

**‘The dark hollow of her pram’: a study of a mother’s grief and its
public disclosure.**

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Abstract:

Though there have been many studies of the forms of autobiography, much less has been said of the costs, both personal and professional, of literary self-exposure. This thesis comprises a critical analysis of my poetry collection *Her Birth*, a genuine account of my daughter's death and my period of bereavement, accompanied by a study of the consequences of self-disclosure particularly within a prize culture. I have taken what Adrienne Rich referred to as the 'odd-fangled approach' in her new introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *Of Woman Born*. A decade after its publication, Adrienne Rich describes her book as 'personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both'¹ Using a similar hybrid, I have developed the thesis in three ways. First, I have explored the composition of *Her Birth* as a study of bereavement addressing my reasons for writing the book. Secondly, I have studied the reception of *Her Birth* in the aftermath of the 'success' that followed the book's prize nominations. Thirdly, I have explored the consequences of placing a personal narrative into the public sphere by reflecting on my own experiences and the experiences of three other female writers who have published prize-winning memoirs on the subject of grief: Cathy Rentzenbrink, Alice Jolly and Marion Coutts.

¹ Adrienne Rich, 'Introduction: Ten Years Later' in *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.x.

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Introduction

I have mourned for my daughter. The mourning began with her terminal diagnosis at birth; it took a hard hold of me at the moment of her death; it left me, at times, unable to speak. But the mourning made me write. It demanded that I document what I saw, and, over five years, it became fifty-two poems – about her illness, her vanishing, my grief – eventually titled *Her Birth*. This thesis will see me return to my published body of work, and to those fifty-two poems in particular, as I examine the process of writing a personal narrative on grief and consider the consequences of making that narrative available to the public. What might I gain from questioning decisions I cannot undo? What can be learned from burrowing back? Joan Didion writes: ‘We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer.’² I do mourn myself. I was a young woman: I was a poet and I wanted a baby. That baby died, and I am ‘no longer’ who I was, not only because my daughter pre-deceased me, but also because I decided to write and publish a personal and truthful book. ‘Why do writers do this? Why do they continue to examine their pain when they are most at risk for more heartbreak in reminiscence?’ asks poet Judith Harris. Her answer: ‘Writers do this because writing saves life in fact and function.’³ I need to know if the act of writing and publishing poems about my daughter’s death did save my life, or, if by writing those poems, I set about breaking it apart.

My first collection, *The Anatomy of Structures* (Flambard Press, 2010) features poems mostly written in my twenties. I have always

² Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 198.

³ Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self Through Writing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 2.

been drawn to writing about the family dynamic. Those early poems addressed relationships, sex, experiences of being a daughter, imagining being a mother, the family unit and the domestic space. Poems were both autobiographical and fictionalised: I explored my own personal experiences, but also relished writing poems involving scenarios that were purely imagined. I had spent my teens and early twenties reading Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Mona Simpson, Sharon Olds – fiction writers and poets who mined the extraordinary in the ordinary. I saw that stories of familial interactions were enough to sustain a narrative, and this was beguiling to me.

The Anatomy of Structures is a collection that, as its own blurb states, explores ‘lives behind closed doors’. Within its pages, I wasn’t always seeking out the drama of the domestic space, but also the ordinariness, as highlighted by poet Zoe Brigley in her 2012 review of the collection: ‘Rebecca Goss is preoccupied with relationships within families, and her new collection *The Anatomy of Structures* deconstructs marriage and relationships in particular [...] mundane moments of intimacy and feeling are foregrounded throughout the book.’⁴

In those early poems, I looked closely at family dynamics, frequently choosing to focus on families that were not my own. I am often described as a narrative poet. Narrative poetry can be defined as ‘poems that tell a story, recount a series of events’⁵ and I admit to stealing other people’s ‘stories’ and turning them into poetry. ‘Keeping Houston Time’ in *The Anatomy of Structures* is also the title poem of my first publication, a pamphlet published by Slow Dancer Press in 1997. The title comes from something said

⁴ Zoe Brigley, ‘Part 2: Social Anatomists’, *Notes for Broadsheet Poets 19* in *Agenda Poetry*, 46 (2012), 94-105, (p.104).

⁵ Ruth Miller and Robert A. Greenberg, ‘Part One, Section 8: Genre’ in *Poetry: An Introduction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1981), p. 159.

by a fellow passenger, sat beside me on a train journey from Liverpool to Cardiff in the mid-nineties. I asked her for the time, whereupon she looked at her watch only to tell me that she kept her watch at Houston time. Originally from the US and travelling abroad for several weeks, she explained that she never altered her watch when she left the States, so that when she looked at it, she could quickly work out what her children were doing. I loved this piece of intimate knowledge but took its sentiment to an extreme in my poem, which is about parents who, on learning of their son's death in America, look at their watches to work out that he died while they were asleep.

Reading Sharon Olds in particular, made me see the combined territories of motherhood and the domestic space as a terrain I could step into. And, though I wanted to celebrate this space, I think I was always aware of a vulnerability within it. Reviewer Zoe Brigley had suggested this in 2012: 'Goss's poems convey the contradictions and cruelties of human behaviour, as well as vulnerabilities and frailties. This latter feeling is especially redolent in Goss's poems about parents and children [...] Goss focuses on parental anxiety about harm coming to one's children which is not often the subject for poetry. Goss conjures a sense of parental helplessness very effectively.'⁶

There is a poem in *The Anatomy of Structures* about the true story of a mother whose daughter died in the Lockerbie air disaster. There is a poem about a mother imagining her son's suicide. There is a poem about a father recalling the accident in a lift that resulted in the loss of his son's arm. I consider my desire to write about these subjects to be more than morbid fascination. 'Parental helplessness' is real, tragedies like this happen, they are part of

⁶ Brigley, p.105.

life, so these stories should exist. Little did I know then that my own parental helplessness would soon become apparent.

My first child, Ella, was born in 2007 with the rare and incurable heart condition Severe Ebstein's Anomaly. She was diagnosed within thirty-six hours of her birth and not expected to survive the night. She went on to live for sixteen months. My chosen poetic subjects of domesticity, female identity and motherhood were truly realised with the birth of my daughter, but they were now compounded by fear, grief, loss. I would not be writing from the recognised parameters of motherhood, but from its margins.

In their US study of mothers' experiences of bereavement and marginalisation, counsellor Elizabeth B. Farnsworth and academic Katherine R. Allen observed the dramatic shift in child death statistics and how this change affected cultural responses:

During Puritan and Colonial periods, for example, death was omnipresent in everyday family life with almost half of all children dying before reaching adulthood. In 1900, one half of all parents would have experienced the death of a child; by 1976 only 6% would (Skolnick, 1991). With these shifts in occurrence, the death of a child has come to be viewed as a devastating loss from which a parent may never fully recover, instead of a normal hazard of parenthood (Knapp, 1987) [...] Contemporary parents are situated in a social context in which open discussion of death is taboo. (Stinson, Lasker, Lohmann, & Toedter, 1992).⁷

It is heartening to discover that child mortality rates are much improved, but with that progression in medical care has come a silencing. I had no idea when writing the poems in *The Anatomy of Structures*, that one day I would lose a child of my own, or that I would eventually come to write a collection of poems addressing one of the biggest taboos of all, the death of a child.

⁷ Elizabeth B. Farnsworth and Katherine R. Allen 'Mothers' Bereavement: Experiences of Marginalization, Stories of Change', *Family Relations*, 45, (1996), 360-367 (p.360).

Her Birth was published in 2013 and is about the life and death of my young daughter, Ella. Between 2013 and 2015 the book was shortlisted for many literary prizes and as a result, I spoke frequently, in public, about my grief. An important part of my research for this thesis included meeting and interviewing three female memoirists, Cathy Rentzenbrink, Alice Jolly and Marion Coutts. My criteria for choosing to speak with these women was immediately clear. Not only did they have to be the author of a published, personal narrative on the subject of grief, but their respective books had to have been shortlisted for, or recipients of, literary prizes within a similar timeframe to the publication of *Her Birth*. It was important to me that each writer had experienced literary prize culture, resulting in increased attention on their books and their lives.

I first came across the work of Cathy Rentzenbrink when she and I were both shortlisted for the Portico Prize for Literature in 2015. Her memoir *The Last Act of Love* tells the story of her brother Matty, who was hit by a car in the summer of 1990. He was sixteen and would remain in a persistent vegetative state for the following eight years until he died. I first met artist and writer Marion Coutts at the Medicine Unboxed conference in 2015, where we were both invited speakers. Marion Coutts was married to the writer and art critic Tom Lubbock and her first book *The Iceberg*, about Tom's diagnosis with a brain tumour and subsequent death, was published in 2014. Alice Jolly and I also met at Medicine Unboxed in 2015. She is a novelist and playwright. Alice's daughter Laura was stillborn in 2005. Her memoir *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* is about motherhood, grief, infertility and surrogacy. All three books were shortlisted for an array of prestigious literary prizes, as specified in the full interview transcripts, provided with this thesis. (See appendices.)

The interviews did not focus explicitly on the author's respective memoirs. Instead, we talked about the reasons for choosing to write and share a personal narrative. I asked each writer to consider the impact of self-disclosure on their relationships with readers and audiences. I asked if publishing autobiographical truths had had an impact on their health, mental wellbeing and the grieving process. I wanted to know how they navigated the landscape of literary prize culture, and if the success of their books had come with any costs. I had been considering all these points myself for some time, but privately, silently. I now wanted to speak with other women writers to find out if my experience was a common one. The interviews were unpressured, private and, importantly, they felt like conversations. Conversations between women, who from the start felt safe enough with each other to talk frankly about love, death, books and grief.

Section I: The composition of *Her Birth*

Her cot collapsed, I sobbed in that desolated space, while my desk was carried in, books and pens planted on its surface, her father's wise reclamation of the site. – Rebecca Goss⁸

What is there to be gained from writing a personal narrative on grief? What can the poet learn from writing her sad story down? Is it an act of confession and the relief that comes with that? Is it about therapy, resolution, closure? Marion Coutts recalls having ‘a very strong sense that the things that were happening were extremely valuable to record in my life.’⁹ For me, there was a necessity in the act of writing. Ella died in 2008. I wrote *Her Birth* in the years leading up to 2012 because it felt instinctive, essential and right.

Ella was treated at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool. In 2015, the hospital was undergoing a staged process of demolition. A new hospital was being built on the site. The time came for the cardiac ward to be pulled down. By then, I no longer lived in the city. I rarely went back to the hospital, but I felt strange about the obliteration of that space. The cardiac ward, Ward K2, was where my daughter had been a patient. Its layout was branded in my memory. I knew its corners and sounds and different types of light. I had slept there. I had washed and eaten and cried there. My daughter had been saved, and not saved there. How could it be gone? I am still in touch with the Cardiac Liaison Specialist who cared for Ella and my family. She told me that as the last families were being moved from K2 to the new part of the hospital, something happened. Parents started to write things on the walls of the emptying ward. They wrote the names of their poorly children, the names of the heart conditions for which their children were being treated. They drew around their hands, wrote down

⁸ Rebecca Goss, *Her Birth* (Manchester: Carcanet/Northern House, 2013), p. 36.

⁹ Appendix C, p. 61, para 5.

important dates, they documented their stories. What those parents did in ward K2 made total sense to me. They had witnessed something no parent should see, and this triggered a physical act of expression. The handprints proved that they were more than ‘patient’ or ‘carer’, they were bodies with stories, worthy of awe and observation. And for all those parents, there was a necessity to tell. It is that urgent, necessary act of telling that I want to explore here.

Her Birth includes a poem, titled ‘Mining’, about dismantling my daughter’s unused cot. I had been using the cot to store Ella’s clothes after she died. I’d let it become ‘a cold pit of pyjamas, dresses, jeans’.¹⁰ Once it was taken down, I remember standing in that desolated space, bereft, crying but not speaking. It was my husband’s decision to fill that void with my writing desk. I felt numb about the action at the time, but can recall watching him do it quickly, ensuring that the bare patch of carpet did not become a stored and gloomy image. Then it became the space in which I wrote *Her Birth*. At readings, I have often referred to that specific positioning of my desk as enabling me to create something tangible in the space Ella left behind. This is true, but not something I was conscious of whilst writing. Why did I do it? Why did I write the book? Of all the other things I could have done: I did not set up a support group, or volunteer at a hospital, or run a fundraising marathon, or become a recognised advocate for the Children’s Heart Federation. I sat at my desk, alone, and took four years to write fifty-two poems. Such indulgence in my sadness. Such blatant focus on my loss. Joan Didion writes: ‘Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.’¹¹ I had reached that place and sitting at my desk there was only one way I could process the experience of residing there. I wanted to record

¹⁰ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 36.

¹¹ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 188.

Ella's life, understand her death and as Didion astutely states 'confront the experience of meaningless itself'.¹²

'Why didn't you just write a memoir?' I was once asked at a reading. Suddenly and publicly, I found myself justifying my decision to write a collection of poems about my daughter's death. In his study of memoir, G. Thomas Couser writes that memoir is a 'subgenre of autobiography, a particular way of writing one's life'. He goes on to state that memoir can also refer to 'a narrative that is primarily about someone *other than* the author' and, therefore, is a 'subgenre of *biography*'.¹³ *Her Birth* could be described as a poetic memoir; it is about my life and my daughter's life. I see it as many things: a personal narrative on grief, realistic and linear. It employs the lyric confessional mode: I mine my own experience of bereavement and offer a portrayal of intense emotion speaking in my own voice. In public, I often refer to it as an autobiographical poetry collection.

When trying to define what *Her Birth* is I'm most taken by critic of the elegy Jahan Ramazani's description of the modern elegy as a form 'often regarding itself as private utterance'; according to Ramazani the elegy 'offers refuge from the social denial of grief; yet as published discourse, it carries out in the public realm its struggle against the denial of grief'.¹⁴ One clearly, identifiable thing that I learned from interviewing three memoirists as part of my research, was the unified desire to expunge the silence that surrounds the subjects of death and grief. I was frustrated there was no 'literature' for the death of a sixteen-month old child. Plenty for stillbirth or miscarriage, but nothing that reflected my experience. Like Cathy Rentzenbrink, 'I had to write it because

¹² Didion, p. 189.

¹³ G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 18 [italics in the original].

¹⁴ Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 15.

nothing existed'.¹⁵ I'm not sure any of us were seeking resolution or closure. It was more about interrogating Didion's 'meaningless'. Ramazani argues that the modern elegist 'tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss'.¹⁶

The writing, however, did not progress easily. There were obstacles. Once I had made the decision to write a collection of poems about my dead daughter, the issue of approval caused my pen to stall. As clinical psychologist Jenna Baddeley and Professor of Psychology Jefferson Singer point out, 'Bereavement is frequently a shared experience rather than an individual one: the loved one's death has left multiple people bereaved'.¹⁷ Ella wasn't just my dead daughter, she was also my husband's. She had been a half-sister to my stepchildren. She had been a grandchild. She had been a niece. Whose emotions would I be intruding upon with this work? There was also the subject of censorship, how much was I prepared to reveal? Whose story was I telling – Ella's, or mine? And of course, there was Ella herself to respect. She had no voice when she was alive, she had no voice now. I would be not only speaking about her, but for her.

Such authorial decisions hindered my beginning. I had never been required to make such decisions before, I had not deemed them necessary. Historically, and particularly in *The Anatomy of Structures*, I wrote whatever I wanted to write. Now, I floundered, writing notes on scraps of paper or in notebooks. I had tried to keep a diary while Ella was alive and achieved one miserable entry about her struggle to eat properly. It was after she died that I eventually made small lists. This early genesis for the collection

¹⁵ Appendix A, p. 8, para 2.

¹⁶ Ramazani, p. xi.

¹⁷ Jenna L. Baddeley and Jefferson A. Singer, 'A Social Interactional Model of Bereavement Narrative Disclosure', *Review of General Psychology*, 13 (2009), 202–218, (p. 204).

involved noting the things I wanted to address in the poems: her clothes, feeding her, specific episodes in hospital, her death. The unresolved question of whether to write about the moment of her death resulted in a conversation with my husband, where I stated emphatically that I would not write about it. If I wrote about it, I would be crossing a boundary that was too personal and too private. It would not be fair on him. I made my husband a promise. And I broke it.

I am conscious of this fact every time I read the poem that I promised I would never write. My subconscious attempt to appease my husband, was to make the poem more about him than it was about our daughter. It is about his unarticulated desire to ‘fix’ her. Only I knew this fact, and I only discovered it after she had died. I set about things obliquely, convinced myself I wasn’t really writing about those terrible final minutes by disguising her death in watery metaphor. On reading the poem, you’ll find a broken man, a boat, a drowning, an ‘undocking’. When I read the poem aloud, I am deep within the metaphor, I am not in the ICU. I haven’t had to explain how I sensed the medical panic, the rush of activity around her body, the noise I made. I struggle to go back to that moment. But the poem allows me to go back.

Severe Ebstein’s Anomaly

The lack of a cure sparked dreams.
In one, her father and I set out

for the island of disease beating
in her body. Her breath in our sails,

we navigated waves of excess fluid,
toured the ruins of her lungs.

Gradually propelled to the heave
of her heart’s edge, I lay my hand

on its plump shore. Her father kissed
my brow, kitbag swung

across his back, and trekked towards
the faulty, flapping dam

of her tricuspid valve. There,
he gazed into the chamber

with its swish of redirected river
and set about his sole desire

to fix her. In intensive care,
as she fails in her father's arms,

doctors run to swarm her, apply
repeated pressure to her chest.

We flounder in the doorway,
lose sight of her small body

until a man, head bent, his mouth
aflood with tender vowels,

tugs us to her bedside to grant him
the undocking and let her come adrift.¹⁸

I wanted to write a book that demonstrated what it is like to live with dying, death and grief, to reveal the untold facets. During our conversation, Marion Coutts referred to a time during her husband's illness when her son was sick at home; and she included this detail in *The Iceberg*: 'In a normal way, you'd be hanging out with your kid who was sick, but of course this wasn't normal. It was like we were doing that under this other schema, which was like a physical law.'¹⁹ My poem 'Toast' describes my husband and I eating in the parents' kitchen on the neonatal ward at Liverpool Women's Hospital, hours after Ella's birth and diagnosis. At readings, I always introduce the poem by explaining we were trying to do something normal in a situation that was not normal at all. These are the details; these are the facets.

¹⁸ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 24.

¹⁹ Appendix C, p. 62, para. 1.

Writing the collection enabled me to express experiences and emotions that I struggled to say – coherently, meaningfully – aloud. Alice Jolly and I discussed the writing of our personal narratives as liberating acts. Describing her life before *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* was written, she told me: ‘I was far too well-behaved. I thought I mustn’t be weeping in public places and ranting at people. I didn’t do any of that. I was incredibly well-behaved about it, to the extent that was completely unhelpful.’²⁰ Writing enabled her to ‘boil it down to the essence of it. So, you’re actually not ranting in an uncontrolled fashion in the book. You’ve sort of processed it and made it into this thing, which is a poem or a couple of paragraphs you’ve thought about quite carefully’.²¹

Poet Judith Harris notes that ‘personal writing, which is often dismissed as too self-referential, is not just about language or even the manipulation of language in an aesthetic container; it is about how we find our way to utterance’.²² I have never considered the poems in *Her Birth* as self-referential, purely because I document Ella’s life, as well as my own. My husband’s presence is also significant throughout the collection. There is a poem in the book, written specifically for the mothers of heart babies. I feel that I considered others closely in writing this collection. But the book is about utterance, and with utterance came understanding, not just for my readers, my listeners, the people who paused to hear my story, but an understanding for myself.

In *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, poet Denise Riley’s essay on the effects of her grief after the death of her son, she writes of the bereaved and their quest for understanding: ‘The plainest simplest horror from which the mind flinches away: never to see that person again. The purely *cognitive* violence of it. Now you

²⁰ Appendix B, p. 44, para. 3.

²¹ Appendix B, p. 45, para. 1.

²² Harris, p. 11.

understand those ideas of the migration of spirits, or of reincarnation: to try to soften the blow. Or no, not to soften it – but to provide something for baffled cognition to grasp at.’²³

In Riley’s striking term of a ‘purely *cognitive* violence’, I recognise my own damaged mind. After Ella died, I was lonely, often inarticulate about the loss and reaching for an understanding. The composition of *Her Birth* was as much about searching my own ‘baffled cognition’ at Ella’s death, as it was about wanting to describe the death itself. I had to make the unfathomable fathomable. I had to make the incoherent coherent. I didn’t want to normalise my daughter’s death, but I wanted to normalise its subject. I wanted to create a discourse that liberated the voice within it, the voice of the bereaved. I wanted to utter my dead daughter’s name and not feel shame or guilt. I wanted to write about her death in a way that did not frighten people. I did not want to invite people to look closely at what happened, I wanted to make them.

Riley explores the urgency of this desire: ‘People’s intentions are good; a respect for the severity of what they suppose you’re enduring, and so a wish not to pretend to grasp it. Still, I’d like them to *try* to imagine; it’s not so difficult. Even if it’s right or at any rate unsurprising that those with dead children are regarded with concealed horror, they don’t need to be further shepherded away into the inhuman remote realms of the “unimaginable”.’²⁴

Riley is right to speak of a parent’s segregated existence after the death of a child. The ‘horror’ of it pushes you out of acceptable boundaries of speech. It pushes you out of society. When I spoke to my interviewees, I was struck by the commonality of our

²³ Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), p. 22 [Italics in the original].

²⁴ Riley, p. 12 [Italics in the original].

experience here. Alice Jolly referred to the existence of an ‘unpleasant club’.²⁵ Cathy Rentzenbrink described herself as belonging to the ‘Dead Siblings Club’.²⁶ But it is not a warm and welcome membership. Referring to Marcia Westkott’s 1979 research on women’s experiences within the social sciences in their article ‘Mother’s Bereavement: Experiences of Marginalization, Stories of Change’, Farnsworth and Allen recognised that bereaved mothers ‘may experience isolation, misunderstanding, and inadequate support of others as they adjust to their loss. They may internalize the cultural ideology of motherhood and come to view themselves as failures for their inability to protect their children. Their altered status may provide a basis for reflection and for the development of a critical perspective in which they become conscious of their status as “insiders” and “outsiders” (Weskott, 1979)’.²⁷ I can recall a very specific episode where I was marginalised, made to feel a failure and felt deliberately shunned because my daughter’s incurable diagnosis (this was before she had died) excluded me from that cultural ideology of motherhood.

Ella was transferred to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital two days after her birth, and I stayed with her on the cardiac ward for two weeks. When I finally returned home with my baby, a midwife came to visit to be updated on what had happened. We sat at my kitchen table, Ella asleep in my arms. Liverpool is a good city to be pregnant in. The pre-natal care and support offered to parents is outstanding. My local NHS Health Centre ran free, pre-natal pilates classes, run by midwives, followed by an informative group session available to prospective parents to discuss labour, childbirth, breastfeeding and beyond. I attended these classes regularly and I enjoyed them. It was custom at the classes to bring

²⁵ Appendix B, p. 43, para 7.

²⁶ Appendix A, p. 6, para 5.

²⁷ Marcia Westkott ‘Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences’, *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (1979): 422–30 quoted in Farnsworth and Allen, pp. 360-361.

your newborn baby back and share your birthing story. I sat through three of these return visits whilst pregnant and I distinctly remember noting how those tiny, swaddled creatures were always all right. Labours may have been hard and long, drugs may have been administered, babies may have rejected their mother's tit, but no one spoke of anything truly alarming.

So, when the midwife sitting in my kitchen asked me to bring Ella to the group, I was perplexed. How could I do that? How could I return with my baby who looked well only to explain that she had a complex heart problem for which there was no cure? How could I tell them that the birth was straightforward, but within thirty-six hours this precious six-pound being was in the Neonatal Unit, then an ambulance and then the cardiac ward at Alder Hey? How could I tell those expectant women that I knew my daughter would die before me? How could I frighten them like that? The midwife looked directly at me and said, 'Don't tell them.'

So, I didn't. The following week, I walked back into the room where I had spent Friday mornings for the past six months, placed Ella's car seat on the floor beside my chair, along with my newly acquired paraphernalia of baby bag and blanket and looked directly at eight or so round, tired and curious women. It was the most ridiculous and damaging thirty minutes of my new motherhood. I want to apologise to you, Ella. I am sorry, sweetheart, that I did not hold you up in front of those women and tell them exactly how brave and wondrous you were. I am sorry I did not describe the room where a doctor drew a picture of your heart because it was easier to explain the faulty valve that way, how the nurses let me hold you all night rather than incubate you because no one expected you to live until morning.

But you did live. (A doctor told me he thought the fact that I'd kept you tucked inside my dressing gown, against my naked chest

possibly kept you alive.) And here you were, proving everyone wrong. Not only had you already survived the odds, but you were breastfeeding (an achievement for any heart baby), you were growing, your blue eyes open and searching for me like any other newborn's. I should have been proud of you. Not made to feel ashamed, made to feel that yours was a story I could not tell. I can still see myself sitting there, listening to the other mothers who had also brought in their babies, one of whom was crying because her child was not 'latching on'. I can still see myself leaning forward in my chair to console her. Yet *my* new knowledge was not permitted knowledge in that room. Ella's diagnosis tore apart the 'cultural ideology of motherhood'²⁸ and left not just her, but both of us as 'outsiders'.

The midwives present at the pre-natal class that day all knew about Ella's diagnosis, yet they actively discouraged me from explaining what had happened. It was as if they were not prepared to address the fact that things sometimes go wrong. Yet congenital heart disease, a term which covers any heart abnormality present from birth, is one of the most common birth defects. Leading UK children's heart charity The Children's Heart Federation states that 'one in every 133 babies in the UK is born with a heart condition, over 5,000 babies per year'.²⁹ Statistically, it wasn't going to be 'just me'. God help any of those women if they had gone on to have a stillbirth, or a terminal diagnosis delivered to their child. I am not saying that hearing my story would have helped them, but it might have made those perhaps already nervous and unknowing future mothers feel less alone.

The actions of that particular midwife, her reinforcement of silence, meant I went on to keep Ella's diagnosis a secret for most

²⁸ Farnsworth and Allen, p. 361.

²⁹ 'Heart Conditions', Children's Heart Federation <<http://www.chfed.org.uk/how-we-help/information-service/heart-conditions/>> [Accessed 22 November 2018].

of her life. Not from family or friends. But in public, at any gathering of new mothers, at any baby and toddler group in some chilly church hall, at any place where I could have potentially made new friends, I chose not to speak about the fragility of my daughter's life. I'm realistic. I know there is little space for such language in everyday interactions. We stop ourselves from revealing intimate details about dying and loss that are difficult to hear. Yet I craved an intimacy and an understanding from everyone I saw. But I think the seed was sown. The desire to articulate my daughter's life and future death was forming. The poems had to be written. The poems would be a way of not letting myself be marginalised. Never again would I walk into a room and be denied the chance to speak about what happened to my daughter. *Her Birth* would be a way of making myself heard.

I wanted the book to be read as a linear narrative. The collection is divided into three sections. The first section 'Echo' is about Ella's birth, life and death. The middle section 'Mining' is about my life without her and my grief. The final section 'Welcome' is about my next pregnancy and the birth of my second child, Molly, born healthy and well in 2010. Jon Glover, my editor at Carcanet/Northern House, played an important role in the gestation and realisation of my book. He was able to talk to me frankly about each poem. And each poem went on to be honed not only by me, but also by Jon's wise editorial eye.

There are two poems in the book that refer to my daughter's ashes: the scant amount 'weightless as dried herbs'³⁰ and another where I discover the sachet we kept her ashes in, some considerable time after the scattering. I use the tip of my finger to swipe for the remaining grains and rub them into my armpit. At the time of editing, on a day when we studied the manuscript line by line, Jon

³⁰ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 28.

and I sat beside each other in his office. When he read about the 'bits of grit [...] smeared into pores',³¹ he turned to me and asked, 'Did you really do that?'. Yes. I did not explain or justify or elaborate. We both realised then how truthful the book was. I had made an authorial decision to disguise nothing.

