

HIDDEN STITCHES, SILENT CHORDS

A Play in Monologues

and

Exegesis: *Stitching from the Inside Out*

(including audio CD of original song: *None Can Name*)

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This MA consists of a performance script entitled, *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords* (including an audio CD featuring my original song, *None Can Name*) and an accompanying exegesis, *Stitching from the Inside Out*.

The playscript was written in acknowledgement of my grandmothers and is inspired by my only tangible connection with them, their needlework. *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords* is aimed at addressing, in some measure, the silences around their lives and their omissions from familial, historical documentation.

Although the playscript could be adapted to suit performance by an ensemble cast, its design as presented for this assessment, is for one actor playing seven characters across of fifteen monologues. The play explores the small moments in women's lives from points of view represented by characters of different ages and eras. The piece is devised to accommodate minimal production costs, so that it can be performed anywhere from a kitchen or a church/community hall to a theatre. The song, *None Can Name*, in this presentation of the work, is played after the final monologue.

The exegesis, *Stitching from the Inside Out*, includes an introduction, which gives an overview of, and background to, the beginnings of the project, and indicates the scope of the subsequent chapters. The two central chapters focus on the development of play's structure and symbolism. The play's structure is discussed in the context of its evolution, from a linear concept to one based on the design of a lace doily/web, and how this serviced my aim of creating a cohesive meshing of fifteen monologues across the work.

The layering of the play's imagery, around the cloth, the colour blue and spider mythology is examined in the chapter focusing on symbolism. These are discussed in terms of creating visual and textual dimensions that link the characters of the monologues, and their impact in developing a subtext throughout the piece. The concluding section, considers the combined, crucial elements of craft, the practice of writing, and determination in developing the work towards its completed form in performance.

Declaration

I, Jennifer Watkins, declare that the Master by Research entitled *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords* is no more than 60,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:..... Date:

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I gratefully acknowledge the ongoing guidance, encouragement and support of my supervisors, Dr Enza Gandolfo and Dr Anne Harris: their generous understanding, kindness and great, good sense provided a steady and shining light as I steered my course towards the completion of this project.

Thank you to my partner in life, Marcus, for your wonderful heart and gentle soul, and for pretending not to notice when I talked to myself.

To all the women in my family, this work is dedicated to you: my daughter, Daisy, my mother, Lesley, and my aunts and grandmothers.

Part One

HIDDEN STITCHES, SILENT CHORDS

A Play in Monologues

By

Jennifer Watkins

HIDDEN STITCHES AND SILENT CHORDS

INTRODUCTION and PRODUCTION NOTES

Hidden Stitches and Silent Chords is a play consisting of fifteen short monologues, presented to the audience via seven different characters.

Two of these characters form the spine to the piece:

Mary, a timeless and Hestia like figure, who speaks in a Scottish Highland dialect and serves as both a chorus to the narrative and an historic reference for the dramatic present of the respective characters

Bee, Mary's great, great granddaughter, whose journey through the narrative is presented in three separate monologues – near the beginning of the piece, at its centre, and near its end.

The five remaining characters circle the arc of Bee's story and each provide at different points throughout the play, elliptical and imperfect echoes of Bee's monologues and Mary's wise reflections. They embody diversity of age, historic placement, circumstance and/or occupation.

Some are not given names and are characterised by their monologue's title.

The sequencing of the monologues is:

Gift (Mary)

Bride to Bee (Bee)

Test o' th' Weave (Mary)

Something Blue

Maid to Measure

Kindling the Flame (Mary)

Web of Learning Part 1 (The Girl)

Got You Pegged (Bee)

Web of Learning Part 2 (The Girl)

Sweeping the Corners (Mary)

Tilda and the Lost Sheep (Tilda)

Making Jam (Rachael)

The Return of the Day of Rest (Mary)

Bee Three (Bee)

Voyage (Mary)

The monologues of **HIDDEN STITCHES, SILENT CHORDS** are designed to facilitate a performance by one actor assuming all parts, or by a cast of players. The play is presented here, with suggested directions for staging and props, as a production for one actor.

(NB. Should a cast of two or more players assume the roles of this narrative, it is my recommendation that the characters of Mary and Bee are each performed by one actor respectively, as their monologues appear several times throughout the piece. Similarly, one actor should be assigned to Web of Learning, as the character appears in Parts 1 and 2 of her monologue.

The song, “None Can Name” can be performed [or not] according to the discretion of the production company, as the monologues are designed to stand on their own, with or without musical augmentation.)

In the stage notes, the actor is referred to as either “She” or the character’s name.

HIDDEN STITCHES, SILENT CHORDS was written and designed to accommodate minimal staging and production. Props used in this version can, in the main, be sourced in any household and include: ***a square of blue fabric (approx. 1 x 1 meters), a washing basket, a candle, candle stick, a box of matches, a packet of cigarettes, one pair of lace gloves, a broom, clothes’ pegs, a length of string (2metres), a champagne bottle, a vegemite glass, a whiskey flask, a bag of peppermints and four strong elastic bands.***

The square of blue fabric is essential as it features in all of the monologues and serves as a central and visual motif throughout the narrative.

The props utilized in this production of the narrative are stored in the washing basket and are taken from it and returned to it, where required. The elastic bands should each be attached to the four legs of one of the chairs, in readiness for “Rachael, Making Jam”.

Jennifer Watkins

(A washing basket housing props, sits on the floor in front of two chairs. A candle and a box of matches sit on one chair and a square of blue fabric is draped over the back of the other. The space is dimmed to black.

***MARY**, attired in a brown, knee length dress, enters the space, wraps the fabric around her shoulders and sits on the empty chair. She lights the candle, sits and ponders for several beats before she begins...)*

GIFT

(MARY)

The pull o' this moon, uhtt leads me awae
Frae the four, square walls o' my dreaming room,
On this tidy farm o' bleating sheep, o' beating rugs,
O' beating hearts, o' tight, scrubbed boards
An' th' silent tug o' the girl I once was.
An' the pull of this moon.

The pull o' this moon leads me awae
Frae th' dry, stone walls of' my dreamless days,
O' volcanic plains tha' tear m' hands an' m' skirt,
As I bend m' back t' Patterson's Curse.
In th' yards, th' stock shiver tha' were fed by m' hand,
As we pray for th' yield from th' blood of th' lamb.

Th' pull of this moon will nae lead m' awae,
Fae th' seasons hae swept through m' dreamin' days.
I pray m' sons grow strong an' m' girls grow wise,
An' grow honest and true under these western skies,
An' may they profit th' soil from here to MacLean's,
An' in each blessed return, find something o' me.

*(**MARY** blows out the candle and returns it to the washing basket as the lights come up...)*

(She takes a champagne bottle, vegemite glass and cigarettes from the washing basket and places them on the chair. BEE puts on a pair of lace gloves, and drapes the blue fabric over her head ...)

BRIDE TO BEE

(BEE)

Sooo. I'm organised.

(...pours a champagne into the vegemite glass...)

Here's to me.

(Raises her glass)

Pulled it together.

(Drinks)

The date is set.

(Drinks some more)

Everybody's happy.

(Speaks to the air above her...)

I pulled it all together, Mary!

(Lifts the piece of fabric off her head)

Mary made this.

Here's to you!

(Drinks again, then looks more closely at the fabric)

Or maybe it was her mother? My great, great, great grandmother?

My 'something old'.

And these.

(Inspects the gloves on her hands)

Made by my great, great...or was it just... 'great'... aunt?

My 'something else old'.

(Lights a cigarette)

And this...

(Holds out the skirt of her dress, swishes it and speaks in a stagey French accent...)

Not too froo froo. Le garment de la Op Shop! With some adjust-a-ments of course!

We ‘ave zis panel, mais non? Eet ees ze edgy lace from ze shoulder to ze knees. Tres chic. Tres La Eeleezabeth Taylorry. Eet ees tres ze teeny beetsy see through. And ze lace eet matches ze gloves.

Do not you sink zis ees so, great great Mary?

And ... great... Aunty? Voila!

(Spins in a dramatic circle. Loses her balance slightly, then steadies...)

His mum’s not pleased.

She is knitting christening robes for the baby. Wants a baptism.

“That’s nice,” I said, “but you needn’t go to the trouble.”

(Drains her glass...)

Apparently champagne is fantastic for breast milk. Best to start early.

And I don’t feel sick at all.

I feel great.

Great.

And I will go back to study. We’ll manage somehow.

(Waves her glass at the ceiling, then, swaying with the effort, replaces it and the champagne bottle carefully into the washing basket. BEE folds the fabric to her breast and continues, sotto voce...)

Things are different now.

(She wraps the blue fabric around her shoulders once more and addresses the audience as MARY...)

THE TEST O' THE WEAVE

(MARY)

The design wae th' story. Th' one learned a' her mother's knee. An' uht wae woven mony times. Passed on an' oer, like a stitch tha' held firm; tha' looped about th' heart wi' th' finest o' threads.

Frae only th' softest o' th' fleece...th' fleece frae here... frae the chin o' th' lamb - only tha' wae used in th' spinnin'.

Th' design complete...

(MARY removes the shawl slowly from her shoulders...)

...th' weave and warmth o' th' work would be pulled through th' gold o' a wedding band.

(Makes a circle with her thumb and forefinger and passes the fabric through it, like a magician with a silk scarf)

Tha' were uht's test.

