern hoarder back to the 1940's with the infamous case of Langley and Homer Collyer,

siblings who lived in Harlem, New York and who came to define the idea of the hoarder within at least Western constructs. In fact, so infamous did they become that the NYC fire department called it a 'Collyer' whenever faced with cases that involved HD.³⁰ The brothers came to fame not so much with their lives but rather with the bizarre nature of their deaths, when one wheel chair bound and blind brother died of a heart attack caused by malnutrition because he could not escape the house when his care-giver brother died pre-maturely in their pile of possessions.³¹ Their neighbours only realized that there was something amiss when the able-bodied Langley had not been seen for a number of weeks and there was the smell of decomposition coming from the house. The brothers had crammed so much stuff into their house that the fire department and police had to access the house from the attic. They found Homer almost immediately, dead in his wheel chair, but it took nearly six weeks to navigate the debris to find Langley, who had been killed by one of his own booby-traps set to dissuade thieves. This story was such a watershed moment in the neighbourhood's history that, once the house was cleared of over 52 tons of garbage and then eventually condemned and torn down, the city of New York chose to create a park and name it after the two brothers,³² a park that still exists today.

Herring asserts that the over-pathologizing of HD negates the effects of the socio-economic contexts specific to the case or indeed the context of any case. He sees the brothers as engaging in a class struggle that originates with the changing Harlem demographics and the fading fortunes of the Collyer family, a Caucasian family caught up in the African-American migration from the rural south to the urban north in search of jobs. He argues that the 20th Century obsession with scientific classification pathologizes those things or people that do not fit neatly or conveniently or quietly into defined roles. It is not a coincidence that Randy Frost whose work with HD assisted in the new DSM-V classification of hoarding as a distinct disorder, has been linked to Sandra Felton, a

³⁰ KeithYorkCity, Blog. September 2012

³¹ Herring, Scott. *The Hoarder – Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2014.

³² KeithYorkCity, Blog, September 2012.

Professional Organizer, as his focus is mainly Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.³³ It is a method that is enacted with the myriad shows about HD where professional organizers arrive to school people with HD on how to empty their homes.³⁴ Marry that obsession with the development of the soundbite; it negates any discussion besides the obvious in regards to hoarding or any other complex phenomena. For Herring, there needs to be a place within the understanding of this individual story and within the understanding of our societal forces for deviance or perversion to exist without it being necessarily a pathology. Looking within a contextual paradigm, it is difficult to assess what led to the Collyer brothers' obsession but most likely it is a combination of factors that ultimately reveals the entire story.

There are, of course, many examples of behaviours or experiences that have been automatically dismissed as fringe or pathological behaviour. For example, there has been ongoing research linking religious experiences or conversion experiences to epilepsy³⁵, psychosis³⁶ and schizophrenia³⁷. Yet what remains consistent across these studies is that the majority of the subjects examined, regardless of their physical or psychological conditions, perceived these experiences as positive and in some cases life-altering. Psychologist Robert Panzarella attributes permanent, lasting affects reported by over 90% of the subjects involved in his research³⁸. Indeed, part of his research indicates that some subjects were even loath to discuss their experiences, not because of a sense of judgment about the veracity of their experience, but because they

³³ Cognitive Behaviour (also known by its abbreviation, CBT) is a short-term, goal-oriented psychotherapy treatment that takes a hands-on, practical approach to problem-solving. Its goal is to change patterns of thinking or behavior that are behind difficulties, and so change the way they feel about their helplessness. Definition: psychcentral.com

³⁴ Herring. *The Hoarder*. p. 301.

³⁵ Dewhurst, Beard. "Sudden Conversions in temporal lobe epilepsy". *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 117, (1970), 497-507.

³⁶ Penzner, Kelly, Sacks. "Religious Conversion in a Psychotic Individual". *Journal of Religious Health*, 40, (2010), 351-360.

³⁷ Wooten, Raymond J., Allen. David F. "Dramatic Religious Conversion and Schizophrenic Decompensation". *Journal of Religion and Health*. 22:3, (Fall 1983).

³⁸ Panzarella, Robert. "The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Peak Experiences". *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 20:69, (1980).

“felt that to describe the experiences would reduce them and inhibit their occurrence.”³⁹

Perhaps a further suggestion might be that those who, because of their personal circumstances, operate outside the established parameters of societal ‘norms’, may in fact be open to a different kind of experience of being in the world, perhaps a more sensitized reality, a different kind of beauty, fully embodied.

Religious experiences seem only to be able to be expressed in comparison to another knowable physical experience. Thus we may not understand god but we do understand our sexual selves and our sensual experiences in the world and in a very concrete way we can achieve a moment of transcendence in our physical connection with another person. This may be backed up by recent medical research on brain activity which indicates the connection of the same kind of brain activity present during sexual experiences may also be present while in experiences that are identified as religious or transcendent.⁴⁰ The pleasure or ecstasy of sexual experiences may be biologically determined for an evolutionary gain. If we are activating the same brain centres for religious experiences, are we not then programming or perhaps programmed to seek transcendence through our physicality?

In the 1960’s, Psychologist Abraham Maslow would re-define conversion or religious experiences. He specifically focused on what he described as the “de-sacralising” of life by organized religion.⁴¹ Citing the compartmentalization of the sacred from daily life, by creating a day, time, place and method of ritualized behaviour through controlled rites and tedious rituals that, “most religions have wound up denying and being antagonistic to the very ground upon which they were originally based”.⁴² For Maslow, one of the issues that concerned him most about this change in emphasis was to take the transcendent and make it ordinary. This meant that the rituals were not enabling people to maintain a sense of equilibrium, or resiliency in the face of suffering

³⁹ Panzarella. “Aesthetic Peak Experiences”. p. 72.

