

I Thought the Bones Would Do

Mourning Postpartum Suicide Through Collage Renovations

This paper is a textual collage that ebbs from autobiographical to theoretical inquiries of working-through the loss of a mother to suicide, and considers collage as an essential and productive aspect of re-remembering suicide “in other words” beyond stigma. My central question is “how does one re-remember what one cannot remember?” I consider collage as a site of recovery that does not cover-over a story of suffering, but allows it to border-cross between fact and fiction. My work of mourning thus begins in fiction, while my father’s begins in matter. After witnessing my mother’s suicide, he “collaged” home renovations from recycled materials and fragments from their lives together. I will outline how his architectural collages pieced-together uncanny and unexpected expressions of guilt that ironically reshaped the meaning of her suicide in ways that promoted reparation.

Renovating Home: A Work of Mourning

In 1980, two years before I was born, my father inherited a barn-shaped plank house from his great aunt. The house had been in the family since 1934. He bought it for five dollars and a case of O’Keefe’s. Sitting at the top of a gravel hill, buried behind tall grass and invasive cedar trees, the house needed to be brought back to life, namely with major renovations. Since the early 1960s, the house was left abandoned as a forgotten family heirloom.

The roof had caved in. The floors were rotted. Windows rattled from the constant draft. Remnants of the house’s past life greeted my father. Antique cupboards, tulip-shaped shutters, tree-saws and axes.

When my parents married in 1982, they moved into the dilapidated house. Together they began to renovate the house as a family project. I have pictures

of my mother and father standing on the overgrown lawn, tools in hand, ready to work. My mother wore my father's overalls. They shared steel-toe boots. Together they began to collect materials from Victorian mansions in Westmont (Montreal neighbourhood)—demolitions they had assisted, working as freelance carpenters. They lived as artists and radical architects.

After I was born, my mother fell into severe depression. She had stopped eating and bathing. For five months, she hid in the house and avoided friends and family. The renovations were put on hold, while she was put on a psychiatric waiting list at the Douglas Hospital in Montreal. Two weeks before her first appointment, she hung herself from a ceiling beam while my father was at work.

The story of renovation has been running in the family ever since. My father continued, even after my mother's suicide. Her artwork covered the half-painted walls, masking their imperfections. As I grew up with covered knowledge of the loss, without knowing how she died, I had her paintings. I had walls. Her clothes. Pieces of her that lived-on in the house.

My earliest memories of the house are dark and wild. I often felt like it would swallow me if I entered. Afraid of the trees marked by bear claws, I preferred to stand on the steps in daylight, away from the forest—in full sight. In an attempt to help me adjust, my father brightened my room with yellow paint and rosebush wallpaper. A small plastic record/cassette player filled my room with familiar sounds, the songs my grandmother sang to me like the heart shaped lullaby machine that hung from my bedpost.

Introduction

Whatever the outcome for individuals the lives of people bereaved by suicide will be altered irrevocably—the old environment must be given up, the new accepted. (Wertheimer 94)

After my mother's suicide, my father took up restoring the 1934 farmhouse through collage renovations that reshaped the meaning of her death. As he layered misfit pieces of wood, stained glass, and Victorian moldings laboriously, recounting his responsibility to make the house safe and sound—shards of my mother's suicide stuck out like splintered wood. I am fascinated by my father's poetics of debt and indebtedness: rebuilding as a way of recovering what he cannot repair. Nearly 30 years later, the house remains an unfinished project. My father uses recycled materials from past renovation jobs to remake what he cannot afford to buy new, yet refuses to leave untouched. The house remains enclosed with very little sunlight. Small windows held my father's dreams of one day installing wall-length glass. Perhaps to overcome the shadows my mother