I don't consider myself as a poet wanting to manipulate her reader, but I did want to stimulate an emotional response. The response I wanted was not one of heartbreak or pity, but one that left the reader feeling moved and, at the same time, more informed. In her essay 'Death sentences: Confessions of living with dying in narratives of terminal illness', Ruth Robbins considers the conscious use of metaphor: 'One might say that it is the craftiness of the writing, the writer's manipulation of event and metaphor in the organization of experience into narrative, which produces emotional affect in the reader.'³² One might say I did this, that I manipulated both event and metaphor to garner emotional responses in my readers. Whilst writing the book, I longed for my daughter. I wanted my readers to feel what I felt, but according to one reviewer, Lawrence Sail, I executed this with restraint: 'Her linguistic tact and her judgement never falter, so that the reader has no reason to feel hectored or emotionally leaned on.'³³

In her essay, Robbins dissects the language of cancer describing euphemisms and metaphors as 'a defence mechanism rendering the unspeakable invisible'.³⁴ I embraced metaphor. I believe it enabled me to create a unique language for what happened. It provided access to the subject and led my readers through the challenging territory of taboo. I made a conscious decision,

³¹ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 43.

³² Ruth Robbins, 'Death sentences: Confessions of living with dying in narratives of terminal illness', in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* edited by Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 157.

³³ Lawrence Sail, 'On Rafael Campo, Wendy French and Jane Kirwan, Rebecca Goss and John Mole', *The Warwick Review*, 7 (2013), p. 106.

³⁴ Robbins, p. 163.

however, to avoid euphemism. There is one poem, where I address the euphemism I once let slip from my mouth when talking about Ella. I was instantly struck by how inadequate it was:

Lost

Walking with my baby in the park and slowing for someone
I hadn't seen in years, I heard myself interrupting coos
to say, *You know I lost my first child, don't you?*

As if there were a possibility she might turn up again,
with my glove or best pen. That a sweep of the sofa
might reward me her hand, then body, pulled from the gap

between cushions. As if all I did was lose sight of her.
That an anxious scan of sand could bring her into focus,
squat and peering at shells. As if I could swear

I had hold of her earlier, that a frantic spill of my bag
would bear lip gloss, chewing gum, keys and I'd be
unable to explain, apologising for my dreadful mistake.

As if one day, I could run from my house, screaming 'Found!'
Lift her for the whole road to see, shouting 'Here she is! Here
she is! She is here!'³⁵

This poem, which won a prize in the Troubadour International Poetry Prize in 2012, often stirred an emotional response in my audience at readings. People told me the poem made them cry. There was no artifice in the forming of my poems, but nor were they purely visceral in their making. Though I could not wish for more than an emotional reaction to my words, I had to maintain the intellect and integrity of the poet throughout.

Reviewing *Her Birth* in *The Guardian* in 2013, Sarah Crown wrote: 'The difficulty with a collection such as this is to consider it objectively; to separate subject from technique and work out which you're responding to. Clearly, for Goss, this is essential

³⁵ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 61.

poetry: one has the sense that she's writing for herself and for her daughter, rather than for an imagined, critical, reader.'³⁶ Crown is right, I was writing for Ella and for myself. I did not anticipate a critical reader for the poems. Lost in the writing, the reader felt like a faraway concept. Despite already having a published book of poems, the poetry I was writing about my dead child did not feel ready for an audience. I was more conscious of wanting to write down what happened, and to write it well. My complex relationship with readers came much later.

The final section of *Her Birth* was slow in the making. When I was six months pregnant with Molly, my second child, I made a conscious decision to do two things: I ceased my weekly sessions with the psychologist I had been seeing since Ella's death. And I stopped writing *Her Birth*. I needed to concentrate on the future child I felt so ambivalent about. There is a poem in the final section, written about the fetal echocardiogram I had to have during my second pregnancy. I describe my thought processes whilst looking at Molly's squirming shape on a monitor's screen: 'Four months from now, I'm hoping I will love you/each time I find you, usurping another's cot.'³⁷ Detaching myself from my therapist's support remains one of the hardest severings I have ever had to make. It felt reckless, but I don't regret that decision, or that time away from the poems. I owed it to my unborn child to begin thinking about her arrival, her very real and imminent existence.

When I did return to writing, Molly was born. She had not usurped anything or anyone, but her arrival was deeply complex for me emotionally. The bliss of new motherhood was intensified by grief and I realised there was more to say. The final section of *Her Birth* is about trying to fathom the arrival of a healthy child whilst

³⁶ Sarah Crown, 'Sound of Silence', *The Guardian*, 2013, Review, p. 17.

³⁷ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 56.

mourning the child I lost. Every time I reached for the pram, the blanket, the sleepsuit, these were items I had used and held before. But they had not been stored away simply because a child outgrew them, they had been kept as the saddest of keepsakes, the owners too bereft to throw them away. To touch these items again each time Molly required use of them was like being scalded. I return to the very first draft of 'Clothes', a poem about dealing with those previously owned items. I keep every draft of every poem I write. Sometimes a poem comes satisfyingly quickly, in eight or nine drafts and it is done. But more often, there are thirty, forty, fifty drafts. This very first draft of 'Clothes' is a hybrid of poetry, prose and poetic notes:

They will yellow, that's what I was told.
Left in a loft, a baby's clothes will gain
a creeping lemon stain along the seams.

And I thought of her things, stuffed into sacks
stirring
with a benign mould in the dark

will grow
a lemon hue,

yellow

benign mould (spreading in the dark) when left
inside plastic sacks, in lofts.

So much is white, for a baby and it yellows when left inside plastic
sacks, in lofts.

Wash this benign mould...

And

I could not throw them away, could not part with them
each bag proof of shape and life

...something once filled and held...

Jumble, muddled, no order when things happen in order, clothes
washed, folded away,
In ordered boxes labeled in months, catalogued in months.

Buried under a cot

And then when I became pregnant again...unknown sex of my
bud...

I carefully picked out the neutral colours
I finally braced the stairs, the loft door, the bags
Sacks buried beneath a cot

Spilled them like Santa sacks, generous jumble

The vests with their scabs of food breakfast, crusted...proof of her
meals...not clean, shocked at how dirty some of them were...but
why would I wash a dead baby's clothes...?

And sat cross legged...washed what I could, and that hopeful load,
a hot line waiting/flapping in the garden as my last hopeful load
spun dry – of the clothes for a girl...

The final version in the book reads:

The Clothes

Left in a loft, a baby's clothes will yellow.
That's what I was told and I thought of my

dead baby's things, stuffed into sacks,
stirring with a benign mould. A year later

and pregnant, I yanked plastic bags
from their muggy, attic dark, spilled

them like Christmas sacks and picked
my way through sleep suits, patchy

with the promised lemon stains. Vests
scabbed with breakfast, crusted proof

of meals and my shock at dirty things.
But why would I have come home,

numb from intensive care, and set about
washing what she left behind?

I selected neutral colours, an array of small
things for the unknown sex of my bud,

only to creep back later and delve for the pink,
a last hopeful load. Spun dry and flapping

on a line, my longing exposed in a string
of rosy pennants, ready to hail her, wrap her tight.³⁸

It is revealing to read drafts. How often does a writer return to the early stages of their work, once the work has been published? I wrote in note form, list-like, and the writing is like that of a diarist. When reviewing *Her Birth* in 2013, poet Jane Draycott described the book as: ‘Something close to a poetic journal, the poems are by turns meditative and bewildered, uttered in the quietest of delicately weighted language.’³⁹ When I talked with Marion Coutts, she described working on various edits and drafts of her book as ‘a way of being invested back in that time.’ ‘It allowed me a space - in my own time and not under the pressure of illness - to *really* organise what I thought’, she told me. ‘It was kind of lovely, intellectually. It was a good space for me. The editing space on *The Iceberg*, allowed me to keep thinking.’⁴⁰ I had not considered the journal style of writing until my research began, but perhaps like Coutts, who also began her book as a series of very short texts, it was my thinking time.

Molly’s arrival completes *Her Birth*. The final section explores Molly’s birth and life until she was two years old. It could be said that, at the end of *Her Birth*, I reject the modern elegy Ramazani identifies, and instead of choosing to resist consolation, I offered it. Molly signifies solace. However, I believe including Molly’s presence in *Her Birth* was not an act of consolation for myself, but for my reader. She is a restorative gift after the emotional hardship of all that preceded it. By the time my reader reaches the closing lines of the book, he or she can exhale, breathe out, the story ends

³⁸ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 57.

³⁹ Jane Draycott, *Canto, Reviews section*, 1 (2013). This originally appeared online, but the site has since been taken down; original review provided by the author.

⁴⁰ Appendix C, pp. 68-69, para. 6 & 1.

well. I am accepting a future with my healthy child. I am making a promise to look forward from now on.

Come and hold my hand, little one,
stand beside me in your small shoes,

Let's head for your undiscovered life,
your mother's ready now, let's run.⁴¹

⁴¹ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 68.

Section II: The reception of *Her Birth*

If you make a thing in the world you have to take all the risks that come with making a thing in the world, you just do. – Marion Coutts⁴²

Her Birth became a tangible thing. It was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection in the summer of 2013, requiring the book to go to print and be published ahead of its scheduled September release. I'd spent years looking at the poems on a screen, then ten hard copies were posted to Suffolk, where I had recently relocated.

It was a thrilling and emotional time, exacerbated by the recent move from Liverpool, the city where Ella and Molly were both born, where Ella died and where most of the book is set. I had anticipated moving to a new house whilst the manuscript rested with my publisher until its autumn publication. I had planned to spend the summer not thinking about it. The book's composition had consumed me for the past four years. I wanted to unpack, enjoy and adjust to my new life in Suffolk. But on the day the removal men parked the bulk of their trucks outside my new front door, a full-page article appeared in *The Observer* titled 'Rebecca Goss: the mother whose poems for a lost baby see her tipped for prize'. My face is smiling in the page's centre (my only photograph with the required resolution, yet for me, that beaming smile has always sat incongruously with the article's content). There was no resting from the book now.

The shortlisting for the prize was utterly unexpected. I had to complete a lengthier questionnaire for the Forward Prize organisers, to aid the press release. I was considered 'unknown' compared to the other shortlisted names and they needed to know more about me. Few of the *Her Birth* poems had been seen

⁴² Appendix C, p. 73, para. 1.

anywhere leading up to the announcement. They were rejected from numerous major poetry journals in the years leading up to the book's publication. This is another reason why I was so surprised by the prize shortlisting, and all the prize shortlistings that followed. I was surprised the poems were suddenly being considered 'good enough' to be regarded in such a way.

I soon found myself reading from the book and talking openly about my experiences at many literary events, on a regular basis. My very private story was not private anymore. As Cathy Rentzenbrink said, 'It's the migration of your experience from being locked within you, to being on display.'⁴³ Alice Jolly and I talked about the differing terrains of public and private discourse. She concurred with me when I said, 'I just don't know how to articulate it [my loss] in my private life but in my public life I can talk about it freely.'⁴⁴ I had formed a thick, dark silence around Ella's death in my private life so to suddenly be able to speak about Ella, to be *asked* to speak about Ella at literary festivals felt wonderful, liberating and, for a while, I thrived on it.

Her Birth was eventually shortlisted for major, international literary awards: the 2013 Forward Prize for Best Collection, the Warwick Prize for Writing 2015 and the Portico Prize for Literature 2015. It was winner of the Poetry Category in the 2013 East Anglian Book Awards. It was the book that secured my place on the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets in 2014, a list compiled every ten years of twenty poets who, as described by the Poetry Book Society themselves are 'expected to dominate the poetry landscape of the coming decade'.⁴⁵

⁴³ Appendix A, p. 4, para 1.

⁴⁴ Appendix B, p. 45, para 5.

⁴⁵ Sarah Shaffi, 'Twenty "Next Generation Poets" Of The Decade Named | The Bookseller', *Thebookseller.com*, 2014 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/twenty-next-generation-poets-decade-named>> [Accessed 24 March 2019].

Literary prize culture is a heady thing to be part of, but to take any kind of swipe at prize culture is risky. How dare the poet malign a system that has singled out their book, warranting it significant national and international attention and monetary reward. The poet could only come across as ungrateful, speaking from his or her privileged position. Poet Kathryn Gray brilliantly dissects poetry prize culture in her 2015 essay for *The Dark Horse* magazine. Gray was herself shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the T. S. Eliot Prize. She writes: ‘I proceed with a degree of trepidation, not to mention an explicit concern that I might be read as perfidious in all respects, since I have personally benefitted from prize culture and all that such notice brings with it. Even stating such biographical detail in this context places one in the curious position of being simultaneously both humblebrag *and* turncoat.’⁴⁶

I feel similarly hesitant about addressing this topic. My book was lauded and I too ‘personally benefitted from prize culture’ in ways that Gray identifies:

For the lucky ones who gain entry to this private members’ club of prize culture, privilege goes well beyond the welcome ego massage. Practical benefits are conferred, and I speak from experience. Offers of readings, festivals, judging and teaching will arrive via the inbox with regularity, because biographical data now has the sprinkle of stardust. For a time, at least, such lucky poets are the go-to people, who reinforce or lend establishment credibility and marketing to a variety of poetry-community enterprises.⁴⁷

I accept this analysis of the prize culture system, I accept ‘how it works’. What I want to look at is how it is managed, by the prize-winning writers themselves. I recently listened to an interview

⁴⁶ Kathryn Gray, “‘To Tell Your Name the Livelong Day’: The Paradox of the Poetry Prize”, *The Dark Horse*, 35 (2015), 8-14, (p. 8) [Italics in the original].

⁴⁷ Gray, “‘To Tell Your Name’”.

with poet Andrew McMillan about his experiences of winning and being shortlisted for multiple prizes. He says:

The whole prize culture thing is such a weird thing [...] exciting for a few weeks, but then you have to come home and empty the dishwasher. It's not life-changing in the way that winning an Oscar would be in another art form or winning the Turner prize, it doesn't really shift anything. Being shortlisted then not winning is a weird thing in itself because there's a lot of hype leading up to it [...] I remember after one [award ceremony] me and my boyfriend just went to the cinema to see a Helen Mirren film [...] We clapped who won, then we were like 'oh, let's just go to the cinema'. It's a very weird, intense bubble for four or five minutes and then you have to leave it, thankfully, because it's an odd space to occupy.⁴⁸

McMillan is respectful and speaks many truths. I feel validated by his words but note the absence of any regret at his not winning. All my interviewees were remarkably candid on this matter. Marion Coutts and I laughed a lot when she told me she really thought *The Iceberg* should have won *everything*. Cathy Rentzenbrink described being swept up in the belief that she was going to win the Wellcome Prize because she was surrounded by people who kept telling her she would. Alice Jolly won the PEN Ackerley award, yet went on to see the other shortlisted writers asked to read at literary festivals, while she remained uninvited. We all agreed it was a kind of 'circus'. As an author, you are trapped inside the heady madness of the tent, until you don't win, and find yourself ejected on to the empty, trampled grass outside. But are things intensified for the author if the lauded text in question is one of personal narrative? Cathy Rentzenbrink speaks candidly about not winning the Wellcome Prize: 'I shouldn't feel like this, but I also felt fucked over. That the terrible thing that happened to my

⁴⁸ David Turner, 'Episode 117: Andrew McMillan', *Lunar Poetry Podcast*, 2018. Transcribed by Christabel Smith <<https://soundcloud.com/lunar-poetry-podcasts/ep117-andrew-mcmillan-transcript-available>> [Accessed 24 March 2019].

brother and my ability to represent it was not enough for these people.⁴⁹

After I lost the Forward Prize in 2013, I went dancing in a Soho club until four in the morning. In a haze of alcohol, music and sweat I obliterated the emotional rollercoaster of publicity, and the losses more painful than an un-won prize. Dancing was therapy. But by 2015, and the night I did not win the Portico Prize for Literature for which *Her Birth* was shortlisted, my husband and I wandered into the dark, wet streets of Manchester city centre and went straight to our hotel. I was exhausted. We were both exhausted.

McMillan is correct, it is not ‘life-changing’ when you are swept up in prize culture. It is a concentrated, short-lived and disorientating time. The ‘benefits’ of prize culture and being considered one of the ‘go-to people’ meant I was frequently away from home. For me, each trip involved speaking about my dead daughter. I was struggling to cope with the extent of which I had to talk about my sadness, in public. Despite trying to see my reputation as becoming established, and this being my job, the trips were starting to cost me money, rather than recoup it. That ‘weird, intense bubble’ had taken its toll – financially, emotionally, physically. I touch upon this in a 2016 essay for the poetry journal *Agenda*:

Then, very gradually, things changed. I wasn’t sharing Ella’s story anymore. The poems were spilling from my mouth, leaving me drained. Her story had become caught up in publicity around competition shortlists. I was only thinking about Ella in the context of the poems. She had become reduced to fifty-two pages, and I was only ever talking about her at literary events. I began to feel I was losing control of my experience.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Appendix A, p. 17, para. 3.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Goss, ‘Losing Ella’, *Agenda: The Power of Poetry*, 50 (2016), 8-11, (p. 8).

I think it must be acknowledged that this lack of control by the author, over their text and how it is broadcast to an audience, is an added dimension of being immersed in prize culture. I asked Cathy Rentzenbrink about this. She said:

The way I think about it is, once you decide to put your book into the world you have no control over it [...] you just have to think that you've put it in a boat, you push it out and then the waves take it or not. After that, you really have no control. The boat might just stay there or it might not go anywhere or it might go out and it might get tossed on the high seas and people will like it, or not like it [...] I completely accept I surrendered control.⁵¹

In 2018, poets Diana Arterian and Natalie Eilbert recorded a conversation in which both women considered the role of poetry when dealing with distressing material, and the resulting costs of publishing personal narratives. Both women have written autobiographical collections containing traumatic content. Their conversation, published online, was titled 'Poetry Can Handle This: on poetry and radical exposure'. At one point, Diana Arterian asks: 'How do we learn and honour the boundaries of body and psychology? We all know artists who seem to take themselves to the brink for their work and succumb to the darkness there in one way or another. The potential cost can feel so great, the emotional limits far more nebulous – difficult to recognize.'⁵²

I wonder if a reader, an audience, ever considers the emotional limits of the author? We stand before audiences, articulate and open about our loss, yet our grief is immeasurable. How, as writers, are we managing that? All of my interviewees were seeing therapists once their books were published. Marion Coutts seems to have been least affected by the 'circus' of prize culture, but also

⁵¹ Appendix A, p. 17, para. 2.

⁵² Diana Arterian and Natalie Eilbert, 'Poetry Can Handle This: On Trauma and Radical Exposure', *Literary Hub*, 2018, <<https://lithub.com/poetry-can-handle-this-on-trauma-and-radical-exposure/2/>> [Accessed 24 March 2019].

accepts that she was an interloper of sorts. Up until the publication of her book Coutts was known as a visual artist and the literary scene was entirely new to her. All three women acknowledge they were seeing therapists to address their grief, the grief that is as Marion Coutts puts it ‘the background to breakfast, lunch, dinner’,⁵³ but the conversations with their therapists also became a way of managing their books as published artefacts. Interestingly, Cathy Rentzenbrink acknowledges that although she sees the book’s existence as ‘complex’ it was ‘a good thing for [her] to do ultimately as it made [her] go back to therapy’.⁵⁴

In psychology, most of the literature focusing on the disclosure of a personal narrative, examines the relationship between the narrator and the listener. In the case of the author (the writer, the poet, the memoirist), they are the narrator. But an important thing to note is that the author does not have one, sole listener. The author has multiple listeners. And the ‘exchange’ entered into is, therefore, hugely unbalanced. There is a resulting responsibility on the author to manage that overwhelming disparity. There must be consequences to this dynamic, surely? Poetry readings are not bereavement support groups. They are not therapy sessions. Reading from a personal narrative at a public, literary event, to a (sometimes large) group of people, can be disorientating when there is no opportunity for immediate conversation and exchange for the author. Arterian considers this when she says:

One of the things that surprised me [...] was the psychological effect it had on me in its transition from manuscript to physical object [...] Instead of any definitive sealing off, the book existing, and reading from it time and again in front of audiences, provoked an intense emotional upheaval in me for a while.⁵⁵

⁵³ Appendix C, p. 76, para. 6.

⁵⁴ Appendix A, p. 11, para. 6.

⁵⁵ Arterian and Eilbert, ‘Poetry Can Handle This’.

I recognise that ‘intense emotional upheaval’, but should we, as confessional authors, be so ‘surprised’ at our own reactions to sharing ‘emotionally difficult’ material? We chose to write it down. In the initial thrill of my book’s publication, I relished opportunities to talk about Ella but within two years I was feeling forced to talk about Ella and her death. That force did not come explicitly from my editor or my publisher, but a poet has to work hard to see her book placed into the consciousness of potential readers. Typically, with no agent and a publisher with a limited promotional budget, there is a responsibility for the poet to take their book and, as Eilbert puts it, ‘telegraph it to a wider audience’.⁵⁶ For me, this responsibility was intensified once my book was caught up in prize culture. I felt obliged to honour commitments to prize-related events, to turn up and read poems about Ella, often unpaid. My reserves were limited, financially and emotionally, yet the ‘stardust’ that Kathryn Gray referred to was meant to be enough to sustain me.

For two years, I read aloud from the book at literary events and conferences. I spoke extensively about the poems on discussion panels. I never cried on stage and I rarely cried in private. When amongst friends or family, it was not uncommon for me to be flippant about people crying at my readings. My way of dealing with it? Certainly. But there must have been an impact. Imagine hearing members of your audience weep? Or worse, scanning the room the way a poet can, as the words roll from our lips, and catching the eye of one member of the audience only to see that face drenched in tears. I don’t know how I stood it. All the time standing there, trying so hard not to cry myself. I’d written a book that garnered huge emotional response in others, but it was causing me to curl up and forget how to howl.

⁵⁶ Arterian and Eilbert, ‘Poetry Can Handle This’.

Reviews of *Her Birth* were difficult to read. Not because they were unkind, but because they made me see what I had been writing about. It was like having my life mirrored back at me to see its wretchedness anew. I couldn't really bear it. And as reviews of the book began to appear, it soon became apparent that everyone was crying, apart from me:

In *Her Birth*, Rebecca Goss has let silence speak, and in her bringing together of subject and medium, questions of objectivity are chased out of the window. I'm sure I won't be the only reader to finish the book in tears.⁵⁷

The story throughout is told with tact and delicacy like an intense verse novel, moving the reader to tears.⁵⁸

I gasped and blinked back tears and knew that *Her Birth* is a poetry collection freighted with riches; insight and understanding to those of us who may not have been through this experience, congruence and comfort to those who have...⁵⁹

I read the book from cover to cover in one go and couldn't keep back the tears.⁶⁰

I have watched three of my readings, video recorded at the time, and one very noticeable thing is the effort I put into ensuring my audience felt at ease. I watch myself on the screen, holding my small book of sadness, and I'm self-deprecating, striving to make people laugh. I reassure the audience that listening to the poems will be tough, but they'll get through it. I protect them. Once the readings started taking their toll, I would walk off such stages and feel desolate. Cathy Rentzenbrink was adamant about practising self-care after a public event: 'You need to get in the bath, you

⁵⁷ Crown, p. 17.

⁵⁸ W. S. Milne, 'New Generation Poets', *Agenda*, 49 (2016), 134-143, (p. 140).

⁵⁹ 'Her Birth ~ Rebecca Goss @Forwardprizes', Dovegreyreader Scribbles, 2013, <http://dovegreyreader.typepad.com/dovegreyreader_scribbles/2013/09/poetry.html> [Accessed 24 March 2019].

⁶⁰ Writers Centre Norwich to Rebecca Goss, 'The East Anglian Book Awards 2013: Judge's comments' (email, November 2013).

need to cry, you need to process it, you need to.’⁶¹ I did not exercise good practice.

Joan Didion describes observing the recently bereaved: ‘I think about how these people looked when I saw them unexpectedly on the street, say or entering a room, during the year or so after the death. What struck me in each instance was how exposed they seemed, how raw. How fragile, I understand now. How unstable.’⁶² Didion refers to people she sees in everyday life, but what about being viewed in your grief after *willingly* placing yourself in the spotlight? Reading the poems in public was an act of self-disclosure, but also an act of self-exposure, one that I agreed to, and that exposure left me looking (and feeling) like the raw and fragile people Didion describes.

I have to remind myself that while I was busy promoting the book it may have been five or so years since Ella’s death, but I was still in that raw and fragile place and it began to manifest itself at public events. The type of public event I was involved in began to change. One of the ‘benefits’ of prize culture, and the publication of *Her Birth*, is that it led to my involvement in the world of medical humanities, an interdisciplinary field focusing on the relationship between medicine and the arts. Medical Humanities is a relatively recent term. The publication of my book coincided with significant expansion in the field and an increase in related journals and conferences. Between 2009 and 2014 the Wellcome Trust funded research programmes at King’s College London and Durham University fostering what are now considered recognised centres of excellence for Medical Humanities.

I felt fortunate to step outside the immediate literary arena and take *Her Birth* into a wider field. I believe this is one of the most

⁶¹ Appendix A, p. 14, para. 3.

⁶² Didion, p. 169.

beneficial things a poet can do. In 2015, I spent a day working with undergraduates at Manchester University's Medical School. I ran workshops and group discussions, using poetry to explore issues of empathy within a medical setting. The day was illuminating in many ways. I appreciated the students' candid responses to the poetry we shared. I learnt a lot about a medic's perspective on language and communication used in hospitals. I concluded my visit with a reading from *Her Birth* to students and clinicians from the school.

Afterwards, as I conducted a book signing in the shadow of a full-size, anatomical skeleton, a consultant approached me. There was a slight reluctance in his body language. He was tentative. He bent his head downward towards his chest as he began speaking, keen to get my ear only and I had to lean close to hear what he said. He was asking me a question: 'Do you think this, all this – the poetry readings, the talks – is actually prolonging your grief?' This is the only question to floor me in all the years reading from the book. I felt acutely uncomfortable, caught in headlights and unable to escape. My answer was muttered and muddled. I eventually found myself agreeing with him. Saying 'perhaps you are right.' But his question made me doubt the last fifty minutes of my life. It made me question my decision to stand before a room full of strangers, and tell them private, personal information about my dead baby. Was I making things worse?

Three years on, I think that consultant was almost right. Making the story in *Her Birth* a publicly accessible thing, that I willingly shared, did not prolong my grief, but it certainly interrupted it. I was restricted to the narrative I had constructed. It was too risky to go outside it. It could increase the risk of crying. Crying was something I had trained myself not to do. I now believe once the poems were published, I stopped grieving for my daughter. I let the book do the grieving for me. I kept my experience framed

within the book's eighty pages and I suppressed anything (everything) else I had not written about. So, I've come to regard *Her Birth* as a script. A script I didn't stray from. I let a controlled amount of information be published, and that information was all I was prepared to reveal.

When I asked Marion Coutts how she dealt with the fact her experience became 'public knowledge' once her memoir was published, she said:

I'm totally happy about that because it is a construct. I made it. I totally control what's in there. And even though it *seems* extremely authentic and about us, I made it. It's not the experience [...] So, regarding its relationship to my life, I never feel exposed by it, in any way, at all. It's a construct, a formal construct.⁶³

I admire this intelligent outlook. Coutts controls how things are told, resulting in her agency over the experience of making it public. Maybe the 'script' of *Her Birth* was actually doing a job. For Coutts, the act of making her book, seeing it as a construct, sheltered her from any feelings of self-exposure.