⁴⁰ D’aquili, Eugene, Newberg Andrew. “Exploring the Biology of Religious Experience”. *National Catholic Reporter*, April 20, 2001.

⁴¹ Maslow, Abraham H. *Religious Values and Peak Experiences*. Kappa Delta Pi. Ohio State UP: Columbus. 1964. p. 33.

⁴² Maslow. *Religious Values & Peak Experiences*. p. 25.

or hardship: “In the peak experiences, not only is the world seen as acceptable and beautiful, But the bad things about life are accepted more totally than they are at other times. It is as if the peak experience reconciled people to the presence of evil in the world.”⁴³

Maslow speaks of our proclivity for peak experiences; our desire to seek them is in itself a further ritual to manifesting god, “another way of becoming “god-like”⁴⁴. It is a way for god to enter not just our spiritual realm, but our physical realm and therefore become sensually experienced. If we take god in, then we are ingesting, just as the body and blood of Christ is consumed in Christian rites, some portion of the infinite nature of god that we desire to achieve. We do not wish to achieve symbolic interaction but a bodily inter-connection that can alter us, affect us, on a cellular level. Can it be so difficult to understand how that physical inter-connection can so easily deviate from normative behaviour?

It seems we do need then something to call ritual, something to call church, something to call sacred, some-thing more than everything else and if we choose to do that by accumulating things beyond our capacity, we should not necessarily refer to that accumulation as pathological. We don't, after all, always apply the same standards when assessing individual cases regarding hoarding. The Collyer brothers are reviled for their spectacular accumulation. However, artist Andy Warhol, a person with documented hoarding tendencies, had his ‘collection’ sold at auction and attached to an ever growing estate.⁴⁵ So it seems that context may play a huge role in how willing we are to ascertain pathology in any given situation. It is ironic that hoarding seems to be most tied to the accumulation of wealth and misers in many cited prior to the 19th Century. Now we honour the 1% of the population that accumulates money at the expense of the 99%, while reviling those whose personal collection of toilet paper rolls offends our sense of order. Jerzy Grotowski is lauded as an iconoclast forever re-mapping theatre practice in the 20th Century. But it could be argued that he and his acolytes became lost in the

⁴³ Maslow. *Religious Values & Peak Experiences*. p. 64.

⁴⁴ Maslow. *Religious Values & Peak Experiences*. p. 64.

⁴⁵ Herring. *Hoarding*. p. 303.

ritualized physical rigour of their practice, even to the extent of believing that there was only one opportunity for a truly authentic performance experience, a single moment of perfection that was lost, once realized.⁴⁶ It was the ritual or the process that became an end, the ritualized perfection itself, a type of hoarding of experience that negates the original intent of live performance experience; relationship with an audience. The extreme of this ideal consequence of ritual cannot help but be at the forefront of the question of who gets to decide whose accumulation is worthwhile and whose is revolting.

I would assert one more factor that is not often discussed within pathology of HD and that is the contributing factor of the family structure of those who hoard - a context that Herring touches on in regard to the Collyer brothers, but does not delve into in any depth. It is difficult to assess what role the foundational reality of these two men played in their hoarding, just as it is with Jean, as there is no specific information about how their family life affected them as people, much less as individuals with HD. Yet there is no way not to take it into account because it seems the evidence of family trauma is present in the compulsivity of behavior. Cognitive Behavior Therapy⁴⁷ has taken the lead to address the symptoms of HD and suggest solutions by re-structuring behavioural patterns. There has been a limited discussion about familial structures and behavior in regards to the development of hoarding within individuals.

Hoarding may be a distinct way of remembering for those engaged in the activity. For most of us, the details of our lives retreat into memory, are softened or changed by the passage of time and the constant gathering and re-gathering of further details about other issues, concerns and ever shifting realities. We may perhaps even welcome the persistence of the sharpness of an immediate situation giving way to what may be a new perspective about our lives. This does not, of course, mean that we do forget or that we are successful in always masking the results of our peculiar individuation. Oddly or, perhaps, most tellingly in studies done with individuals with HD, while there isn't necessarily a higher correspondence of trauma in their personal histories than the

⁴⁶ Amankulor. "Jerzy Grotowski's Divination Consultation". p. 162.

⁴⁷ Cognitive Behaviour (also known by its abbreviation, CBT) see footnote 34.

general population, there were less incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in those individuals who experienced trauma because their compulsion acted as barrier and protected them from the long terms effects of PTSD.⁴⁸ For them, HD was a way in which they coped with what happened in their lives, buffering them from the psychological effects of severe trauma.⁴⁹ This compulsive drive to hoard is so strong that Jean, who could no longer remember her own history, could not stop hoarding, even in the midst of advancing Alzheimer's. Andy and Jamie had to clean out her room and Dot's garage every few months to prevent the accumulated things from taking over Dot's house. There have been also documented cases of hoarders actually dying when their hoarding was forcibly cleared out and this practice was discontinued in some areas in the USA due to the high incidence of mortality connected with the practice.⁵⁰