"My father at the kitchen table (2008)." Photo: Christina Foisy

carried. I argue that mourning through collage allows one to re-member the past towards future ways of reconfiguring loss. Collage disrupts stable categories of knowledge, by finding new coherencies, threading narratives while relying on uncertainty and non-linearity. Storylines are cut-up and retold. Memories are re-membered anew, transformed by being put-back together in a different way. While "collaging" an artist never knows what to expect, images and textures are layered intuitively, as an unconscious process of letting go of a set course. Therefore, by bringing collage to my mother's suicide, I hope to re-member her death from the fragments she left behind, as a way of moving beyond the social stigma and paralysis associated with suicide. What follows is a series of narratives, pulled from my family home, intertwined with theoretical discussions on what it means to attend to an event that shocks, like suicide. And more importantly, regarding my mother's suicide, I seek to explore the ways

silence can be heard ethically, to unearth what is inaudible under the thick narratives of meaning. How can the silence surrounding my mother's suicide become an opportunity to speak about suicide in other ways, in ways that do not cover-over the act but re-member it? By exploring this question, my main argument is that our family home, and the subsequent work that my father and I have put into it, embodies our family's remembrance of my mother as a "mad" work of art and a process of symbolization that moves beyond the stigma towards productive forms of mourning and thinking about suicide. As a result, collage has opened up a space, and created a context to renovate the meaning of suicide in our family.

Suicide's Stigma

In western discourses, suicide is often relegated to a speech that silences. We tend to "explain away the act" (Szarz 9) without ever addressing its significance: how suicide is in fact an expression of the crisis of surviving personal trauma in a traumatic social world—and that we need to speak of this relationship, and more importantly we need to listen. As such, my "collaged narrative" of my mother's suicide invokes the ethical necessity of listening to that which cannot speak in a comprehensible language, or that speaks in a language that makes us uncomfortable: a reminder of what we fear most—of all that slips between our grasp of knowledge. The anxiety of not-knowing is amplified by the inability to utter such anxiety, for lacking a language in which to speak of suicide. Conversely, Alison Wertheimer in *A Special Scar* explains how finding the words to speak about suicide is difficult because historically "suicide was equated with homicide, self-murder, and was viewed as an unlawful taking of life" (15). Criminalization has made it difficult to discuss and confront suicide as a real or legitimate way to die. The most unsettling aspect of suicide is not having "answers" to understand the death rationally—and therefore many families cope by either erasing the dead person from their narratives or by avoiding the subject. The effects are debilitating for the mourning process. Wertheimer discusses Lily Pincus and Christopher Dare's sociological study on suicide, to emphasize how stories "in denial" reinforce stigma, by allowing families to "avoid their feelings of guilt and the pain of their loss" (11). As such, it seems to be difficult to successfully mourn a stigmatized death with and without words.

Margaret Atwood, in her collection of short fiction *Good Bones*, attempts to listen to the matter of the deviant deceased, to the bones of those who died shamefully. Using writing as a mode of listening, she attempts to grieve the lives of the stigmatized. Judith Butler [ref missing] made a similar attempt in her essay *Bodies That Matter* suggesting ethical examination of how we categorize

and valorize bodies by looking at the way we grieve bodies. In the same vein, Atwood welcomes the deviant deaths as lives worth grieving and attends to those, in Butler's words, "who fail to qualify as fully human ... which motivates a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter ... ways of living that count as living" (Butler 237). Atwood qualifies bones as good and bad as a way to disrupt the categorization of social stigmas. As Erving Goffman taught us, social stigmas emerge as signs that mark someone outside of a social category, which makes them a stranger: "society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the compliment of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural ... when a stranger comes into our presence, then first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate their category" (3). Most would consider bones as bones, seen as universal corporeal matter, yet Atwood personifies them, re-inscribing the vague dichotomous qualities, which once placed them in hierarchical order in the living world. She recognizes their spirit within an ideological framework that marks them as other, or stranger. The bad bones, those belonging to criminals, murders, suicidals or sinners, are silenced, buried without a narrative to haunt the living. They are to be forgotten along with their history, as she writes:

The bad bones have been bad, so they are better left unsaid. They are better left unsaying. But they were never happy: they always wanted more, they were always hungry. They can smell the words coming out of your mouth all warm and yeasty. They want some words of their own. They'll be back. (Atwood 110)