Reviewers frequently note that I shunned sentimentality. When reviewing the book in 2013, poet Maria Taylor wrote "Mining" the middle section, is about as moving and devastating as any poetry I've ever read. This isn't simply because of an emotional response to the tragedy of losing a child, but also due to Goss' unsentimental and direct approach to describing a new, alien life without her daughter.'⁶⁴

Five years on it is interesting to consider that refusal of sentiment. I am not sure how conscious my decision was, to eschew sentimentality when writing about myself as a grief-stricken

⁶³ Appendix C, p. 72, para 2.

⁶⁴ Maria Taylor, 'Poetry of the Moment', *Under the Radar*, 12 (2013), 86-91, (p. 90).

mother. Reviewing the book for *Poetry London* in 2014, Katy Evans-Bush wrote ‘*Her Birth* [...] must be at once the most painfully personal and the most restrained and sparely written poetry collection of the year.’⁶⁵ In an early draft of this thesis, I wrote that sentimentality was something I refused to give in to. I didn’t feel anything remotely sentimental about Ella. I felt raw and angry and unhappy. However, I don’t think it was about not wanting to give in to sentimentality, rather I made a decision to bury it. In order to write unsentimental poems, ‘better poems’, about my dead daughter – poems that showed reasoned emotion and exercised the restraint that Evans-Bush identified – it was my dead daughter I eventually became less sentimental about.

In her book *The Empathy Exams*, a collection of autobiographical essays covering a vast range of personal experiences including abortion and heart surgery, Leslie Jamison says of sentimentality: ‘The truth is, I resist something in sentimentality [...] I’m afraid of its inflated gestures and broken promises. But I’m just as afraid of what happens when we run away from it: jadedness, irony, chill.’⁶⁶ Whether or not I chose to run away from sentimentality, I still recognise myself in Jamison’s words.

I came to assume the characteristics of ‘jadedness’ and ‘chill’. I think I became cold to the events surrounding Ella’s death because I was purely the vessel from which they spilled. I shut down my grief in order to manage Ella’s story in the public sphere. There were times at my desk when I did cry writing the poems, but I would quickly stop, in order to concentrate on crafting the work. Suppression and control had become such necessary methods in order to write unsentimental poems, and then eventually share those poems in public, that my real feelings became skewed.

⁶⁵ Katy Evans-Bush, ‘Witnessing the Flow: Katy Evans-Bush on Hannah Lowe, Maitreyabandhu, Marianne Burton and Rebecca Goss: new poets immersed in the stuff of life’, *Poetry London*, 77 (2014), 37-39, (p. 37).

⁶⁶ Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams* (London: Granta, 2014), p.130.

I stopped reading from *Her Birth* at the end of 2015, after a particular event. I attended Medicine Unboxed, a two-day conference in Cheltenham, curated by oncologist and writer Dr Sam Guglani. Artists, scientists, writers, medics and historians were all brought together to talk about the culture of medicine. I had been invited to read from *Her Birth* and take part in a discussion on the subject of elegy. I had a cough, it was bothersome, but not enough to prevent me from conducting a reading.

Over three hundred people sat in the audience. I had one of those tiny microphones, its workings hooked behind my ear to leave a small dark pearl suspended just beyond my mouth. I wasn't allowed to touch my hair. I had to take my earrings out. This is one of the readings I have since watched online. For me it is uncomfortable viewing because I know what followed. Once on stage, I am open, smiling and relaxed towards the audience. I remember sensing them relax too. I recognise the tactic of putting my audience at ease. I remember the silence I heard the moment I spoke the words 'This book is about the birth of my daughter Ella, born in 2007 with the incurable heart condition Severe Ebstein's Anomaly. She lived for sixteen months.' (That silence often intensified as a reading progressed. It's why I could always hear the crying.) I start to read the poems. I am searingly honest, I am resolutely in control. It is possibly one of the best *Her Birth* readings I have ever given.

Coming off stage, I immediately lost sight of the two other poets I had been reading alongside. I rushed to a dark corner to cough violently for a few minutes. I felt clammy and exhausted. Eventually I walked out into the foyer where the audience had spilled to. It was very crowded. I had just bared my soul to these people and now felt far too physically close to them. I headed for the exit, to get some air, despite it being a freezing November day.

I struggled to make it to the door. I was stopped by people wanting to talk to me about their own dead babies, their dead fathers, their dead mother-in-law. They wanted to talk about a dead relative's clothes, a dead relative's possessions. I had to listen. When I eventually got out and back to my hotel, I telephoned my husband and sobbed. I made my terrible confession, that I could not do this anymore. I didn't want to be five hours away from him. I wanted to be at home, talking to him about Ella. I hadn't talked to him about Ella for years.

I often think back to that hotel room, and how lonely I felt. I rarely look back to my more positive experiences with the book. One aim of this thesis is to regain an understanding of the *good* the book achieved. I struggle to see it anymore. I still ask myself why would anyone want to read something so sad? I turn to Judith Harris' words for assurance: 'More than other kinds of writing, confessional writing can broaden the vernacular of human understanding. Readers are moved by the liberation that touches the lives of those people who have endured painful experiences and then had the courage to revisit these experiences.'⁶⁷

It would become apparent in the months and years after the book was published, that I had said the unsayable. Not just words I was struggling to express myself, but words other parents were struggling to find. The reviews allowed me to step back and consider how I had written the book. But I did not know I was providing a language for others until the book became a tangible thing and people began to make contact. I began to receive letters, emails, messages on social media. Mostly from bereaved parents. I may have seen myself as writing from the margins of motherhood, but it was becoming clear I was not the only one who resided there.

⁶⁷ Harris, p.1.

Leslie Jamison also received contact from her readers and explained that ‘notes from strangers were gifts and burdens at once’.⁶⁸ When people wrote to me, I always responded. If I had been moved and touched by their words I said so, but I also carefully ensured that was the end of all contact. I then stowed all their words away. Letters were stacked together on a shelf above my desk and have since been moved to a box. Emails were and still are, filed in an unvisited virtual folder. I never re-read anything. Jamison’s word ‘burdens’ is so precise in this context. I felt these stories had come into my home, and I had a responsibility to deal them, yet I had few reserves for the task. This morning, as part of my research for this thesis, I opened the email folder and began to scroll through names I had forgotten. I opened one email at random and only made it through the opening paragraph before crying forced me to stop reading. I had to get up from my desk. Wipe my face. I emptied the washing machine. Addressed something mundane.

It still troubles me how I am able to write graphic poems about my dying daughter, but then struggle to take on board other people’s sad and real stories. What, still, makes me so incapable? I knew that what these people had done had taken a certain amount of courage, to write to me (a woman they had never met) after reading my book, but all I wanted to do was keep them at arm’s length. From the moment Ella died, I rarely turned to other bereaved parents’ narratives myself, for knowledge, assurance or comfort of any kind. Their stories felt like a pain bigger than my own and they broke my heart. I did not glean clarity from what they had to say, just a raw sadness, making me turn away and retreat back into my own story. This manifested itself at readings, when I was often approached by bereaved parents after I had read the poems. To this day, I feel I let many women down. What were

⁶⁸ Jamison, ‘Confessional Writing’.

my obligations as they queued to buy my book? What responsibility did I have, as the author of the book, to pay attention to these women? Did I listen when they brought their own stories with them? On that cold November day at the medical humanities conference, did I stand there and care enough?

I raised the issue of reader contact with all my interviewees, sharing with them Jamison's 'gift and burden' perspective. Alice Jolly responded:

I've always been able to cope with it, but I've sometimes found it very burdensome [...] it's that grim thing at ten o'clock at night, when you're really tired and you know there's that email from that woman, and you really ought to reply about how awful it is. I didn't ever [not reply] but wonder if I should have done? I think now I would be a bit tougher, but then what I find is that you just feel guilty if you don't reply to the email.⁶⁹

Like me, Jolly recognised that it had taken a lot for these women to make contact:

It was quite difficult for them to write that email [...] You know yourself, when you were in a state of really deep grief the fact that somebody did bother to respond to you, really mattered. So, then it is a huge burden because you think (and it's not too much to think), this person may be suicidal. They might be really at the end of their tether and actually, whether I send a nice reply to them really does matter and that's awful.⁷⁰

Cathy Rentzenbrink said:

What I started to do with emails was I would put them in one folder then I would have a dedicated time of the week when I read and answered them all. I put myself in the right zone for it. My therapist taught me to breathe white light over myself. You know there's those sorts of things. Sometimes I forget the stages I had to go through.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Appendix B, p. 51, para. 4.

⁷⁰ Appendix B, p. 51, para 6.

⁷¹ Appendix A, p. 10, para 4.

There came a time when Jamison stopped responding to the letters she received. ‘An abiding sense of guilt and hypocrisy began to fester: I was peddling empathy everywhere and getting so much from it – absorbing the affirmation of every charged emotional response to what I’d written. I’d made everyone feel, and now I was ignoring those feelings. I was empathetic in the abstract and stingy everywhere else.’⁷²

The weight of festering guilt experienced by Jolly and Jamison is palpable, whereas Coutts was able to execute more detachment and control: ‘Sometimes I respond, sometimes I mark them with a red flag and respond ages later, sometimes I don’t respond. And I don’t beat myself up about any option.’⁷³

Coutts told me she was happy to have contact from strangers, but took time to consider the issue of readers ‘knowing’ the author in some way:

It’s like somebody saying to me ‘Oh God, now I know all about you’ and I thought ‘You don’t know anything about me’. And then another person saying to me ‘I don’t know anything about you’, and me saying ‘But you know how I think’. Do you see what I mean? So, somewhere between these two positions, that’s how you deal with stuff.⁷⁴

As authors of personal narrative, have we let ourselves be known? How is this interpreted by our readers? Alice Jolly reflected on this:

The business of memoir is slightly asking someone to be your best friend for a few hours. And that is really dangerous, because they understand that relationship but to you, they’re just somebody that read your book. They’re nobody to you. I’ve had a lot of, *I felt like this was written by my best friend* comments about this memoir [...] people feel like it’s something shared over a kitchen table, you

⁷² Jamison, ‘Confessional Writing’.

⁷³ Appendix C, p. 73, para 6.

⁷⁴ Appendix C, p. 72, para 4.

know? Which in a way, is a sort of compliment to the book. It's lovely when they can understand that, but it's when they then think they are my best friend, it's kind of scary.⁷⁵

This is valuable testimony. These authors, at times, experienced feelings of vulnerability, responsibility, exposure and guilt. I feel it proves that the placing of a personal, traumatic narrative into the public sphere must be regarded as a complex process, more than simply the 'sharing' of an experience. And that maybe we should start recognising, acknowledging and dealing with these emotional costs, as writers, as agents, as publishers. I comprehend the risks and benefits of revealing personal stories, as I believe do all my interviewees. Each of us understands that to *not* speak of our experiences would undoubtedly affect how we function throughout our lives. But I do feel more attention must be paid to the effects of self-disclosure on an author specifically. Cathy Rentzenbrink, who worked in the book industry before she was published herself, was right to point out to me that this is something easier said, than done:

It's really difficult for publishers because on the one hand when someone gets loads of exposure, it's tempting to think they could have done with a bit more preparation for this, but publishers have no idea. It's only really very close to publication that they might know something's going to be on Radio 4. It's only very close in the process when you know what's going to happen.⁷⁶

We discussed too, the possible fallout if a writer was 'prepared' for a large amount of media attention and reader contact, when in fact that 'attention' may never materialise. But Cathy Rentzenbrink did conclude 'When I talk to memoirists now, I say 'You know, if you're not already in therapy you need to be, when the book comes out.'⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Appendix B, p. 52, para 8.

⁷⁶ Appendix A, p. 7, para 6.

⁷⁷ Appendix A, p. 11, para 2.

Leslie Jamison has questioned the relationship between the confessional writer and the ‘strangers’ who read their books.

As I got more notes from strangers, I started to wonder what desires motivated them. What do readers want from the writers they read? What sorts of responses do they imagine? Sometimes a reader offers his own life; sometimes he only offers praise. Every offering suggests itself as a mixture of gift and request – a desire to show the author what her words have meant, and a desire to be seen: “Let me know I’m visible to you, as you’ve been visible to me.”⁷⁸

A desire for visibility, of course! I had been allowed the chance to be seen (and heard), but the readers wanting to make contact with me, the women/parents/carers continued to be denied that chance. Either they weren’t able to find the words, or they were faced with a society who deemed their words too difficult to hear. When Alice Jolly spoke of women who experience stillbirth, or the death of a child or infertility she asked: ‘What do we do with those stories as a society? Are we just saying you can’t tell those stories, it’s too difficult? But that is the reality for some people, so why can’t we say it?’⁷⁹

Making contact with me, could have been a bereaved reader’s first step towards visibility. As Jamison puts it: ‘The reader wants to confess something back, make a reciprocal exchange.’⁸⁰

Maybe the intimacy I longed for, way back when Ella was born and I struggled to speak about her diagnosis, maybe that intimacy did transpire after all, it just came from somewhere unexpected, it came from strangers. I go back to the letters that were sent to me:

⁷⁸ Jamison, ‘Confessional Writing’.

⁷⁹ Appendix B, p. 38, para 7.

⁸⁰ Jamison, ‘Confessional Writing’.

I wanted you to know [...] how I keep going back to it [...] since I lost my little girl, I have searched for her in other people's words, or rather to that shared grief.⁸¹

I have also been trying to use poetry to express the loss of my child. Your book struck me very powerfully as a truthful account of your grief.⁸²

The book strikes an important chord with me and it will do so for others I know who have experienced the death of a child. My daughter died soon after birth and I found that poetry was the only way to say the unsayable.⁸³

I lost my eldest child last year. The poems are astonishing, and I keep going back to them with a yes, yes, yes. Thank you for your courage and for sharing your journey.⁸⁴

I must draw comfort from this. This is what bereaved parents gained from reading *Her Birth*. They have told me.

⁸¹ Wendy Pratt to Rebecca Goss, 'Her Birth' (email, May 2014).

⁸² Chris Edgoose to Rebecca Goss, 'A Letter' (email, June 2014).

⁸³ Caroline Bath [pseud.], comment on 'Motherhood, poetry and loss', Rebecca Goss: poems etc., comment posted [13 August 2013] <https://rebeccagoss.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/motherhood-poetry-and-loss/> [Accessed 24 March 2019].

⁸⁴ Maureen Jivani to Rebecca Goss, 'Her Birth' (email, September 2013).

Section III: Aftermath

In her most breathless state, there was a tree - cankerous and scratching, malevolent in its reach around her frame. - Rebecca Goss⁸⁵

By the end of 2015, I was not coping with any aspect of *Her Birth*. I could not bring myself to open its pages. The thought of looking at the book resulted in an overwhelming sense of distress. The costs of repeatedly sharing my narrative of loss in public were making themselves known in my personal, private life.

Julia Samuel, grief psychotherapist and Founder Patron of the charity Child Bereavement UK, has worked extensively with bereaved couples. In her bestselling book *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*, she writes: 'If couples can find ways of communicating with each other, they can become closer through the loss. They are the only two people in the world that truly know what this experience of their child dying feels like. However, research shows that couples who already have difficulties in their relationship and who don't seek support are more likely to separate following the death of a child.'⁸⁶

I have been married for fifteen years. My husband and I met when I was twenty-two, we married six years later, we danced until first light at our wedding. Over the years we have fought, and we have wept. We have endured job loss, financial struggles. We have borne the death of a parent, we have rescued a dog. We have held our babies in the dawn of delivery rooms, and we have scattered one child's ashes at sea. We are still married.

I feel sure enough to state that my husband and I did not have difficulties in our marriage leading up to Ella's death. We were

⁸⁵ Rebecca Goss, *Girl* (Manchester: Carcanet/Northern House, 2019), p. 20.

⁸⁶ Julia Samuel, *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving* (UK: Penguin Life, 2017), p. 187.

exhausted by the weight of her diagnosis, by extended stays in hospital, by those final weeks watching her die. But we had to survive this terrible thing and I can recall that sensation of feeling closer to him after our daughter died. I wore his shirts for weeks after her death. I would often accompany him to work, if only to be beside him for the car journey. We were rarely apart. But our closeness became threatened by the publication of *Her Birth*.

There are fourteen poems in the collection that refer to my husband explicitly. In the book he is constantly beside me and beside Ella. If it was possible to return to any one of my public readings, you will see that I always mention him. It was a very conscious decision to include him. The publication of the book however, enabled *me* to speak, but it silenced him. It was my husband's bowed head I tried not to watch in the audience at readings. It was his lack of inclusion in interviews. No one asked him to appear at literary festivals. Publication meant I was away from home, regularly, for the first time in years. However important he was in the book, he had no life alongside it. And this resulted in strains on our marriage. After the Forward Prize award event in 2013, we drove home and I remember him very clearly saying 'Thank God all that is over', how he wanted to 'throw that fucking book out of the window'. We had no idea there were more shortlistings and prize events to come. We were already talking about Ella less and less. We stopped talking about my 'work' yet my work was all about her. Ella was everything to do with my professional life, but she vanished from our home. By 2015, drained from readings or events, I had no reserves to continue the conversation I was having about my daughter in public, at home. The silence between my husband and I came from the book's ability to separate us. Cathy Rentzenbrink spoke frankly about the split existence between the writing life and the familial, domestic one:

For me, I think there's something extremely intoxicating about talking about life and death with writers and strangers and people caring about my opinion. It's quite difficult for me to then go home where actually no one really cares about my opinions, they just want me to get the laundry up to date. That's quite hard.⁸⁷

During a particularly low point in our relationship, I recall explaining to my husband that when I left the house *Her Birth* became a positive thing that people wanted to embrace. But inside our house, the book was a toxic thing that he was uncomfortable with. Not long after sobbing to my husband in that Cheltenham hotel room, telling him I was unable to cope with the readings anymore and realising that we were rarely communicating about our dead daughter, I was diagnosed with pleurisy.

I am still undecided whether bereavement should be regarded as an illness. But one thing I am sure of, is that grieving can make you ill. Pleurisy is a pain unlike any other I have experienced. I would be as bold to state that childbirth hurts less. Pleurisy physically cripples. My body was bent, sore. I could be found grappling for something to cling to each time a cough scored its way out of my body. I was left breathless, often unable to walk or speak from the sheer pain of inhaling and exhaling. There were hospital visits, X-rays, checks for embolisms, an ECG, everything manageable medically, but the pain stayed in my body for the following four months. I didn't work for the rest of the year. I felt as stricken as I had in the immediate months after Ella's death. I wrote a series of pleurisy poems following the illness and learnt that in Chinese medicine, it is believed that grief manifests itself in the lungs. So, there she was. Ella. Kept not in my heart, but in my lungs. Whilst recovering from pleurisy I 'lost' my copy of *Her Birth*. I let it be swallowed up in my domestic chaos. I didn't look at it or touch it again for over eighteen months. In that time, my husband and I

⁸⁷ Appendix A, p. 24, para 3.

slowly repaired our marriage. It became easier to talk again, with the book out of sight. I saw myself as having multiple identities, that of poet, mother, wife respectively, and for a period of time I chose to stow the poet away.

I am skilled at separating those identities. Judith Harris has considered strategies employed by poets when reading personal material:

Adopting a mask, or inventing a speaker through language, is often a helpful device for poets who wish to explore the conflicted aspects of their own personalities. The dramatic persona covertly expresses something the poet could not express from within his or her own consistent identity. As the monologue emerges, the poet immerses himself or herself into the flow of speech uttered by a speaker who is, in some fashion, differentiated from the writer's own self. This fictional speaker expresses emotions that are not directly attributable to the author himself or herself. Such dramatization, or 'play', can be a therapeutic aid to self-understanding and self-reconciliation.⁸⁸

Cathy Rentzenbrink told me that in her memoir she 'trapped, maybe captured is a better word, a version of [her]self.'⁸⁹ Taking my private story into the public domain meant adopting the guise of the poet. I was speaking about a subject and could pretend I was not the same woman who had experienced it. Ella's mother was fragile and damaged, but she spoke through the poet. Adopting this mask, as I did, enabled me to read the poems in public, but the wearing of that mask was not therapeutic as Harris states, instead it became damaging in the long term. I was not able to be myself, and I am not sure I was able to be true to my grief. There were so many other factors to consider because I was in the public eye, including containing and censoring certain aspects of my experience in order to share it with strangers.

⁸⁸ Harris, p. 109.

⁸⁹ Appendix A, p. 15, para 5.

Whilst researching for her PhD in bereavement at Trinity College, Dublin, Caroline Lloyd identified shared experiences of bereaved parents, including ‘a diminished sense of self with a questioning of “Who am I?”; for example, she explains ‘with a full-time mother, the death of an only child can challenge her primary identity’.⁹⁰ When you become a mother, you acquire not a uniform exactly, but an array of items that label you as parent: the pram, the sling, the nappies and muslins. When your child dies, such paraphernalia becomes detritus. You don’t have permission to hold it anymore. You no longer have access to the baby aisle in supermarkets. You are pramless in the High Street. The poem ‘Stretch Marks’ in *Her Birth*, addresses my longing for physical markings of some sort, to prove that I was Ella’s mother. I did not get any stretch marks when pregnant with Ella because ‘my swims kept those scars at bay,/two thousand lengths it took//to form my mapless globe’.⁹¹ That ‘mapless globe’ felt like an achievement at the time, yet I felt very differently about stretch marks after Ella died. Even in private, I had no proof that I had ever been a mother: ‘I have wished for them,/ a record of her tracks, all snowed over, gone.’⁹²

Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman have each written extensively on the subject of bereavement. In their co-edited work, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, Klass asks: ‘When does a parent stop being a parent? Death does not seem able to sever this bond. Yet, bereaved parents are often misunderstood when they continue to include their dead child as one of their offspring and include the child in their lives. Society does not legitimize the long-term grief of a parent whose child has died.’⁹³

⁹⁰ Caroline Lloyd, *Grief Demystified: An Introduction* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 90.

⁹¹ Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 33.

⁹² Goss, *Her Birth*, p. 33.

⁹³ *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman (London/New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), p. 197.

Think of the bereaved parent, not only losing a child, but also an identity. You consider yourself still to be a parent to your dead child, you are still their ‘mother’ or ‘father’, but the lack of child disproves it. In order to be accepted in society, we find ourselves forced to surrender that identity. My hands were empty, motherhood could not be proved, and I did not know who I was. So, I turned to the poet.

Looking back, I was keen to stress my identity as poet at readings, making sure that the mask of *writer* was firmly in place. This was an act of self-preservation. My identity as *mother* felt ambiguous, and I wanted it to be kept private. I write in my maiden name and used it to set up a barrier, keeping the audience slightly at arm’s length, knowing they were not accessing the real me: Mrs _____, mother of Ella _____. They are the names on Ella’s birth certificate. They are the names used to call us from hospital waiting rooms, as I held my breathless child.

But a glorious thing has come from my research. I see now that writing *Her Birth* and reading the poems in public restored my identity as a mother. I have come to see that *Her Birth* allowed me to remain Ella’s parent. The book allowed me to uphold a crucial attachment with my dead daughter, what is known in bereavement psychology as a ‘continuing bond’. US psychotherapist Briana L. Root and US psychology professor Julie Juola Exline cite Margaret Strobe and Henk Schut’s 2005 definition of a continuing bond as “‘the presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by the bereaved individual’ (Strobe and Schut 2005, 477)”.⁹⁴ They go on to define a variety of ‘continuing bond expressions’ or behaviours, including acts of reminiscence, story-telling and looking at photographs, to dreams and nightmares,

⁹⁴ Margaret Stroebe and Henry Schut quoted in Briana L. Root and Julie Juola Exline ‘The Role of Continuing Bonds in Coping With Grief: Overview and Future Directions’, *Death Studies*, 38 (2014), 1-8, (p.1).

letter writing and prayer. Some impact more positively than others, on longer-term grieving. I longed for Ella to be alive, but I accepted she was dead. I did not suffer, unduly, with nightmares. I did not sense her actual presence returned – also a common expression of continuing bonds. My desire to retain some form of attachment with my daughter after her death meant I wrote a book. *Her Birth* is an expression of a healthy continuing bond. I cradle the book's spine in my hands, and I am with her. I turn the book's pages to know her still. I went on to be heartened by my interviewees responses to this 'discovery', with each of them agreeing that their books acted as some sort of bond with the deceased person in their life: 'Gosh that's true. I suppose [...] that's what I'm doing, I'm continuing my relationship with my brother.'⁹⁵

I now understand that writing the poems in *Her Birth* and reading them in public was my way of maintaining a continuing bond with Ella. That seems simple, obvious almost, yet is so healing to me. My husband and I have talked about this at length. He was the first person I wanted to share this realisation with, because it affects us both. Together, we are talking about Ella more, and learning to include the book in our lives again. I want him to understand that his inclusion in *Her Birth* is about maintaining another connection too, my connection with him.

⁹⁵ Appendix A, p. 12, para 3.

Section IV: Conclusion

I began writing this thesis in 2018. The year also marked the ten-year anniversary of Ella's death. That spring, my husband and I returned to Liverpool with our daughter Molly, to plant a commemorative rose in the garden of the newly built Bereavement Centre within the grounds of Alder Hey Hospital. I remember walking through the gate into that peaceful space, holding the flower in its pot, to see two women sitting on a wooden bench facing a fountain. They worked at the Centre and were expecting us. As I approached them, I could feel my body weaken. I began to cry before I had even said hello. It was a crying that felt like it might not stop. I had to put down the flower, let go of Molly's hand, sit down on the bench, suddenly felled by my grief. The sorrow felt powerful, overwhelming and frightening. I could not stand up. Later, on the long drive home, I kept asking myself where do I store all that grief? Where do I keep it, the rest of the time? My distress had alarmed me. I think one place it is kept is inside *Her Birth*. Rather than thinking my grief is locked away within its pages, the book probes and articulates its existence. To read from its pages is to stand tall.

I turn to the Danish poet and author Naja Marie Aidt. The poet's 25-year-old son Carl died in an accident in 2015. She has consequently written about her experience of grief. Her book will be published in the UK in 2019 by Quercus Books, titled *When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back*. Aidt refers to her book as being a 'choral work', incorporating not just her voice, but other writers who have explored the subject of loss. In August 2017 Aidt was interviewed by Synne Rifbjerg as part of the Louisiana Literature Festival in Denmark. The interview was about the book, the subject of 'bereavement literature' and the different ways we can write about grief. It can be watched on YouTube and for me, listening to Aidt was illuminating.

The interviewer is keen to stress that Aidt was a writer before she was a bereaved mother, and this has often been said of me at public events. Again, questions of identity are raised, but it is Aidt's response to this interview prompt that resulted in a moment of great realisation for me. She said: 'I knew that I was going to write a book about what happened because I knew that if I didn't write that book, I'd never be able to write anything again.'⁹⁶ I had never stopped to consider what my life would be like without *Her Birth*. What my life would be like if I had not written those poems. But on hearing Aidt's words, I realised *Her Birth* had to be written if I was going to continue my life as a poet. All my struggles with the text, my struggles with placing the text into the public sphere had to be endured, because the act of writing it meant I was still a poet, and I could continue to be a poet after Ella died. During our conversation, I shared Aidt's words with Alice Jolly who said: 'I felt like that, that it's such a big story if I don't tell it, no other story will be told.'⁹⁷

In a fifty-three-minute interview, Aidt barely took a breath. I was astonished at her stamina and clarity. She cried several times, and this made me feel vulnerable for her. But she recovered well each time and carried on talking in great detail. I felt she had things she needed to say, had perhaps even said before, so chronological and detailed was her account. Maybe I was seeing a version of a 'script' I've mentioned before. Even so, she was able to be erudite and moving. She echoed my belief that *Her Birth* is my expression of a continuing bond, saying that she believed writing the book was about being with her son, in a new way. Her experience of therapy was very revealing. As part of her treatment, she was encouraged to go back to the worst places (the moment she received news of her son's death, the chapel, the funeral), close her

⁹⁶ Naja Marie Aidt, 'Naja Marie Aidt: What You Don't Want to Hear', online video recording, YouTube, August 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ytPirnv6Ag&feature=youtu.be>> [Accessed 12 February 2019].