(She waits a few beats then walks once around the chair and places one foot upon it and turns to speak to the audience...)

SOMETHING BLUE

She has asked me for something blue. She has asked me to make this.

(Folds the blue fabric into a long band and then twists it around her thigh as a garter)

They say that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Perhaps.

(Untwists the garter from her thigh and flicks it back into a handkerchief shape)

Perhaps it depends on the family of apple.

Do brides wear something blue because it resembles a bruise? One that is hidden away beneath all that white?

I wore something blue at my wedding – a sprig of forget-me-nots. Made everything else myself. Scrubbed up all right.

That's what Crawley said: "My, you scrubbed up all right. You were quite the beauty"

As he stood there, leering over my photo before shifting his gaze to my breasts, then to the newly inflated versions jutting out of Penelope, the ones he made, I had a sudden urge to punch him.

I forget who had the idea – probably Penelope – that we girls bring our wedding photos to work. One of those on the job/bonding/fun things that people do these days. It became a little game of who belonged to which photo. And then Crawley and Penelope announced that after a long and difficult decision making process, Penelope's sister in law had been appointed the new coordinator of admissions.

"You look as though you could still fit into your wedding dress." That was Penelope and her smile was at full stretch and her eyes were shining hard and I had the sudden urge to punch her too.

But I let it go.

That's another thing that is bandied about now: Let it go. Don't let the anger build.

(Flicks the blue fabric to emphasis her point)

Let it go.

(Examines the edge of the fabric)

Oh. A money spider. A dipoccephalus cristatus. There we are...

(Holding the web over one finger, she gently guides the spider to the floor)

Perhaps the bruises only begin to show after a long and slow unravelling?

When comes that moment; that hour; that accumulation of days, that creeping recognition that you have complied with all this? That you have stood there, numb and humiliated on the kitchen table, arms stretched out wide, as they measured you and stitched you up?

Incrementally, you feel the force of your suffering; the pain of all your smiles and your thank-yous and your arms begin to ache and you say, "I don't want this any more," and the hands give you a quick clip and say, "We are only doing what you asked for!"

Oh. Let it go.

(Wipes away tears with the blue handkerchief)

He seems a nice young man. And my girl is wonderful. I want her to enjoy a wonderful life. I wish I could show her how...how that is done.

I wore blue at my wedding – a sprig of forget-me-nots. I wonder, do brides wear blue because it resembles a bruise? Like an apple that has dropped from the tree... with a thud?

(She pushes the chairs together back, and sits on one. She bounces slightly in her seat, moves her legs to allow someone to pass...she is on a train or tram. She sneaks a look at herself and preens in the imaginary window before studying the clothing of the person sitting opposite her. Caught in mid stare, she grimaces a quick smile to the object of her attention, adjusts the blue fabric which hangs in the style of a scarf, untied about her neck, stands and makes her way to an imaginary door where she alights. As she begins her monologue, she walks once around the arranged chairs, in the manner of one who has much to do and who rarely sits still.)

MAID TO MEASURE

Nothing tells like an ill-fitting garment. It will be found out. A flattering mirror or sales assistant may distract or delude you from the faults. Eventually though, if a garment doesn't fit, it will tell and is painful to wear.

I make all my own clothes. That's why I am well turned out. All this...
(sweeps a hand over her attire)
... by my own hand.

It's about self-knowledge, really. Wasn't that written over the altar at Delphi? Know thyself?
Yes, being honest about who you are and knowing yourself well enough to choose the designs that best disguise your faults. We don't want to show them off, do we?

Colour is the fun part. Knowing your colours. I know never to put black near my face.
(Removes scarf [blue fabric] and hangs it over the back of one of the chairs...)

Just like I said to my friend, "Don't put black near your face," I said, "not a good idea at our age," I said. "And with your skin tone," I said, "you're best to avoid those yellow scarves." But no, she keeps wearing them. No self knowledge. No knowledge of her husband either, it seems. He heads some large sporting organization or other, and was caught out the back of a stadium with...oh...what is her name? Terribly thin. Even on the telly. Must put her fingers down her throat. Turns out, that's not all she puts down there.
(Pulls a length of string from the washing basket and drapes it around her neck like a measuring tape.)

Anyway, my friend was most hurt by it all, which is understandable. Took him back though. And not for the first time. All happy families again. She will wear those yellow scarves.

(As she speaks, she moves the chairs so that they now stand side by side. She spreads the blue fabric across the seats.)

Accessories are most important. Reliable accessories will mask all manner of sins. A good pair of sunglasses and a nice shade of lipstick, preferably Dior, works wonders for me. *(Walks behind the chairs, leans over their backs and 'measures' the blue fabric with her piece of string.)*

And the cut. The cut of a garment is essential. As an excellent cutter myself, I can say with full confidence that we are definitely not cut from the same cloth. Like Mr N., who runs a business from the garage behind his house. I was there picking up my lipsticks one day – my discreet little back Dior connection – and although I didn't say anything to him about it, I noticed some pretty tawdry cutting going on. Perhaps it was the heat. I nearly fainted there myself. Thank goodness he stores my lipsticks in the fridge.

But a good, clean cut is impossible where the fabric is inferior. The best machine, the most fancy over-locker, will chew up cloth that isn't up to the task. *(Holds one end of string to the side of her nose and stretches it to arm's length. She then hooks an end to the back of each chair.)*

Fabric says something about the person. My preferences are silk, good cotton, and wool. All natural fibres.

And easier to mend when one must make do. *(Shifts the chairs so that they are back-to-back, but standing apart, with the string stretched between them.)*

Invisible mending is tricky. No one likes to see frayed edges or seams coming apart. A good, straight seam, sewn flat, is the truth of the garment. And none of this crimping business – it must be finished, properly.

(Walks around the chairs in the other direction to that taken at the beginning of the monologue.)

The seam is where all lines meet, particularly if you are working with a lovely tartan, checked or striped fabric.

(She seats herself so that she is facing the opposite direction to her earlier tram-ride, drapes the blue fabric around her neck and, once again, moves her legs to allow someone to squeeze past...)

My mother taught me how to lay out the pattern over the cloth so that all the checks met and matched at the seam...

(Lurching forward as the tram begins to move...)

...so that you cannot tell the front from the back of the garment...

(Bouncing in her seat and preening in an imaginary window...)

... so that the pattern just keeps on repeating.

(She waits a few beats, then wraps the blue fabric around her waist as an apron. MARY, leans towards an imaginary fire. She appears to sprinkle leaves over it...)

KINDLING THE FLAME

(MARY)

Eucalypt.

(Breathes with deep pleasure...)

Some hurry uht. Build a great pile.

But I prefer t' coax uht along. A few twigs. Some leaves. Gently.

Lest uht create a great deal o' smoke wi' nae heat.

Tha's th' way wi' some, int' uht?

They b'lieve thay kin force th' nature o' things?

They b'lieve tha' they kin fill their silos wi' more grain, if they tug at th' wee shoots emergin' frae the ground.

Uht's a world where some are forever tellin' y' what to do – tah convince themselves tha' they know wha' uht is tha' they're doing.

After a time, people b'lieve them. They're convinced. An' their conviction bestows a reputation whether uht be true or no'.

(Sits and warms her hands...)

I let them blether on. I dinnae listen. They b'lieve I do, but I dinnae listen.

I prefer to dwell upon th' things tha' bring me pleasure. Th' things tha' I choose.

Uhts a bonny flame.

(Leans in even closer to the flame...)

In uht, I kin see the wee spark tha' were there a' th' beginnin' o' th' world; tha' will be there a' th' end.

I see uht's centre. An' uht's blue. Like water. An' uht finds uht's own level.

For th' flame will only consume tha' which is there tae burn.

Lest uht create a great deal o' smoke an' nae heat.

(She continues to sit for a few beats, removes her apron and drops it into the washing basket. She moves the chairs apart, so that the string is stretched between them. THE GIRL skips around them and hums a little tune as she plays a game of “Elastic Skippy” kicking one leg over the string and back again. She “hears” something off stage and turns in the direction of the sound...)

WEB OF LEARNING Part 1

(THE GIRL)

Whaaat?

Ooooh. But Muuuuum!

(The GIRL reluctantly turns one of the chairs to the front and sits down huffily on it.)

Mum said...

(She removes the blue fabric and a quick unpick from the washing basket.)

...she said... I have to go back to the start...

(Using the quick unpick, she works the cloth)

...Mum said that the seam wasn't straight.

I said that it didn't matter, but she said it did. She said a crooked seam is “like a lie in the garment which will be found out when you wear it”.

We have our class Christmas party tomorrow and... and I wanted to wear this. I told all my friends that I was sewing a dress. On the machine.

I even told Lorette and Noreen. And Lorette said, “My mother bought mine,” and then Noreen whispered something to her and then they went to their desk and then they wrote notes to each other and Mr Hedge never says anything to them and he always says something to Joey and me when we talk.

Anyway, I don't like their hair. Noreen's is so straight and Lorette has a stupid curl, right here...

(points to the middle of her forehead...)

...and she says her mum sticks it with sticky tape every night and she must because everyday...

(Slaps her palm to her forehead)

...there it is!

I didn't tell Mum about Sophia.

She's really, really big and hairy and she covers the whole side of the box now and you can see her underneath, where her legs all join above her belly.