Atwood's passage, refers to the "traces of voices and epistemologies that haunt history" (Tavin 1) and conjures our responsibility to "talk with the ghost, and to think about how to give them back speech" (Derrida 115). Her passage reminds us that these buried bones have voices and un-told histories, and they can still "smell the words coming out" of our mouths (Atwood 110) since their traces are in us, even if we cannot perceive or understand them. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida developed the concept of hauntology in order to attend to the ghosts of those who lie outside of the discipline of history and language. In a way, Atwood's *bad bones* perform a hospitable welcoming of the stranger, the stigmatized and the deviant ghost. Without anticipating its position, she warns that it has a story to tell, and that we should listen. Similarly, although not specific to mothers, Derrida suggests that welcoming the stranger should embrace the following deconstruction:

To welcome, we were saying then, but even while apprehending, with anxiety and the desire to exclude the stranger, to invite the stranger

without accepting him of her domestic hospitality that welcomes without welcoming the stranger, but a stranger who is already found within, more intimate with one than one is with oneself—the absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular and anonymous—an unnamable and neutral power that is undecidable, neither active nor passive. (216)

Derrida's elliptical passage attempts to deconstruct what language has decided and built of the stranger as something outside oneself, and unfamiliar. Instead, Derrida uses language, with great difficulty, to welcome the stranger *found within, more intimate with one than one is with oneself*, as a process of welcoming uncertainty back into the knowledge and linguistic production of the stranger that troubles its proximity to the self.

Skeletons in the Closet, Speaking of Suicide

In 2008, my father finally covered the exposed pipes that crept along the ceiling. He incased the pipes with pine boards like a casket. But he didn't nail the boards shut. Instead, he used hinges to insure accessibility in case of a leak. What struck me, is that he hung dollar-store Halloween skeletons from the pipes—maybe as an idiomatic joke or maybe not. It might be because my mother hung herself beside those very pipes after a long battle with manic depression and postpartum illness. The skeletons in that closet are symbolic of the silence surrounding her death and societal stigma of postpartum suicide. Family guilt is buried and constructed by thick narratives nailed on top of one another trapping a way to think through her death differently. Yet the skeletons are hung purposefully, as a shrine reminder and way to re-member. Bound to the site of her death, they offer an imaginative outlet for memory to be re-interpreted. Perhaps, they are meant to suspend preconceived notions of what her suicide means, and offer possibilities of what can be built from this loss. On second thought, perhaps the skeletons are not symbolic of silence. Maybe they can speak of the life he once had with her, and is now re-constructing without her—thus reshaping the meaning of the site of her death. The skeletons could represent my mother's bones. Excavated and enshrined within the collage of our home, beside the site of her death just like an *aminitas*.¹ they may promise a miracle. Giving my father the strength to break up the past and reclaim it, I see those skeletons as an ironic form of hope. By opening the closet door, startled by the plastic skeletons, we silently confronted the silence of her suicide, and listened to what we could not answer or understand.

Since the language of suicide is devoid of thinking about the act beyond prevention and moral panic, given “historically one of the ways in which society



“Sweet grass on saw and beam (2008).” Photo: Christina Foisy

has dealt with its collective fear and hostility towards suicide is to criminalize it” (Wertheimer 15), to overcome suicide’s linguistic silencing, instead of using words to utter our *story of suffering* regarding my mother’s suicide, I am fascinated by my father’s uses of matter and building materials from his past with my mother and his present-time with me, to express his guilt and forgiveness. My father’s renovations and architectural gestures not only repair the family home—they generate new metaphors surrounding our work of mourning, and recovery from suicide. In light of these architectural articulations, I consider how collage makes possible “for everything to be something else” (Brockelman 230) and promotes non-verbal expressions of suffering that transcend the ethical limitations of guilt. My father’s skeletons in the closet ironically allow us to attend to her death. Echoing what Emmanuel Lévinas describes as “saying beyond the content of speech” (67), my father’s skeletons are almost seen as the uncomfortable consequence of opening the house up to reveal what it might know about my mother’s suicide, and our family’s guilt. Thus, to work-through guilt one must perform the difficult task of pushing open the closet door of psychic defenses, while being able to welcome the surprise of what is hidden behind the door.