COMPULSIVE HOARDING DISORDER III

Jean's story remained fresh in my mind and in the fall of 2011 when I took a course with Professor Duguid exploring the human species ethical treatment of animals. Within the framework of the course, there was much discussion of the human species' evolution of our infamous 'big brain' and our development of abstract thought – art, god, the 'otherization' of non-human species - and I began to think of hoarding as possibly the absence of something that was made apparent by the overwhelming presence of democratized things that are hoarded. I hypothesized at that time that perhaps it was our

⁴⁸ PTSD Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental illness. It involves exposure to trauma involving death or the threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence. PTSD causes intrusive symptoms such as re-experiencing the traumatic event. Many people have vivid nightmares, flashbacks, or thoughts of the event that seem to come from nowhere... PTSD can make people feel very nervous or 'on edge' all the time and may have a hard time concentrating, feel irritable, or have problems sleeping well. They may often feel like something terrible is about to happen, even when they are safe. Some people feel very numb and detached. They may feel like things around them aren't real, feel disconnected from their body or thoughts, or have a hard time feeling emotions. People also experience a change in their thoughts and mood related to the traumatic event. For some people, alcohol or drugs can be a way to cope with PTSD.
www.cmha.ca

⁴⁹ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 92.

⁵⁰ Frost & Steketee. *Stuff*. p. 147.

distancing from animals and their invisibility in human's current world - animals being our first and most distinct other - that left a permanent absence in a Jungian defined collective unconscious⁵¹ - and, for some people, that was played out in the extremity of hoarding. In other words, hoarding was actually just a materialistic example of an addiction that was attempting to fill or perhaps obscure a lack of something in our human cultural and/or evolutionary legacy. I was fascinated by the idea that these first interspecies relationships may have produced the ritual, in effect created gods and portable mythologies, in an attempt to produce a continuous cycle of renewing the human species survival. It may be that those were all the first attempts to address the void of our own mortality characterized through a repetition of actions and beliefs. Paul Shepard believed that our very ideas of self and society “. . . were shaped by the traits of animals observed, the dangerous, competitive, beautiful, tasty, scrounging Others. The human hunter or hunted shared recollections through stories, song, and performance, nouncing and verbing the Others and, by indirection and insight, themselves.”⁵²

Our brain evolved around an interspecies relationship and indeed these integral relationships means perhaps that it was the only way in which our brains could have evolved. We no longer understand the reciprocal nature of interspecies exchange because we no longer live in an interspecies world where reciprocity is necessary for survival and ritual is necessary to lay the emotional, psychological and physical reality of this exchange. This perceived lack also means we no longer understand the transformative nature of ritual, a transformation that informs us as a species and as individuals. It may be that we have forgotten that “whoever we eat, we contemplate”⁵³ and that the cyclical rhythm of hunter and hunted has been imprinted in our physical beings and our mental processes.

Philosopher Kelly Oliver writes in *Animal Lessons* that animal pedagogy frames all of human animals' relationships to other species and to the world in general and over the millennia of multi-species discourse, non-animals have provided the very models for

⁵¹ Jung. *Man and His Symbols*. p. 42.

⁵² Shepard. *The Others*. p. 24.

⁵³ Shepard. *The Others*. p. 30.

'otherizing' others in the world. Our very identity as human animals hangs on the notion of our separation from something or someone that is not us, a separation that provides the very notion of a human being and that this distinction is responsible for the human propensity for binary thinking.⁵⁴ It may be that other animals revealed our human selves to ourselves by way of a metonymic process and maybe one of the reasons for the emergence of our larger brains. As a species, keeping track of other species may so have obsessed us that our brains evolved to become larger and more complex so that we could always keep the 'other' in mind. Therefore, it could be our compulsions that propelled us forward into the very realm of abstraction that offered the opportunity for representational thought and makes human beings, as Anthropologist Ian Tattersall would have it, such, ". . . fascinating - and dangerous creatures."⁵⁵

The story of the human animal is for millions of years the story of all life forms. As hominid species transformed through what Tattersall refers to the "opportunistic process of evolution"⁵⁶, it did so along a whole other cacophony of varying species, including other hominid species, involved in the same process. Tattersall points out "that features linger in a population as long as they simply don't get in the way"⁵⁷. For instance, speech mechanisms in human beings were available for hundreds of thousands of years before there is any clear indication that they were ever utilized for speaking and instead are a useful exaptation, a random evolutionary ability that ended up as a defining moment for the human species. Tattersall explains that the ". . . human brain is the outcome of a hugely long evolutionary history. . . descended from simple structures that first emerged something like 400 million years ago...as far as we know, not much if anything has been 'lost' in the course of human brain evolution."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Oliver, Kelly. *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us To Be Human*. Columbia UP: New York. 2009. p. 33.

⁵⁵ Tattersall. *The Monkey in the Mirror: Essays on the Science of What Makes us Human*. Harcourt: San Diego. 2002. p. 78.

⁵⁶ Tattersall. *The Monkey in the Mirror*. p. 39.

⁵⁷ Tattersall. *The Monkey in the Mirror*. p. 52.

⁵⁸ Tattersall. *The Monkey in the Mirror*. p. 72.