Anyway, Joey dared me to put my finger on the glass. He said, "Dare you to touch it." And then he said, "Dare you to touch it on the fangs." And then he said, "Dare you to touch it on the fangs and hold your finger there for ten seconds."

And I did and I counted, "onetwothreefourfivesix..." and...and she lifted her front legs and her fangs got bigger...and I screamed and Mr Hedge took two big steps and his scar got really purple and he leaned over me and said, "Front desk, now!"

I did tell Mum what happened with Florence.

She's a really good runner and netball player.

She had something wrapped in paper and stuffed up her jumper for her morning talk.

But first, Noreen took ages to show all her weather poodles. She says that they change colour when it rains. Well, they're supposed to change colour.

Her poodles always look sort of pinky blue – like Mr Hedge's scar when he's not quite so mad. Anyway, they looked just the same as the last time she brought them.

So I put my hand up and I asked, "Why are they the same colour as last time?"

And she said, "They're not. They're different."

And I said, "They were pinky blue the last time you brought them and then it was raining. Today is sunny."

And then Mr Hedge pointed at me and said, "That's enough from you!"

(She stabs into the seam with her quick unpick as she continues...)

So, Florence stood in front of the class and she pulled the big parcel out from under her jumper and said, "I found this in the back paddock."

It was a bone. And it was sort of yellow and really long.

It was different to a sheep's bones 'coz when my pet sheep Blackie died and Dad buried him in the back paddock, our dog Gazza dug it up and it stunk and so did Gazza, but the bones were small.

Anyway she held it up over her head and turned so the whole class could see it.

Then Mr Hedge held the big ruler up against it and then he said, "You'd better put that back in your bag."

And Florence started to cry and all I could do was sit there and Mr Hedge sounded angry and

that wasn't fair because she hadn't done anything wrong.

(She examines the piece of cloth and runs her hand along its edge...)

I did tell Mum about that, and she looked sad and said that Florence just wanted to tell her story.

I asked Mum why Mr Hedge would want Florence to put the bone back in her bag. It was a much better morning talk than Noreen's stupid poodles. But Mum said to never mind about the bone and that there was no need to be nasty about Noreen and to worry about getting my own seams straight if I wanted to wear my dress tomorrow.

So I didn't tell Mum about what happened later after that, when we were making decorations for the Christmas party.

(She works the cloth for a few more beats, then, jumping to her feet, she drops the quick unpick into the washing basket, and skipping around the chairs, she returns them to the “Elastic Skippy” shape. Her skipping slows to a fatigued walk and, as she continues her circular walks, she picks up the washing basket and places it on one of the chairs. The string is now a clothesline. She removes a clutch of pegs from washing basket and, as BEE, she absently pegs these in her hair....)

GOT YOU PEGGED

(BEE)

There’s an art to it...apparently.

(BEE lifts the blue fabric from the washing basket and, taking one at a time from her hair, she pegs the blue fabric to the line as she speaks. [NB. She pegs these in close arrangement, only a centimetre or so apart])

Or a method. One method. Her method.

Irons everything. Everything.

Even underwear. Got her whole family pegged.

(Mimics...)

“You don’t want to leave a mark, now, do you?”

(Yawns)

Now. I must think.

The question reads something like: “Within the paradigm of Freud’s Oedipus complex...blah, blah...Romeo and Juliet’s demise...blah, blah...product of familial dysfunction...blah, blah...

Discuss.

Ah.. the Montagues and Capulets had nothing in common – except that they hated each others’ guts.

Romeo...Romeo...Romeo jumped from Rosaline to Juliet at the ball...could have been a player...

(Rubs her eyes)

Perhaps mothers everywhere should call their sons Oedipus?

Be up front about it. Where there are multiple sons, just number them: Oedipus 1, Oedipus 2, Oedipus 3...

Well, no shit Freud! It all ended in tears.

But what if it hadn't? What is...what if...Romeo received the message that Juliet had taken the sleeping drug? What if they lived and they were married and had moved in with his parents? What is his mother ironed his underwear?

If Juliet had read Oedipus, would she have run?

I'd read Oedipus.

I didn't run.

Poor Juliet.

(Begins to unpeg the blue fabric and slowly drops each peg into the washing basket as she continues...)

And Romeo would come home from work and she'd try to tell him about her day...

(Mimics)

- Oh Romeo...your Mum called me a slut today.
- Oh Juliet, my sun and my moon, don't you listen to her.
- She's always watching me.
- She really likes you.
- She really likes Rosaline. You know she's trying to poison me.
- Don't be ridiculous. My mother would never....
- You know that soup that made you sick?
- Just a 24 hour thing...
- I switched bowls with you.
- You...you poisoned me? This is insane...
- Your mother's insane...

(Drops the last of the pegs into the washing basket. Pauses for a few beats...)

But of course that didn't happen. They both...died.

And did that change anything?

(Presses the blue fabric to her breast and again, pauses for a few beats...)

Does anyone ever...really change?

(Bee starts suddenly at a sound...)

Oh. I can hear Mary. Time for her feed.

(She drops the blue fabric into the washing basket and walks to one side of the performance space, where she waits for several beats, then skips back to centre stage as THE GIRL. THE GIRL stops and speaks to the back of the space...)

WEB OF LEARNING THE GIRL Part 2

(THE GIRL)

I know...nearly finished

(Humming to herself she unties the string from the chairs and drops it into the washing basket as she speaks...)

Joey and me wanted to use more blue in our chain but Lorette and Noreen took all the good paper to make Christmas cards for Mr Hedge and they wouldn't share wouldn't share.

(Moving one chair beside the other, she retrieves the quick unpick and the blue fabric from the basket and continues...)

I like blue.

Anyway, Joey and me made our chain really long and we put chairs on the nature bench – just next to Sophia's case – so we could hang our chain really high and I ...I was stretching to hang the next bit and ...well, my chair slipped and I ...I grabbed the beam and I swung and I tried to kick the chair back with my foot but it didn't work and....it smashed into Sophia's case.

And everyone went really quiet.

And then Mr Hedge pointed at me and his scar was really purple again and then someone screamed because Sophia was out and she was going really nuts and running in circles and had her front legs up and she was really angry and then...and then she ran straight to Lorette's desk and straight up her leg and Lorette jumped up so hard that she pushed the desk over with Noreen in it and it..it broke all Noreen's weather poodles.

And my arms were really hurting and I didn't think I could hold onto the beam anymore and then Florence pushed the chair back under my feet and I saw Sophia crawl into the head of one of the weather poodles and scrunch up there but Lorette kept running and screaming anyway and she was trying to pull her dress over her head and Mr Hedge was running after her and her curl was all messed up and stuck out in front and she sort of looked like Sophia.

I didn't tell Mum about that.

Joey ran up with an ice cream bucket and said, "I've got her! I've got her! Open the window!"

(She flattens the fabric across her knees...)

Anyway, when Sophia crawled out of the poodle head it was really hard to see her because she was the same colour as the ground.

And it was funny...the poodle head was hard to see too...it didn't look pinky blue...like it always does.

Maybe they do change colour?

Now. A straight seam.

Back to the start.

(The GIRL lowers her head over the fabric, concentrating on her work. A few beats and she stands, drops the quick unpick into the washing basket and skips to the rear of the space where she ties the blue fabric around her waist as an apron. MARY picks up the broom and sweeps back to centre stage...

She looks up to a high corner...)

SWEEPING THE CORNERS

(MARY)

Och, you're back again.

(Stretches with the broom and sweeps at the corner as she continues...)

There y'go. Dinnae fight me. I'll no' hurt ye.

There y'go. Outside.

Ah'll nae harm ye. Such a fearsome nature. There y' go. Make a straight run a' things.

Ay. You're quite large. As big as m'hand.

Ah've seen her. Sh' feeds ye. She'll catch a fly an' balance uht on a twig an' hold uht t' y' web. Ah've seen y' come an' take uht.

So, Ah will nae hurt ye. Ah'll put ye outside.

Ye'll return, though. In th' mornin'. Ye'll be back, up there, in y' corner, high in th' room.

Watchin' an' spinnin'.

Forever a' work. Ay. Uht's best tae spin y' true weave.

If only uht were tha' simple.

(MARY returns the broom to the rear of the space)

(She removes the blue fabric from around her waist and, brandishing it as a duster, she takes a few brisk steps to the chairs where TILDA sets about polishing them with great vigor...)

TILDA and THE LOST SHEEP

(TILDA)

This morning in his sermon, Reverend McCall spoke of the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd left his flock of ninety nine to find the one that had strayed.

Well, Rachael strayed. She always sits next to me – third from the right.

Today, she took it upon herself to sit in the MacLean’s pew. I stood, and was about to fetch her back, when Mother put her hand on my arm and told me to sit.

Sit! As if she was speaking to a kelpie.

We have a family pew. And Rachael is not a MacLean. But people will have it that she wishes to be one.

And later, when Leila Stewart was making a mess of things in the church hall and had plates strewn over the kitchen bench and shortbreads next to the sponges where they’d be spoiled by the cream, I asked Rachael had she thought to unpack the doilies? They were folded, next to the bag of fabric scraps – the church always dusters– and could she sort them onto plates?

I was busy myself, with Leila Stewart – had asked her to set out the cups and the saucers and to fill the sugar bowls, as it was something even she could manage - and I turned to set the bellows to the copper, when... when...well, there was Rachael... standing before me. Just standing there, holding the bag of dusters.