The plastic skeletons are metaphors that speak of our *story of suffering* from different standpoints and subjective experiences. Therefore, within this polyvocal moment of opening the closet door and being startled by my father’s architectural



"Skeletons in the Closet (2008)." Photo: Christina Foisy

layerings, I consider how collage as both a language and context, allows for communication beyond the symbolic borders of life and death—by promoting continuous re-symbolizations and opportunities for new meanings to emerge. My father's skeletons are not ghosts. They visibly re-mark how my mother's death haunts our family but they are hidden from everyday sight. As such, they must be recovered to be seen. Someone has to *push* the closet door open and risk entering a confrontation with the dead through the uncomfortable, startling sight of skeletons in someone's closet. In a sense, what my father is

expressing largely relates to prying for information, asking too many questions, trying to get the bottom of a story too deeply personal or traumatic to be shared, or to be uttered.

Speaking of my mother's suicide is necessarily imaginative—it is a necessary push at discursive boundaries that contain her death in stigma. She died before I was able to speak, before I had her story. My memory of her is pieced-together from family narratives, secrets and reverie. She is a figment of my imagination as much as a biological trace. Living in the traces of the unsaid, in family photographs, mementos and artwork, I try to find her—but fail. As such my imagination of her is frustrated, since “the capacity to bring what is absent into symbols must work overtime” (Britzman 106). However, considering imagination as a labour of thought and possibility, even in its failure, “we can try again to encounter the unknown” (Britzman 106). In an attempt to express what is inexpressible in my personal history (the loss of a mother to suicide) my writing and artwork responds to this history of *not-knowing* by turning to the family home, the place where she died, to listen, and to imagine other possibilities of thinking about suicide beyond failure but rather as an opportunity for creation. Much like my creative writing and collage art, my father's renovations seek to address what Melanie Klein, in her 1929 essay “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” describes as reparation which is an ongoing psychic process that keeps a psychological wound open while enabling one to recover new bonds and means of symbolizing the lost object. In my case, I have symbolized my mother in creative writing and autobiographical fiction that re-members her through my own experiences of living in the home occupied by her presence/absence.

My wound, the loss of a mother to suicide, was covered with a linguistic band-aid for many years while I recovered ways of speaking about her death with my own fictional accounts. Whether I invented stories about her or not, the family's explanation of my mother's “hormonal imbalance” sounded like a made-up disease that could have been a myth in my mind. I don't know what was worse, having a term to explain her death that I could not explain, or having nothing except my imagination. I was not sure how an imbalance could lead to death, nor could I say what hormones were, which is not very surprising given how much disdain society has for mental illness and suicide. As Alison Wertheimer says in *A Special Scar* “family myths or ‘secrets’ may be created where the truth becomes denied or distorted as families attempts to avoid their feelings of guilt. This is particularly likely to happen when the survivors include children, and when communication in the family often becomes distorted as attempts are made to hide the truth from them” (96). Suicide counters the belief that life is of utmost value as well as “the family's entire belief system including their own sense of themselves as a unit” (Wertheimer 96).



My mother's blouse beside her portrait (2008).” Photo: Christina Foisy

While my father has been rebuilding our family home with collage aesthetics and architecture, before and ever since my mother’s death, as a writer, I have been rebuilding a relation towards my mother through experimental writing: collaging autobiographical fiction, poetry and notebook entries into one text. “Speaking with the dead” is a metaphor, familiar to literary critics, that describes moments in literature that haunt, where the author’s voice interrupts our reading of the text, forcing us to think beyond it, and engage in an impossible dialogue (Barthes 121). To overcome this dialogic paradox,