The first human stories were most likely games to honour and imagine the very processes for survival. 'Game' then became the things by which we honoured ourselves, in the success of the hunt, literally and figuratively gobbling whole other animals upon whom we were entirely dependent on for our continued existence. In this process, we catalogued their individuality into systems of thought and ritual that were transportable, ". . . objects' that could be worn, and fetishized and bartered and owned, tracked in to a world of double meaning."⁵⁹ We were able to move from the exchange of non-human animals, to the exchange of the products of non-human animals, to the exchange of coins stamped with non-human animal forms. We could and do fill our metaphorical bellies with the things that are bought with the remnants of our multi-species history, as if we can own a fragment of that history and re-capture our own natural contract with a multitude of material objects. Or as Shepard reminds us, "We have forgotten that the coin was a substitute for death. We hide death, whose most dramatic expression is the interspecies drama of the eater and eaten. And we prefer not to acknowledge the eater as eaten except as a physical necessity."⁶⁰

We 'thingified' our Other and at the same time removed them from our daily interactions, their remnants only oozing through in fragments of our current language and in their continued, if unacknowledged, usefulness to ourselves. Yet, we remain intrinsically and inextricably, tied in human development to our primal development alongside our co-species. Our early attempts at individuating our own anatomical structure is what Shepard refers to as a "garish parody of butchering" as parents cheerfully dissect and categorize the child's anatomy. Even the naming of animals as children is about cognition not about language because animals provide the first source for categorization.⁶¹ Now every 'thing' is something to be consumed, a commodification of a desperate need to understand ourselves in a framework of unease and mis-identification. It can be little wonder that attempts to invoke the sacred are experienced in the most profane and banal experience of urban living, the shopping mall.

⁵⁹ Shepard. *The Others*. p.23.

⁶⁰ Shepard. *The Others*. p.36.

⁶¹ Shepard. *The Others*. p.46.

We believed ourselves until recent centuries to be continually in the proximity of a multitude of wise animal elders . . . who filled human life with excitement and strange associations for so long that our species continues to anticipate their reassurance. The artifacts for industry and media, all the human mob and its distractions and therapies, do not make up for that loss. (Shepard, 141)

45,000 years ago Homo sapiens were creating – and re-creating – their obsession with and dependence on other animals, through the conscious representation of the Other. At first, ornamentation fashioned from the teeth and bones of animals and also from the physical environment was possibly utilized as symbols of hunting proficiency or, in some way, to physically represent and thereby possibly own the qualities of those other animals being worn. 35,000 years ago, elaborate animal figures were being carved from these same substances to be used as portable totems or fetishes, and some of the oldest cave art from the Chauvet Cave in southern France “were put to different purposes . . .but all seen to have used for one form of magic or another, images that would be manipulated to advance some human end”.⁶²

The emergence of this vibrant ritualized and, most significantly, representational world also coincides with the development of more elaborate tools, efficient hunting methods and even, it is posited, language. Or conversely, perhaps because of these developments in technology and efficiency, ritual developed. Whatever the order, what may be true is that for 45 millennia, we have created sacredness, purposefulness, our very identity around the existence and inter-relation of the human species to the other species that inhabit the world. Sociologist Adam Seligman asserts that “. . . Ritual creates a world, temporary, fragile to be sure, but not false – a world where difference can be accommodated, tolerance enacted . . . and openness to other maintained.”⁶³ Ritual is necessary, then, because it creates and supports the tenuous connections between each other and the world around us - in essence it allows us to believe in the possibility of ‘future’.

⁶² Sale, Kirkpatrick, *After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination*. Duke UP: Durham. 2006. p.57.

⁶³ Seligman, Adam B. “Ritual, the Self, and Sincerity”. *Social Research*, 75:4, (Winter 2009), 1073-1096.

But we have also spent the last 75,000 years disassembling this knowledge from the urban cultures in which we live - at least here within western constructs - and our companion species have been de-nuded of any overt wildness. It is truly a remarkable feat of disassociation to have so removed other animals from our daily urban existence that we do not even make associations between abattoirs that kill 10 billion domesticated animals per year and the neatly packaged rows of butchered meat at our local supermarket⁶⁴. By association, we have also removed ourselves from our own deaths to such an extent that the funeral services industry enjoys multi-billion profits to dispose of human animal remains in a similar invisible fashion. Yet as Carl Jung proffers, “When something slips out of consciousness, it does not cease to exist, any more than a car that has disappeared around a corner, has vanished into thin air, it is simply out of sight.”⁶⁵

Ian Tattersall cites neurobiologist Anthony Damasio who believes that the history of human cognition is based upon emotion rather than reason. Or at the very least, that emotion and reason work in conjunction with each other to create meaning, with emotion taking the lead. Consciousness for Damasio then comes in two forms according to Tattersall: “core consciousness which is limited to the here and now” and; “what make us unique . . . extended consciousness. This type of consciousness adds awareness of past and future to the mix.”⁶⁶ To extrapolate from Tattersall, and Damasio, core or extended consciousness is predicated on the idea that our emotions that dictate the structure of our consciousness and, again by extension, our unconscious – ness. We may be icebergs in the sense that ¾ of what we know, we don’t know or don’t remember we know and that comes to the fore in times of physical or mental stress or trauma. It may be that much more difficult to be dismissed as it is emotionally based reasoning embedded in our deep, archetypal imaginings and longings. Art may be seen as a form of hoarding emotions and projecting feelings and as scholar Kirkpatrick Sale muses may have “. . . arose in a response to the threat of the survival of the species . . . and. . . . because of two phenomena occurring about the same time . . . a drop in temperature in

⁶⁴ Joy, Melanie. *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows*. Conari Press: San Francisco. 2010.

⁶⁵ Jung. *Man and His Symbols*. p.18.

⁶⁶ Tattersall. *Monkey in the Mirror*. p.73.