“Rachael,” I said, “I asked for the doilies.”

And still, she stood there.

And she waved that bit of rag; that worn out thing that mother has insisted on keeping – an embarrassment, useful for nothing, I don’t care where it comes from or who made it – she waved it in my face and said, “This is not a duster!”

And she walked out.

And I would have caught her up had not that Jeannie MacLean practically bowled me over. Could I set the good china for the elders’ meeting? And, she went on, “we seem to be a bit short of bread and butter plates with the navy trim” which are, of course, the good china and of course I had set them...by which stage Rachael was outside.

(Stops for a beat...)

Mother says she wouldn't know what to do without me.

She says that.

But she prefers Rachael.

Even though Rachael is not quite right.

That business with Malcolm. Secretly engaged! And now? Now what does she have?

Rachael fell apart, of course. The whole district mourned.

I took care of all the sympathy cards – not that I was thanked.

But I am too busy to give it much thought. If I did, then they would all see how things would fall apart...fall apart like that bit of rag that Rachael and Mother are so fond of.

I have never been able to understand why, in the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd left ninety nine perfectly good stock, to seek out the one stupid enough to wander off into the night. What was the point of that?

(TILDA turns one chair upside down and stacks it on top of the other. She flicks the blue fabric a couple of times and hangs it over the chair's upturned leg...

She walks to washing basket and takes out the pair of lace gloves.

RACHAEL pulls them gently onto her hands and lifts the blue fabric off the leg of the upturned chair to inspect the cloth...)

MAKING JAM

(RACHAEL)

This weave is perfect. We mustn't waste.

Straining the fruit properly creates the finest jelly. Just let it drip away. Don't force it through or the jelly will cloud.

Jeannie MacLean loves my jams and my jellies. They're everyone's favourite, she says.

(While she speaks, RACHAEL, using the elastic bands, carefully binds the four corners of the cloth to each of the legs of the upturned chair...)

The fruit is particularly important. Best that it is not fully ripe. And definitely not bruised.

Bruised fruit will not set properly. It moulds before the winter is out.

What a fine night for the church social. All the young ones – shining their shoes, in their best, dancing and talking and laughing and...

I'll send along my passionfruit shortcake for the supper table. It's a favourite too.

I find it best to warm the sugar before adding it to the juice. I let it sit for a few minutes in the oven - but not for too long or it will brown and leave a bitter taste.

(Inspects her gloved hands...)

I made these for a social and Malcolm held both my hands and said,

“Will you wear these on your wedding day?”

And I said, “What nonsense. What do you mean?”

And he said, “On our wedding day.”

Mother taught me this - to turn a chair upside down and stretch the cloth...just so.

(Smooths her hand across the fabric)

Then place a pudding bowl underneath to catch the juice. The “Ipsy Wipsy” juice, I call it because the bag looks like a spider’s belly full of eggs.

(She tenderly pushes down into the cloth...)

This is the perfect weave for the job. And perfect width.

It was a pity to cut up the dress. But the rust and silver fish made great holes all through ...

(Looks to her gloves...)

... all through it.

And we mustn’t waste.

(She waits a few beats before removing the gloves from her hands, and the cloth and from the chair which she then turns the rights way up. She places the whiskey flask and peppermints in her pocket and wraps the cloth around her as a shawl. MARY walks to the side of the space, as if looking out a window, contemplating something beyond...)

RETURN OF THE DAY OF REST

(MARY)

There's great company in th' quiet o' th' house and great comfort in th' moon as she settles in her heaven.

(She ponders the stillness for a few more beats, then walks to a chair and sits...)

Ronald is a strong believer in observing th' day o' rest. A day wi' nae work, nae play; nae music, save fae hymns; nae reading, save fae scripture. In the evenin' he takes down the family bible and selects a passage.

This evenin', he read frae John, chapter eleven, verse forty:

“Jesus saith unto her, ‘Said I no’ unto thee, tha’ if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see th’ glory o’ God?’”

(Again, is still and quiet for a few beats...)

Perhaps th' finer point is found in what y' dinna believe?

I dinna believe I kin redeem tha' which is past, back tae th' present.

(Removes a whiskey flask from her pocket.)

But I do believe I kin taste somethin' o' tha' which I may hae missed.

(Takes a nip)

I'm nae certain whether I've missed this or no'.

(Takes another nip)

Some decisions take time.

(From her other pocket, Mary produces a peppermint)

I chew on these. I tell Ronald tha' they're fae the wee grandchildren.

Some find a type o' strength in religion. Power. But I've found uht only serves t' squeeze m'soul into a wee, joyless space. If God is perfect, an' we are imperfect sinners, then our souls are bound t' meet wi' disappointment.

(Chews silently on her peppermint, then continues...)

An' I'm no' disappointed – in m'self or in m' life.

F' I accept tha' I'm alone.

Mother would say, "Keep y'hands tae busy tae think." Did she do as I hae done? Did she busy her hands and let her thoughts wander an' dream? For tha' is what I do. I dream an' I dwell in a place - no' somewhere else, but tae a place in me.

Och. I look back an' I see m' Mother. I see her forever, standing th' rocks o' th' Isle.

An' I believed, a' tha' moment, tha' I could die. But I did nae.

But I will.

Soon.

There's great company an' comfort in th' quiet an' in th' moon.

(Takes the flask from her pocket and enjoys another nip)

There's one disappointment tha' I own...

(Holds up flask to the moon)

...tha' I did nae discover this sooner.

(She stands and removes the shawl from her shoulders. She drapes the blue fabric, so that it hangs from the back of the chair and down over the seat. She returns the whiskey flask and the peppermints to the washing basket and as BEE, she lifts it and places it on the other chair ...)

BEE THREE

(BEE)

Mary is excited.

I explained that it is a long, long journey. Longer than the drive to her father's.

She asked, "How much longer?" and I said that it was the same as driving there and back and there and back and there and back and there and back...and... she laughed and then she frowned and asked, "What if I need to go to the toilet?"

I explained that there are toilets on the plane.

(BEE begins selecting items from the washing basket and placing them on the blue fabric as she continues...)

Best to travel light.

(Lifts the champagne bottle and the vegemite glass from the basket, then puts them back, taking instead the whiskey flask. She rubs her hands over it, as if it held a genie...)

She came to me. In a dream. Well, I think it was her. And she carried this, which seemed both odd and sensible at the same time.

Perhaps despair is a gateway. To surrender. Because that is when she came – when I was at my lowest ebb. When I had given up. Given up even wishing.

Anyway, I was standing in the kitchen – the old kitchen on the farm – and I was young. And I was talking to Elizabeth Taylor, who was also young and was dressed for her ride in the Grand National.

That is when she appeared. And she reached into a pocket and handed me a peppermint and said, "Take this, it hides all manner o' sins."

I bit into it and it didn't taste of peppermint at all. It tasted of fruit and honey and there were tiny, tiny pips all through it, sort of like a jam. And the pips bothered me and I tried to spit them out but she said, "Och, they're pearls. Best tae swallow them whole."

So I did. I was swallowing mouthfuls of pearls.

And then Elizabeth Taylor (who was now suddenly all grown up) butted in and said, "You wouldn't want to try that with diamonds."

(Places the whiskey flask on the square of fabric)

Mary and I are travelling to Scotland. To the home of her namesake: Mary, my great, great grandmother. At first I thought, no, too expensive, be responsible...but then...then I thought of my dream. Of the peppermint, the tiny pips and the pearls. All that day I thought of it...at work...

and later... driving to pick Mary up from kindergarten...should I? Could I?

And then, as Mary climbed into the car - out of the mouths of babes, and all that - she pointed to the macaroni necklace she'd made that day and said proudly, "Look Mummy! Pearls you can eat!"

(Takes the bag of peppermints from the basket and pops one into her mouth, while she gathers the candle, matches, cigarettes, and puts them with the whiskey flask. She looks at her watch....)

Heavens!

Best get moving.

(Glancing into the washing basket one more time – in the manner of one checking for anything they may have forgotten - BEE pauses, reaches into the basket and retrieves the pair of lace gloves. She holds them, gently in her hands, lost in thought for a few moments, before putting them on.)

Mary's at her friend's house. He has a huge gum tree in his back yard and they're forever climbing it. I expect she will be at the top, not wanting to come down.

(She lifts the washing basket and the chair on which it sits and carries them to the rear of the space as she speaks ...)

But it's best that she has a good run around now.

It's quite a journey ahead – a long time in a confined space.

(BEE arranges the bits and pieces she has selected, into the centre of the cloth and, drawing the four corners of the fabric together in the fashion of a swag, she lifts it off the chair)

Soooo. I'm organised.

(She swings the swag over her shoulder and walks around the remaining chair, in a large circle to the rear of the space, empties the 'swag' into the basket, removes the lace gloves and returns to centre carrying the blue fabric in one hand. MARY stands for a few beats...)

THE VOYAGE

(MARY)

She didna move.

Th' boatmen heav'd their oars against the crossing an' she did nae move.

I close m' eyes an' I see her now as I saw her then: standing stone still an' th' blue an' grey o' her dress became th' rocks on which she stood; became th' sky an' high winds about her; became th' curve o' th' end o' th' world.

She hae given me this – her one bonny thing.