Roland Barthes made it clear that “the silence of the dead is one of the very conditions that enable us to speak” (121). Thus, the skeletons in my father’s closet are more than idioms of silence, they move beyond words, becoming the matter they describe. They enable a way to speak, and express what Sharon Todd describes as “stories of suffering” (131) beyond language. Ironically, as symbols, they invite a literal relation with my mother’s death, beyond the social stigma of suicide. Given that I have no conscious memory of my mother, I turn to Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology to wrestle with the paradox of this “impossible dialogue,” that the skeletons provoke, and try to figure out a way to listen. Perhaps, Derrida’s figure of the ghost, as a specter that vacillates between worlds, coming to us from the boundaries of language and thought, can allow me to consider my mother’s presence/absence within the family home through the “skeletons in the closet.” Even as over-determined signs, clichés at best, those plastic bones are heavier than words, for they carry more meaning in silence, calling my attention to speak and listen to my mother’s postpartum suicide. The skeletons startle, surprise and cause one to halt mid-sentence, to stay, and remain present in an uncomfortable encounter. Much like being haunted, as described by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, despite my mother’s absence, in the closet she is partially re-presented, made present by the bones that seek justice. Such representation allows me to attend to the site of her death, even if the details of (or reasons for) her suicide are not certain. Only recently have I begun using the quasi-scientific label, “postpartum suicide” to describe her death, yet my father’s assemblage of the family home, in retrospect, seems to do a better job of saying, or relating to, the event. Beyond language, where the literalness of suffering is shown without intelligible plot lines or narrative, the skeletons demand a response, yet remain open, to what Lévinas claims as, the “risk of communication” (qtd. in Todd 139). Is there a risk in “speaking with the dead?” Would the risk be to stand in and speak over silence, interrupting the possibility to learn something new or be transformed by the ghost in unexpected ways? By creating a context to receive my mother, in alterity, as the infinitely unknowable other, I attempt to demonstrate a form of listening that attends to rupture and silence, and that “says more than what is being said” (Todd 121). Through the act of collage, of melting and merging what never could have been thought to fit together, I seek to have incongruous things meet in one, polyvocal frame—to speak with ghosts and narrate their presence in a non-linear timeline.

Buried Plots, Excavated Stories

For years, I ran along the paved paths of the Notre-Dame-Des-Neiges Cemetery. Without reason other than to climb steep hills, I made the ten-kilometer trip regularly.

I indulged in a picturesque, yet morbid view of Montreal. There was something calming about the rows upon rows of tombstones: maybe it was an escape from the constant movement and congestion of the city below. I liked the trees and seventeenth-century graves. I enjoyed stepping on roots in heart rate rhythm.

For years, I had no idea my mother was buried there.

I discovered the family plot, by chance, on the eve of my birthday. It was my last day as a 25-year-old. The age she would be forever. She died at 25, as I live on.

No one had ever taken me to her grave: it was the unspoken plot of our family narrative. As I ran, about to out-live her, I stumbled on her humble plaque to the side of my great aunts' and uncles' pillar monuments. A rock in the grass one might overlook then trip over. Buried with the murmurs surrounding her death, there she was, deviant and denied, haunting the family-plot: the skeleton in our closet. I didn't know what to say as I knelt beside the plaque: feeling somewhat caught between the freedom and restriction of not knowing her. As the mechanical arms of Ditch Witch trenchers dug graves in the next lot, I thought about her bones. If found by an archaeologist, what would they say, what story would they tell?

My mother's grave is a disembodied text, marking her death with someone else's words: my father's last name and the cemetery lot number. Unlike the plastic bones in my father's closet, what would the real bones say? Sharon Todd discusses, in *Learning from the Other*, the importance of creating a context for listening, where attentiveness is a response to something more than speech. Where undisclosed secrets, thought dead and gone, are revealed in other ways, re-symbolized and read anew. Todd stresses the importance of listening to "that which is not easy" (131) and which has a potential for disrupting a sense of self. From this stance, ethical communication is not solely based on the content of what is said, but as Lévinas puts it "the nearness and orientation we bring to the other" (130). Keeping this relation in mind, when I reflect on the way my father first said that my mother committed suicide, to the way that his skeletons speak from within the closet—ethical listening requires one to listen to what is not said but nonetheless expressed.

As Julia Kristeva posits, the maternal "I" exists in a space where no one is present to signify what is going on (Kristeva 127), and from this impossibility of knowing what went on, all I have is the possibility of proximity. I can approximate without completely understanding my mother's story. There is a risk of violation in speaking of her, violently digging for answers, uprooting what no one wants to know, or can know. There is a sense of silencing the silent: of disrupting the silence of her body. Since "the maternal cannot be spoken of except across the gap that forever separates language from the mother's body" (Kristeva 127), it is from this gap that I trespass, interrupting her death with language and medical labels that define her death as "postpartum suicide".