Europe after 35,000 years as the subcontinent began to enter a full glacial period . . . and game and the people . . . gradually moved south . . . particularly into the river valleys of the Russian plain and south-western France and Cantabrian Spain . . . under these extreme twin pressures the peoples of Europe would have turned to intensified forms of ritual...and a form of hunting magic.”⁶⁷

It was these heavily ritualized communities that created more and more efficient tools and techniques for killing so that “a subsistence threshold seems to have been crossed”⁶⁸. Sale estimates that the sheer number of humans in such a relatively small geographical area meant that in any given area, “successful hunts . . . may have been responsible for decimating up to 60% of large mammals between 20,000 and 10,000 years ago.”⁶⁹ This, not coincidentally, coincided with a flourishing of art and ritual as approximately 80% of the paintings were done after 18,000 years ago.⁷⁰ These early human populations may not have understood that their behaviour was creating scarcity as did the unshaken belief that more ritualized behaviour would make them more successful at the hunt. Of course, increased and more complex ritual had the dynamic of slowly severing the idea of co-existence and allowing human animals to re-imagine a ritualized environment where other animals disappeared into our symbolic practices and unconscious yearnings, only emerging as co-opted players in our constructed world views. Describing this evolution of ritual, Paul Shepard argued that “In two or three million years of human evolution such tracking of nature replicated itself in the neural elaboration of the human brain. The perception of animals ceased to only a recognition. First swallowed in substance, then swallowed in thought, they were finally incorporated into our psychic structures.”⁷¹

Carl Jung identifies the “shadow self” not just as the psychological remnants of negative aspects about ourselves or the culture that we wish to repress, but also positive

⁶⁷ Sale. *After Eden*. p.25.

⁶⁸ Sale. *After Eden*, p.74.

⁶⁹ Sale. *After Eden*. p.73.

⁷⁰ Sale. *After Eden*. p.86.

⁷¹ Shepard. *The Others*. p.38

qualities that become unmoored from their context and find themselves lapping at the beach of our consciousness, like a song or a person unable to be identified that provokes anxiety in the attempt. The initial association may indeed be one of pleasure but in the attempt to remember we find ourselves “at odds” with ourselves, with one foot firmly planted in past associations even as we belong most definitely to the here and now.⁷² We even try to ‘jog our memories’ by re-visiting, literally or figuratively, the place that first engendered the experience. Barbara King rapturously describes the first impression of Hall of Bulls in the Lascaux Caves in France as a “timeless place where senses and consciousness become altered” and impossible to imagine the human species inhabiting them without the presence of ritual.⁷³ Perhaps in the overwhelming cave-like spaces carved out by people with HD, we too might be able to see the awesome representation of meaning struggling to be recalled. And perhaps the emotional attachment to the objects hoarded is in fact the proof of the very existence of something we lack; absence of a myth of our own existence that “. . . honoured death as a social bargain because the myth’s true function was community.”⁷⁴

HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT JEAN? III

God appears because his creation appears.⁷⁵

I returned to the source material in Toronto over the next two years and met Jean and interviewed my friends further about what their knowledge was about Jean’s background. There was little to go on as Jean by this time was far enough into the ravages of Alzheimer’s that she could no longer recall the names of Jamie or his mother, Dot. All that was left were a few boxes of photos, letters and even some 40 year old lesson plans from her days as a home economics teacher shoved into some mildew-y

⁷² Jung. *Man & His Symbols*. p.18.

⁷³ King. *Evolving God*. p.136.

⁷⁴ Shepard. *The Others*. p. 244.

⁷⁵ Jerzy Grotowski as cited by Amankulor in “Divination Consultation”. p.158.

boxes and stored in Andy and Jamie's cellar. Family photos were treated with the same care or disdain as report cards from long forgotten students and had been left to disintegrate into damp cardboard. Those that did remain were compelling: near Century old photos of Jean, her three brothers and her parents standing on the back porch of a peeling white house while an overgrown garden threatened to overtake them; Jean laughing in posing outside the Sylvia Hotel on a 1946 graduation trip to Vancouver; or huddled with a group of grinning teenage boys in the kitchen of the high school where she taught home economics in the 1970's and; 50 years of inherited correspondence of family members. I began to look for it that moment, the moment when she fell from grace as it were, when hoarding took over her life, eventually leading to a very real exile from her own home. I used those few deteriorating images as well as the carefully documented images from Andy of Jean's house being decluttered as a talisman for a fictional exploration of her story.

I carried these ideas into my Directed Studies with DD Kugler in the spring of 2013. I wanted to write a play about a hoarder very loosely based on Jean's story, reflecting my evolving notions about the necessity of rituals and how they are subverted by our origins and context as well as what role they play in our development. I had a basic understanding of Jean's childhood and family structure, but no one was capable of filling in any knowledge regarding her childhood beyond some rudimentary facts. I knew that she and her three brothers grew up with her mother and father on one of the Toronto Islands in the early part of the 20th Century. Her father was the head constable for the island, her mother, a homemaker. Jean was born in 1921 and three boys followed, including a set of twins. Their life continued undisturbed for her early childhood and I would venture to call it a seemingly protected existence even beyond the collapse of the stock markets in 1929.