(Drapes the blue fabric over her wrist)

I folded uht flat an' tucked uht tight under m' bodice, here, fae shoul' th' crossing or th' great voyage ahead take me an' th' monsters o' th' deep feed o' me, my heart would be shielded by this wee thing. This bonny lace an' delicate thread tha' was worked by hands unkown tae rest, by a soul tha' grew – weathered an' strong - frae th' rocks o' home.

She would say, "M' hands are tae busy to think". Perhaps it's a fine thing that a woman's hands know nae rest, are forever at work. Perhaps the Lord himself, resting on the seventh day, longed to busy his hands lest he fall to a great tug o' loneliness tha' stretched frae his heart like a chord, tha' frayed an' knotted across all th' lands an' oceans o' his craft?

Perhaps th' core of His world; the stars, the sun and the moon; th' centre o' all life, is th' slow drum o' loneliness, an' th' great sweep o' longing for tha' which can ne'er be.

Th' voyage brought tae many thoughts o' these things. M' hands were nae busy. I wae sick. I feared m' bairn would nae come t' full time. I feared uht would be lost t' th' stinking privy of steerage; tha' uht would feed th' monsters o' th' sea. In m' corner I lay an' watched th' beam tha' creaked o'er m' fever.

I did nae see her at first. Grey like th' beam, she came only t' spin an' work her web. She wae doing m' work. She watched an' knew me.

She watched as Robert offered me salted meat that ne'er took to m' belly. She watched as I tossed through dreams o' m' mother standing e'er still on th' rocks o' home.

Awake or asleep, I would speak t' her an' believed she listened an' understood, when all the world did nae. When all the world could nae.

An' through our great voyage, together we felt th' heave o' each wave across the bow, each moment, an' each clutch tae m' belly.

Wha' wae th' span o' her dwellin'?

Had she spun her way across th' world an' back again?

Or wae sh' born tae th' mother who had?

(MARY wraps the shawl around her shoulders, the light dims to black and the song, "None Can Name" begins...)

FIN

Part Two

EXEGESIS: *STITCHING FROM THE INSIDE OUT*

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The tin roof of the Bradvale Hall rattled, and the southerly shivered across the volcanic plains, over the paddocks, on through the windbreaks, into the emptiness of the winter Sunday afternoon. My mother's clan congregated in the hall and had set out family memorabilia for display on long trestle tables. Farm tools and maps, birth, marriage and death certificates, photographs and needlework, sourced from sheds and cupboards, evoked nearly two centuries of life in rural Victoria and echoed the distance of our origins in Scotland.

To this my mother had contributed a selection of embroidered and lace tablecloths, all pressed, starched and perfectly preserved. Each was hand stitched and matched with a set of delicate table serviettes. Expert hands had crafted the embroidery, it was difficult to tell which was the right or wrong side of each piece. There were no knots, no stumbling stitches. Crocheted lace had been turned with dainty hooks, so that it would lay flat where it ought, or drape from the table's edge with fragile grace.

Through the rise of greetings, conversations and the clatter of tea cups, I noticed that a wall was papered with branches of the family tree. Winding my way through the crowd, I stood before it and studied the mapping of the ancestral line. My fingers traced lovely names from another time: Louisa, Jesse, Miriam, and Mary, and counted, in some cases, as many as fourteen children per family. The family tree, however, pursued only the male lineage and told nothing of the women behind the beautiful names, apart from noting their dates of birth, marriage, death and the number and names of their children. For those unmarried women among them, references to their birth and death were the only evidence of their having lived at all.

Yet my family had dined on tablecloths made by their hands. I had worn the crisp lawn petticoat edged in handmade lace, which was crafted by my great Aunty Daisy over a hundred years ago. A framed sampler graced a wall in my mother's house and bore the name of my great grandmother. A slip of silk remained from the wedding gown of my grandmother, Louisa, and a portrait of a love lost to the First World War, edged in sublime needlepoint, hung above my mantelpiece. Were these the only moments of contact between their worlds and mine? It seemed that, despite surviving immigration, multiple childbirth, world wars, the Great Depression, tragedy and isolation, my knowledge of them was written in pieces of cloth.

Sorting through the copies of birth, death and marriage certificates, I discovered that my great, great grandmother arrived from the Isle of Mull, Scotland, in the first half of the nineteenth century. I envisaged her sailing steerage from her subarctic corner of the world, leaving forever her girlhood family and friends, and settling in rural Victoria; her first summer of heat, flies and lack of water; the unfathomable distance between one farm house and the next; the ache for home and all that was lost to her.

I tried to imagine the isolation and hardship of her life and the lives of those who followed. The stoicism and courage required in countenancing each day as a farmer's wife in nineteenth century rural Victoria. As hard as her husband may have worked, she would have worked harder. Through pregnancies, childbirth, child nursing and rearing, she cooked, cleaned, sewed, educated her multiple children, and worked the farm. And somehow, she found a shred of time and a small space to apply herself to fine needlecraft - to lend her soul to the creation of art; the making of beautiful things.

There were no schools or educational communities where she practiced these skills. She learned them at her mother's knee. There were no shops just down the road where she could purchase threads, fabrics, or needles and very often, no money to buy these things with. Wherever possible, she would have saved remnants of fabric, recycled old clothes, rescued threads and reapplied them to another and another use.

When considering these things, it seemed to me that whatever successes a farmer enjoyed in establishing himself on the land, it was due in large part, to the diligent resourcefulness of his wife - the one with the name but without a story on the family tree.

Folding the tablecloths and lacework into tissue and boxes for the drive home, I felt sewn into an expanding and untold tale, a web made up of stray threads of understanding, scraps of misconceptions, twists of fortune, of lonely dreamscapes, embroidered rumours and the hushed spaces in between.

As the last of the teacups were washed and put away, the car packed, goodbyes said and promised visits declared, I returned for one more look at the family tree on the wall.

Leaning in close, my great aunts and grandmothers crowded in silence by my shoulders, and as I pronounced their beautiful names in turn, each whispered, "Yes. Yes. That was me."

It has been my experience that a creative concept can arrive in a second – a moment illustrated by John Steinbeck in his novel *Sweet Thursday*:

The flame of conception seems to flare and go out...There is plenty of precedence of course. Everyone knows about Newton and his apple. Charles Darwin said his Origin of Species flashed complete in one second, and he spent the rest of his life backing it up. (1972:25)

On the drive home from the Bradvale Hall, I conceived of creating an homage to my grandmothers, of fashioning a performance piece, a playscript, in acknowledgement of the women behind the names on the family tree. Steinbeck considered such moments as a great "...mystery of the human mind" and termed the experience "...the inductive leap" (1972:25). Of course, there is then the challenge of "backing it up" with action, of working the idea into a grounded form; where, like a tennis player who stretches and volleys a back hand over the net, the idea is a ball in motion, and it generates the momentum with which the artist leaps into the game. In all of my creative endeavours, this is where the hard labour begins.

As a writer, musician, and songwriter, I can attest to long hours where I work like an accountant, from 9 to 5, at my desk/piano, in an attempt to invite an idea onto the page. It is a process like dream catching, where my net can be a scrap of envelope that has housed the gas bill; a note on the inside of my hand; a scrawled entry in my diary; a chord progression played in open inversions to tease a tune into being; a constant chipping, honing and application towards a form; an insistent coaxing of an intuitive notion, from the ethers of god-knows-where, into its cell of art.

This process can lead to some curly paths, littered with a flotsam of images, phrases, fragments of research, that can appear to block my way to a particular creative outcome. Yet I have found, through a combination of intuitive and rational sifting, a willingness to change direction, if that is what my instinct suggests, and to most importantly keep going, the song, the story will come to form. Again, Steinbeck wrote of this:

Everything falls into place, irrelevancies relate, dissonance becomes harmony, and nonsense wears a crown of meaning. But the clarifying leap springs from the rich soil of confusion, and the leaper is not unfamiliar with pain. (1972:25)

Driving home that evening, I accepted the moving ball of an idea; I experienced my own inductive leap. This exegesis explores my voyage from then until now; my sifting through the “rich soil” of my confusion, in crafting the performance narrative, *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, written in tribute to the lives of my grandmothers’.

Background

My very young, newly married great great grandparents joined the large numbers of Western Highlanders who took passage to Australia in the first half of the 19th century. The Scotland they left behind was enduring a time of agrarian and industrial upheaval; an era that saw the brutal and systematic eviction of tenants from their farming lands (Devine, 1987:1), while the islands of Mull and Skye were also afflicted by a potato famine where “...the number of deaths were even more appalling than in Ireland” (Cigler & Cigler, 1990:81).

The rudimentary conditions of their resettlement, first in South Australia and later in the western district of Victoria, as they established themselves and their growing family on the land, would have been particularly challenging for my great great grandmother. As a Scot, unaccustomed to the Australian heat, forever removed from her mother, family and girlhood friends, the demands of a harsh life were further corseted by the 19th century ideal of femininity, when a woman was expected to be “gentle, submissive, naïve, and good” (Bernheimer & Kahane, 1990:4). Despite the qualities of stoicism and good sense that I believe she, and other women of her era and circumstance, must have possessed to survive, there remained a perception of women as weak or soft. A woman’s inherent nature predisposed her to hysteria, should life present as difficult and this belief persevered across the century, aligning with views in the emerging field of psychiatry: “[hysteria] attacks women more than men...they have a more delicate, less firm constitution, because they lead a softer life” (Sydenham cited in Bernheimer & Kahane, 1990:4).