⁹⁷ Appendix B, p. 43, para 3.

eyes, talk about those places and record it on her phone. She was instructed to do this every day for a week and then listen to her own account. Initially, she said, it was terrible. But she began to realise that when listening to the account, she would start thinking about something else. It started to bore her, listening to her own stories. I loved her candour about this and recognised an ability in myself to do such a thing. Towards the end of 2015, when reading aloud from *Her Birth*, I would often let my thoughts drift to school run, a train journey, or something on my to-do list at home. Had I become bored of my own story? Aidt doesn't regard the boredom as a bad thing, instead she said the entire process worked for her, cognitively. I wonder if the repeated act of recounting our stories of sadness to public audiences is a therapy of some kind? That it enables writers to gain knowledge and understanding. I wonder now if the consultant who questioned me at Manchester Medical School was wrong. That the frequent readings from *Her Birth* were not prolonging my grief, instead they were a way of processing what happened. I was in fact dealing with my grief, by repeatedly sharing my story aloud.

The gathering of testimony from other female writers has been a vital and fruitful part of my research. I ended all my interviews by asking each author if they had any regrets. None of the authors expressed regret at writing and publishing their memoirs on grief. They all saw the landscape of literary prize culture as something that must be navigated carefully, but they also understood that prize culture ensured their books reached and helped many other people. My interviewees all saw their books, and the opportunity to discuss their books in public, as extremely positive factors in their lives. Cathy Rentzenbrink said: 'Basically, writing this book was the nuclear option of me saying 'You know what? The bottling up is wrong. I'm going to look at this properly''.⁹⁸ Jolly

⁹⁸ Appendix A, p. 9, para 6.

recognised that writing her memoir afforded her some control over her grief, that it ‘had quite an effect in terms of containing it [...] Whereas for years and years it was all over everything [...] everything was touched by it’.⁹⁹ Aidt said that after her son’s death, language was broken, but when she eventually did start to write, the words ‘were like small rafts that I could hold on to’.¹⁰⁰ These women have been aided by the writing process.

Author Scott Esposito regards Naja Marie Aidt as his friend. In an online article he wrote:

As much as they frighten me and fill me with dark emotions, I am drawn to books like Naja’s [...] In part, I think it is important to try and understand these areas of the human condition, simply for our own sake. And I also feel that anyone who believes in the power of words should see what they can do when they are most truly needed. As Naja told me, ‘I had to write this book to survive. It is as simple as that. I am a writer who lost her language and had to reclaim it.’ I want to see such writing – books that perhaps we should not only call the literature of grief, but also the literature of survival. They have saved the life of their author – who knows how many other lives they will save.¹⁰¹

Did *Her Birth* save my life? I think now that it did. It saved my life as a poet because writing it meant I could then go on to write other books. It saved my life as a mother because I can connect to my lost and longed-for child through the poems. It saved my marriage because despite all the strains the book’s publication placed on us, its existence meant my husband and I have been able to face what had happened. I think my life would be terrible without it.

⁹⁹ Appendix B, p. 43, para 1.

¹⁰⁰ Naja Marie Aidt, ‘Naja Marie Aidt: What You Don’t Want to Hear’.

¹⁰¹ Scott Esposito, ‘On the Books We Read (and Write) to Get By: Death Shall Have No Dominion Over the Literature of Grief’, *Literary Hub*, 2017 <<https://lithub.com/on-the-books-we-read-and-write-to-get-by/>> [Accessed 12 December 2018].

Closure is a word adopted in bereavement literature and counselling 'speak'. Psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz has written of closure that it is 'an extraordinary compelling fantasy of mourning'.¹⁰² To heal, to reach 'closure' is to no longer mourn. To stop mourning is to stop being with the one you love.

I seek closure. The closure I seek is not to stop grieving, or for my grief to be finite. What I am looking for is a closure to the negativity I associate with *Her Birth*. I do wonder what it would be like to have grieved Ella differently. What it would be like to grieve my daughter, had I not written the poems. I am curious to meet that bookless woman, going about the daily business of mourning. Who would she be? Would she still have new, fine lines around her eyes; a sudden crop of white hairs at the centre of her thirty-four-year-old scalp? I know I would not have found her sobbing beneath the plum tree of her garden having been asked to attend a *Sunday Times* photoshoot on the anniversary of Ella's death. She would not have come off stage and wept after reading at the biggest venue of her career, on Mother's Day. She would have navigated her sad calendar in private.

But denying the book, rejecting it, would mean leaving Ella behind, and I'm not prepared to lose her again. I want to return to *Her Birth* and include it in my life. I understand now, why I wrote it. I can see the good it was able to achieve, for me and for others. I want to situate *Her Birth* in my body of work, knowing its place there is valid, whilst accepting the woman I have become. Because I like her. She is a woman who is able to speak out about child death. A woman who is able to render her dead daughter visible. A woman who connects with other bereaved women. A woman who has gained agency over her sorrow. A woman who is still capable of love.

¹⁰² Stephen Grosz, *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 209.

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Appendices

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Appendix A:
Rebecca Goss interviews Cathy Rentzenbrink, London,
December 5th 2018

Cathy Rentzenbrink is the author of two books, *The Last Act of Love* (2015), and *A Manual for Heartache* (2017), both published with Picador. The former is a memoir, documenting the story of Cathy's brother Matty, who was knocked down by a car in the summer of 1990. He was sixteen and would remain in a persistent vegetative state for the following eight years until he died. *The Last Act of Love* was shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize and the Portico Prize for Literature. *A Manual for Heartache* was written as a response to the feedback Cathy received after publishing *The Last Act of Love*. As her publisher states, it is 'a book that will help to soothe an aching heart and assure its readers that they're not alone.' Cathy has one son and lives in Cornwall. I first came across Cathy Rentzenbrink's work when our books were both shortlisted for the Portico Prize for Literature in 2015. More information about Cathy and her work can be found here: <https://cathyreadsbooks.wordpress.com> My interview with Cathy was conducted in The Reading Room, at the Wellcome Collection, London.

RG: So, what I love about that book (*The Last Act of Love*) is that your voice is so candid throughout. We know from the outset that you are going to tell it how it is, and I wondered if that was an intention, a sort of literary intention. Did you intend to tell us so much or do you feel you've only told us so much? Were you aware of any 'voice' you were using?

CR: What an interesting question. I do think if you are going to tell somebody something about yourself you might as well do a good job of it, if you're going to bother. And I also think you might as well do a truthful job of it, as much as you can, so I did aim to tell the truth. There are other reasons why you can't tell the truth, like you don't know it, but as much as it's possible I really aim for the truth. I also thought if I was going to go to the significant kind of effort and difficulty and trouble of doing it, I wanted to do it really well and really thoroughly. There was a lot more kind of pussy-footing around in earlier drafts.

RG: What do you mean by pussy-footing around?

CR: I remember before my book came out my agent wanted me to read it through one more time and take out all the apologies: *Should I be doing this? I don't know if I should be doing this?*

RG: About the actual process you mean?

CR: Apologising for the process, yes. Apologising for myself, about what a terrible person I am. At every draft, people who read it made me take out all the stuff about how awful I am which is funny now because when I mentor, I'm quite often doing the same to them: 'I don't think we need the paragraph about how terrible you were', you know?

RG: The self-loathing!

CR: So yes, I feel that the voice in the book is entirely mine but there's a dynamism to it that I don't always feel. I think there's quite a lot of purpose and drive in it. It's interesting isn't it how the truth is often a casualty of the desire to be dishonest or mislead. It's just a logistical casualty.

RG: Okay.

CR: Because if I tried to write it more truthfully it would be an extremely boring book. It would be like: *and then I got drunk and cried myself to sleep. And then I walked around the park staring at the trees feeling depressed.* And it would just be that really. So, you have to take some of that out, and I wonder sometimes whether some of the decisions that took me, I don't know, years, often feel a bit stripped back in the book.

RG: Okay that's interesting.

CR: But I think that's the only way it could be. I remember talking about this once at a literary festival saying if I tried to write it all, it would be *how big*? It would be impossible. So, you distil it and I think in the distilling I sometimes sound a bit more energetic than I am, whereas I feel the voice is entirely mine. To be honest it's one of those things where people say 'How do you do that?' and my honest answer is 'I'm fucked if I know.'

RG: Is it the writing, or the talking about it when they ask you that?

CR: Oh, the writing I think. Capturing the voice and taking us into the rooms and all that. I was very close to the text whereas now I have a really odd relationship with it. I almost read it now as a reader and I must say when I read it as a reader I'm really impressed with that writer, somehow, but I can't always connect the fact that I was the person that did that.

RG: That's really interesting, that question of authorial distance from your own work. Do you think that's come about because of the exposure, because of what you've had to do with the book? Because I feel a similar thing about my book.

CR: I'm not quite sure. I think when something happens to you so central, I mean it remains central doesn't it, but it's not *all* the time, I don't think about it all the time but I have this push/pull. I think of it as a dance, I'm dancing with it and I danced with it in the book very up-close, and then because of having to talk about it I remain very up-close, and now sometimes I'm trying to do all the dances. I'm trying to write a novel that's *not* about my dead brother. I'm not convinced it's any good. One of the reasons I struggle with the fiction is I'm not convinced I have any other stories. I'm not convinced anything else matters. (weeps)

RG: But you're doing it...

CR: By the way the crying - I'm not distressed or anything. I'm fine. I've just worked out that it's better to actually let it out than to try and hold it back...when I'm talking to someone I like and trust, not on the telly!

RG: Do you think the text became a way of managing the stories, and coping with the stories?

CR: Yes, I think so. I do definitely feel that was good for me, I think as much as it is possible to do so, I managed to wrestle the complexities of that story into the pages of a book and I feel good that I was able to do that.

RG: I think it's wonderful that you have, but I wonder if that distance has come about because you have to return to it so much when you take it (the story) into the public eye?

CR: I think when you're actually writing the book it's interesting because there's obviously a period when you're doing it very

much alone. I don't think I could have written a book if from the beginning I thought people were going to read it. And I certainly couldn't have done it if I'd imagined myself talking about it on BBC Radio 4 on Woman's Hour or talking to you. I would never have been able to, and this is something I talk to people about when they're writing memoir, in the early stages, just be really tender with yourself. Just explore it, maybe at some point there's a step into the world for you but not the early stage. So, it starts off as this extremely private thing and then gradually goes out and becomes a not private thing. It's the migration of your experience from being locked within you, to being on display. I still don't understand it myself, it's very complex.

RG: When I read your work, you strike me as so optimistic. So admirably optimistic that I felt in awe of you throughout both texts. How you were able to manage the public side especially, because I knew you'd taken this very private story and I felt you (I hate the word 'journey'), but I felt you really embraced that public journey with grace and generosity.

CR: Well the thing is, I love connecting with a stranger over a story. I find it such an unbelievable privilege. The best thing that's happened to me is that people write me letters, usually they send me emails because of my contact button on my website, but occasionally I get hand written letters via my publishers. People write to me because they've read my books and reading my book has made them write to me. They sometimes tell me what's happened to them, sometimes they've witnessed a long death or they've just experienced shame, they've experienced guilt and shame and they've felt stuck, some people write to me about that. I just love it.

I can never regret it because of the letters, that's why I could never regret it. I could never regret it because of the way strangers have written to me and told me that I've helped them, and often people say to me this has changed/is going to change my life. I understand now, all the stuff that took me so long to work out, all the stuff like realising it's not a linear process, like trying to live with the to and fro. Like trying to live with it as a dance that doesn't stop. All of that stuff was hard learning, but the fact that other people find it useful, is utterly transformative for me, so that's the beauty of it for me.

I genuinely love talking to people about it. My favourite interactions are with people who have already read the book. I don't enjoy *telling* people about my story. I don't like saying 'this happened, then this happened and that happened' because it's a difficult story to tell and I did that in this book. So, I love it when people have read the book and want to talk about the issues and bring their own stories in, like book groups, I just think that's wonderful. And then of course every so often it's not, because someone there will say like 'I don't know what your parents were thinking to let you drink so much!' That happened to me and I was defensive about my parents. That's where I risk losing it.

RG: There is that risk I suppose, we never know what's going to be thrown at us. You may have touched upon this already, but I was interested when you talked about the writing process as an exercise in self-harm. I want to ask about the impact of writing the book while it was still a private narrative. I feel sometimes it's almost easier for you to carry the book now it's out there, than when you were writing it in private.

CR: Yes, I think so, and actually I feel that about all writing. I find the writing process the hardest bit, and when it's done, I've just got such a sense of relief. I can get on with the bit that I really like, because I think writing a book is like opening a conversation, and I really like it when people talk back and then I will learn more things.

RG: It's an exchange of knowledge.

CR: It's completely an exchange. I don't want to ever say definitive things. I'm not the sort of person who wants to say, 'This is how it is, let me tell you.' I don't have any opinions about anything. I have no opinions, other than that I think human beings should try to be kind to each other, apart from that I have no opinion. I don't want to pronounce. I don't think of the book as a pronouncement, I think of it as *here's some stuff, what do you think?* It's that kind of thing. And then of course the second book only exists because of the response to the first book. I felt I had learnt more things. And that's the thing about doing events and stuff, I still always, always, always learn something new. Often not what I'm expecting, but I always learn stuff from....(pauses)

RG:from interacting with other people?

CR: Yeah and realising again, it is the thing I most like. Honest connection with another human being.

RG: Do you find yourself, when you talk at events and literary festivals that you've been pigeonholed at all? Are you on panels with other people talking about grief all the time? Can you break away from that, or do you not want to break away from that?

CR: That's a really interesting question. I didn't expect it to happen but then I became an expert, accidentally, on death. Actually, that's been very interesting for me, so I like reviewing other books about death. It never occurred to me that that would happen.

RG: I know a poet who wrote a collection about her experience of having breast cancer. At a reading she got introduced as 'one of the cancer poets.' Another writer I know said she got up on stage and realised that everyone else reading with her was also a widow like she was, and they were all writing about that experience. She didn't feel comfortable that she had been pigeonholed in that way.

CR: That's probably a thing that does happen. I think I just decided to try to not care about that because it's so overwhelming. I think you have to work out what you're going to care about and what you're not going to care about. Quite early on I realised that if I get bruised, just to really focus on the bit I like, the connection with the human beings. Because that stuff does happen and it is weird, it's quite odd when people make mistakes when you're being interviewed and someone gets your dead brother's name wrong, but I just decided that it's not important, that it doesn't matter. I mean I even try to make a joke of it, you know? So-and-so is also in the Dead Siblings Club. And I wonder whether being a bit involved professionally in the world helps, I know that festivals organise panels by theme.

RG: Oh yeah, I completely understand why I am where I am sometimes.

CR: What I do now is I interview people quite a lot. I interviewed Antoine Leiris. He wrote a book about his wife being killed in the terrorist attack at the Bataclan in Paris, called *You Will Not Have My Hate*. I've interviewed Greg Wise about his sister's death. I interviewed Paul Kalanithi's wife. So, I interview people who have written these sorts of books. I really love doing that and I

love being asked. I know I do a good job of it. And sometimes it's nice to interview people about other matters.

RG: Yes, it's all about that knowledge you were talking about. When you were writing your book, when did you know it was going to be published? I had an inkling that mine was going to be published about half way through.

CR: I hadn't finished it. I got an agent during the writing process and she helped me at that point.

RG: But you never saw any of it coming, as it were. You never foresaw any of the prizes?

CR: No, no. Because of working in books for years, in bookshops, then as a trade journalist, I know when someone gets their book published their families say to them 'Ooh, you're going to be like J K Rowling' and of course most books don't ever get that far. It's tragic really. I mean it is a great tragedy that there are more good books than people want to read. So, I had very, very low expectations for it and I think that was quite good. If I gave one piece of advice to people who were being published, I'd tell them to have low expectations.

But conversely be prepared for...(pauses) This is why I think it's really difficult for publishers because on the one hand when someone gets loads of exposure, it's tempting to think they could have done with a bit more preparation for this, but publishers have no idea. It's only really very close to publication that they might know something's going to be on Radio 4. It's only very close in the process when you know what's going to happen.

RG: Maybe that's a good thing?

CR: Yeah, I think it is. Again, you just have to roll with the punches of it, I think.

RG: You've talked about your book being a 'tool' for encouraging people to speak. Were you conscious of that when you were writing? Or was it really a tool for you at the time?

CR: I think it was just all about me initially. At some point during writing it and when it was nearly finished I met (and I wrote about this in the book), Jenny Kitzinger. She was taking family

testimony from people whose relatives had been in a prolonged disorder of consciousness and there was something very profound about that. She interviewed me, then I watched myself be interviewed with her. Then I ended up with a transcript which was 50,000 words long, of me telling the story to her. And I honestly think if that had happened *before* I started writing the book then I might not have written the book. I think that might have been enough. Unburdening myself to her might have been enough.

I realised that because I process the world through reading about it, and one of the reasons I feel I had to write my book, is there *isn't* anything written about it. I had to work all this stuff out for myself. There's plenty written about what to do when your boyfriend leaves you, nothing written about when your brother's in a persistent vegetative state. So, I had to write it because nothing existed.

And then at some point I realised, when my book exists people will read it not because they want to read a memoir, people will read it because their son's in a persistent vegetative state and that really changed the way I edited it. There was loads more in it about books and reading and I took it all out. The way I felt about it was some builder, who's never really read a book before, who's a manual worker, works with his hands, didn't like school and his son's been in a persistent vegetative state for 3 years. Someone says to him *here's this book*, and he does not need to read me twatting on about Julian Barnes. (laughs)

RG: (laughing) I think that's absolutely right.

CR: But actually, I think the book is the stronger for it. And of course, working for a literacy charity and the fact that my Dad couldn't read, I didn't want to write a book that was incomprehensible for everyone except for people that read broadsheet reviews, and I still don't. I didn't, in any way, write my book to literacy guidelines, but actually knowing what the barriers to comprehensibility are was quite useful and I did sort of use them.

I felt that something that was going to be hard reading from a 'facts' point of view needed to be easy reading from a stylistic point of view, so that's what I tried to do, and I think that's what I've done. I can't tell you how many people have said to me 'Oh, I was worried, I didn't want to pick it up. I knew it would make me

feel this and that. Then, I did pick it up and it's such a page turner and I read it in two and a half hours!' And I feel really pleased about that because I wanted it to be a quick read.

And then one of my favourite things and I hope my book is one, is where there is a surface obvious meaning, so you're not blundering around, not having a clue what's going on, but then there are depths beneath for those who want to plumb them and plummet them and I think my book does that. I hope it's a fast read and that if you want to carry on thinking about it you can, at length. I also tried to create space for the reader, so although it's a very intense story I tried to leave space for people to see themselves in it. Which I think I did as well because people often confirm that.

RG: Yes, your experiences feel relentless for you at times but never for the reader. We are watching you, you're managing to keep us close to you and your story, but not in a way where it's 'too much'. I think that's a lot to do with how the voice is so candid and open. You never make us feel like we're intruding.

CR: No that's good. I think my editor helped with that. There was some stuff I took out, I mean I used to have all these really awful dreams and I'd written about some of them. She said 'I just think it's a bit much' and I thought, you know what, it is a bit much. So, I took them out. And I think that's fine. I think if you trust your reader, the reader will understand the distress, so you don't have to keep telling them what distress feels like. I think I've trusted the reader to fill in some of the blanks.

RG: And like you say, you can't tell it all anyway, it would just be too big. At one point you've talked about the 'poison' that has been drained away. I just wondered if any of that poison became stirred up in taking the book into the public?

CR: Ummm, that is so interesting. I think having a book just turbo charges! It's the nuclear option of that kind of question in life: is it better to think about things that distress us or is it better to bottle them up and not think about them? Basically, writing this book was the nuclear option of me saying *You know what? The bottling up is wrong. I'm going to look at this properly.* And that was the nuclear option. I feel that a lot of the public stuff actually keeps me on the straight and narrow. Part of me wants to lock it away in a cupboard and not look at it - it being the book, and experiences

described in the book. The fact of *having* to talk about it keeps me on the straight and narrow. The reason why stopping doing that would be bad is because it's important to accept that it happened, that it happened to me.

RG: Can I go back to what you said about the times when you do want to lock it away, just to have a break from it. Because I actually did do that. One particular reading finished me off. I came home and put it (the book) in a drawer and I physically couldn't open it, I couldn't even go to reach for it, and I left it there for nearly two years. So I wanted you to talk a little bit more about that. What happens when we get the feeling when we want to be away from it? For me it was the public experience, I just found the exposure too much. I didn't have the reserves to cope (and it wasn't anything on the scale of attention you got), but I found myself not being able to cope with other people's stories and I felt so guilty about that. Whereas I really admire you. In *A Manual for Heartache* you list some of the stories people have come to you with, I notice how generous and open you are, with those people. I heard so many stories like that, but there was part of me that thought, I can't take them on.

CR: The only important thing to say is I had some really good therapy after writing the first book. I think that was quite necessary and the therapist taught me to have a relationship with the stories, again like a therapist has to have. And to listen and be present to people, but how you then don't have to do that. Because there was a time early on when I didn't have any of those boundaries in place. I mean post-publication I went really mental. I went on this holiday, it was supposed to be a treat with an old friend, my parents were going to look after my son, so it was supposed to be a rest. But of course, free from not having anything to do, I just got very drunk every day. I was shaking, having terrible panic attacks and by the end it was so awful. I think after that, I then organised therapy.

Then what I started to do with emails was I would put them in one folder then I would have a dedicated time of the week when I read and answered them all. I put myself in the right zone for it. My therapist taught me to breathe white light over myself. You know there's those sorts of things. Sometimes I forget the stages I had to go through.

RG: I stopped all my therapy when I was pregnant with my second child, only because I felt like I was obsessing over my dead child and not thinking about this other child that I was going to have. And then two, three years later when the book came out, I desperately wanted to have a connection again with a therapist. I really felt I needed her back, someone to support me through that bleak bit. I felt I was really floundering. Do you think maybe that should be taken into consideration more, for people who are writing personal books?

CR: I do. When I talk to memoirists now, I say *You know, if you're not already in therapy you need to be, when the book comes out.*

RG: So, you don't see your agent as having any kind of duty of care, or anything like that?

CR: I do, my agent and editor have been completely amazing and friends, but therapy is something different isn't it? It is dedicated. I had proper trauma therapy as well, called EMDR which is really good for post-traumatic stress. I now think there's an argument that my book is just an example of someone with untreated post-traumatic stress disorder because when people ask 'How did you take us back to that memory that happened all those years ago?' it's like 'Well, it's in my head all the time.' Now it isn't, after the EMDR.

RG: I've not heard of that, what does it stand for?

CR: It's Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, and fairly new therapy. It started off in America in the seventies with Vietnam vets, often used for combat. It's really good. So why I think the book has been an entirely complex, all-encompassing experience, part of the reason why it was a good thing for me to do was that ultimately, it made me go back to therapy.

Some writers really hate this, but sometimes when people wrote to me they'd say 'It occurred to me that you might really benefit from...x, y, z.' Some therapists would read the book and say, 'Love the book, I'm using it with my clients and I did wonder if you've thought about doing 'this' because it might help?' Sometimes I would follow the recommendations and it *did* help. But I'm quite unusual I think as a writer, because loads of writers hate that kind of stuff. Sometimes I wonder maybe that's why I

wrote the book, it's like a big cry for help and then loads of people said to me *I know what you need love* (laughs).

RG: I like the part when you talk about that yearning for a visible sign. I'm interested in the sorts of identities that we have as writers, when writing things like this. You talk about that mourning brooch, the tattoo, the ribbon and the gloves. Marion Coutts, in her book *The Iceberg* about the loss of her husband talks about the need for 'a garment, an armour to define you as witness.....a living testimony to mortality and to the acquisition of perspective.' I just wondered if maybe, our books are the most visible signs of all? I felt that my identity as a mother was stripped, gone, taken away from me after the death of Ella. But I feel like I can be her mother again, when I have the book.

CR: Gosh that's true, I'm not quite sure I've thought about that. Of course, I suppose in one way, that's what I'm doing, I'm continuing my relationship with my brother.

RG: As part of the research for my thesis I've been looking into (and I am no psychologist, by any means) continuing bonds. There was never at any point where I thought Ella was alive. I didn't expect her to walk back in the room or anything like that, I accepted that she was dead. But I wonder if my book is my continuing bond, my link with her, that's what I'm thinking more now.

CR: That completely resonates with me. I do wonder as well if - and I didn't think this was an objective - but maybe I just wanted people to care about him. I wanted people to care about what happened to him, because at the time, sometimes, it felt like people didn't care. Every time somebody told me *You know it's sold this many copies* or whatever, the thing that always made me feel pleased was thinking that's how many people know about him. That's what I felt.

RG: That's a nice thing. I remember on the night that Ella died, at one point finding myself sitting on the sofa, and the ten o'clock news came on and being outraged that her death was not on it. Outraged! Because it felt so enormous, but then the news put it into perspective that so many people don't know this, this happened today, a normal day for so many people, and I was furious.

CR: Maybe our books are about making it a news story for more people.

RG: Yeah, and also that idea of wanting people to know the people that we were close to.

CR: I've just been interviewed by The Guardian Society. Sometimes when I get asked to do stuff like that, I just don't want to get into the headspace for it. But that's more to do with having to prep.

I think it's more to do with the media than with me. I would probably always quite happily talk of my experiences, but if you go on the Today programme, to talk about a recent court judgement, they put you up in the same news feature as someone from an organisation called something like 'Care not Killing' and they make it confrontational. It's everything I don't want to do.

One of the things that's happened *because* of the book is that people want me to sometimes be a spokesperson for things which I am very happy about. If my experience can illuminate the subject for people, then that makes me feel all the better. I'm not being definitive about anything, but I actually don't want to go into a head-to-head debate. I'm not a campaigner.

RG: That's interesting, because I feel a kind of guilt that all I've done is written a book of poems. I'm not campaigning for the Children's Heart Federation. I'm not campaigning for any of that. I sign petitions, I spread the word about things that are happening in related charities, but I haven't embraced that, and I sometimes feel guilty. Would I be better off doing that, or are we better off just opening up a conversation?

CR: Yeah it's not necessarily 'your bag'. I've accepted I'm just not a campaigner by nature.

RG: Yeah, I've accepted that now, that I just didn't do that.

CR: When I did BBC Breakfast, they didn't tell me what was going to happen. So I'm in my front room, with an ear piece in, at 6 o'clock in the morning - my husband and son were asleep upstairs - and as they patched me through I hear this strong northern Irish accent saying something like 'The law should not be

changed just because families find it burdensome to look after their relatives.’

RG: And you had no idea that was coming?

CR: I had absolutely no idea that was coming. They actually talked to me for ages, and I thought I did a good job because I kept my composure. I’ve trained myself so that in the moment, the public moment, I don’t lie. I’ll say something like ‘Well, you’re entitled to your opinion’ and I obviously don’t agree, but I stay really composed. I don’t get confrontational, I don’t get angry. I will allow a little emotion to show. I did a 45-minute interview out of which for about 30 seconds I welled up. Of course, that’s the clip and the picture that they’re currently using of me on the BBC website. I look insane! (both laugh) But equally I kind of don’t care. I mean I do care, but what’s really important - privately, afterwards - you have to take time with your therapist or your family or whatever to drain down. You need to get in the bath, you need to cry, you need to process it, you need to. It’s all been much better as well, since I started keeping a daily diary which is a very hyper-private space. I don’t write with any sense of an audience.

RG: How long have you been doing that?

CR: Since I gave up drinking, and I think the things might be related. I stopped drinking in June, and I have written my diary nearly every day since. I was doing it in notebooks and actually from January I started doing it on my computer. At first I had to *make* myself do it, 500 words a day, whereas now I feel very agitated if I don’t do it. And often it’s long. Sometimes it becomes writing, so I will end up cutting and pasting it into my *Prospect* column.

RG: You have a column? I didn’t know that.