Photos from that time show a family posed tensely on a sagging porch of a clapboard house, a teenage Jean shooting up behind the sunburnt faces of her brothers with her parents standing silently in the shadows as everyone resignedly waits for the click of the shutter. The garden is overblown in late summer sumptuousness and the feeling is of tiredness and stillness made more omnipresent by the stiffness of the photos participants. I know that one of the twins died in his teens and very shortly

afterwards in the late 30's the family, possibly for economic reasons, possibly to escape the memories of their loss, decamped to a suburb of Toronto. Jean went onto Teacher's College and graduated in 1945, teaching home economics for 40 years in the Toronto school system. She lived with her parents until their deaths a year apart in the early sixties and they left the bulk of their estate to her, giving her the responsibility to dole out to her brothers any monies bequeathed to them for the remainders of their lives. Her two remaining brothers were pater categorized ne'er do wells, living transient lives for the most part and any monetary allowances they received were accompanied by letters from Jean chastising them for their behaviour. There is anecdotal information that she provided a home for one brother who married late in life and evidence that also that her hoarding was something that followed her throughout her lifetime. One of her brothers was still alive at the time of the discovery of the condition of Jean's house and recounted a story where years earlier the two surviving brothers secretly arranged for the garage of Jean's house to be cleared of stacks of old newspapers, only to have to return the debris back to the garage when Jean returned early to the house and caught them, as it were, red-handed.

I created the play with a sense of ritual. I would write for the same amount of time at each session, just re-reading the previous few lines before continuing with the story. I didn't have any idea how the writing would show up but allowed the form to set up the possibility of a continuation of an experience. I allowed my accumulation of knowledge about hoarding, about Jean, and of course my own context and filters to inform the narrative however that was going to arrive in written form. She was, it seemed to me, repeating the same steps, trying to perfect a ritual. That it didn't work is more a testament to the addiction of the ritual's cyclical nature than a failure of intent. I also remained committed to the understanding that there would be no resolution to the writing or the story. The complexity of the compulsive behavior of Jean and other people with HD is that, regardless of the level of consciousness about their behavior, the hoarding would not be resolved by some neatly tied bow, either in reality or in the play. Jean remained alone and isolated for much of her adult life, never forming intimate, platonic or sexual relationships with either gender. While she is just one individual story of a person with HD, I did not attempt in the writing to attach happy to the word ending. She became the repository of her family's, and all the people from all the estate sale's she frequented,

histories and their ghostly presence was with her throughout her lifetime in the piles of debris she compulsively hoarded.

As I wrote, the play took on the feel of a creation mythology as I delved into the idea of a paradise lost. She experienced an island childhood defined by the dysfunction and unity of its family unit and I was interested in how the decisions and make-up and trauma of that family, can and did affect each family member in a different fashion. It did not seem so impossible to imagine that for the young girl called Jean her reaction to a troubled childhood or family trauma may be to attempt to accumulate possessions, a safety net, and become compulsive about the control over her accumulated possessions, especially if she already tended to have the propensity to collect. In effect, she was attempting to recreate her environment, her memories in a different image. All those possessions stacked up were proof of an existence beyond the one she had been given and a determination to tangibly possess her own story and redefine her own life's framework. The idea of familial love or our notions of it at any rate consciously began to infiltrate her story. Love, after all, is not defined by the child but for the child and if love is therefore defined as violent oppression as a child, then that is what it is for that child. More, if there is a failure of the child to identify some other more functional models there may be a lack of recognition that there are words to attach to negative behaviour the child witnesses or experiences. This sense of isolation may be heightened if there is an ingrained notion of secrecy within the family unit that discourages questioning of the family's functions and, if from a societal stand point, the family's interactions are idealized. The family or the situation may look like an Eden from the outside and may instead be another kind of unexpressed or unexamined hell from within the confines of what is defined as the family. Jean and her family came to represent for me a chaotic understanding of that internalized familial tension played out in a seemingly idyllic setting that, in one way or the other, ends up consuming them all. I began to see her brothers' fecklessness and servitude to Jean, as well as the siblings' lack of intimate relationships as indications of a foundational scenario enacting itself over and over again. They are endlessly trapped in the cycle of self-destruction and self-denial established from the beginnings of their familial origins as even with opportunity for freedom from the island, from their parents, the remaining family members are only able to survive

I wanted to understand the fascination and horror we have with HD and with addictions of all sorts through this process. It seems that we are projecting upon this behaviour our fears about our own constructed reality and don't see the fragility of that construction, and our own complicity in our own hoards. We all utilize behaviour, or collect to us in a way, rituals, items, beauty, that both impede our understanding of ourselves or assist us in coping with the vagaries of our worlds. It is interesting to entertain the notion that we are all using something to fill a lack that cannot be spoken so deep does it flow from an evolutionary and cultural framework that calls to our primal selves. Even so, adapting a non-specific evolutionary response for whatever reason it arose does in affect complete the circle of re-creation that seems somewhat inherent as a trait across many species. The ability to adapt has been useful to us as a trait as a species, and has allowed for infinite variations on this abstraction even to the extremity of ritualistic behaviours that seem to defy our own sense of self-preservation or, at the very least, defy our ability to accept them as hyper-forms of more acceptable actions. Likewise, the act of re-creation calls to the forefront the emergence of imagination and the act of creation in ascertaining original beliefs. We are, as it were, caught in an endless repetitive cycle and I saw Jean as enacting this reality with her own compulsive actions.