Freud’s theories too, reflected this: “For women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men” (Freud cited in Tong, 1998:135). So, whilst the larger world was deciding on a definitive nature of women, debating women’s eligibility to vote etc; whilst Freud was sorting out his theories on women’s hysteria, my female antecedents were bearing multiple children without medical aide, working the land, cooking, cleaning, building a home environment from the dirt and dust, and finding time to devote to fine needlework. If they were “soft”, “less firm,” if they were, as Freud thought, hysterical, feeling castrated, or suffering penis envy, perhaps they were too tired to notice?

Good sense must have remained a premium for women living the rural life. In 1941, Hephzibah Menuhin, the world celebrated pianist, lived on a property in the district settled by my mother's family, and although her circumstances were decidedly more luxurious than most in the area, she wrote to a friend in Melbourne of her life on the farm: "...frailty and the resultant impression of femininity and grace, are far from being a virtue in practical terms" (Niall and Thompson, 1999:214).

It was against this historical backdrop that I began to imagine scripting a play, made up of verse, song and monologue, drawn from the landscapes of my grandmothers' origins in Scotland, their settlement in rural Victoria, and from my only tactile connection with them through their needlework. I did not seek to create an historical recount of how I believed they may have lived, I did not assume to speak as them. Nor were my intentions to write an auto-ethnographic tale in reflection of the past - to do so would be an homage to self, rather than to them.

What I aimed to do, was to amend, in some measure, the silences around their lives and the scope of a performance script seemed to perfectly fit to my designs: it could expand from text into a visceral, sensual and visual incarnation, and just as a switch ignites the current and lights the light, its journey from the page to the stage, would bring literal voice, sound movement, breath and life to the stories I desired to tell.

Through monologue, verse and song, I could see the opportunity to present women's stories in an unadorned form, from a first person point of view, a construct that reflected both the isolating circumstances of my grandmothers' lives in rural Victoria and the relegation of their histories to the margins of familial documentation. This simple arrangement would permit an economic presentation of the work, one that required minimal staging and could be performed anywhere from a kitchen, a church hall, to a theatre – a thrifty and practical concept, of which I like to think my Scottish grandmothers would approve.

How then to imagine stories woven from the omissions of familial documentation? Reflecting on her experiences of fictionalising the life of a woman in her family, Natalie Kon-yu wrote that she "...learned the value of writing from the margins to try and work the silences, omission and distortions about women in the past" (2009:7). My margins were literally the edges of tablecloths, the curled stitches of lace doilies and to construct women's lives, albeit fictional ones, from this perspective, required that I steer my view of the subject beyond any 'guise of objectivity' (Murphy, 2003:641) and acknowledge the patterns employed by the needleworker as an "act of translation from one patterned way of recording to another"

(Murphy, 2003:645); that I consider the fabric with which my grandmothers' worked, as a threshold into imagining stories inspired by their lives and their needlecraft. I wondered: was their work a means of venting dreams, disappointments, of celebrating small victories? Was it a craft that they felt it was their duty to perform? Were their needles pushed hard into the fabric like a voodoo jab, or were their works made with tenderness and love; an ambition to be the best, the neatest, to excel where there were no other opportunities to do so?

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Roszika Parker referred to women's embroidery and needlework as signifying:

...a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness...it can also lead women to an awareness of the extraordinary constraints of femininity, providing at times a means of negotiating them, and at other times provoking the desire to escape the constraints. (1996:11)

It was from this place, between the power and powerlessness that Parker suggests is represented in the stitch, that I found the heartbeat of the proposed play; where the silenced "enablers" (Olsen, 1980:196), whose skills and work were deemed less important than those of men (Saunders & Evans, 1994:222); whose lives had been "colonised" (Summers, 1975) by social, historical and cultural containment, would find voice by telling their stories centre stage, in the dramatic present.

The French feminist, philosopher and poet, Helene Cixous wrote:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing ... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and history – by her own movement. It is by writing, from and toward women...that women will confirm women...in a place other than silence. (Cixous, 1975:351)

Although my playscript is a work of fiction, it is inspired by the tangible truth of my grandmothers' needlework, and was written to redress, in some measure, their exclusion from familial documentation. And while *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, is not auto ethnographic, I have, as Cixous suggests a woman should do (and I do it because I agree with her), put myself and what I felt and feel about a world that diminishes women, into the text.

Like the character of Bee in *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, I know the confusion and the challenges early womanhood brings; my seams have always appeared a little crooked, in the classroom and elsewhere, as with the Girl; I've cut my cloth in an effort to appear to fit in with the world, like the woman of *Maid to Measure*; I am familiar with the brutal realities and despair of mid life spoken of in *Something Blue*; I've known the sharp anger of Tilda and the sadness of Rachael. These feelings are not fiction, and nor are they only mine, but are the fabric of life, in that we all know what it is to ache and bleed and weep and laugh.

Mary remains a mystery to me. I wish I had her wisdom but I do not. Yet her appearance on the page reflects something of my day at the Bradvale Hall; she echoes both the distance and nearness of Scotland, of a world far away yet present in every word, and signifies the unwritten strength and heart of my grandmothers.

It has been a long ride since that winter's afternoon in the Western District and this exegesis examines the curves in the road that I have encountered in passage, from then until now. The development of my playscript grew from a deep and personal motivation to acknowledge the lives of my grandmothers and my intention was to bring fictional stories to centre stage, so that "the carnival [could] be held on the church steps" (Mitchell, 1993:101): the characters of the work could give voice, through their monologues, to the circumstances which hold them captive, and in so doing, metaphorically rattle the cage that excluded my grandmothers' lives from familial documentation and recognition. To do this, to bring the characters of my "carnival" to life in a playscript, involved drawing from a magpie's assortment of influences that ranged from my imaginings, my research of feminist theorising of women's silences and writings, field work, the writings of other authors, playwrights and monologists, to the daily practice of showing up on the page. Each of these aspects/elements contributed to the crafting of the playscript and all could be explored in this exegesis. I have decided, though, to focus on *structure* and *symbolism*: my deliberation around crafting an appropriate shape for the work (one which would weave together monologues presented from a range of characters across the narrative arc of the play) posed persistent challenges; and my explorations of symbolism and myth served to deepen the dimensions of the monologues, link the themes inherent in the characters' stories, and mesh with the structure to create a cohesive whole. My aim, in this exegesis, is to make a contribution to scholarship on creative writing and creative process, by reflecting on and analysing the particular attention I applied to structure and symbolism when writing *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*.

As I will discuss in the second chapter, I developed the structure of the play first; I built its "house", so that my vagrant, fragmented notion of a playscript had a safe place to go. The

chapter is divided into sections which explore: my early conception of a linear, chronological structure; my endeavours to construct the play so that it would both house and reflect the intergenerational dynamics inherent in mother/daughter themes; finding the voice of the mentoring character Mary (told in an excerpt from my journal); how and why I altered the structure to a cyclic form; my introduction of a central character to the work; the protagonist/antagonist dynamic within monologue; my reasons for the sequence of the monologues ; the guidance and influence of other monologists and playwrights; the features of monologue that supported the telling of the women's stories within the cyclic structure; and the transformed role of music and verse in the work.

Just as I view the structure as the narrative's "house", I consider its symbolism as its hearth, its light and shade, the furnishings of the walls, mantels and hidden corners that augment the stories of its inhabitants.

Chapter 3 on symbolism will examine why I chose the cloth as the central motif of the work, its service as a threshold to imagining characters, and its significance as a constant, yet silent presence throughout the work. The returning imagery of the colour blue is discussed in terms of both spoken and visual references across the monologues; and the impact of the Olympian myth of Arachne and Athena and older, spider myths are examined in the context of creating dynamics of character and theme in the play's imagery.

Chapter 4 concludes the exegesis with a discussion of the elements that I found crucial to creating and completing a tight and cohesive play script: craft, maintaining creative flow in tandem with analysis of the written word, consistent editing, and determination.

CHAPTER 2 STRUCTURE

...the vicious circle has never been complete...women have nevertheless sewn a subversive stitch – managed to make meanings of their own...(Parker, 1996:215)

During my day at the Bradvale Hall, I sensed and heard something of my grandmothers through the needlework they had left behind and, in this, recognized (like Parker) an incomplete circle which wove together their lives and mine. I looked for meaning in this, for inspiration, and, in the act of my writing from this point, aimed to subvert their omissions from documentation, by honouring my grandmothers' lives.

This chapter documents my process when developing the structure of my play, *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*. I begin with my early, linear conception of the play's structure featuring a chronology of monologue, verse and song; my perceptions of music and verse as continuums of women's ballad traditions; my intention that the structure support monologues exploring grandmother/mother/daughter themes; and my aim of creating a focus on particular aspects/the small things, of and in a woman's life.

The emergence of Mary's voice and how she became the mentoring presence of, and through the work, is discussed and followed by an account of a synchronistic moment at the ironing table that instigated my changing the linear structure to one that arranged fifteen monologues in a cyclic design.

These changes are then examined in terms of the introduction of a protagonist to the cyclic structure, her role in creating a narrative line through the play in concert with the elliptical stories and that of Mary; the scripting of off stage circumstances in order to agitate change and growth in the protagonist's journey in monologue; and my process in, and reasons for, sequencing fifteen monologues from seven different points of view across the play. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the influence of other monologists and playwrights; the value of economy in monologue (to say without saying); and the altered role of music in the play.