CR: *Prospect* magazine, about habits. I’m nearly running out of bad habits. It’s about the absurdities of modern life. My basic idea is with modern life you have to protect yourself more to be able to navigate it. For example, my grandparents: my granddad had a quid on the grand national once a year with people from work. He didn’t have to self-discipline to *not* be a gambler because to place a bet you had to *go* to the bookies and hand over money. Whereas now, with the internet etc, you have the availability of things.

RG: When it comes to social media though if I can touch upon that a bit, what was your relationship with that when your book was out? Weren't you on Twitter, briefly, but then you disappeared?

CR: Yes, I was. I was on Twitter a lot and I loved it. Social media is the area that makes me feel entirely insane. (both laugh)

RG: It induces my anxiety hugely, that's all it does to me as a writer really. Do you have quite a distance from it now?

CR: Yes, and it's been a big thing for me, because I really loved it. I really loved Twitter. The thing I've been unable to cope with is that it feels performative. When someone sends me an email about the thing that's happened to them, and I respond in my own time, I find that a really beautiful thing. But when someone tweets me about something terrible that's happened to them, and if they're on Twitter and I have to respond *in that moment* I find that tricky. Not because of them, but because of their audience.

And it's weird, how you want to be defined. One of the funny things about writing a personal book is someone who has just read my book, is more up to date with me than I am. I finished writing the book in December 2014. They're more up to date with that December 2014 self than I am, and sometimes that's the self they want. So when people say they've read my book and they want to talk to me about it, I always want to know which book they've read. Then I'm giving them that slightly updated version. So, I've become interested in that, that within that book I have trapped, maybe captured is a better word, a version of myself. I'm not unhappy with it. I think it would be really interesting for me to read when I'm eighty.

RG: Someone did tell me once, don't ever underestimate how many years in the future people will come back to you and refer to your book. You wrote it, it's out there, you've had this busy couple of years and then you're thinking about your next thing. But people will still be coming back about that book, and that's interesting because we have changed, moved on.

CR: I like that. Basically everything I like is difficult to cope with on Twitter. I mean some of it is just etiquette stuff, like getting very confused about when you're supposed to retweet or not, and not wanting to kind of....

RG:not wanting to offend anyone, things can be misconstrued.

CR: Yes. Everything I like about being with people in real life: bonding and being emotional, just feels really odd on Twitter. I liked it very much, I miss my friends, there are a lot of things I miss about it. It's my relentless optimism isn't it? I'm making it sound like it's great, but I have had to stop drinking and I have had to stop all social media which I loved. And I have paid a fortune in therapy since writing the first book.

RG: These are consequences.

CR: Yes. These are all things to think about. And the way I cope with it, is by doing that reframing thing. I think *What do I like about this?* and then I focus on those things.

There was this moment when I was in bed, trying to think, work through some emails or whatever, really hungover, terribly hungover. I mean I had a difficult relationship with alcohol before publishing the book, but then the book just supercharged it. So, I'm in bed I'm really hungover, I'm looking at emails, and then there's this picture of me. I don't think I ever Googled myself, maybe that's not true, maybe I used to and then stopped. (I also used to read Amazon reviews which I don't do anymore because that way madness lies). So maybe this is before that, maybe I am looking at Amazon reviews, anyway there was this photo of me, and I don't remember this photograph being taken. I'm lying in bed, looking at this photograph that I don't remember being taken. I look quite nice in it, but I don't remember it being taken. Then I accidentally hit the Facetime thing on my computer which means that suddenly my *actual* face is on the screen and I look so ill and old and grey and hungover and mental and I thought *Where am I? Where have I gone in all of this?*

I think one of the problems with social media for everyone (and this is exacerbated when you are the sort of sensitive writer type who's now written a very revealing book), is the complexity of having our entire selves represented by one image and one collection of things that you say. And the extent to which you want to be identified with something or identified in one way.

RG: I wanted to talk to you a bit about prizes. For me the prize experience, being shortlisted for things, meant I felt I suddenly wasn't in control of my experience. Ella's life and death became

all about promoting a book to win a prize. It was about publicity for that and doing radio interviews where people wanted to know certain things. I felt like my experience was being manipulated and I had no control over it anymore. I felt very vulnerable then as a writer, I didn't know how to get that control back.

CR: You can't row it back in. The way I think about it is, once you decide to put your book into the world you have no control over it. I do feel I knew that, possibly because of working in the industry, and the way I think of it is: you've done your book, then you just have to think that you've put it in a boat, you push it out and then the waves take it or not. After that, you really have no control. The boat might just stay there or it might not go anywhere or it might go out and it might get tossed on the high seas and people will like it, or not like it.

I mean it's one of those things that is easier said than done but I completely accept I surrendered control. What did my head in with the prizes, this is a terrible admission I feel ashamed about this, I really wanted to win. And I found it very difficult to not win. I didn't think I wanted to win, only in the moment when I *didn't* win, did I realise actually I did want to win. And sadly, I shouldn't feel like this, but I also felt fucked over. That the terrible thing that happened to my brother and my ability to represent it was not enough for these people. The Wellcome Prize [prizegiving] was in this room. Maybe I want to come back because I feel that's healing. I suggested it because I want to get over all this sort of stuff.

This is the thing about any kind of trauma, how do you heal yourself to walk around in the world, how do you not let it define you for your whole life? Writing the book was one thing and it's still ongoing, but I have to think if I somehow suffer from it, I'm learning things through it.

Afterwards one of the [Wellcome Prize] judges said to me 'Oh we really liked your book' and I honestly wanted to say 'Not fucking enough, obviously' but I knew that was an angry, working class way to feel and I knew that I had to say 'Oh that's very kind of you, thank you very much' which I learnt to do. (It's a bit of a class thing. I used to be in this pub in Yorkshire, now I'm in all these fancy rooms and I have learnt how to keep my manners. I even taught myself table manners at one point, because I realised in restaurants I was always doing stuff wrong. Recently somebody

didn't choose me for something because I wasn't 'working class enough', this is how well I've taught myself to appear different from who I am!) I didn't drink that night. There's that bit of you you're keeping under wraps, who just wants to throw the fucking bottles around, wants to smash the bottle and glass someone, as I've seen done in our pub many a time (laughs, wryly). Which I would not do because it would not be my way.

RG: Andrew McMillan, a poet whose first book was up for lots of prizes, was recently interviewed about prize culture saying it's such an intense bubble. You lose, and you just go home and load the dishwasher.

CR: And the other person goes on Front Row.

RG: (laughs) Yes! And, you don't hear from anyone again. There's no sort of ongoing care, you've been out there projecting your book, doing all the work, you lose, and you never hear from anyone again. That's what kept happening and I'd sometimes say to my husband, I'd be so much better at *organising* prizes rather than being shortlisted for them. I'd make sure everyone got a follow-up call and maybe a cup of tea and kept in touch. 'We're interested in you as a writer now, so keep in touch.'

CR: They did actually ask me afterwards what my experience had been. I used to come to the Wellcome Prize award as a journalist and that was so enjoyable. Then of course I was the person writing the book, not sure whether I'd ever finish it, not thinking anyone would ever read it, you'd think I'd feel great to be *there*, with my book.

The year before, I was at the prizegiving, I think it was the year Marion Coutts won, and the journalist next to me said 'You'll win this next year' (my book had just gone out) and at that point I thought *Oh how ridiculous and silly, there's no way....* but a year later, on the night, I thought maybe I would. Not helped by the fact all the other authors seemed to think I was going to win. They kept saying to me, 'Oh my agent says you're going to win, my editor says you're going to win' and I felt like such a twat. I felt like a cunt. I felt like I'd been screwed over, that I'd been forced to have hopes beyond my station and then I'd been publicly humiliated. None of which I think is actually true (laughs).

I actually think prizes are great for authors. The great thing was hanging around with the other authors, that was brilliant. We spent time together and I really loved that. We did loads of events, but the thing is I'm really *good* at live events. So as the time went on everybody kept saying to me 'I think you're going to win' and I kind of thought I was, because by that time, if the judges had been on that weekend, I would have been winning it by then. But, of course, that wasn't anything to do with it, the decision had been made.

RG: I do recognise that thing when you're carried along on the rollercoaster to the point where you think it's going to happen.

CR: Yeah people keep telling you you're going to win, which is nice but actually kind of awful. I wasn't long listed for the Guardian First Book Award, but everybody had said to me 'Oh you're a shoo-in for the Guardian First Book Award'. Should people *not* say that sort of stuff? It's kindly meant, and I wasn't even *looking* for it, but on Twitter people started talking about it and then I had that feeling of 'Oh God, if I was on it (the longlist) I'd know about it. So obviously I'm not.' The people I think who navigate this really well are those who have a level of detachment, which I do think they tend to have learnt because they have parents or relatives who have experience of how the whole hoopla works. Whereas I had no idea, just didn't have a clue, so it all came as shock.

RG: Yes, it's a complete shock. I had no 'prize' experience at all when I was launched into it and was so naïve, with no one to turn to. No agent or anything, I felt very confused. I said yes to things I should have said no to, and I said no to things I should have said yes to. I'd do things quite differently if it ever happened again.

CR: But actually, what I've come to, is that I'm even more honest than I was before because I've worked out none of it matters apart from being true to myself.

RG: Would you ever talk publicly about prize culture then? Because I've thought about it and there are mutterings in the poetry world – that people need to assess this - that you're hyped for something and then it's over and actually what is the fallout from that? But I still feel like these are mutterings and none of us will actually really speak out loud yet.

CR: I'm not that sure yet about the extent to which things should be changed. All of this is tricky because what are you going to do? Give everyone training for huge exposure but then loads of them won't need it and that's humiliating in itself? People who've sold in single digits and they'll say, 'My publisher sent me on this media training course, and I thought I was going to be *everything* and then I was never talked about again.' I think publishers in-house should try to emotionally prepare people for *all* outcomes and actually be honest. Because for some people that's their experience of publishing: the book gets published then they never hear from their editor ever again, it kind of sinks. I think it could do with a bit more transparency about the range of outcomes. And no one talks about money.

So in terms of speaking publicly - if there was a useful way in which to get publishers to address some of these things with their authors then I would be up for it. But it might make me feel nervous. As though I'm complaining, which I never want. I don't want to be misconstrued. And that's the modern world problem.

But you can become too hyper vigilant. What I've currently decided is that as long as I am true to myself people can do with it what they will. I thought after the Today Programme and BBC Breakfast I thought you know what, actually it kind of doesn't matter. The other bad thing about social media is it makes you feel like you matter, it puts you at the centre of the world whereas actually fuck it, it doesn't matter. As long as I'm true to myself, it doesn't matter, does it? If people don't like me on the Today programme, then fuck it. It doesn't really matter, which of course I couldn't feel this at the beginning. But I think it's great I feel fabulous about it now.

RG: There are costs aren't there, of putting the story out there and having some success, whatever 'success' is, and the cost of our success is we've had to lose people that we love. But maybe the positive thing is that we have been liberated in some way, that we can talk about things when we want to. When you were on the Today Programme your voice was just as valid as the one you were meant to be opposing. We have been given that space to walk into. That territory is now yours to walk into.

CR: I worked out recently what I need is a really big failure. Not a failure that isn't a failure but feels like one, like not winning the Wellcome Prize. But what will free me to write this novel? I

decided last night, what's the worst that can happen when writing this novel? The worst that can happen is that educated, literary people say this isn't a very good novel. That's the worst that can happen. Do I care? Do I really care about that? Do you know what, I don't. In some ways it would be a very interesting experience wouldn't it, if I forget everything I know about getting a good review in *The Sunday Times* and blah blah blah. If I forget all of that, then actually who gives a fuck? Some people like my work enough to allow me to write a novel.

RG: I'm also at the 'next book' stage as my next one's coming out in 2019. Maybe there's something about the books that we did write: these very open, honest personal stories, that means there are people out there who like us a bit. So, I'm not worried if my next book gets slated. I still think there's enough people out there who like the Rebecca who wrote *Her Birth*, who will want to pick up the next book to see what I will say next.

CR: That's so interesting, but I worry a bit about that because one of the things that's stopping me is I don't want to disappoint all those people.

RG: But then it's a never-ending cycle! (laughs) You've got to stop it!

CR: But I've always been such a people pleaser. It's in me. An engagement with some nice, intelligent person at a festival who has thought through the issues is really satisfying but you can't control that that's what you're going to get. You might get something else and if you're not prepared for it then it's going to feel bruising and awful.

RG: Did you ever get upset in public, did you ever cry at readings?

CR: I will kind of well-up a bit publicly. I never mind that and actually it's often a response to someone in the audience who's told me something, so I don't really mind that. What I don't like to do is get angry and that's been the problem I get angry if people are mean about my parents.

RG: Have you felt you've had to protect them?

CR: It's only happened about twice. No one has really been horrible to me, everyone's been delightful to me. I had one ropey event where I felt the interviewer hadn't really...(I think being interviewed by someone who doesn't really care, that's hard) so I didn't feel the interviewer was very good.

Then there was one event, with a question from this woman who had had some kind of minor head injury. She was very preoccupied about the fact I should be using this platform so that her and people like her can get more in the way of benefits. I didn't really understand and again if I had been the interviewer in that situation I would have said 'Thanks for making the point but I think we want to move on to another question' and the interviewer didn't. I was just floundering, trying to think how to deal with it. I ended up saying 'Well I'm really glad that you survived but my brother didn't and that's what I'm here to talk about.' But I felt quite discombobulated about it.

And then there was also someone in the audience who I hadn't seen for 20 years which was nice, but I had to go straight into a signing for lots of people. I was also really hungover. Life has got a lot better since I stopped drinking. A big thing for me was I could not control my thirst, so coming off stage with all the body chemistry swilling around, I was a bottomless pit when it came to drink. I've realised it's just much easier for me to have no drink than some drink. Also, I want to be in full possession of my faculties.

I went to this party where I drank too much and had these odd conversations with people that I couldn't fully remember the next day and I felt very uncomfortable. It was then I thought, I can't do what I used to do, as a journalist. I'd go to book launches and toast the book and have a few drinks and have interesting nights and then go home. Now that this other stuff about me is in the world I have to be prepared for what happens. Other writers can be funny as well, like I was really surprised to encounter jealousy from people. I remember someone saying to me quite early on 'People are being very nice about your book aren't they? But then of course they would be, with *that* material'.

RG: The whole jealousy thing is bizarre anyway because there would be no book if that person was still alive. Look what had to happen for there to be a book!

I wanted to ask about your family. Did you feel protective towards your parents at any stage? How much did you consider people very close to you and close to your brother? Perhaps talk about that first, but also, once the book was public, did it change your relationship with family members?

I found that I was going to literary events and talking about Ella all the time, but I actually hadn't really had a proper conversation with my husband about her for a long time. I think that didn't do us any good at all. I was constantly talking to a room full of strangers, walking out of that room, not looking after myself and then going home and thinking *I was just away for a few days. I'm back now, it's fine*. But not actually talking to him. I just wondered if any of that chimed with you and your family or your experiences?

CR: Sometimes I feel I've written my book to enable me to talk to my Mum and Dad about it.

RG: You have said that in the book a bit, about unlocking things.

CR: Yeah, and sometimes they come to events.

RG: How is that?

CR: Interesting, and again initially, like a massive head fuck, but I learnt to enjoy it. It's quite sweet, I mean other people like it. They often get their own little queue and people want to meet them and they think it's quite sweet. I think for them, especially for my Dad and this is all tied up with him not being able to read and write himself, he's just so proud. He's so unbelievably proud of the fact that I've written a book and then I also think he likes the fact that I've told the story.

And I think he also has, *well nobody cared then but people care now*. I think he likes that. I think he quite likes the fact that he's in a book and people are always saying to him how nice he is, because he is! What I find really odd is I forget. I forget all the time that I've written these books so I will still try to hide things from people that I've written about in these books or I've talked about on the telly. Yeah in my real life, I'm still trying to pass like a normal person.

RG: That massively resonates. We moved to a new house five years ago, so I left the city that she, Ella, was born and died in. I moved 200 miles away. There are still women who I stand next to in the playground who know nothing about Ella. I'm not pretending I never had her, I would never ever operate like that, but it's the fact that I struggle to talk about her in my 'real life' that is bizarre.

CR: Yes exactly, but on a festival stage, brilliant! It screwed me for normal person small talk (both laugh). I mean I'm loving this, I'm really enjoying this. I'm mentoring this really nice young woman and I saw her yesterday and we were talking about a part of her work where she relates to her dead father, who was also a poet. One of the things that really resonated with me was thinking about my son having a writer as a mother.

I said to her (and I don't say this to my son, but he probably knows because children know things), I would rather be with her at the Leon in Paddington, talking about her memoir in progress, than I would be at home playing Pokémon with my son. And that isn't because I don't love him. I think this is the great taboo. Whenever I say this, I now think maybe right this second at school he's fallen off the climbing frame, but I'm also glad that I'm here and as long as he doesn't fatally fall off the climbing frame, if he like hurts his finger or whatever, I'm really glad that it's not going to be me that has to go and pick him up at school. I would rather be with you, talking about these big subjects. I would rather, to be honest, be on a festival stage talking about my brother's death than I would be unloading my dishwasher. So, for me, I think there's something extremely intoxicating about talking about life and death with writers and strangers and people caring about my opinion. It's quite difficult for me to then go home where actually no one really cares about my opinions, they just want me to get the laundry up to date. That's quite hard.

RG: Yep, very hard, to the point where I actually remember having a conversation with my husband explaining to him that when I leave the house my book is a positive thing that people want to talk about, they want to embrace. *Inside* our house, the book is a toxic thing, because it's taken me away from him, he's uncomfortable with it, I'm talking about it all the time, but he and I are not talking about it. It took us a couple of years to sort all that out. I just love how you've remained so comfortable talking about it in public, I really look up to you, how you deal with it in public.

I've taken a lot from your book because I've read it at the end of my two years of hibernation, and I thought it's not actually such a bad place out there. Taking the book out there is not such a bad thing and part of my thesis is not necessarily looking for the answer *it's horrendous putting a personal narrative out there don't do that*. What I'm trying to find is a way back into my book, to go back it.

CR: It's complex isn't it? I mean we moved to Cornwall, which I didn't think at the time it was anything to do with the book, but actually...

RG: Do you think it is? The book's success?

CR: I think one of the things about the book's success, it has to a certain extent hobbled me professionally and in other ways.

RG: Meaning? The whole pigeonholed thing?

CR: Not really that. I'm talking about being in the book world. It's a beautiful thing, it's not like I'm complaining about it, but it's very odd to be in a room for a professional purpose with loads of people who have read your book. What has been quite odd as well, is being on everybody's lips to a certain extent and to not be the flavour of the month anymore.

RG: This is something we learn by being in the game. You've just got to be in the game and realise there is a time when nobody's talking about you.

CR: The whole Oscar Wilde thing: the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about. Which I don't think I believe is true, but it's when you say hibernation... My next book is called *Talking to Strangers About Books*. I've just sent it to my editor. I am now so interested in all this stuff we're talking about, it's trying to creep into other things. She's always reminding me not everyone is a writer who has written a very personal and successful memoir. Then I'll meet someone who is a writer, who has read my book and I wish I kept a few more of those bits in.

But yes, it's about how I just wanted to reset my reading brain, so I came off social media, I was in Cornwall, I just decided to reread all my favourite books. So that's also a period of hibernation. What I've worked out is for me, real-life stuff great, anything else,

careful. Social media, toxic. I worked out, I can do the event, but I can't be on social media, because basically I can't care about what happens after the event. I did an event, I thought it was a beautiful event. Loads of people afterwards had said that it was the best book event they'd ever been to. I was with Decca Aitkinhead who I adore, and it was wonderful. We went out for dinner afterwards with my parents who were there, and it was wonderful and lovely.

My therapist says my body chemistry likes being on stage so basically, I get all the good drugs from myself when I'm on stage, but what I've had to learn to do is manage the come down. Because I will do something, and it's amazing - I write about it in the afterword [to *The Last Act of Love*]. I did this thing in Bristol, it was so cool, then I got lost on the way to the station. I did nearly get knocked over by a bus. But in general, I've worked out it's after the event when you have to look after yourself. So again, no drinking, be kind to myself.

I remember being in a hotel room in that state. Somebody had written a blog post which they'd tweeted to me. And the thing I always remember about their blog post is, and it wasn't unpleasant at all, they were using a technique that I've used lots of times in books journalism which is along the lines of 'Didn't think I would fancy this novel about blah blah blah but at the end it's so great I'm glad I read it'. The first line was something like 'I didn't know if I wanted to go to this event. What dignity can there be I thought, in trotting out your grief in front of an audience?' and I was so desperately upset by that. It was only later that I realised *Oh that's not what she's saying, that's what she thought before she came to the event*. Of course, the reason why that upset me so much is that I worry that it's true, which I don't think it is, but I found that very upsetting. The problem with the social media stuff is because it's very addictive, certainly for me, I don't have the discipline to think actually it's not a good idea for me to look at social media when I'm in hotel rooms away from home. The only way I can do it is to not be on it. It is the only way I can cope with live events. I can't enjoy doing them if I'm worried about what people are tweeting or blogging about.

RG: So, do you do an event now, and then walk away from it?

CR: Yes. And the same with the TV and radio appearances. I don't usually watch it or listen to things.

RG: And you feel better for that? Does that feel like a real coping strategy then?

CR: Yeah, I've surrendered control, of the book, and of the stuff around the book. Because I know that the thing that matters is that I am true to myself as much as I can be in that moment. And then I put the authenticity of it before everything, except, the wellbeing of my son. There are things that I don't talk about that I would actually find quite interesting to talk about, but that I don't want him to read. My no-go subjects are because I don't want him to consume something about me. And that's troubling me a lot with this novel, because I want to write about how difficult it is having children and I want to write about the taboo that you can't say that. I want to write about how it's not really about the love, it's almost irrelevant the love. I quite want to get into some really sludgy stuff about sex and all that kind of stuff, but I know that my son is a blocker, because I'm worried that that is what he has left of me.

RG: Did you have to protect him at all in the publicity for any of the books? People always wanted pictures of Ella and I said no and made sure my publisher knew that there was to be no picture of her in the public domain at all. Only because I knew I would never have control over it. I have journalists in the family, and they said to me *you'll never be able to control when you see that photograph*. And I didn't want that. But also now, with Molly, my second child, I feel very protective of her too, because I did write about her in the book and I continue to write about her now. I'm almost doing something against her wishes by writing about her and talking about her publicly when she's so little and has no control over that.

CR: I do worry about all that stuff a lot, but I think I might be worrying a bit too much and so might you, because in Cheltenham this year I interviewed an InstaMum, who has millions of followers, this is now her career. She gets a huge amount of money for her kids eating baked beans on the internet. Fair play to her I thought, she was rather lovely, but it did make me think I'm worrying an awful lot. I'm doing a very writerly thing of worrying an awful lot about putting in a couple of sentences about my son in effectively a book that nobody reads. Whereas the internet is full of people... and one of my problems with social media is that I did used to post pictures of Matt then as soon as I became aware, as soon as I clocked that that maybe wasn't wise, I stopped. I think there are pictures of him on Facebook up until the age of 3 or 4,

then there are hardly any. But I've deactivated that as well at the moment.

RG: Are you continuing to get lots of contact, do you continue to get letters and that sort of thing? I read the essayist Leslie Jamison recently and she said that she saw any contact from our readers as a 'gift and a burden at once'. I wondered, because you talk so animatedly and positively about contact with readers as a positive thing, have you ever felt it's been a burden?

CR: No, but I've had to be careful that I don't over-assume responsibility about what I can do for someone. There was a point earlier on where my husband said to me are you sure you're not meeting up with a few too many people who've got dead siblings, who have you read your book?

RG: Oh, were you actually physically meeting up with them?

CR: Yeah, yeah. I know lots of people find that a bit weird.

RG: I don't find that weird, I just don't know where you got the strength from. I admire you for it.

CR: People say things like 'Isn't it awful, all these people have read your book and think they know you.' And what I would always say to that is, if they've read my book, they *do* know me. They know me a lot better than anybody that knows the real-life version of me. My first book is the truest version of me and my soul. They don't know the full details of past sexual shame, they don't know what I argued about with my husband this morning, but they know the core of me in a way that nobody would ever know me who just knew me in real life. You know that dance you do in real life, when you're just trying to be a normal person at the school gates, you want them to like you and have your kid round for tea and you're trying to work out how to bond with this person, when really all you like talking about is death and writing.

RG: You've made me realise that maybe in the book I am more the 'real' me than I realise. Not many people know me in that playground. Not many people know I write or what I've written about. Perhaps two or three Mums, that's it. Maybe it's going to be a positive thing for me to see that the real me is in the book. I like what you said then, that they [the readers] do know you and that's

all right. Whereas I used to think they know a bit about me, and I'm a bit scared of that.

CR: I mean, isn't what we really want is to be known?

RG: And you are lonely and isolated aren't you, in grief? Grief is a lonely and isolating thing.

CR: It's a lonely and isolating thing, and I think life is a lonely and isolating thing. Trying to be normal, trying to be a mother, is a lonely and isolating thing. Trying to be a normal person, doing the best for your child. I spend a lot of time trying to manage my anxiety about the fact that he might die, or I might ruin him.

RG: Do you have any heightened anxiety as a result of what happened?

CR: Yes, I think so, definitely. I try very hard, with the help of good therapists, not to bleed that fear into him, but yes, part of me thinks he's going to die when he's 16. What I fear more is brain damage, something terrible happening. I don't know whether this is true for you, but I have no fears for myself. I literally could not give a shit. I fear that the people I love will die or be damaged and that I won't cope, that's what I fear. Because that's what happened. Though as my therapist says, I have to change the belief that I didn't cope. I did actually cope very well for my age and those circumstances and have made something that is useful for other people and so I need to stop being so hard on myself.

RG: And is that finally happening?

CR: Yes, that's the thing I felt really bullish about it in the end of *The Last Act of Love*. What I feel about my books is they're really me but there's an uplift at the end which I genuinely felt because it is a great feeling to finish a book. I became worried at one point that in the need to edit out the all the pebbly, dribbly crap about getting drunk and crying myself to sleep that I have, in some ways, been dishonest. But then I read the book again, and I thought actually that's it, I've done a pretty good job as much as it's possible to do. I have done a good job of it.

RG: Very much so. How many years is it now since it was published?

CR: It came out in 2015, in July. But of course, because of working in the industry the proofs went out at Easter. Actually, what was very weird, was when it went out to publishers and I was going for a meeting with that publisher about my charity and somebody in Reception said to me ‘I’ve just been reading your book’ and in that moment I thought I might actually die or be sick all over their shoes.

RG: Because you couldn’t believe it could be a real, tangible thing?

CR: Yes, and even though I vaguely knew how publishers worked, it hadn’t actually occurred to me that my agent would send it out to these editors and then the editors, if they like it, share it internally, and then they have big meetings with everyone from sales and marketing to discuss it. And that still sometimes slightly gives me the heebie jeebies.

It slightly scuppered me professionally. In my industry a very high proportion of my colleagues now know all this stuff about me, which in some ways is wonderful because they tell me stuff about themselves now. So, in some ways I have become the confidant of the industry, which I love. I don’t think I ever find it a burden, I actually really love it. At some points I get tired, if you’ve got a big queue of people and there is a requirement to be ‘present’ for that many people, at an event.

RG: At the last event where I actually did keel over, when I couldn’t do anymore, there was a queue of women waiting to talk to me about their dead babies and I couldn’t do it anymore. I felt so guilty about that, but I had no reserves, just no reserves.

CR: That’s the thing I write about in *Manual*.... an awful lot, about learning how to plug into an energy source. That was all kind of writing-related really. I’m much more careful now about how long I will be away from home for. Realising that I need to send myself to bed before I am literally disabled by my own body shutting me down. Another therapist who does a lot of grief therapy shared with me about how she can’t really engage with world events and world trauma because there’s enough in front of her face and the downtime is spent watching romcoms and reading funny books. I just thought Yes! I’m going to stop feeling bad about myself. I’m not going to think that in this moment, in this

hotel room, I need to read the 800 page disturbing book written by....