I was intent on immersing myself and the audience in the overabundant sensual nature of Jean's world, to somehow have the audience even for brief moments be overwhelmed and compelled by the magnitude of her world. I was captivated by images of both the vastness of the caves rapturously described by Barbara King, the intensity of the world of hoarders, blind to their own clutter described by Randy Frost, and the exquisitely beautiful photographs of Jean's empty house taken by my friend Andy. Somehow, I want to enact that feeling of awesomeness and chaos in the performance space so that the audience members would experience through sight and sound even a small taste of the hoarding experience. I imagined a space where both performers and audience would be unable to escape from the relentlessness of the narrative and/or the addiction, just as Jean could never be released from her own narrative and her compulsion for hoarding. To, in effect, ritualize the space and plant the idea that while the audience is experiencing the narrative for the first time, this is actually an endless loop of activity that gets told and retold, reshaping itself every time to the particular

audience. It is what happens in our own hoarded emotions, secrets, grudges and grievances: we don't achieve transformation or catharsis but instead learn through time to live with them as part of a history that cannot be denied.

Finally, I wanted to address the very silent but very real presence of violence as it relates to Jean as a woman in her father's household. I wish to be clear that there is nothing to confirm that the real Jean McLarty was experiencing any sexual or physical abuse by her father or otherwise nor did I set out to write about sexual abuse. There has always been a distinct difference for me between the real Jean McLarty whose story provided the inspiration for the play, and the Jean McLarty who shows up as a character in the play, *Hoarding Paradise*. In fact, were the play to be taken into production, I would more than likely change the name of the character in the play to further delineate this difference as ethically I am suggesting situations about a living person that are entirely fictionalized. I refrained from doing so prior to submitting this paper to provide context and cohesion in a discussion of my creative process. I also did not plan nor did I research the issue around sexual abuse. I was responding, or being influenced by what was occurring in my own personal life context and these issues were being filtered through my writing process. As an artist, I believe that this is unavoidable but it should not be taken that there is evidence that this occurred in the real Jean McLarty's life.

However, there is something about the overwhelming presence, the ugliness and the undeniable existence of the hoarding that seems to conform to an idea of psychic pain unable to be expressed and unable to be hidden, that kept on circling within my creative thoughts as I wrote. I think of her living with her aging parents, accumulating items from estate sales and watching as the house fills with these items as an overt manifestation of that pain or anger that gradually takes up every corner of the house. Even when they died, she carried those items and that pain into a new custom built house that again filled up every nook and cranny until she found herself homeless. It is too easy to dismiss her behavior as pathological when, in truth, the explanation may at least have roots in the seemingly 'normal' family unit into which she was born and to whose rules she ascribed to even after the death of all of her immediate family. She was a competent teacher, a true believer, and yet until outed by Jamie and Andy, no one

really knew the extent of her hoarding habit. By the same logic, perhaps no one really knew the extent of her secrets or her pain or her mourning.

PLAY SYNOPSIS: HOARDING PARADISE OR IN THE BEGINNING

Jean, a woman of middle years, narrates the puzzle of her life. The environment through most of the play is an endless summer, and a white hot sun that produces a stultifying heat. There is no real time frame for the play but is suggestive of the early part of the last century, a nostalgic nod to simpler, perhaps safer life - an idea that will unravel throughout the play. Jean speaks of an island where she grew up with her stern and distant father, alternately called Father, I am, and Papa, her Mother, who seems to spend much of her time in suspended animation on the faded porch of a run-down Victorian era house, and her three brothers who are only referenced as boylings and as B1, B2 and B3. These characters will act as a kind of Greek chorus, always on stage, surrounding both Jean and the audience, synchronized in feeling and movement, popping up from in an around the audience, and providing music and sound effects as necessary. They will also act out the few additional incidental character voices as necessary. They are her ghosts, her memories, her history, her every-thing, heightened objects in a sea of objects. The stage is in the round with the seating in a steep rake with four entrances that break the audience up into 4 sections. There is a screen circling the audience at the top of the house seating and the entire set is white as are the actors dressed in white. This is so that everything can be projected on and these projections will in effect create the set. The audience also will be given white smocks and they too will have projections on them as well at various times and, along with the screens at the top of the house, they too will be part of the set. This is to give the opportunity for the audience to feel both the sunbaked youth of Jean's early years on the island and also her later cluttered years in Toronto without the necessity of huge set changes. It is also an opportunity for the audience to be complicit in the creation of the hoarding addiction.

The story unfolds of a family dominated by a father who delivers harsh punishments but essentially ignores his children and a mother who lives in her own

world, occasionally coming to hurriedly enforce the father's rules after she too ignores the doings of her children for too long. Jean, with her brothers as co-conspirators, are left to run wild on the island, like a pack of dogs with Jean as pack leader and mother figure. They collect the natural beauty of their island home, bringing it back to their rooms as fond collections, before their mother tires of the accumulated beauty and denudes their rooms, only to have the collections surreptitiously begin again after a brief, if silent, demand for parental order. This cycle continues unabated until Jean hits puberty and is ruthlessly yanked from the imagined kingdom that has been created by her and her siblings into the adult world. She is banished figuratively from the world of her brothers never to return and except for brief attempts at communication, they now have a distant and angry relationship that is never resolved. The father's nod to attention now that Jean is an adolescent is to begin an incestuous sexual relationship with Jean that ends only with his death. He also increases the severity of his punishments to his sons as they too start to mature and, despite Jean's attempts to intervene, the father's harshness and judgement as well as his emotional distance result in the suicide of one of the boys. This death precipitates the total breakdown of the mother and for the family leaving their island paradise to settle in Toronto. The one piece that Jean has total control over is her hoarding and this is now ignored by both parents, even to the point where the hoard is transported with her from the island to Toronto. Her hoarding increases in scope as she and her parents, with the intermittent presence of her brothers, settle in a new house and begin new lives. Jean does try to change. She goes to school to become a teacher, she dates, she tries to have a life of her own but between the toxic relationship with her parents who she lives with until their death, her passion for her continually growing possessions, and her irresponsible brothers, she keeps herself isolated and seems unwilling or unable to enter into relationship. She remains alone except for the encroachment of her possessions, absorbing the objects from her parents after their deaths and meting out money to brothers with whom she no longer has relationships. Eventually, her objects of desire are the only relationship she has with anything or anyone and she can no longer really remember why she accumulates only that she does, and that for her, that pleasure, it is everything. Surrounded by her ghosts she exists in a world of her own making unaware of the fragility of that construct. A final voice appears at the end calling her name but to what is undetermined.