Tuning Up: A Basic Pattern

In shaping the play's structure, I have been influenced by my knowledge and background in music, the textile works of my female ancestors, and the desire to bring to centre stage the

stories of women of disparate age and era in a theatrical format that would align with economic production values.

I am a songwriter and determining an appropriate structure for the playscript was of paramount importance to me, as it is my usual practice, when composing a song, to first write the tune and then the lyrics. There is no right or wrong way to go about the process, but I have observed that this is mine. Writing the melody first, is like writing an invitation, creating a shape and mood, a basic pattern, for the lyrics to enter and feel at home in.

Like someone selecting fabric to be sewn up for a special occasion, I considered possible directions the narrative style and structure could take. I could see parallels between music, storytelling and fine needlework: the patterns, the need for balance and structure, the deft touch required to execute the skill, and the hours of practice behind every sound stitch, note or word. In creating a piece, the needleworker, storyteller and the musician, draw the materials of their craft together, be they threads, storylines or melody, for the purpose of forming their work.

Ballads and verse, are part of the Scottish tradition of my ancestors, one described by Mrs Mary Mackellar, originally in an 1895 publication of *Scottish Home Industries*, who observed Highland women while they worked the weave:

These good women, with strong, willing hands, take hold of the web,
and the work proceeds. Slowly at first...the song commences...The
greater number of songs are...in ballad style. (Mackellar cited in
Ross, 1974:24)

Belonging to an oral culture, ballads were sung by women, were the voice of their lives, in kitchens, beside the cradle, in the fields, while they attended to their domestic tasks, and were reinterpreted as they were passed on from generation to generation. In his *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*, K.K. Ruthven considers women the traditional custodians of the folk ballad, who altered and evolved its form in "...authentically feminine ways" (1993:93). Up until the eighteenth century, Ruthven contends that the women's songs were ignored by men, largely because they were deemed low brow, "old wives' tales", and some only came to be published after men had made it their business to "... 'correct' the transcripts that had come their way" (1993:93). I viewed the act of writing the monologues as a subversion of the silences, corrections and diminishment of women's experiences over time; as a reclamation of women's stories and a continuing and collective voicing of the ballad tradition. Structured

into a playscript, these stories about women and told by women, would be given public voice in the realm of theatre, and could challenge what playwright Michelene Wandor considers to be a “carefully maintained dominance” by men of “public, cultural creation” (1993:104-105).

Feminist, Rosalind Coward, suggests in *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, that the *I am* of a woman's life represents the history of oppression shared by all women (1984:185). I did not know if my grandmothers sang songs as they worked, if their lives were accompanied by a tune that had journeyed with them from Scotland, or if a returning chorus echoed the *I am* of their experience. But in my intended writing of a play script, I believed I could imagine the ghost of their songs; could acknowledge the *I am* of their lives as resonant in the lace and needlework they left behind.

Music could lend a melodic meshing of the structure; could provide a sonic return to a theme, or set the tone for, or serve as commentary on, a story or stories. Verse could be employed to similar effect, within the stories themselves, or as a means of enhancing the text's imagery. And monologue, like many ballads, would present the first person, the *I am*, perspective of women's stories.

Whether the songs, monologues and verse would be presented in equal measure, was, at this point, unclear, but music and verse could be used as a type of chorus between monologues, a transition and/or segue between one character's story and the next.

Grandmother/Mother/Daughter

It seemed both inevitable and appropriate, that some of the narrative's focus and themes, whether suggested in the monologues, music or verse, be given to exploring the relationships between mothers and daughters. I sought to build a structure that would reflect and give expression to the intergenerational currents between the child, daughter, mother, grandmother, alluded to by Luce Irigaray in 'And One Doesn't Stir Without The Other':

...You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks? (1997:323)

It was the complexities of women's lives and of their relationships, sadly absent from familial and official records that had motivated the initial project, which I wanted to gain some access

to and to understand. I aimed to assemble the narrative so that an intertextuality could develop between the monologues and reflect Irigary's questions around individual space and the containment of a girl/woman's experiences across generations, and, through these endeavours, allow dimensions "beyond all the masks" to emerge.

The tight borders and stitches of my grandmothers' needlework had become a rich metaphor for that which is not always said or declared, a hidden language echoing far more than surfaces and appearances would suggest. Roszika Parker alludes to this in *The Subversive Stitch*: "...Embroidery as a tool for transmitting feminine behaviour from mother to daughter created both a bond between women and a focus for mutual resentment" (Parker, 1986:4). In each stitch of my grandmothers', in the needleworks passed on from mother to daughter, I saw the containment of "feminine behaviour", a dichotomy of bond and resentment – a feeling echoed in the words of Collette as she observed her daughter sewing:

...Bel-Gazou is silent when she sews, silent for hours on end,
with her mouth firmly closed...She is silent and she – why not
write down the word that frightens me – she is thinking. (Parker,
1986:9-10)

It was in those secretive thoughts that are turned and neatened and tucked away, that I believed lay the voice and story behind each monologue, and it was my aim to respectfully frame and express these within the structure and content of the play.

The Small Things

Mother/daughter relationships, the culminating desires to pay homage to my grandmothers and address the quiet that cloaked the lives of women, are themes of great scope. They suggest at a broad premise, a vast narrative line through the play and an extensive scaffolding of structure in support. In such a landscape, however, subjects could become lost. For as Louis E. Catron writes in *The Elements of Playwriting*: "Your play...gains strength with a more narrow focus on specific actions that are most significant to your vision" (Catron, 1994:20). Should the brush strokes be too broad or the sketches drawn with too light a hand, the opportunity to bring strong voice to the women of the narrative could be hindered and the silences could linger like unheard ghosts. Consequently, the structure needed to arise from a focus on the particulars of women's lives. The Australian historian, Katie Holmes considers a concentration on these particulars, as central to understanding women's experiences: "To study women's daily life involves giving priority to the seemingly insignificant things that absorbed their time" (1995:xiii).

By confining the machinations of the larger world to the margins of the composition, I aimed to structure the play in support and revelation of the hidden threads that can hold a life together or bind it in its web. For ultimately, this is what I love about theatre: it can, as playwright Sam Shepherd says: "... make something be seen that is invisible...you can be watching this thing happening...and something emerges from beyond that..." (Catron, 1994:17). Writing the play was my invitation to imagined characters, to step from the shadows of exclusion, and in performance, perhaps reveal dimensions of the script that I had not envisaged.

Having decided then, on the play's structure featuring monologue, verse and song, I began to consider the characters who would people it, what they could make visible to an audience, what stories might emerge, and where the piece would start.

It was on another trip to the western district, that the character who became the pulse of the play, made herself known.

From the Plains to the Page (notes from my journal)

A winter's morning, I sat on the back step of the shearers' cottage drinking a cup of tea from my thermos. The plains of the Western District stretched before me, brown and grim with drought.

Rain fell here on occasion but not in any predictable fashion. A farm on one side of the road might house some green grass for stock and firm crops, while 20 metres opposite, another struggled with its cracked earth, skinny sheep and failing grain. These farms suffered and had resorted to carting water in by semi-trailer from more fortunate areas of the state. It was as if El Nino and El Nina had drawn clear lines as to who would receive and who would do without.

Sipping my tea and gazing over the paddocks around me, I was attempting to break a drought of my own – writer's block or, more specifically, songwriter's block. My recording equipment, korg keyboard, guitar, and piano accordion, were set up in the small room off the kitchen, all ready for me to rock or roll or, closer to my mood, lament. The farm belonged to my cousin and his wife who had generously offered the use of the cottage for the purpose of my writing and recording of songs.

It was quiet. Too quiet. No distractions. No phone calls or sudden urges to put on that load of washing or think about making something for tea. No internet where I could double check

on the footy news. Nothing to break my stare over the bleak paddocks, or shift the sense that my creative soul creaked like the water tank standing rusted and empty in the paddock. And then the words came.

They dropped onto the page like the first thuds of rain onto dusty soil. And, like a storm, like the tempo of rain, my pen pelted across the page, line after line, with a beat and metre of its own, coursing, unquestioning and unafraid, until it was done.

From whence the words came, remains unclear. My experience suggests that there is no measure or definitive explanation of the creative process. Occasionally though, something is received or found or allowed and the words, phrases, tune, or vision arrive unannounced, like a surprise and welcomed guest.

So the poem, *Gift*, was born. It spoke in the voice of an old woman from another time; one who had toiled and lived on these western plains; one who would feature as the central character in a narrative I was yet to write; and one who would lead me through the years ahead and out of the drought.

I named the narrator of *Gift*, Mary. She spoke in a Scottish dialect and, from her first words, she became the heart of the play script that would follow. Mary's poem placed her firmly in rural Victoria, an old woman considering the moon and the surrounding vast plains; the landscape of her life. It is named *Gift* because of the manner in which it came to me and because of its content: it seemed to give poetic blessing to the work that I had set myself to complete.

Mary could, I reasoned, both open and close the play: appearing at its beginning as a young woman leaving Scotland forever and at its end, in the verse *Gift*, as an old woman talking to and of the moon. The characters as they appeared throughout the intervening narrative, could present chronologically, bookended by the young and old Mary.