RG: No, that's not a world we have to keep ourselves in, is it?

CR: No, and nor do I have to (social media tricks you), nor do I have to look on Twitter and comment on Brexit and Trump.

RG: You said really early on in the interview that you have no regrets. I was going to end the interview asking if you have any regrets and you said that right from the outset that you didn't and I like that.

CR: (pauses) I don't ultimately, if you see what I mean.

RG: I don't have any regrets about anything I wrote down, I believe in absolutely everything in that book.

CR: Yes, and I think that's why I have no regrets. I told a lie in an earlier version of the book. It was a lie just to protect people, something I didn't want my son to know. So I told a lie. But in a later draft I changed it. Again, working with my editor I just realised that in a lot of writing it's up to you what you say. I talk about this a lot now when I'm mentoring people. There is a whole trick, a whole manoeuvre by which you don't have to lie. You can just very assertively talk about the subject you *do* want to talk about and then people don't ask you about it.

Most people are very preoccupied with the thing that they want to hide. Anyway, I told a lie in an early draft and then in one of the last drafts, having learnt my craft more, I realised that I didn't have to tell this lie. I could just not tell the full story or situation. I'd feel really different about this book if it had a lie in it. When writers talk about feeling very uncomfortable with their work, and of course it's complex etc., but sometimes I wonder if it's because they're not actually happy with it. I'd find it very difficult if it wasn't an honest piece of work to the best of my ability. I'd have a very different relationship with it.

RG: But also, I think we're vindicated by that in a way. When we get up and talk about it, it's all absolutely true, it all happened, we are just telling the truth.

CR: Yes, and that's why I do events. I say what I think about things in the moment. It's helpful for me that I'm good at that. I like thinking on my feet. Like I so much enjoy being interviewed by you, but if someone said 'Write 2,000 words about this' I'd be like (groans).

RG: I thought about sending you the questions, but I thought I would definitely miss something. Reading your book, talking to you, has made me feel it's a much more positive experience writing a very personal narrative about grief and putting it into the public sphere. I think it's not been without its consequences for you, but you've also made me want to embrace the more positive side of it. I realise I'm not going to run a marathon. I'm not going to raise a million quid for heart babies, but I do get up and talk about them in public and maybe that's a good thing?

CR: And I think life's not necessarily meant to be easy. The modern world is continually trying to make us buy stuff by telling us that perfection is just a purchase away. Whereas actually when you think of life as accumulating experiences and knowledge, then it does change what you think about what you've experienced. I have to remind myself of this all the time.

RG: So the *Prospect* column came as a consequence of all this, what other things have happened?

CR: Yes, so it's kind of changed my life, in that the work I do now is quite different. Obviously I'm writing my books.

RG: Do you work in the industry still as such?

CR: No not really. Of course, moving to Cornwall was tricky. I miss work, I love work. I would love a job. I don't know if this is about writing a personal narrative, I just think this is about me as a writer, but I think I work better if I have to cram my writing in between 5 and 7. If I've got loads of time it's just morose introspection all the way. I think if I got a job, I would need less therapy because basically with too much time I just sit around and feel depressed in it.

RG: So you are writing pretty much full time at the moment?

CR: Kind of-ish, in that I don't have another full-time job at the moment, but I do have a lot of journalism, a lot of event chairing. What I really love is teaching and mentoring. I love doing that.

RG: I mentor.

CR: It's wonderful isn't it? Helping other people shape and craft the narrative of their life.

RG: Is it specifically memoirs you work with?

CR: No. I have done a couple of novelists. I haven't finished a novel yet, but they didn't mind. I mean that's a weird thing for me. With books I've always been really involved in fiction and fiction is what I've known. I'm now at this point where I don't really feel particularly confident that I will ever finish a novel but actually I really *know* memoir now by writing one. I didn't really read it much before I wrote one.

RG: No I didn't. Part of my research for this is I'm reading memoirs for the first time and I've found it really interesting. Because they're so different, so varied. I've loved the way that they can be as creative as novels, does that make sense? I thought What is memoir? Is it: this happened, then this happened and then they had a cup of tea. I just didn't think they could be as immersive novels, or as creative and I've loved discovering that.

CR: I'd probably rather now read a memoir than someone's fictionalised version of something... I'm very fascinated by what people leave out.

RG: But we'll never know.

CR: No, but I think you can quite often tell. I couldn't tell before, but I can now, being a memoir writer. I think I can see where the memories try to duck and dive and actually it remains a secret.

When I worked in bookshops, I was always saying to people we're all in the operational gutter, but you have to keep your eyes on the stars and actually I think writing is just the same. You have to keep your eye on what really matters which is the honest connection with other humans, readers who engage with your work, writers who write stuff, the fact that you now have an enhanced understanding of other people's work because of dealing in it

yourself. And I keep my eyes on that and not on the *Oh I didn't win this, or I wasn't on this list, or so and so said this shitty thing to me in this bar, or what a surprise I always liked this person but turns out they're a cunt, or people are talking about me too much I can't cope with it, or nobody's talking about me anymore I can't cope with it.* That's the gutter, and it's how you stick on the stars.

Appendix B:
Rebecca Goss interviews Alice Jolly, author of *Dead Babies*
***and Seaside Towns*, London December 18th 2018**

Alice Jolly is a novelist and playwright. She has a substantial body of published work, including the memoir *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* published with Unbound in 2015. It won the 2016 PEN Ackerley Prize and is the focus of this interview. Alice's daughter Laura was stillborn in 2005. Alice went on to suffer miscarriages before embarking upon the route of surrogacy. The memoir is about motherhood, grief, infertility, and alternative ways to create a family. She has two children and lives between London and Gloucestershire. More information about Alice and her work can be found here: <http://alicejolly.com/wp/> Alice and I first met at 'Medicine Unboxed', a medical humanities conference in 2015. I interviewed Alice in her London home.

RG: Hello, Alice. We're going to talk about *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns*, the experiences of having the book published and it being in the public eye.

What I really liked about the book from the offset is how you acknowledge the writing process throughout. I noticed it was a sort of device you employed. You are very conscious you're writing a memoir. You state how you feel about memoirs, how you didn't know if you wanted to get into this area. In my research, I've read that personal narrative is regarded as being very self-referential, but I consider you to be a writer who is very self-aware. I found it really refreshing. How do you feel about memoir now, now that you've written one?

AJ: Yes, it's true that I was very reluctant about the idea of writing memoir and I think the book begins with that thing about *moi, moi, moi*. That thing about putting yourself centre stage. I don't think I've really lost that actually. Although I now read many more memoirs and I probably enjoy them much more than I did, I still think there's a problem with the form in the sense that it is only one voice. I think it's great when you read memoirs which are quite balanced, where somebody has been aware of the other arguments even though they haven't put them in the book. And sometimes, when you read quite a weak memoir it is because somebody is just going on about their own story and they haven't thought how it might be received by anybody else. I think there's a line in the book 'the case for the defence is never heard' and I

think that's what is awkward about memoirs, the one-sidedness of it.

RG: That's very interesting. You say in the book that 'in a memoir you cannot tell everything'. In my last interview it was said [about memoir] that there's simply too much to say and you can't tell it all. I wanted to ask you how easy it was to include, or exclude, information? Was that something you thought about at the beginning?

AJ: I suppose there are kind of two levels, and I think it was easy in a sense to exclude stuff that was also going on in my life, you know, our daily lives. Lots of other stuff was happening in my life, it was quite easy to exclude that.

I'd decided on the focus of the memoir, but then, even just within the information about fertility there was a hell of a lot to tell, and at one point I lost thirty thousand words from the book. I had written it, I'd finished it and I looked at it and I just thought *this is far too long*. Initially I thought *I don't know how to cut this*. Then one morning I just sat down, and I went through it all and everything I looked at I asked, *is this really something new? Is this actually telling people something that I haven't already said in some other way?* And it became quite easy to lose a lot of it. Also, there was quite a lot of small-minded spite in that longer version. I needed to write that, I got that off my chest, but really, I don't need to share that with the wider world because it's a bit sour and a bit unpleasant. Again, it's that lack of balance, it becomes me going on about all this, and how unpleasant people were which actually, isn't really quite fair and it is also just quite boring to read.

RG: The book isn't the place for that, maybe? But I liked by the end of the book you were still holding onto that 'rage', it's the word you used – in the context of 'closure' and anger still being there. I like the way you realise anger still needs to be acknowledged.

AJ: Yes. I felt that very strongly. I didn't put in the book the fact that I went to see a shrink and that I realised that her whole agenda was about acceptance. She was waiting for me to say 'I accept this'. I think acceptance is a very odd word anyway because of course you accept it, in that you know perfectly well what has happened. I'm not arguing with that. Eventually the most I could

say was that I finished up in a state of peaceful non-acceptance. That I don't accept it, and I still think it's terrible but I'm, equally, not battling with that on a day-to-day basis. I'm sort of saying *Well, it's never going to be okay, but I don't now need to feel bad about it all the time*. I think I was thinking a lot about people who might read that book and I think when you're in that situation you always have that question of *Will I come to a point in my life when I just let go of this and that'll be the end of it?* and I don't think you do. I wanted to say that, because I don't think you do.

RG: Yeah, I think it's really important that you did say that actually. Have you read *The Examined Life* by Stephen Grosz?

AJ: Yes.

RG: There was one bit that stood out for me, when he talks about closure being a myth, a fantasy of mourning. I really liked that your book had a happy ending in one respect, with Hope's arrival but also you accept that that doesn't mean it's all done now, it's all sorted out, it's all over. At readings, I will refer to *Her Birth* and say that it is about a difficult period of my life that is by no means over. Because it's changing all the time isn't it? But it's not over. So, I do think that it was important that you put that in there.

AJ: Yes, I think that this whole idea of closure becomes another pressure on the grieving, why have you not got over it? There must be some failure because you still get upset about this? Well, no, that's just making what has been a very difficult thing, even worse.

RG: I really liked it when you wrote 'Grief is a disastrous subject for a book'. Do you think it's a disastrous subject for a book because people want a happy ending? Do you think our readers want a happy ending? Do they want a kind of closure? Even though we know there isn't one.

AJ: I think that's really interesting because I would never have written this book if Hope hadn't been born. I would have felt nobody would publish that because it's just a very sad book, lots of sad things happen and then it doesn't get better. I thought, nobody's ever going to publish that book but that makes me angry.

For lots of people, that's the reality. That *is* their life. There are very sad things which will never be resolved and can never be put right and that's it. I'd love to be able to write that book, but I was

thinking no, I won't be able to get it published. Then interestingly, the book that actually does have the happy ending finished up too sad for people to publish. There's a real limit, or a perceived limit, on what people want to hear about sad stuff, but I think that's completely wrong. I think it's a sort of invention by the publishing industry and the marketing people and the whole pressure to have a happy ending. I actually think people are often very consoled by books that don't have happy endings, because they see their own life reflected there. The sad things are not really going to get better. It's not a negative narrative because people's lives go on, it's just that that thing will always be hard for them.

RG: That's so interesting, thinking you would not have written the book if Hope hadn't been born. I wonder if I would have written my book if Molly hadn't been born. My book finishes with Molly's arrival. I wonder how I would have felt about it as a text if it ended with my first daughter being dead. I think I probably would have felt very similar to you and yet it is still a valid narrative, isn't it?

AJ: Yes, and I think I would have thought poetry could have encompassed that more, because poetry isn't a narrative as such.

RG: Right, okay....

AJ: Maybe there are collections of poetry that people say are too dark, a bit too gloomy. So, people probably do want that sort of redemption whether it's poetry or prose. As this was all happening to me, I met people who were in much worse positions than me. People who had a child that died and were never going to have another child, they were over 40.

RG: Yes, I've met people along the way like that.

AJ: Or people that have just never got pregnant, years and years of IVF and I think, what do we do with those stories as a society? Are we just saying you can't tell those stories, it's too difficult? But that is the reality for some people, so why can't we say it?

RG: Why can't we say it indeed. That actually links really neatly onto my next question. You write about society's inability to talk about dark things and you write about being rapidly silenced. I experienced that early on in Ella's life (my daughter who died) because I knew she was going to die. I felt it was a really difficult

thing to bring up at baby group and I did find myself often being silenced. I wonder if writing your book was a way of ensuring you were silenced no longer? Do you see it like that?

AJ: Yes, in a way I do, very much. And I know that it's broken the silence for a lot of people. I've had amazing emails from a lot of readers. A woman who was so emotional about it because her son is the third child and the other two died. She's never managed to have any conversation about it with her very elderly mother-in-law, then she read the book, gave it to her mother-in-law to read and they had this discussion that they'd just never had. That's just one example. There have been quite a few like that and you think, *oh gosh*. So, it was about breaking the silence but then, equally, there were quite a lot of difficulties around the reception of the book: you shouldn't have really written that book, or you shouldn't have written it in that way.

RG: Where did that come from?

AJ: I think it came from some mothers of stillborn babies and a lot because of the title. It was going to have another title, but my agent didn't like that title. I didn't really like it and she said to me is there something you feel really viscerally that it should be called? I said it should be called *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* and she said *Let's go with that, at least no one will forget it*. The publishers were well aware of the risk and the possible offence but mercifully they are not frightened of an edgy title.

I've never really had that big a problem with it, but I've had plenty of problems from other people. In the book I talked a bit about the grief police and in the world of stillbirth there are lots of angels, lambs and light and all that kind of stuff, and you really realise there are acceptable ways and unacceptable ways to grieve. If you really just want to say *My baby died*, people just don't want it said like that. That's in a way, why my book *had* to have that title. My baby died, that's it. Rather than 'My Angel's Gone to Heaven' or something like that. So, people find that hard and yes, I have had really quite awful comments about it. But can't they see what the book's about? Therefore, don't you think they should be careful about what they say about it?

RG: How did you deal with those reactions?

AJ: I suppose I just kind of shrugged them off. But they are quite horrible. People also do really quite illogical things. A woman I

know who is quite a well-known writer once said online ‘I’ve never been able to read *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* because of the title.’ And that’s fine, but you don’t need to announce that to the world in general. It turns out, she had a baby that had died. Why did she not tell me that?

RG: So, it’s not about the title, it’s about her own relationship to the subject.

AJ: Yes, exactly. If she’d said that, that it’s because of her own experience I would have said, okay, fine, I can see that’s difficult for her. But she didn’t say that. I think you probably know, you get very strange reactions.

RG: You do get very strange reactions and I didn’t know whether you wanted to talk about that, about the kind of reactions to the book? There are obviously some positive ones and negative ones. Did you feel you could manage all the contact from people?

AJ: I think in terms of the book I was, overall, very lucky. I was sitting there, in a trench with a tin hat on waiting, in particular because of the surrogacy thing - with the hard-line Catholic people out there. I really thought it would be quite difficult and actually it didn’t really happen. Although it’s also interesting the extent to which I was protected from that. It was only the other day someone said ‘Oh it must have really been awful for you when there was that really horrible review in *The Oldie*’ and I said ‘Was there?’ and they said ‘Oh, didn’t you know?’ and I thought ‘Shall I look it up?’

RG: You didn’t, did you?

AJ: No, I thought why would I do that?

RG: Did someone actually *tell* you that though?

AJ: Yes. I think a good year had probably gone by and nobody had said anything, and the publishers probably knew, and they didn’t say anything, so I’m glad that people didn’t say that kind of thing. At the time all this happened, I felt I hadn’t been heard. I felt I was always the person mopping up other people’s tears. So those kind of reactions - often I think I’m fine with them, but sometimes I have period of times when I just feel like no, I don’t want any more of your stuff. I can’t do that.

Also, it is that thing of somebody thinking *Well I've read your book, I've heard your stories now it's my turn to go on about this*, but I don't sort of see it like that really.

RG: Do you think it's important memoir writers recognise that? That they don't have to take people's stories on board? Did you have an agent or publisher that supported you? Were they conscious of the reactions to the book? Did you feel you got any support in the literary world about how the story was being managed?

AJ: Not very much. In fact, I got slightly fed up. I heard a publisher at a literary festival talking about a very personal memoir written by X who is a well-known author. The publisher said, 'We were very concerned to protect X in that process.' I was never aware of anyone doing that for me really. Although I do know that both my agent and my publisher fully understood the personal challenge that was involved in publishing that book.

RG: That's interesting.

AJ: But also, and I think I need to say this, had I been someone that around the time of publication had been bursting into tears saying I just couldn't cope that would have been different. But I thought I've decided to do this, I need to get on with it and I'm not that kind of bursting-into-tears-on-people-and-telling-them-I-can't-cope kind of person. So when I say overall I didn't get much help, I didn't acknowledge I'm probably quite a difficult person to help. I don't look vulnerable. I don't invite help with 'Now I'm going to sit and cry for 20 minutes.' So, I think people think I'm okay. They think: she seems okay, better not to mention it. I've never put up a sign saying *vulnerable person, finding it hard to cope with this*.

RG: Did you ever cry at readings or public events?

AJ: No, you see, I didn't.

RG: No, I didn't. It's not something to apologise for. I didn't either and I've worked very hard not to.

AJ: In a way it's possibly a mistake. You can't decide to do that, or not to do that, but to be the person that doesn't do that, is also a

bit of a mistake because perhaps people then think it's a sort of free-for-all.

RG: That you can deal with it? Absolutely. It's such a tricky business - this part of going into the public arena with very sad stories. You project them into the public's fear, but then in order to manage it, we have to put on this sort of armour that says, 'I can cope, I can do it, I can talk about it', but actually does that have a toll eventually?

AJ: Yes, I think it does. It sounds as if for you, the toll was quite immediate. It was clear that you reached a time in your life when you couldn't do it anymore, and you felt physically sick. It's quite a long time since the publication of my book and it may actually only be now that I'm acknowledging the level of exhaustion. And what I find disappointing about me, at the moment, is that thing of hearing other people's stories and thinking I can't really be bothered, and I don't like that.

It's also complicated because you had Molly and I had Hope and as women you are in give mode a lot. I say to people occasionally, the give switch got stuck on, the take switch got stuck off. I stopped knowing how to take stuff, in terms of saying 'I need this.' Even after Laura died, when people did say 'What can I do to help?' I said, 'Oh no, it's fine, there's nothing.' Well if people ask that, I should sit there and say 'Actually I need this, this and this' but I'm not very good at that stuff. I think that's a bit of a gender thing. My mother's that woman who just gives the whole time and so I come from a whole culture where for me to say 'I'm just going to sit there and cry about my story' just doesn't happen. It seemed okay to write a book about it, but it didn't seem okay to talk about it. And that was one of the strange things about the book was that people who know us quite well didn't know a lot of that stuff because I just stopped talking about it.

RG: So it was a useful outlet? It is important that you wrote it?

AJ: Yes, and it's interesting because I didn't write it as therapy. I wrote it in an actually rather calculating kind of manner. I couldn't get a novel published at the time (which is now being published) but I then thought I just have to write something. I thought, *Oh God, I should write the story of what happened to us*. So, I did it in quite a calculating way and I don't now, even though I've written it, see it as therapy.

But it has had quite an effect in terms of containing it. I think that is what happens to grief eventually in the process. That it becomes something you've sort of got control over, so you get it out when you want to get it out. Whereas for years and years it was all over everything and you couldn't get control, everything was touched by it. I think the book was a good part of the process of saying *This is a statement of what it is, and I'll look at that when I want to look at it but it's not all over everything.*

RG: I listened to an interview recently with the Danish poet Naja Marie Aidt. Her son died when he was in his twenties and she said (and I found this really interesting), that if she hadn't written the memoir about it, she possibly wouldn't have ever written anything else.

AJ: That was also what I felt like. It felt like a roadblock. Yes, I felt like that, that it's such a big story if I don't tell it, no other story will be told.

RG: She also said she didn't want the story to haunt everything else she told in the future. It had to be told in that one text. I think that's interesting. So, we've talked a bit about people coming forward because our text is out there. We've had the chance to speak about our story so they then feel they can come to us. But what I don't think most people realise is that that period of time from when it *happened* to you, writing the book and getting it published. There's a timeline there that people maybe don't see or read, and I wondered if by the time the book did get into the public domain, did it stir things up for you?

AJ: Yes, I think it did. I kind of knew that it would. It's quite difficult when you've slightly laid things to rest to some sort of degree, and then suddenly you're back in it and that I did find quite difficult.

Also, it was then quite difficult as people got in touch with me to say, 'I'm so incredibly sorry that all this has happened to you' and often it was people that hadn't really been in touch with me at the time, when it might have been more helpful to me. I wouldn't have written the book if I wasn't ready for this to happen, it was bound to happen.

It's also quite sad for the people who are then in touch, a whole new generation of people as it were, proving that these sorts of things [stillbirth] still go on. That's quite depressing. Every week there are new people that join this unpleasant club. There's that failure to fully engage with it because you've just reached the point where you've heard all sorts of people from your generation tell their stories, and now there's a whole new bunch of people. Also, it's raw for them in the way that it isn't for you now. Sometimes it's quite strange to find myself thinking 'God, they seem so upset by that'. I look back on that period of my life as a kind of madness. I did mad things and I know rationally how incredibly difficult it was. But on another level, I have also accepted it so *completely* that I have a kind of 'Yeah, that does happen' attitude, which I don't really want to have.

RG: I really liked what you said about describing yourself as being 'in the land of unreason and feeling gloriously liberated' and I'm trying to match that with what you said about madness. I think grief, how it affects behaviour and that period of madness you refer to, is also a time when you are recently bereaved. I really think you can say what you like, do what you like. I wonder if writing the book is an extension of that liberation?

AJ: Yes, I think I had to write the book because I never felt I had enough of that liberation. I was far too well-behaved. I mustn't be weeping in public places and ranting at people. I didn't do any of that. I was incredibly well-behaved about it, to the extent that was completely unhelpful. A friend whose baby died a year before mine said she was more or less stopping people in the street to tell them about it. I asked her, 'Didn't you feel like you shouldn't do that? Because it's really awful and upsetting for them?' And she said she didn't care at all.

RG: Wow. You see, I think her behaviour is really admirable, do you? I can't imagine myself doing it.

AJ: Yes, I do and no I can't. But I'm sure that she kind of healed better, got through it better and finished up less bitter. I suspect because that was what she needed to do and didn't care. Whereas I was, as you probably were, massively sensitive to other people's reactions and not laying too much upon them and not expecting too much of them.

RG: When you did a public reading, (and in writing the book) did any of that censoring kick in? Or, did you just think I'm here to tell my story, I've got my book, I've got permission.

AJ: For some reason I could do it in the book. I had boiled it down, in the way you did in your poems. You boil it down to the essence of it. So, you're actually not ranting in an uncontrolled fashion in the book. You've sort of processed it and made it into this thing which is a poem or a couple of paragraphs you've thought about quite carefully. And I suppose when I took those thirty thousand words out, in a way what I was doing was protecting those people from me ranting on a lot.

RG: And that woman you spoke about, who was much more open, has the publication of your book enabled you to be open more now?

AJ: I don't think so, no. It's something I didn't learn from the whole experience, that I'm still not good at talking. You think *Well I'm past a lot of this now*. Then, recently, a woman who lives in our village lost a baby very late in pregnancy. For two or three days I was just utterly destabilised by the whole thing. I thought, there are people I can ring up and say *this has just happened and it's all so long ago but it's really brought things back for me*, but I just didn't. What are they going to say or do to help?

RG: Do you sort of see yourself as having this split identity? I used to quite happily do a reading about Ella, talking in great detail about our experiences and her death, then get back to Suffolk and pick Molly up from school, standing in the playground next to women who don't know anything about that part of my life. They don't know I had a baby that died. When do I bring it up? Maths homework, spellings, oh by the way. I just don't know how to articulate it in my private life but in my public life I can talk about it freely.

AJ: Yes, that is true and it's strange because I know in fact there are women at the school who have said to me 'I find it quite difficult because I've read your book but I don't really know you, and now I feel sort of embarrassed talking to you because I know so much about your life.' That's quite strange. Yet I don't think, whilst I'm standing there, Oh god I can't believe they've read my book how embarrassing. I don't feel like that about it, I don't really know why. It must be because the book is somehow

separate. How can you have somebody read what is a very personal book and not mind that they're doing that, but then not be able to say to that same person on some day 'Oh I'm feeling upset because of.....' ?

RG: Yes, I know, it's a really strange thing for writers and a difficult territory for us to manage. But perhaps we are fortunate that we have the book to manage it for us? Otherwise, I would be standing in that playground never saying anything for the rest of my life.

AJ: Yes, exactly. There is that relief. If you want to know, it's in the book, you can go and read it.

RG: A relief that we've said it, been able to say it.

AJ: Yes, and for it to be reasonably, widely listened to. Because that's the other thing, people who write that kind of book and nobody at reads it, which must be very hard. Because then you're kind of repeating the silencing, as it were.

RG: I meant to ask you, have you had any regrets about publishing it? I'm not looking for negative answers.

AJ: No, I haven't. I mean, it's been hard in lots of ways, but I never think, God, I just wish I'd never published that. In fact, I feel glad to have done it, as I feel it's started quite a lot of debate and so on.

RG: I wanted to talk a little about your marriage now, if that's all right? I liked how candid you were about your marriage in the book, about how certain experiences affected it. Like Stephen not wanting to talk about things and you did want to talk about things. I just wondered how the book affected your marriage? Just to give you some brief context, I found I was talking a lot about my dead daughter at public events, but I stopped talking about her at home. *We* stopped talking about her. Ella's story became all wrapped up in the book and it didn't have a great impact on our marriage.

AJ: Yes, it was quite strange. I'd said to my husband how do you feel about that and he said yes, I think you should tell that story.

RG: This was at the beginning?

AJ: Yes, this was at the beginning but then interestingly, he didn't read the book until after it was published, and I don't think he's ever read all of it in fact.

RG: Same with my husband, I think.

AJ: And actually, I was very grateful for that decision and grateful for the fact he said 'That's your version of it' and obviously his version would be very different. He is quite a private person. When people say to him 'What do you think about Alice writing that?' he can just say he didn't know and cut off a lot of conversations by making it clear that he didn't have any input into the book.

But yes, possibly it's meant that we've discussed it less. But then I think he didn't want to discuss it a lot anyway. I have concerns about it, because there is some sort of emotional outsourcing that goes on [with men]. He said to me early on 'If you're going to survive this okay, then I will.' I thought well, that puts it all on me, how we're going to deal with this. That also means I've got to survive it so that you can survive. All the emotional stuff is going to be handed over to me because I'm a woman, so obviously I do that kind of thing.

So yes, I think that is really hard and I suspect that it did have quite an affect. But I think the problem was there anyway, in the terms of the way he wanted to deal with things which was completely different to the way that I wanted to deal with things. I joke about it in the book but it's not really a joke when he [Stephen] says 'A problem shared is a problem doubled.' He *honestly* thinks that. Why do people go around telling other people their problems because it's just bringing the other people down? Or, as he's a lawyer, if you want a problem solved, he'll solve it by telling you what legally you should do, but he doesn't want discussion of things that cannot be resolved. I think what happened was a bit subtler than that, and I think this is what I would like to be at the end of now, but I'm not quite sure if we are. We're both making ourselves absurdly busy with all sorts of things, so that a lot of *stuff* has to be sort of pushed aside.

RG: Just this morning I was talking to my husband (he was a widower when I met him, and various sad things have happened to him in his life), and he has a theory we are busy, always busy. And I don't mean busy as in happy, active family days out, we're just

busy. We're both self-employed, we wear lots of different hats and he thinks it's a coping mechanism for us. We don't go on long holidays, (we never have the money to), but we don't wind down or stop. He wonders now if it's a coping mechanism, because if he stops there's just too much to come at him, too much that's happened to him.

AJ: Yes, I think that's true.

RG: Maybe it's a male thing as well.