Yet within the impossibility of knowing my mother, of bringing her back to life, I had the possibility of imagining her beyond the voices of others. Just as Vladimir Nabokov, says: “I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void” (qtd. in Nafisi 24) I invented a mother within the silence of the family plot, and the over-determined text of the grave. Thus silences become opportunities for creation and dreams. Silences are “spaces of critique in which codified culture does not predominate or prevail but makes possible for multiple interpretations and expressions” (Garoian 93). Therefore, I used the silence surrounding her death as an opportunity to speak of suicide differently.

Staged Presence of Absence

Last year, inspired by my father’s artistry in renovation, I staged a fictional family dinner to collapse the “thick narratives” (Lear 71) that define my mother’s death as a failure in motherhood. Heart-shaped *Little Debbie* cakes sit beside chicken bones on a colorful tablecloth of family photographs and magazines. The juxtaposition is shocking. Sugary artificial hearts, wrapped intact, beside the decaying bird bones, speak of unhealthy, almost hyperbolic, love contained by the cellophane of nuclear family ideals, medical myths, and popular discourses of motherhood. Just as I could say my mother was a fake, postpartum suicide falsifies the authenticity of motherhood as a sublime and wonderful experience. Such work is meant to falsify dominant narratives of motherhood, by re-inscribing its discursive presence in domestic and social fantasies. This is the shock of collage: where worlds that normally never meet collapse and collide creating something new, possibly something grotesque and beautiful. I have never seen her bones, and I don’t remember her body, yet I know it is a part of me. From these contradictions, my mother left an opportunity to use the presence of her absence, to listen to the silence between fragmented family narratives, medical and philosophical theories of motherhood that cannot tell the complete story. Just as collage embraces the chance meeting of found objects, mementos, pieces and sounds of everyday life, I have pieced this story from traces.

And so the chicken bones in my installation tell the story of the family dinner we never shared, traces of the body I don’t remember and the corporeality of her death, which I have never seen. They are the language of the dead. As the fictional dinner table is set with pink lace, porcelain teacups, flower patterned teapots, lush green tapestry and heart-shaped sweets, the bones are decoratively arranged around these ornaments suggesting their disembodiment and contrast with the traditional, nuclear family dinner table, which subverts assumptions about conventions of femininity, motherhood myths and sublime fertility. Ornamentation paralleled with grotesque displacement, where hyper-feminine

elements of domesticity exist in the same realm as decay and death, helps to dissolve motherhood myths beyond the essence of binaries. Bones, similar to the people they once held together, are intricate. They have several functions, holding a matrix of cells with inorganic and organic parts—categorized since the Enlightenment. But what about the parts that often do not fit into clean sermons and stories to be told at the family dinner table? The spirits of those bones—where do they live, and can we “speak” with them? Bones rest as evidence of being and not being, a reminder of the “spectral traces, phantom voices and pamlipseptic discourses that shape a particular way of life” (Derrida 66). Thus the stories, in which I re-write and re-construct the contradictions surrounding my mother’s death, are part of a critical conjuring process, where postpartum suicide can nuance the discursive codes of motherhood.

I Thought the Bones Would Do: The Flesh of Collage Narratives

In my first college-level art class, the professor made us sit on the floor, and listen to a Sylvia Plath recordings. As Plath read through the lines of “Daddy” sternly, unflinching, I lingered on the following lines: “Bit my pretty little heart in two/ I was ten when they buried you/ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back to you/ I thought the bones would do.” She had stolen the words from my mouth. And perhaps, from my mother’s mouth as well.

Later that year, I collaged a sculpture of found scraps from my father’s backyard. It was an imaginary sun with a tree stump for a face, metal shards for rays, and a paint-mask for a mouth. Its ontological strangeness was made-up of pieces from my father’s world, the natural world and what I imagined to be my mother’s world. Without realizing it, I captured the estrangement and familiar regret of Plath’s poem. “I thought the bones would do.”