THE END OF IN THE BEGINNING

Stories are not for the faint of heart, the non-believer. Stories are both “wondrous and dangerous things”. They reveal all parts of ourselves to ourselves, reveal that we would wish to remain hidden and once told, they are loose in the world and can never be taken back.⁷⁶ Thomas King in his book *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* recounts hearing the same creation story over and over again at the beginning of each chapter of his book. King makes all the elements of the story the same, changing only the place where it is being told and the make-up of who is listening. Even the questions the different audience members ask about the story are the same. This repetition is not just compelling storytelling for the reader as we seek to understand the meaning in each re-telling but the acknowledgement that King himself seeks the minute details of the story once again and hears the reverberations of the story differently every time he experiences it in a different setting with different people. It is in the nature of storytelling that the story you set out to tell changes with the act of being in the presence of others and changes the very nature of the words spoken and meaning enacted. It is this gift of transformation that is inherent in the performative process. The actions and words and even perhaps emotions are mapped but all is changed in the renewed relationship with a different audience. In that ritualized spontaneity, anything can happen and, given the right circumstance, does. It creates the opportunity for some-thing to fill the space. What it will be filled with - bliss, despair, evil, beauty, love – is unknown but it is only through this repetition that once again can we achieve the purity of an authentic experience.

We are each the filter through which our stories become our history. We are altered by their existence and we keep them in existence. We believe our own press and publicize by our words and actions, consciously and unconsciously, that which we believe. We add the stories to our repertoire, to our lives, incrementally, inconsequentially until we start to understand them piling up around us, smothering us with their sublime neglect. But that for the most part remains in our emotional existences. For a person like Jean with HD, their emotional life is literally piled around them and yet they are able to cope with their emotional debris perhaps because they

⁷⁶ King. *The Truth About Stories*. p.10.

continue to seek the painful pleasure of their compulsions. Even if the actions can and do look bizarre to those outside of the loop of that reality. And it is a loop. But really, is her story any more outrageous than the story of my gathering inspiration from her life for an artistic endeavour? Than the story of you?

We tell stories about ourselves, our experiences, positive or negative, sometimes the same story time and again, moulding it to our present day existences as if those experiences have been a linear extensions of well thought out processes and decisions that have inexorably lead to our current circumstances. We do this to make sense of what has gone on before, connect the dots for past lives that little resemble the entirety of our distant or recent personal histories, to make connection and/or seek comparison with others of our species so as to attempt to understand our actions or the actions of others within a societal framework, but perhaps most tellingly, to take the opportunity to recreate ourselves with each re-imagining of the details of our lives. Perhaps to change the trajectory of our lives.

We are, in effect, addicted to our self-created historical resurrections, be they joyous or tragic, and have made them a necessary part of our individuation and, paradoxically, our surrender to our own particular cultural contexts. More specifically, we have ritualized these personal and cultural re-creations into behaviours that ostensibly set the stage for the re-enactment and, more importantly, re-attainment of what are now meta-narratives that exist beyond the fragile weft of our own mindfulness. Religiosity abounds, whatever god one serves or is served, and in our seemingly self-inflicted prime directive to know the unknowable we visit upon ourselves and others an uncertainty of origin masked in actions and beliefs that inspire horror and delight and everything in between. We are overt zealots to external manifestations of our internal processes, processes that we no longer have names for outside the monolithic structures we have imposed to define them if indeed we ever had words to describe what may have emerged pre-language, knitted tightly to our own evolution as a species.

We are deeply attached to these mythologies and deeply committed to their continual renewal, a cycle of reasoning or compulsion that defines the very way that we

tell our stories or reaffirm the need to keep on re-defining the stories in an endless loop. The sacred-ization of our creation stories are not just useful or comforting or convenient in understanding our own particular cultural and societal maps but a necessary result of the development of our big brains that moved us up the food chain as a species. It is this religiosity that defines human culture. We want the Deus ex Machina whether we identify ourselves as deists or not. We enact the same devotional relationships that we seek at the godhead through our participation in our activities or because of our participation in the world. It is also in the rigidness of these devotional rituals and their attempt to imbue meaning that at the same time extracts from those rituals the transcendent nature of that meaning. We create or re-create the very nature of our journey to god or rather our idealized relationship with the idea of god and bask in the light of this revelation. We do all of this, unconsciously suppressing the knowledge that perhaps what really we seek is “the god within”⁷⁷.

To every action there's a story. (King 29)

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Jung, Carl. *Religion and Psychology*. p.6

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