AJ: Yes. There is this thing that maybe the hamster wheel is the thing that is keeping you going. I think it must have been quite complicated for you that your husband is already badly bereaved, because in a way there is a sort of bereavement fatigue, isn't there? You just can't take any more.

RG: I remember after Ella died, my husband's mother died in hospital two months later. I remember him making this really dark joke, you know that dark sense of humour you have to have, to survive? The nurses came to us at the hospital to say something about contacting the funeral director and Jim said to the nurses 'Well actually, I'm thinking of setting up an account.' And of course, they were horrified, but I burst out laughing in this horrendous moment. His mother had just died, but we were thinking *Jesus Christ, we have to do another funeral now*.

I want to look at the word 'survival'. In another interview I read with a memoirist, the interviewer said the book is actually proof the writer survived. It's an act of survival and is proof that she is still here, that she has survived. Does that resonate?

AJ: Yes, I suppose that is really true. And it's about being further on in the time process. You want the book to be a way of saying to people who are in this right now, *you will get through this*. You will have a life after this and that also - without again wanting to wrap it all up and say it's fine, it's not fine at all - nevertheless now, with the perspective of time you *know*. There is that question of are you always going to be this weepy person who can't do anything much? I think we both said, well Stephen said it in the book, we are not going down. There was that decision made: we are getting a life after this. But yes, still the costs are quite high in terms of the exhaustion and I think I am possibly only acknowledging this now.

RG: The costs of?

AJ: The costs of that we-are-going-to-get-on-with-our-lives attitude. Because you do just shove a lot of stuff aside. There's quite a bit of stuff we're simply just not going to process. Also, I think my friend that died in the book - I don't think I've really dealt with that to an extent, because it was just one too many things. I suppose after a while you do become immune to that don't you?

RG: Can you see the good the book has done?

AJ: Oh yes.

RG: Do you get much comfort from that? How does it make you feel?

AJ: That does feel really lovely because one of the things about writing about surrogacy is that when we were doing that, it was incredibly difficult to find out anything. It's a very closed world, people don't want to talk about it. Not many people have done that. I know that there are certainly parents of two babies who have said, we probably would never have done that if we hadn't known about you doing that – you made that possible for us when we thought it was not possible for us. So yes, I do know that.

I still have people getting in touch to say I found that really helpful. And it's interesting because for all the people who were definitely in the light and angels camp, who thought 'Oh, you should definitely not call your book that, it's quite offensive and the book's just too bleak' there are also lots of people saying: that was the book that spoke to me because it wasn't trying to make this better, it was not trying to put forward a solution or talk about lots of stuff to do with healing. It was just saying this is what it is. My theory is always that that is more helpful, and quite a lot of people have said that.

RG: Yes, and I admired the book for that, definitely. It was helpful for *not* using euphemisms. It was helpful to know that, I've got to say this right, bad things do happen to other people but also, they can process it, talk about it, articulate it.

You talk about resenting others, I feel so bad about that. I'm still shocked that a decade later the last thing I want to be around is someone's newborn baby, even though I've gone on to have another child. If there was a group of women over there sitting with their babies, I would just go in the other direction.

AJ: I never went to any of that mother and baby stuff with Hope. I didn't want to talk to them about the story of what happened.

RG: Nope, too hard.

AJ: And also, I know it's an awful thing to say, but it's the petty nature of other people's concerns. I remember when we first arrived back in this country and this woman at pick-up said her child might be dyslexic and what a huge deal it was. I had the overwhelming urge to say *Look, your child is fucking well alive, just shut up, it really doesn't matter.*

RG: Do you accept that that will always be our barometer? There's no escaping it, do you accept that? I just accept that. I'm not going to say that to the person, but I feel exactly the same way.

AJ: Yeah, I think so. I mean I try very hard, and this is maybe why I've slightly exhausted myself and why it hasn't really been a good thing. I do try and think in the moment this is what is happening to them *now*. That is very upsetting to them in this moment, and therefore me standing there thinking *Oh for Christ sake you've never seen a fucking problem in your life* isn't actually fair and there is also this awful hierarchy of grief, isn't there?

RG: Yes.

AJ: In that there are people looking at me thinking, reading my book thinking: *still, she finished up with two alive kids what's she got to complain about?* which I myself think!

I suppose we're trying to do both. We're trying to acknowledge that what happened to us, by the standard of some people, isn't that bad but actually to the standards of other people it is. That thing of a sliding scale. I wrote about it in *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns*, the sort of hierarchy of grief and what level of grief is acceptable given what's happened to you and actually, that is a rubbish concept. But it does exist, and that's partly how we get

through stuff as well, it is good for me to consider that stillbirth could have happened to me twice.

RG: It goes back to that self-censoring thing. Where does my story fit in in this hierarchy of grief? Is it too sad to be told? If we thought like that all the time there'd be stories that would never be told, perhaps.

AJ: And it's about the right we have to tell that story, because lots of people have lived through that kind of stuff, so why is it you that gets to tell this? I suppose I felt I get to tell this story because I am a writer.

RG: Do people from your audiences get in touch with you? There's an essay by Leslie Jamison (she writes lots of autobiographical work), that says she sees any contact with her readers as both a gift and a burden at once. Did you ever feel you had to set up boundaries? Or, did you always see yourself as someone able to cope with it?

AJ: I've always been able to cope with it, but I've sometimes found it very burdensome. Looking back on it, I could have put something on my email saying, 'I don't take enquiries about the book' and I never did that. But it's that grim thing at 10 o'clock at night, when you're really tired and you know there's that email from that woman, and you really ought to reply about how awful it is. Sometimes, I've got too many other things on in my day, and I can't be doing this. So, I didn't ever do that but wonder if I should have done. I think now I would be a bit tougher, but then what I find is that you just feel guilty if you don't reply to the email.

RG: Yes! You feel guilty forever and you think about how they would perceive you.

AJ: Yes, and also, it was quite difficult for them to write that email. It was quite heartfelt and they were really looking to receive something. You know yourself, when you were in a state of really deep grief the fact that somebody did bother to respond to you, really mattered. So, then it is a huge burden because you think (and it's not too much to think), this person may be suicidal. They might be really at the end of their tether and actually, whether I send a nice reply to them really does matter and that's awful –

RG: But you did realise it, didn't you? You did realise, and you did respond. Perhaps that is a consequence in the life of a memoirist that maybe the public don't realise. How we have to manage that. It's not about having the book there sitting on the shelf and isn't that nice, it's about these other things that the writer has to manage. It's not like publishing a piece of fiction and someone getting in touch to say, 'I love that!' or 'I hated that.' It's about them giving you some massive piece of personal information and you have to then deal with that. You don't have any skills, well I don't know if you have any skills, as a counsellor. Do you know what I mean? I was a poet, I'm not a counsellor or a therapist.

AJ: No, I don't have any skills.

RG: But suddenly, there were very personal stories in my inbox.

AJ: I had this quite weird experience when someone emailed me about the book saying they liked it, and I did that thing of thinking I was forwarding her message to my husband, but I was in fact replying to her. All I said was 'Oh it's really great this woman likes the book.' She got in touch with me, saying that she found it really hurtful to be referred to as 'this woman' because she had just read my book and she felt like my best friend. She felt like she'd really been inside my life and that she knew everything about me. I was really upset and looking back, why was I upset? That's not a rude thing to say.

RG: No, that's not a rude thing to say...

AJ: To be fair to her, just the business of memoir is slightly asking someone to be your best friend for a few hours.

RG: That's really interesting.

AJ: And that is really dangerous, because they understand that relationship but to you, they're just somebody that read your book. They're nobody to you. I've had a lot of, *I felt like this was written by my best friend* comments about this memoir. There's something about it, people feel like it's something shared over a kitchen table, you know? Which in a way, is a sort of compliment to the book. It's lovely when they can understand that, but it's when they then think they are my best friend, it's kind of scary.

RG: Scary and unnerving, the way a memoir could be considered like that. I also wanted to talk a bit about prize culture. Your book won the 2016 PEN Ackerley Prize didn't it?

AJ: Yes.

RG: Did that add a different dimension to the whole experience of publishing the book?

AJ: I think it really did. It happened quite late, a whole year after publication. The thing that was incredibly difficult for me, was that [in the early days] publishers did not want to publish the book. It was grim, because it felt like I had been silenced and I'd written a book about being silenced and then you find yourself silenced again. One of the things that was just terrible, and this is when you really do lose your temper with people, was a guy from a publishing house who got in touch with my agent to say 'You know, I've read four or five pages of this but my wife's just had two miscarriages and I just couldn't keep reading, I just found it too upsetting.' And actually, I did think, fuck off! It's your *job* to read it, you're an editor, get on with it.

Also, I felt like it was okay for him to lay *his* personal stuff out: 'I can't read this, it's just too difficult for me.' My agent immediately responded with 'That's fine, don't worry, I quite understand.' Of course, my agent has to be polite to publishers, that's her job. But I might have wanted to say, 'It's your job'

They all just said the whole stillbirth thing was a commercial killer, nobody wanted to read that kind of stuff. But, did they ever actually read the end of the book? Because it does have quite a happy ending. It made me really quite angry. This [stillbirth], happens seventeen times a day, it's not even a very minority subject, and yet they were saying 'this is too difficult.' I'm still angry about that.

I also feel, since the publication of my book, lots of very sad books about women's experiences have come out. And then of course, that same editor got in touch with my agent after it was published saying how much he really wished they'd published it. I thought, great, thanks, that's really improved my day. The whole crowd funding thing was really difficult - going out there saying I'm writing this book. You have to think yourself into a mindset which is not 'Oh that person hasn't pledged for my book, it must be

because they don't care about what's happened to me' because I know that that's not a valid explanation.

RG: But it is hard, in that sort of process.

AJ: It's really hard. It felt like, she's written a memoir about it, now she's having to self-publish it and crowdfund it, so it's obviously not a very good book. I just felt something horrible about the whole thing, and so the prize was just massively important because it was saying, this wasn't just my little pet project. It wasn't just me having a whinge about the sadness of my life. It actually is a real book that is worth reading, so it was hugely important for that reason.

But equally, it didn't transform the fortunes of the whole thing in the way that I felt it would. I don't think it affected sales of the book that much. I'll go into bookshops and there are all these kinds of memoirs there and it's never in bookshops. I don't want to sound really small and bitter, but there were three of us shortlisted for the prize. A. A. Gill was one of the writers shortlisted. He's sadly dead now. He wrote a book called *Poor Me* and that book's been absolutely *everywhere*. The Cheltenham Festival of Literature absolutely refused to do anything with my book. They were asked by so many people to do it, and yet Gill was at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature. I thought, wait a minute, so I won the prize and he didn't.... To this day I feel kind of annoyed about that, but I do think writers actually spend all their lives being angry.

RG: About prizes do you mean?

AJ: Well, generally about why they're not getting the recognition. We all know that's a complete road to hell, but we all go down it. I try really hard not to go down it, because it doesn't take you anywhere. What I try to always ask myself is, when I read the book that they've written, do I want to have written that book? On the very rare occasion when I think, yeah, I would have liked to have written that book then I feel like it's justified but when I think no, I think well that book is winning all these prizes but actually I didn't want to write that.

RG: That's not the reason you set out to write the book either is it, to win a prize?

AJ: No, it's not. What I say is that I have had to go in for some mental discipline (laughs) in terms of thinking why didn't the prize achieve more?

RG: and change more for you?

AJ: It did change a lot in that it gave the book a validity that it hadn't had, but it's never had any commercial success.

RG: Right, okay.

AJ: So yes, it's been kind of a mixed bag. I think it's slightly different to the world of poetry but in the world of prose, prizes don't transform that much. I think that they used to, but now publishing is so commercial that it is about money. So even if a book's won a prize if it hasn't sold then it still isn't going to change your prospects that much. I think it used to be that publishers wanted books that had won prizes because that was prestigious, but I don't think they're that interested anymore. It's just about money, which is depressing.

RG: Yeah, and a bit depressing.

AJ: It is a bit depressing.

RG: We've touched upon relationships with agents, and the support you got. I read an interview with a writer recently who said they felt a responsibility to 'telegraph' their book. They'd written this book and they couldn't just think I've written that down, that's okay. The author has this big responsibility to telegraph it or to take it out there. Did you feel that there was a pressure to do that? Or, did you feel that you were okay about going out into the public with your story?

AJ: I'm fine if someone asks me to speak at an event. I'm fine to do that, but that sort of cold-calling people, just contacting someone saying *Could I come and do a reading for you?* I've always hated that whatever the book is. I don't like that, and I think with *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* it felt particularly raw. I think they were just looking at the title thinking *Oh God, that'll be somebody sad, no we don't want to do that.* So, I did feel like I should be doing that sort of thing, but I really hated doing it.

RG: I wonder if it's something poets feel more as we don't have agents. We have to do a lot ourselves. But I wonder if it's a narrative that is difficult, if that then becomes an added burden, to use that word again.

AJ: Yes, I think it does. I think my publishers did well with the publicity, it was quite easy to publicise because of the surrogacy thing. Lots of newspapers wanted to talk about the surrogacy thing. We did get quite a lot of coverage which didn't then result in additional sales. That was the difficult thing to understand, publicity doesn't equal book sales at all. I think people read a piece in the newspaper and when it then says at the bottom 'and her book about this is...', they think well I've read enough of that now, which is fair enough.

RG: I hadn't thought of it like that.

AJ: It was a shock for me because I thought this book is going to sell quite well, if it's had this much publicity. But as I say, all of the publicity was about the surrogacy part. It's quite interesting, because I always like to mention the stillbirth. Because then it's like we're people that suffered a tragedy, we are not just selfish people, the kind who "left it too late" as the phrase is, and then decided to do the surrogacy thing. I feel people will feel we kind of earned all of that in some sort of way.

I think there's one last thing that I'd like to say. Before I met you, I was thinking that when I'm writing a book, I'm really lost in my own little world of the book and I just do that. And it's weird, about two or three months before the publication of the book, I suddenly think *Oh my God, now people are going to read that book* and it's as though that thought has only just occurred to me.

RG: I think actually that's healthier. I think that makes you a better writer. I read an interview with the poet Andrew McMillan recently and he said if you constantly think about your audience and prizes it would be so destructive. You've got to stay true to the narrative. A bit like the advice you give to your students, you've just got to get it down. Also, I've met some writers who say they just don't enjoy the writing process very much where actually, I love the writing process. Writing for me is the thing. Maybe managing all the other business that goes with it is what I find quite difficult.

AJ: Yes, same with me.

RG: Especially with a personal book I've realised. Writing is so important to me and I love it so much. You are closed off in it, but I'm very comfortable there.

AJ: Yes, I think that's great. I just think it's weird, every time I get this woah, this is going to be published feeling! What did you think it was going to be?! It's almost as though two bits of your mind don't meet but, as you say, it's good that they don't meet.

I also thought about offence I might cause. When I was writing there was an article in *Mslexia* [literary magazine] and it wasn't a very good article. This woman [memoir writer] said she realised she took things out of the book because they were going to offend her father-in-law. She said at the end of the day it's only a book and family relationships are so important. And when I read this I thought, *it's only a book?* The book is *everything*. It's really terrible to say, but I kind of have an attitude that if you really want to write a certain book and you lose a few friends over it, then stuff it. Which is awful to think but I think I care about the writing that much.

RG: You talk about possibly losing friends over the book, as a consequence of publishing it but I think one of the overwhelming things is that you also wrote that book for Laura. It wasn't just for you, it was for Laura and Hope in the future. It was for your family as well, don't lose sight of that.

AJ: Around the time my book was being published, a book came out called *Gone to Ground*. It's translated from German and has taken from a lot of personal testimonies. It's an extraordinary and appalling story about a woman who, when she was seventeen and living in Berlin when the Nazis came to power, tore off the yellow star and lived throughout the war in Berlin, she survived the whole thing.

The stuff she had to do to survive was just appalling. She was raped quite regularly because that was how you stayed alive, by selling sex. Her son was interviewed on the radio when her book came out. He was asked what was it like to read the book? And he was so brilliant. He said 'What I understand is that this book was not meant for me. This book was meant for a wider audience.' He said it was quite easy to lay aside his personal feelings so that a

wider audience can share an understanding of what happened. I thought that was really important. You're writing for a wider audience who may need that information. And you hope that people who are close to you, aren't hurt or upset by it. It's a tricky one.

RG: I was just going to ask you two things. One, I think your inclusion of photographs in the book was very nice and quite brave. Did you want to include photographs or was that somebody else's suggestion? Very few poetry books have photos, but I was often asked for photos of Ella if a newspaper wanted to interview me. Not that that happened a lot, Alice, but if it did, and I said no. I felt very vulnerable about her photograph being in the public domain and I just wondered where did the photograph decision come from?

AJ: I think I always knew I wanted photographs in it and I always knew I didn't want the photos all in a clump in the middle.

RG: No, I loved the way you did it.

AJ: The publishers were kind of worried about the quality of the photographs. But I said sometimes a blurry family snapshot tells a bigger story than a portrait type photograph. It was interesting because hardly anyone had seen a photograph of Laura because, I just hadn't been able to show it to people. After she died it was something I really wanted to do because I felt like people didn't believe in her existence and there was this sort of time where I just wanted to go around and say no, no, this is what happened, this is what happened! They would understand it if they *saw* it.

RG: It's so interesting what you said in the book: there is no baby. I had a baby that people saw and then she was gone, but with a stillbirth situation there was 'never a baby' for people to see.

AJ: There was never a baby and you really feel that, you feel that hole of absence. Including Laura's photograph felt like a hard thing to do but it also proved she existed, she definitely was here. Also, I feel people don't get the reality of stillbirth unless they see a photograph. We are all so much more moved by something when we see something.

RG: Well your photographs were very moving. If I asked you to sum up the costs of publishing your story, a positive cost and a negative cost, could you sum it up in that way?

AJ: I think mainly it's just massively positive. I think the negatives are things that were slightly there for me anyway, like feeling I didn't share it enough with people at the time or I've given too much of my time. A lot of those negatives were not always created by the book or what happened, they were the person I was to begin with.

RG: Okay, that's interesting.

AJ: Whereas I *know* positive stuff has come out of the book. I think many more memoirs of this kind are published now, so it has been slightly ground-breaking in that way. I think there are many more conversations, there are much bigger conversations around grief. So yes, a positive really. I've never had a moment where I thought *God, I wish I hadn't done this*. I think when it was happening there were times I thought, what did I do this for? And I questioned if I had really thought about it. But I didn't really do any events around this book at all.

RG: Right. I sort of assumed that you had, with the prize and everything.

AJ: Yes, it was odd. There was a lot of stuff in the papers, those kinds of articles, but something that was really disappointing was that literary festivals just didn't want to feature the book. To this day I just don't know why not.

RG: And I didn't really get press. It's a funny old business.

AJ: And you see maybe the reason you didn't get the press was because it was just seen as a sad story whereas they weren't interested in the sad bit or the grief bit at all, they were interested in the surrogacy. That was all.

Appendix C
Rebecca Goss interviews Marion Coutts, author of *The*
***Iceberg*, London,**
January 19th 2019.

I first met Marion and came across her work at Medicine Unboxed in Cheltenham, 2015, where we were both invited speakers. Marion Coutts is an artist and writer. Her work has been exhibited widely nationally and internationally. She has held fellowships at Tate Liverpool and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. After the death of her husband, the art critic Tom Lubbock in 2011, she wrote the introduction to his memoir *Until Further Notice, I am Alive*. Her first book *The Iceberg*, about Tom's illness and death, was published in 2014 to wide critical acclaim. *The Iceberg* won the Wellcome Book Prize in 2015. It was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction 2014; the Costa Biography Award 2015 and the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Award 2015. It was longlisted for the Guardian First Book Award 2014 and was a finalist in the US National Book Critics Circle Awards, 2017. She is a Lecturer in Art at Goldsmiths College and lives in London with her son. More information about Marion and her work can be found here: <http://www.marioncoutts.com> My interview with Marion was conducted at her studio in South London.

RG: Hello Marion.

MC: Hello.

RG: I've read your book several times as explained, but I've also been reading about the book. In a review in *The Guardian* Tessa Hadley wrote 'I don't know how she wrote it, she doesn't explain.' She was quite fixated on the timing of the book's construct. I did also experience this when reading it. Have you ever felt any pressure to explain?

MC: I didn't feel pressure to explain that, I felt like it was better left in the area of the unexplained. The sort of background to it, the specificity of it was that Tom was a writer. He was writing the whole time he was ill, and his language was being distressed and variously affected the whole time he was ill. So, the whole business of our daily life (we spent all the time in the world talking), was very much suddenly, about the urgency of words, finding words, finding the right words, *literally* finding the words.

Of course, Tom just did his stuff, he was always really good at it. There was a pressure on the word and the word as a *currency* as in 'here's a lid, here's a whatever..' At the start that wasn't too bad, but it did get quite (pauses) mad.

So we were forced to think about words, period, all the time. There are bits in the book where I talk about helping him find the word and almost like, a kind of speechlessness, because actually what I had to say wasn't interesting, and really the urgency was to keep our lives together going. Tom continued to write for *The Independent* until September, literally three months before he died. And if you'd have met him at that point, you would have thought that was impossible. If you'd have met him to speak to him, you would have thought no way is this man able to do any of this. But he was able, and he was able to do it in writing, not necessarily verbally where it was all kind of much more screwy. So, it was kind of like we were trying to keep the show on the road by finding the words.

RG: And were you finding *his* words, did you assist him with the writing?

MC: In the very, very end yes. But really it was in the very end. You had the sense that words were physical, and he was putting the words in the wrong place and I had to put them in the right place. Which of course I'm quite good at, weirdly. So I suppose that's a long way round to say that was the *background* right? And so before that point, I wasn't a writer. I'm a visual artist. I have written certain things. When I was much younger I wrote songs, I was in band, and I did write but never wrote with any pressure on the object that I was pursuing.

Though I suppose about a year in or perhaps less, I had a very strong sense that the things that were happening were extremely valuable to record in my life. Record is a dispassionate word to use, but I was very interested in what the hell was happening to time under this pressure, and what the hell was happening to my understanding of the visual world. Things were different, it wasn't the same experience. I started writing these very, very short texts trying to articulate what it felt like to live under this pressure, while I was in it. That was about a year in.

And the things I came up with were very autonomous. I called them in my mind *chains of text*. They were these autonomous things. And I remember the very first one was when I was hanging out with Eugene who's 'Ev' in the book. He'd been sick, and I chucked the rug down the stairs he'd been sick on, and we were just hanging out. In a normal way, you'd be hanging out with your kid who was sick, but of course this wasn't normal. It was like we were doing that under this other schema, which was like a physical law. The laws have changed, and we have to deal with new laws. So, I kind of wrote this chunk and literally it went from there. I was not in any way making a narrative. I'm very uninterested in narrative in that sense. It was like taking a photograph. It was *how can I get this? I want to capture this bit*. And then I started thinking *Oh I want to get that bit*, and then another bit came up, and it grew into something I just *did*, without any thought, without any thought for *it*.

RG: As in what it could be, what it could be in the future nothing like that?

MC: Nope, nothing like that.

RG: And had all those writings remained very private?

MC: They remained as documents on the computer. Sometimes they were very short and sometimes, I think I probably said this in another interview, sometimes the heading of the document was the entire content of the document so only a sentence long. Like thinking *Oh I need to think about that, this is an idea I need to think about* or *ooh, what about this?*

Because of course the stuff that was happening was variously brilliant, mad, terrifying, (pauses) it was all just coming at us really, like a train. But I suppose another thing that I was trying to do, and it was almost like an ethical issue, I was trying to work out how we could be having so much fun. That's what I was trying to work out.

RG: As in, you were questioning that?

MC: Yes. Because it was clear that at certain points, in the present moment, it was great. And of course, the consensus is that it was totally shit. So it's kind of like that was a problem, and that was genuinely what I was trying to work out.

RG: That's really interesting.

MC: It's a complicated response, but in a way it's to do with those things.

RG: My next question was going to be did you share it with him?

MC: Tom was writing all the time, and then he noticed that I was writing all the time and then we just kept on doing what we were doing. This would happen in the middle of the night or it would happen whenever...and it was only quite late on in his illness, I don't know when, but by that time I'd amassed a bunch of docs and I remember putting them into a Word document and I showed it to him. That was quite late, it was probably just in the time that he left home which was probably the September. He died in the January, so it's hard to tell. We were in hospital in November, it was maybe October. A lot of stuff happened in October.

RG: So, there was quite a lot for him to read at that point? And he read it all?

MC: Yeah yeah, he did read it. Again, his reading would take him... (pauses). He described it as how he would see a word, then he'd understand it later. It was about consciousness, the stuff about consciousness falling apart or holding itself together, because at the same time it was falling apart, it was holding itself together. That had to be recorded. It was amazing. *He* was amazed!

RG: That's what I like in the book, that it never feels a voyeuristic. It was a dual, shared experience what happened. You don't have to share his response to the text if you don't want to..

MC: No, he said, he said...let me remember what he said... (I have to say I always trusted his opinions above anybody else), he said *it's brilliant* (laughs) and he also said *it's very hard*. His language was quite complicated at that point, I took that to mean it was extremely unsentimental which was an attribute he always found slightly staggering in me (laughs). I always thought he admired my capacity to not be sentimental about stuff (laughs), so that's how I took it, but I could be totally wrong. So, I took it as a big positive. Off you go! But in retrospect, I'm really glad he read it and saw it. I think those comments suggest he understood what was going on. But obviously he saw it at a chains of text stage, but

it was interesting. And at that point, even when I'd put all the bits of text into a document, it wasn't a book, I wasn't thinking it was a book.

RG: And you never had that conversation, the two of you, that it might be a book?

MC: No, because he was writing his book, the focus was on that, getting that together. And it wasn't just me working on it. There was Jenny Turner who's an editor and old friend of ours. My old friend the composer Tim Hodgkinson. So, people would be coming in to try and help. It was practical work that took forever.

RG: When did you start to think about it as a book?

MC: That's really hard to say. I don't even know.

RG: How did it turn into a book? Did someone find you?

MC: No, no. Not at all. At a certain point I thought it would be quite good to know how many words there were at various points, but I hadn't looked that up on the computer. It was quite a lot of words for example, by the time he died...but it was still endless documents. I can't really answer that, but what I can say is...(pauses) I knew there was something that I wanted in the text. I would do this thing quite often, when you write something and you just leave it and not look at it, then you'd see its name as the document, and I'd know immediately what that was about. I'd know the *feeling* that was about, and I'd go back to it. So, because I kept going back to it, that kind of told me there was something I wanted to work on there.

And then the point at which I thought it was a book, that was rather brilliant because at that point very structural things came into play because you know, it was a bunch of documents. I can't quite say what came first, but at the point I thought it's a book, that was very exciting and at that point I realised I knew exactly what to do with it. And that was just amazing.

That was after he died. Again, it's complicated by the fact that after he died, in quite short order, that book (points to a copy of Tom's book *Until Further Notice, I Am Alive*) came out with Granta. Also, we published two books of collected essays, both with Francis Lincoln. One was called *English Graphic* and one

was called *Great Works*. I was the editor of these things. I was sitting there, putting things in the right order. His own words didn't need any editing because he was pretty good at that. I was just making sure it turned into a book. So, I was very much involved, in a weirdly professional capacity. I'd do the editing in the day and then my own writing in the night.

RG: And had you really not written before? The first time I read it I wanted to put my pen down and not write another sodding thing. Because I thought how could you have done that? I've been writing for 20 years and more. Had you not thought to write?

MC: I hadn't thought to write, nope. I'd written songs which I care about. I was in quite a successful band. We lived in Holland, we toured all over the place and we were very niche, and we were good actually. I'm a trumpet player, and so things had to be short, direct, and they had to be heard over incredible noise. There's that element of: I'm going to send out these words, I'm going to send them to you, nothing more, they have to go out and I want you to hear them.