But bones won’t do, just like words. They fail us, leaving us with only the partial story, the plain fact. Perhaps, bones leave us with a truth too sterile, too distant to assimilate and claim as our own. The knowing, or knowledge that keeps us wondering. In a way, my early connection with Plath’s hauntings poeticize the socially constructed and discursive tragedy of my mother’s death with something other than words: with imagery. I did not have the words to discuss my mother’s suicide, partially because I did not have a family narrative to rely on emotionally, I searched for clues in everything outside of myself: from art, philosophy, music, neuroscience to pulp fiction. As Alison Wertheimer discusses in a *Special Scar*, “finding a language to talk and to write about suicide is not easy, but perhaps as we talk more about people who takes their lives and those bereaved by suicide, we shall find that we have the right words” (15). I do not trust that I have the *right* words, and I do not believe that

such linguistic endeavours are productive. The way suicide is attended to both personally and socially lacks ethical engagement: which may not be possible with language alone. Even if it is *right*, sensitive, honest or politically correct, language requires a body, it requires a gesture towards the Other.

Collage theorist and artist, Kathleen Vaughan, discusses the importance of expanding academic syntax beyond language in order to capture embodied modes of representation (Vaughan 8). Collage as embodied language helps researchers promote ethical engagement, and counter a western positivist paradigm (Vaughan 8) rooted in certainty and defined categories of knowledge production. Postpartum suicide was a new word that I had learned while watching an *Oprah Winfrey* episode featuring Brooke Shield's new book, about her struggle with suicidal thoughts as a new mother. I liked the word. It gave me something to hold on to, to say out loud with certainty. I was relieved to know that my mother was not the only one who had died this way, that I was not an anomaly: that other young women had lost their mothers to suicide. I took comfort in explaining away the act (Szarz 45 [ref missing]). Maybe she was isolated as a new mother, maybe her and my father were not getting along. Maybe she could no longer paint or make art. And perhaps all these maybes are true. Knowing that she suffered from postpartum depression shaped how I interacted and engaged with the traces she left behind, and how I learned to read her suicide as something beyond my control. Yet, even with the comfort of having a way to describe her death, a way to justify suicide with a mental illness, I tried to control the reading of her death, to tame my feelings and stories of suffering beneath a medical label that forgets a lot of the stories between language. The sounds within the silence of suicide that must be listened to in order to attend ethically to those who have died, survived, and continue to live-on with suicide.

Just as family photographs define our similar jaw lines, and psychoanalytic theory historically affirmed that "hysterics" could not tell the story of their lives (Anderson 45), I ripped up family albums, to renegotiate our photogenic lineage. As Plath's poem conjured my mother's spirit before I even knew where she was buried, and the art class led me to dig in my father's yard for scraps that might remember her, the chance and randomness of it all seemed coherent. It seemed to bring together the inability to explain, rationalize or categorize my mother's death into perspective. The text remains scattered, and inconsolable. Marjorie Agosin describes how collage is a way to pay tribute to the souls of people who died violently. In Chile, shrines are erected on the spot where an individual was killed (Agosin 317). They are often an assemblage of mementos, photographs and personal belongings. It is believed that these *animitas* possess the ability to perform miracles for people who pay tribute to them in the form of collage (Agosin 317). With this in mind, collage theory

can be an interesting site to excavate our discomforts with suicide and death, thereby moving from a comfort in certainty, where difficult subject matter and personal stories are disregarded, to a place where they can be heard. Collage theory creates contradictory conditions where meaning is “continually negotiated and teaching as a position of absolute authority becomes impossible” (Garoian 37). Perhaps my father’s skeletons move through language, beyond cliché meanings towards something so particular that it cannot be grasped or understood in a single encounter. It is a text that requires a continual return, and a haunting proximity to be read.