So, I've always been drawn towards condensing. As an artist you have to write press releases and stuff about your work, which is always a kind of hideous and terrible language. Tom was very against that, he was trying to get me to speak to people directly.

RG: I like what you said then, about projecting this information out there to be heard, over other things.

MC: Yes, that was my experience all through my twenties actually, so it was quite informative. You know, it was our job for four years and we lived in Holland. We did that.

RG: There's something in the book about wanting it to be heard, wanting it to be told and heard...

MC: Yes, very much so. But also, being in the house with Tom, because of the nature of what was happening, speaking aloud was huge. Suddenly, the word became heard. It wasn't just on paper. So, I think there is quite a big sense in the book about talking, to a companion almost. I think it's very conversational and very kind of intimate at the same time and I'm sure that comes from those kinds of issues, that speaking aloud became so important because it was happening all the time.

RG: Briefly, going back to that period of composition, you referred to a period of time when you stopped working, you stopped coming to the studio because your ‘single goal was to keep us as a family alive.’ I similarly did not write when my daughter was ill. I made a decision that my time was much better spent with her. Also, I knew she was going to die, I didn’t know when, but I knew. I wonder if your book is a reaction in any way to a period of *not* producing? But now I know you were writing a little while he was alive, but I just wondered.....

MC: It was so fragmentary, it was almost like a kind of muttering. It was so unconnected to anything. It really was quite photographic, it was like *I’m just going to record this and do this*.

RG: That’s a nice way of putting it actually, because I do think parts of the book are captured moments and as a reader there are parts which you really can remember like photographs.

MC: And structure suggests that, the numbering. That’s very clearly about that.

RG: About breaking it down?

MC: Yeah. I wasn’t interested in writing a story. A story is a beginning, a middle and an end, boring. We knew that was going to happen. Again, that’s an almost ethical decision. I’m actually not very interested in memoir particularly, and I’m really not interested in grief memoir particularly. I didn’t think that consciously, but actually that is the case. And so how to talk about these things? Because I felt that they were worth talking about in a way that didn’t have that hideous linearity. Linearity was what we were living under. We were against linearity.

RG: But that’s what I loved about it. Yours was the first memoir that I read, and I remember thinking I had no idea it could be like this. I was expecting linear. I love, in the book, when you refer to the word count of the book. You say it’s maybe 88,000 words and this ‘isn’t even the beginning’. That resonated with me hugely, because no matter how much we can get down it’s never all of it. The whole experience is too big to be written down. That’s what I found so refreshing about it. Certainly, other texts I’ve been reading, some are more linear than others, but it’s opened my eyes

to how different memoir writing can be. I had been quite resistant to reading memoir.

MC: But also, the fact is that time under those conditions does not flow linearly, so you have these periods which were like pools. Incredibly important things were happening, and they took forever, when in fact it was probably an afternoon. And then you have this stuff which is just going by. Again, that goes back to me trying to work out what the hell was happening with time.

RG: Have you read Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*?

MC: I love Denise Riley. I have read *Say Something Back*, but I haven't been able to get a copy of *Time Lived, without its Flow*.

RG: I got a copy from my university library. You'd really like it, the things she's addressing in that.

MC: She is amazing. I did a show last year in 2017, and I asked her to come and read with me and she did and she's brilliant. I really admire her.

RG: Later this year, Naja Marie Aidt, a Danish writer, is publishing a grief memoir about her son who died when he was 25. That is meant to be very fragmented - there's essay, she's a poet as well. She also writes about the other grief texts that she read, and the impact they had on her. Not how they helped necessarily. One of them is Denise Riley's *Time Lived Without Its Flow*. She was very interested in that text.

But that whole issue of time makes perfect sense to me. I do think it comes at the moment of diagnosis, where everything changes. You operate on a different timescale to everyone else around you, which is very unsettling. You don't know where you fit, things look very different. You talk about that time at the nursery dropping your son off, and Tom comes to see you to tell you [his diagnosis]. I can remember my husband and I being told about Ella. My husband's first wife died of leukaemia and he remembers the moment they were told, at the hospital. He went into the loos, just to stand at the sink, and remembers feeling this enormous weight come down, that he said just never left. He exited that hospital bathroom quite changed.

MC: I know this is a weird word to use, but in a way, they're quite charismatic moments.

RG: But that is what I like about your book! You're not afraid to use language like that. There should be more interesting ways to talk about grief and these experiences, to make them less frightening and to make them understood. And accessible, not in an easy way, just that we can think about it differently.

MC: Losing people you love is monstrous, but it's a thing that happens. I did a speech at a conference in Exeter called 'The Chronic' which was around end of life temporality and literature, with Lisa Baraitser, from Birkbeck and others. It was really interesting, I'll pass you the details. There might be papers that you can find.

RG: Thank you, that would be great. I want to talk about a line in the book where you refer to the weak versus the strong. You say the latter live 'outside the village, uncomforted'. When it comes to personal narratives, you are there, writing about a difficult subject. Do you think that as a result you are perceived as stronger? I was constantly told I was brave at readings, and I wondered if you feel the publication of the book pushed you further 'outside' in a way? Did the public assume that you're coping with it because you've written about it?

MC: That's an interesting thought did I think that? Mmmm..... (long pause). I don't know how to respond to that. Certainly that 'brave' thing was very demarcating. Yes, I suppose in a way they did. I can't quite put my finger on it. Because quite a lot of things happened after the book. The one thing I was looking for was activity (laughs), you know, like things to *do*. Because I wasn't going to sit and stare at the wall. Actually, I did vast amounts of that! So, in a way, I valued the activity as a means of What the hell, let's just go and do this. So, it was a bit like doing exercise (laughs).

RG: That's really interesting, I hadn't thought of it like that!

MC: It seems weird now because my life is slightly in a different place, but immediately post Tom's death I was doing all this editing. Three books came out: 2011, 2012, 2013 and then mine came out in 2014 so there was a lot of *stuff*. When I was editing the stuff, it was a way of being invested back in that time, it

allowed me a space - in my own time and not under the pressure of illness - to *really* organise what I thought, *really* work out what I thought. I knew what I was doing. It was kind of lovely, intellectually. It was a good space for me. The editing space on *The Iceberg*, allowed me to keep thinking.

RG: Keep thinking about him?

MC: Yeah, keep thinking about time, about him, about us both. And at the same time Eugene was growing up, there was other stuff going on, like him starting primary school.

RG: I am no psychologist by any means, but I've been reading a little a bit about continuing bonds and our attachments to the people who have died and the things we do to remember them or remain close to them. Some people manage it differently. I read Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and she really is expecting her husband to come through the door, whereas I absolutely never had that experience. I completely accepted that my daughter was dead. But the more I've been reading about things people do to forge and keep connections with the dead person in their life, I've been wondering if our texts (*The Iceberg*, *Her Birth*), are some form of continuing bond, some connection with the dead?

MC: Yeah, I would say that.

RG: I am now trying to see my text as that, as a positive thing that it is my connection to her.

MC: Oh, I see that text as a very positive thing.

RG: Always have done?

MC: Oh God yes, totally. Again, it goes back to that weird ethical thing of how do you talk about happiness under this madness? Because Tom could honour happiness, I could do it too. But I was constantly brought up against the fact that societally, that was regarded as a problem, that I was a bit of a weirdo (laughs). When people said *Oh god, how are you coping?* and I said *Well, this is the good bit*, they'd think *She's mad*. But actually, I'm thinking *this is the good bit*, because he's still alive. We're hurtling down, and afterwards will not be so good. So, in a way, any of that

functional, book-related stuff to do, was just a way of hoovering up time.

RG: That's a nice expression. You've written about the need for a garment or an item to 'define yourself as witness'. Do you think the book has ended up being the most visible sign of all?

MC: I would say probably yes. But I was taken by the fact that these things aren't visible really. I mean you can see a person looks terrible because they're upset but wandering around in a crowd, or on a tube train, half those people will be in mourning for somebody and it might be really present and there, or it might be slightly historical.

RG: So, do you ever feel in a place of advantage because you have been able to talk about it, because of the book, when maybe others can't?

MC: I'm always glad to talk about it. I've had conversations where people say *Oh we don't want to trouble you.....*, and I say *Look, I've written 87,000 words I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't prepared to talk about it.* That is my belief. I'm not pretending. I'm always really happy to talk about it.

RG: I really like the inclusion of the emails to your friends and family and how you dealt with dealing with information. I remember that, having to keep everyone updated.

MC: Keeping everyone updated is a problem.

RG: It is a problem, that needs to be dealt with. There's a line where you say, 'the first thing to understand is the endless retelling is overwhelming'. I wonder how this relates to public events. Did you appear at many literary events or conferences, and did you find them an 'endless retelling', did they ever become overwhelming?

MC: Interestingly no. I don't think so. There was a real flurry of stuff, it's not happening now, but there was a real flurry of stuff, and I suppose partly for me was it was about this business of it taking me out of my house. I'd never actually been to see an author talk before I did one, so I was thinking *Oh what's this then?* It took me from a visual arts background, into this field where the rules were different.

I've done a few conferences on narratives around health and end of life experience with a view to changing how we articulate speaking about death, and they were really interesting. I did one in Basel, and I did a cancer conference in Brighton. It was almost like turning up without really being too bothered about what else was going on. Seeing what was there.

So, there were those kind of events, and then there was the much more literary thing. There were a couple that were a bit uncomfortable, and the reasons why they made me feel uncomfortable....well, for example there was one, really early on, and I won't name where it was, but somebody said 'Oh you know we'd really love you to talk about your book and we will put you on with this other widow' and I just thought 'You fucking will not.' I was really, really distressed by that. I thought I don't understand that at all. And when I explained to them why I felt uncomfortable they said you're absolutely right, we won't do it. But it really made me think what are they seeing from this book? What are they taking? So that was a problem.

RG: I know of a poet who got to a reading, she was widowed, and she looked around her on the stage and suddenly realised that every female poet beside her was also a widow.

MC: Yeah, I was just so angry.

RG: And I know a poet who was introduced as a 'Cancer Poet'...

MC: Yeah, so there were occasional things to do with that. I felt and still feel, that the book is an artwork (laughs). I know what it is, I know what I did. It happens to talk about certain things, but (and you could say this is hubris on my part), I just don't think it is a grief memoir. So sometimes I've been on stages with other people writing grief memoirs and I've felt slightly stymied.

RG: I've always felt much more comfortable when I've taken my book into the medical humanities world, or the medical world. I felt much more comfortable there, than at literary events.

MC: No, I sometimes did feel fine, it just depends how it was framed. I've had some really interesting literary events as well. The first thing I ever did was with Ali Smith who was fantastic. I mean I just thought I'm sold, I want to do this forever. She was a

reader of Tom's writing. But that's someone who knows what they're doing, who was in tune. Not everyone is like that, so sometimes you show up somewhere and think help!

RG: But do you accept that you lose control over the text once it becomes published? You write that once the diagnosis is shared with your friends and family, there was an element of you and Tom and Ev becoming 'public knowledge'. How do you feel about that term now that your book is in the world and has been read by many people across the world?

MC: I'm totally happy about that because it is a construct. I made it. I totally control what's in there. And even though it *seems* extremely authentic and about us, I made it. It's not the experience. When you make a physical object – and I'm always banging on about this to students - you are not the artwork. Here it is. I've done it. People can slag it off, they can do what they like, you are not *it*. My big interest is in form and structure, so the form you give something invests the material with a particular shape. It's *made*. So, regarding its relationship to my life, I never feel exposed by it, in any way, at all. It's a construct, a formal construct.

RG: So when you take it [the book] into the public and the Marion Coutts we see talking about it, is that a certain identity that's been constructed to go alongside the book?

MC: No not really. I can talk about the book, but with the caveat where I feel uncomfortable if I'm being presented as the widow. That may be true but I'm not going to talk about that with you guys. I sometimes wonder if I'm a bit too hard line on that. It's like somebody saying to me 'Oh God, now I know all about you' and I thought 'You don't know anything about me.' And then another person saying to me 'I don't know anything about you', and me saying 'But you know how I think.' Do you see what I mean? So, somewhere between these two positions, that's how you deal with stuff.

RG: When people assume they know you, do you see that as an unavoidable risk? There's a part in the book where you found it difficult to talk to people about it. When you went to the Liz Arnold exhibition for example. You were in the thick of it then. It was all happening. But I just wondered what it is like dealing with strangers now, particularly people who have read the book and

want to talk about it. How do you deal with contact from strangers?

MC: I'm really happy to have contact from strangers. If you make a thing in the world you have to take all the risks that come with making a thing in the world, you just do. And I've made enough things in the world in different formats to know that. And obviously an artwork is different. I went up to Birmingham on Sunday. I have a piece in the Arts Council collection called 'Women, Power and Protest'. This is a piece I made when I was in Liverpool, it's a piece I really like, and I walked into the room and I was like Wow! That's my piece. I hadn't seen it in 15 years, and I was able to look at it. A student of mine came up to me yesterday and said I saw your work in Birmingham! He might have thought it was crap, so be it, but you just have to take the heat of whatever it is. I just think that once you do something like that, it's autonomous. It is not you.

But on the other hand, this week I got a letter from somebody in Belgium, who had read *The Iceberg*, a very personal letter, containing the order of funeral service for his late wife.

RG: How did that make you feel?

MC: I think that's very moving. I'm so happy that if anything I have ever done has helped anyone, even if in a fragmentary sense. And it's slightly more than you can say for a piece of sculpture. I do think a piece of sculpture is important, but I don't really get many letters about my pieces of sculpture. But I have had letters about my book.

RG: I was going to ask about letters, emails etc. Do you respond to them?

MC: I do various things. Sometimes I respond, sometimes I mark them with a red flag and respond ages later, sometimes I don't respond. And I don't beat myself up about any option. I don't know how I'll respond to the one I just got, because it's deeply personal. If it's got an email address, I might send an email. When it first happened, I was slightly taken aback. I hadn't really thought that the public might speak back to me. The first email that came (which I'm slightly interested in tracking down, it is on an old computer) was an extraordinary, very short one-line thing. By someone who's first language was clearly not English and it

knocked me out. I just thought wow. And that was really close on publication, so it began with that.

RG: I found personal emails very hard to read, because I found other people's stories so distressing. There was part of me that didn't realise that my own story was equally distressing. I found their emails or letters so heart-breaking, they had this impact on me where I didn't think I'm so pleased you've read my book. I just thought Oh that's too sad, I can't think about that today.

MC: Did you respond to them then?

RG: I did respond to them. I didn't get as much as you, my readership would have been a lot smaller. I did respond but I know that I ensured that contact stopped at that point. I didn't foster anything, whereas I have met a memoir writer who agreed to meet some people who made contact. I was a bit open-mouthed at. And she's never had a bad experience doing it. She wants to extend the conversation. I can't do that. For me, it also extended to my public appearances. The contact was immediate. You do a reading and then you get a queue of people wanting to talk to you about their own experiences.

MC: Yes, that's true. Yes, now I'm thinking about book signings.

RG: Do they come to the table with their story? And how did you deal with that? I found that I got to a point where I didn't want to listen about anyone else's dead baby. I felt so horrible about that, so guilty, because I'd made them sit and listen to me talking about my baby for forty bloody minutes.

MC: They chose to come! (both laugh). I'm a real hard liner there. I was very polite. I listened. I'm not there to be offloaded on, so I'm afraid I didn't get too offloaded on.

That slightly goes back to what I thought the book was. I mean sometimes I think I'm completely delusional, because obviously it is about a death, and it's a real paradox because it wouldn't have happened without all that situation. But I was *as* interested in the strands around what to do with children, around time, around language, around all the cultural and societal stuff about that happens when you enter into the world of hospitals. Tom remained interested in the world around him. So, there was a lot of meat on

it, which was still the stuff I was thinking about. It's a complex package.

RG: That's what I loved about it, because all that complexity exists - about hospitals being a completely different institution and you're in another world and you have to try and make it normal especially if children are involved. It isn't normal, but you're kind of normalising it for them, for their experience. I don't know if you hinted at it then, about the cost. That the book would never have happened, if 'it' hadn't happened. That's exactly how I feel about my book. Once your book became very successful, and you won the Wellcome Prize, was there that strange feeling of having to rationalise your success with the cost of what happened?

MC: No! (both laugh) I was sad that Tom wasn't there. He would have thought it was brilliant. (laughs). That was just a drag, that was a pure drag because all this stuff was happening and I was thinking he's not here, but I had lots of friends trying to be there instead...

But, like I say, it's something you have to acknowledge: the book would not exist without the disaster. I don't even go along with stuff like, making something amazing from disaster. I don't buy that, I think that's just stupid. So where does that leave me? (laughs) I felt it was useful because it absorbed me at time when I needed something the hell to absorb me. It took me somewhere different, and for that I was kind of grateful, on a practical level (laughs). I don't know if that answers your question, maybe it does.

RG: It's a difficult one to answer anyway because it *did* happen.

MC: Yeah, I'm very pragmatic in a way and I suppose that comes through.

RG: One of the consequences of the success of the book is that people contacted you. The essayist Leslie Jamison has referred to all contact from readers as 'a gift and a burden at once' and I wonder if that chimed with you? That it's a gift and a burden. We've talked about being grateful, about our books being able to speak to some people but the burden is also what our readers then expect from us.

MC: I honestly haven't really felt it a burden. There's the occasional moment at a signing where I thought I wish this person would go away, but if that's a price I have to pay that's quite low.

RG: I'm not looking for negative answers by the way.

MC: No, no I genuinely don't feel negative. What do I feel? (long pause) It provided a thinking space at a very, very crucial time. Obviously, I made that thinking space. To a certain extent work feeds back to you, you have to respond to the work as it develops. Intellectually that's challenging and I needed that challenge. It's just something I'm incredibly proud of. I don't know what else to say about it.

RG: That's really nice to hear. There's one question I do really want to ask, you address in the book the question of grieving in advance, when you're in the world of palliative care. Ella was receiving palliative care which I sort of acknowledged, sort of didn't but I wanted to ask how the publication of the book affected your grieving process?

MC: Okay. So it came out in 2014, when I was just shell shocked. Still, it meant that the work I'd been doing, the invested work in thinking was over. I had a therapist I was seeing at that time and she talked a lot about how with any book when it's over you're going to go down, and that with *this* book it was likely you're going to go really, *really* down. It was a pretty difficult time. I can't quite remember how I was dealing with it on a daily basis but...

RG: As the book became more successful did that alter any grieving process?

MC: I was grieving anyway, you just grieve through it. Grief is like the background to breakfast, lunch, dinner.

RG: And do you think the writing of the book has ever altered how you look back upon what happened?

MC: That's a funny one. For example, one of the slight tiny grains of grit around the way the book developed was that my child Eugene was only one and a half when Tom died. We were thinking so how will he remember this? And it's not written for him, again it's this thing about it being a construct. It is not the

time itself, he will never have that. So there's this element of artefact, which is a good word to use about it. It was made in part so that somebody else, this child, would have a handle on something. So for him it is going to be a 'look back' mechanism.

For me I don't know that it did [alter things]. I don't confuse the writing with the experience, I always really respect the autonomy of an object. Sometimes I go back to the book and read what I've written and I think *Ooh that's quite interesting*, because of the way it's framed. I think a better way to answer this is, since I finished the book, I'm now thinking about writing again. I'm actively interested in what words can do and obviously I'm at a bit of a disadvantage, as my only experience of writing was propelled by this mad, jet-packed explosion. So the idea of *what* to write about never entered my head before. And now I'm faced with this question of what to write about, and the fact that people might arbitrarily choose something to write about gives me a real problem.

RG: And are people expecting you to write now?

MC: Yes they are. I'm expecting me to write! (laughs). So, in terms of looking back and looking forward, before that point, I wasn't a writer. Since that point I now sometimes do things with language and I value that. I valued Tom's language hugely. I am conscious that there's been this weird segue. Because I now write about art for *The Economist* online, and I never did that before. I really enjoy it. You could say that's a gift, that's what it's brought me. Because I know I like it. I like to think about artwork. But no, I don't confuse the narrative with the experience.

RG: Okay. My book is so different, as well as so much shorter, but for me there came a time where I thought I was only ever thinking about her [my daughter] in terms of these 52 poems. I didn't actually think of her outside of the poems. There was a period of time when that impacted at home. I realised I'd stopped talking about her in my personal life and I was only talking about her in my public life, to strangers. It started to have an impact on my marriage.

MC: I can understand that. That didn't happen, partly because Eugene was asking questions all the time. We were very alert to keeping Tom in our lives. I think the problem with grieving is it's incredibly personal to everybody. But it didn't get conflated with

the book. Eugene hasn't read the book. He's got all of Tom's stuff on his shelf, he knows it's there, he can choose to come to it at a certain point. That's one of the reasons why I called him Ev in the book. It was because I wanted him to have a tiny bit of protection, so he can always deny it was him if he wanted to. For us adults it was our story, for him he was just dragged into it, so I thought that was a really key thing. It's his young life.

RG: Has he ever come along to a public event?

MC: I think...he hasn't. I think he might have sat at the back once and read a book – he's not particularly interested.

RG: But that's quite healthy don't you think? Like you said, they will come to it in their own time.

MC: Yes, absolutely. And if I was to have to delineate some of the reasons for writing the book it was to do with laying down a marker, so that at a certain point he could pick it up and look at it.

RG: My last few questions are going to touch on prize culture, because was it shortlisted for other things?

MC: Quite a lot of other things yeah.

RG: Did you find it quite roller coaster? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but we have this private space of writing and then we have the very public space of reviews and prizes. Prizes particularly, put you in a spotlight, and I just wondered if you found it a bit of a circus? And how did you cope with it?

MC: I found it a bit of a circus, but again, it took me out of sitting in the house staring at the wall. I wasn't really doing much else. I was always doing my job [teaching at Goldsmiths] bar a chunk of time where I had some compassionate leave, so I was looking after my child, and nothing else was happening. So yeah, it was shortlisted for quite a few things and I went to some funny events (laughs).

RG: Every other writer I've been interviewing has been shortlisted for prizes too. *Her Birth* has been shortlisted for lots of prizes, and we all seem to have had similar half-laughing/half-despairing reactions...

MC: Yep, very weird some of them. The first one I think was then called the Samuel Johnson Prize. It was incredibly funny. I met Claire Tomalin. I thought she was delightful, so it was very interesting. But felt quite unreal.

RG: It was with the prizes that I first began to feel that I was losing control of my experience. I felt that the prize organisation was in control of they wanted me to do: interviews for this, photographs for that, and I just felt that my whole experience was being reduced to a book of poems and how ‘well’ that book was doing. But at the same time, it changed my career significantly, so I have to accept the good that came from it, in that sense.

MC: I didn’t feel that. I didn’t feel like it was out of my control. I felt – and this is going to sound funny - that it should win all the prizes (laughs).

RG: That is so brilliant (laughs).

MC: I just thought sod everyone else, even if I don’t win, I should win all the prizes and I didn’t care.

RG: And how did you feel when it didn’t win? Did it win them all?

MC: No, of course it didn’t. I didn’t really mind. I just thought it was their loss. I wasn’t paying that much attention to who else was on the list, because also I’m not an insider. It was the first time that I had been to any of that literary stuff, it was all new and quite a good place to come at it from.

RG: People must have been very unsettled by your presence.

MC: They could be unsettled by my presence. There was a certain amount of *Ooh, look at you, we’ve been doing this for 18 years*. But I didn’t care in all honesty. I just thought let it happen. There was only one interview I did where I was too messed up to do the interview, and it didn’t come out.

RG: Did you have control over it not coming out?

MC: I think we both mutually decided it was probably not much good. It was quite early on and I can’t even remember who that was with. I didn’t particularly read much of...

RG:reviews and that kind of thing?

MC: I suppose I did read the reviews, not necessarily as they came out. A lot of my friends would send them to me. There was a lot of nice, collective joy at what the book was doing because I do know some people who are writers, but mainly I know a lot of artists. So there was a kind of collective yeaaaaah and great excitement, and the Wellcome Prize was really fun. I was really glad to win it. I was very happy, but my attitude is it should win everything (really laughs).

RG: I love that. I really love that, why not indeed! You've talked about seeing a counsellor. Was that throughout the prize experience? Did you have an agent then as well? I'm just trying to work out what sort of support network was there for you.

MC: I had a counsellor. She was from an organisation called Cancer Counselling Trust which then lost all its funding, but I still see her occasionally, privately. I talk about her ever so slightly in the book. She's someone who I found nine months in, and I've been seeing her throughout, but it's been a year or more since I've seen her so it's very intermittent.

At a certain point I was seeing her quite regularly, throughout Tom's illness and death. I saw her afterwards, again regularly-ish. And strangely enough, she has a literary background, so she was very helpful, we had a good old laugh (laughs). My agent is brilliant, but there wasn't particularly any other support.

RG: I've read an interview with an author who felt they had a responsibility to 'telegraph' the book once it was out. They'd written and published this thing and now it was the author's responsibility to take it out into the world. Did you feel any pressure to do that? Or were you supported by your publisher and agent, so that you could do what you want?

MC: I did what people asked me to do, unless I didn't want to, and then I didn't. If they asked me to put things on social networks, I don't really do social networks. My friends knew what it was, word got around quite quickly. Some people would have the book for ages and then read it later and say things like *Oh I was worried it was going to be, not quite a downer but....*

RG: People who knew you said that?

MC: Well, I'm just kind of thinking about the take-up of the thing. I like the fact that it's *live*, that's what I like. Again, with an artwork it's in a gallery, someone sees it, they can keep it in their memory, they can do whatever. With *The Iceberg*, someone can physically have it on their shelf and ignore it for eight years and it's still live and making its own context when they come to it. I really like that. I like the occasion sometimes which has happened where someone I know or vaguely know who is in my circle says, *Oh I have just got round to reading your book and blah blah blah*. There's no deterioration of the work and I like that. I think it's quite an interesting mode, and of course it's cheap, it costs £7.99 or whatever, so I like that as well.

RG: So it's interesting to compare your book to your artwork?

MC: Yeah, it's been very interesting. I did this show last year - of objects and photographs and drawings and it was the first time I'd gone and done studio work since it was made, and it was slightly complicated. I felt with this new status of being someone who has produced an object which is a book, which has a different affect, and which has a different agency in the world. I'm still kind of emotionally working that out, I think. I don't really want to make anything visual at the moment except for these texts and photographs.

RG: And that might be a route back in?

MC: I think I'm quite stuck as to what to do next, but I think that's a stuckness that could come anyway.

RG: And you want to write again too? Maybe you need to do more writing first.

MC: I think I need to actually sit down and write. Writing doesn't happen without sitting down and writing I've discovered (laughs).

RG: And my final question, and I think I can possibly predict the answer, is have you had any regrets at all, about publishing it?

MC: No, none at all. Like I say, I'm very proud of it.

RG: It's been really nice for me to hear you speak about it so positively and how you engage with it still, so positively.

MC: That liveness is an important factor.

RG: Yeah, that's a really nice thing you said, that it is something that is live.

MC: For example, it's been published in China. I'm curious to think what will they make of the book in China?

RG: You don't know the answer to that?

MC: No not really, it's all slightly at a distance.

RG: How does that feel, that the story has gone that far, that it's been projected that far?

MC: It feels great!

RG: And on a personal level, great that so many people know about Tom now? Was that part of writing it as well? The day Ella died I was furious her death wasn't on the news. Now, we are in a position where more than our immediate circle can know about those important people.

MC: I suppose the one thing to say is Tom always had his own audience. He was a completely autonomous individual, and he was perfectly capable of making and keeping his own audience even late into his illness. Because he was a journalist he worked to deadlines and he worked in a kind of ephemeral medium (though of course you can read his stuff online), but I'm pleased the two books, *Until Further Notice, I am Alive* and *The Iceberg* exist. I think there's an interesting connection between them. I think that's quite an unusual relationship for two books to have. I like that people come to one to read the other, or vice versa.

RG: Nice for Eugene as well, that there's a relationship between the books as well.

MC: Yes, totally.