Conclusion

But the real wardrobe is not an everyday piece of furniture. It is not opened every day, and so like a heart that confides in no one, the key is not on the door. (Bachelard 79)

My father chose the above quote from Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetic of Space*. I had handed him the book to skim through while we discussed my project. He picked a page at random and began to read. When he landed on the above quote, he told me that it pretty much summarized his feelings regarding my mother’s death. If we consider closets as intimate spaces that “don’t just open for anybody” (Bachelard 79) where we keep things safe and out of the way, then my father’s gesture to open the closet door for me to see Halloween skeletons, hanging, is more than a practical joke. It was an invitation, a welcoming, to attend to my mother’s suicide (otherwise.) Thinking back, it was probably the first time that we ever spoke of her death and listened to each other. From opposite ends, where he remembers her, and I imagine her, we found the key to open the closet door. Afterwards we both laughed into the closet, and he closed the door. We sat for a long time, quietly, with our thoughts. Until he turned to me asked: “they’re pretty neat, eh?” I nodded. Not knowing why they were necessarily “neat,” (they were merely dollar store Halloween decorations) instead I was baffled by how close we had come to speaking with my mother’s ghost in such a haunted space. When I asked my father what he had learned from the quote in relation to my mother’s suicide, he responded: “forgiveness.” Jonathan Silin tells us that, “forgiveness provides the only way of freeing ourselves from irreversible mistakes of the past” (18). Thus, my father’s forgiveness enables the recovery of the family home both as an architectural and psychological intervention. By mirroring his work, my forgiveness came through similar processes of re-membrance that reconfigured the stigma associated with my mother’s death, which I have cultivated using collage.

Extending from my familial home, I have explored how silence can speak

beyond what has already been said about suicide in order to facilitate a productive crisis in language. By listening to the skeletons in my father's closet, they remind me that there is no "true" or "authentic" way to be a mother: just as the bond between my mother and I is a fiction. It only remains real enough for me to express through art and affect. Collage is a site of excavation for exploring contradictions and ruptures within motherhood narratives. It is also a method for examining our discomfort with death and suicide, by merging objects from different worlds into a single frame: they create a meaningful context: a place where meaning can occur. And so despite the gaps and interruptions in the family plot, my mother's death does not have to be the site of stigma and shame. It can be seen as a site of possibility.

¹⁴In Latin American culture, *animitas* are the souls of people who died violently—shrines are erected on the spot where the individual was killed—they are scattered all over the road and drivers pay tribute to them and ask for protection in their travels. The *animitas* possess the ability to perform miracles for people who pay tribute to them in the form of collages" (Agosin 317).

References

- Agosin, Marjorie. "Collage of the Spirit." *Collage: Critical Views*. Ed. Katherine Hoffman. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989. 317-324.
- Anderson, Linda. *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*. London, UK: Edward Arnold, 1990.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Good Bones*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Grain and the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1985.
- Britzman, Deborah. *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.
- Brockelman, T. P. *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.
- Butler, Judith. "Violence, Mourning, Politics." In *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. 4 (1) Winter 2003, p. 9-37.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York and London: Routledge Classics, 1994.
- Garoian, Charles R. *Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics and Visual Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes On the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1974.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Key Writings*. London, New York: Continuum, 2004.

- Klein, Melanie. "Love, Guilt and Reparation." *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works: 1921-1945*. London: Hogarth Press, 1981.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Stranger to Ourselves*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Lévinas, Émmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Pincus, Lily and Christopher Dare. *Secrets in the Family*. London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1978.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Daddy." *The Voice of the Poet: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Random House Audio (sound recording), 1999.
- Silin, Jonathan G. *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. New York: Teachers College Press 1995.
- Szasz, Thomas. *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide*. Westport, CT: Praeger Trade, 1999.
- Tavin, Kevin. "Hauntological Shifts: Fear and Loathing of Popular (Visual) Culture." *Studies in Art Education* 46 (2) (Winter 2005): 101-114.
- Todd, Sharon. *Learning from the Other: Lévinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003.
- Vaughan, Kathleen. "Pieced Together: Collage as an Artist's Method for Interdisciplinary Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4 (1) (2005): 1-19.
- Wertheimer, Alison. *A Special Scar: The Experience of People Bereaved by Suicide*. New York: Routledge, 1991.