From this a plan took shape which appeared to endorse my earlier notions of using verse and song in concert with, and as a chorus to, the monologues: each would be both prefaced and followed by an original song or verse, written to establish the historical context of each character. At this stage, I envisaged that the respective monologues would be set during particular periods in each woman's life (eg. early years prior to marriage, mid-life, old age) and from these, the audience would be given a glimpse of the women, their dreams, aspirations, fears. Post monologue, the song/verse would serve to both punctuate their

stories, and create a transition from one character to the next: the new character would present her own tale and simultaneously comment on how life transpired for her mother.

A Straight Seam Takes a Turn

This structure seemed clear, sequential and one that enabled the coverage of a large span of time and an unambiguous embodiment of the era in which the characters found themselves. Over several months, I wrote and rewrote monologues; developed characters and character voice, and researched and explored historic timelines. However, there was, by the positing of stories in neat chronology, something absent from the telling.

This sense of ‘something’ arose intuitively, and if I chose to ignore it, I would be silencing a trusted aspect of my creative process; I would be drawing up my own version of a family tree that neatly named names in a tidy order, at the cost of hushing up a valuable part of myself. It was difficult to consider this change; to reconsider months and months of work; to put aside well thought out plans and turn in another direction, but the sense that I could better serve my instincts and include in the structure a stronger homage to my grandmothers, prevailed. The American actor and writer of monologues, Spalding Gray, wrote:

I begin to get a structure through mistakes and reinterpretation.
I’m not working specifically with a conscious mind. I’m not at all
a person who works through contrivance and manipulation of
reality where you think, What would make a good story? But
rather I work ...with dreams, mistakes, serendipity, coincidence,
synchronicity. (Gray, 1993:81-82)

And there was a sense of contrivance in the linear structure I had planned, a feeling of doing what I *ought* to do, and my subconscious mind was railing against it; trying to get my attention. It was in a synchronistic moment, while ironing one of my grandmother’s doilies, that the problem and its solution became clear: the sequential structure did not reflect the needlework itself. The prevalent practice of crochet in my grandmothers’ era, “was a skill that most young girls learnt from their mothers or grandmothers...Throughout the 19th century the art of crochet dominated” (Isaacs, 1987:90). I wanted the significance of crochet in my grandmothers’ lives and the manner in which it was made, reflected in the structure of the text.

My grandmothers’ needlework was spun, woven, crocheted like a web; like a compass rose that wound around and back into itself. Their lace work usually began in the middle and grew

out from there. Some became doilies while others were designed so that the individual circles could be sewn together into a larger piece. According to an elderly aunt of mine, when crocheting pieces for their homes, the women would meet in a farmhouse kitchen; sit in a sewing circle and *talk*. Could I, then, take a more cyclical approach to the structuring of the play, so that, in its very form and spirit, it embodied the nature of their craft, the doilies they crocheted, the sewing circles to which they belonged and the stories they chose to tell (or not) as they worked their fine loops of thread from the centre and out?

This was now the challenge: to recreate the play's structure so that the monologues could complement each other and form commentary in the movement from one character to the next, but not in terms of a hard, straight and chronological line of reference. To bring this to form, to give it a life both on the page and in performance, required a structure that, when observed from the perspectives of the individual monologues and the work as a whole, held together like strands in a web. The monologues then, would be presented in counterpoint: like the threads in a doily crocheted in opposite, cyclic pattern; a minute hand ticking clockwise, while the hour hand devolves into the past.

Alterations: The Mentor, Protagonist and Elliptical Characters in the Structure

To bring these changes into effect and create a structure that echoed the concentric circles of a lace doily, my first stitch must begin from the heart of the piece – the voice of Mary in the poem *Gift*. For it was here, in the lines of the verse, that Mary could establish herself as a mentor/chorus who delivers the philosophical paradigm through which the audience may view the narrative line of the play (Barranger,2002:28), and who as an archetype, functions as the "...aspect of personality that is connected with all things..."(Volger, 1999:47).

Rather than bookend a series of chronological monologues, as mentor and chorus, Mary could become a pervasive presence throughout the work, to the play itself, the characters presented in it and to the audience. Both structurally and symbolically, Mary would literally (through the poem *Gift*) bring to the play an expression of "...all those characters who teach and protect heroes and give them gifts..." (Volger, 1997:47). Beginning with the opening monologue of *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, where she bestows her blessing on those who will follow:

...I pray tha' m' sons grow strong an' m' girls grow wise
an' grow honest an' true under these western skies
an' may they profit th' soil from here tae MacLean's
an' in each, blessed return/ find somethin' o' me...(p.9)

Mary's wise interludes, as they appeared on the page, provided a pre-empting and echoing of the themes that arose while writing the play. In the completed work, *Gift* is Mary's (and the play's) only monologue spoken in verse. As a Scot, however, her dialect is rich in imagery, delivering a no nonsense and astute poetry to the heart and tone of her prose. This was a choice made in reference to my ancestors' origins in the Scottish Highlands. Although the symbolism associated with this and its inspiration when devising the script will be explored in a later chapter, it is worth noting here, that Mary signified to me a meshing of reference, between the characters as they presented, the audience, and a universal ancestry steeped in myth.

A Central Seam in a Circular Piece

Having decided that Mary could be the returning mentor/chorus of the work, it became apparent that, from a structural point of view, greater cohesion could be introduced to the play, through the creation of a central character, a protagonist whose journey would weave in counterpoint to Mary, a protagonist who welds "...her intellect and energy against ... an imperfect world" (Barranger, 2002:100).

To bring the protagonist's journey into the play's circular structure, I created the character of Bee, who addresses the audience via monologue, at three different occasions throughout the work: near the beginning, in the middle and near its end. If described in terms of needlework, Bee's story and struggles suggest a recurring stitch through the piece, from which the other monologues fan out in an elliptical and thematic augmentation of the work: the monologues circling those of Bee are reflections of the themes emerging from her protagonist's journey.

To fortify Bee's story and provide the play with a strong, central seam, her monologues were crafted with the view of encouraging the audience to care about her and to ask, "What will she do now?" The choices a protagonist makes in response to the "forces of antagonism" they encounter on their narrative journey should, according to Robert McKee, lead to their becoming a "fully realised, multidimensional and deeply empathetic character" (1997:317). However, because Bee and all the characters appear in monologue, and do not encounter an antagonist onstage, the circumstances or events that agitate change or growth, are "recalled by the speaker," (Bennett, 2007:12) and reported on after they have occurred.

Playwrights throughout history such as Marlowe, Chekhov and Shakespeare have scripted imagined incidents off stage to create progression through their works (Hornby, 1995:84-5) and Alan Bennett wrote that, in terms of monologue, "for all that there is just one person

talking there is quite a bit of action. A section will often end with a seemingly throw away remark that carries the plot forward” (Bennett, 2007:11). So it is that the agitating circumstances in Bee’s off stage story are alluded to at the end of each of her monologues: *Bride to Bee*, closes with the lines, “And I will go back to study. We’ll manage somehow. Things are different now,” leaving the audience to question *how* she will manage and *if* things are different. This pattern continues as her circumstances intensify across the play, through *Got You Pegged*, to her concluding monologue where she closes with the first words she spoke in the play, “So. I’m organized.” Here, my intention was to leave the audience with a sense of hopeful apprehension: they have heard these words before and are left to question if this time, Bee can continue to cut the cloth of her life to the right fit.

In Bee’s three monologues, she reveals the pressures in her life that propel her story forwards. In placing significant actions and occurrences *offstage* between Bee’s monologues, her progression, and that of the “entire play” (Hornby, 1995:84) is structured to advance her story “toward something beyond” (Langer cited in Hornby, 1995:84). However, to create cohesion in the cyclic structure, so that Bee’s journey found echoes in the elliptical monologues, required that the challenges she encounters in her story did not “... just exist for themselves but are always reflecting in other incidents” (Hornby, 1995:85), that they find a thematic mirroring in the stories of the other characters’.

Consequently, the sequencing of the monologues in the structure became my imperative, for this would impact on how the work was interpreted and understood: as Richard Hornby noted, “rearranging sequence actually rearranges meaning” (1995:84). Given the structure’s compact, cyclic paradigm, it did feel at times, when making decisions as to which monologue should be included, redrafted or go where, as though I was moving furniture in a small house, that by shifting one thing, everything had to change.

Overall, my aims when arranging the monologues in the structure were: to represent women of different age and era, separately, yet together, in the one story; to create a through line in Bee’s story, commented on by Mary and reflected in the characters of the elliptical stories; to establish relationships in their groupings and pairings of the monologues that pushed the narrative line of the play forward and out; and to leave the audience with the sense that the stories, through their sequencing, travel full circle. Eventually, after experimenting with multiple drafts and rewrites in an effort to meet these aims, I wrote the names of each monologue on separate pieces of paper (each of a specific colour denoting the age of each character) and shuffled them around until I could *see* the sequence that would create a cohesive narrative line through the structure of the play.

Structurally, this pattern continues, and the monologues are ordered, paired or grouped cyclically to give returning voice to the different stages within a girl/woman's life, and provide echo and contrast to the preceding and subsequent stories as they unfold.

Mary's poise and wisdom, as displayed in *Gift*, for example, is in sharp contrast to Bee's disarray in *Bride to Bee*. Similarly, the pairing of *Something Blue* and *Maid to Measure* are presented after Mary's *Test o' the Weave* with the intention of pointing the narrative line of the playscript to characters of middle age and whose respective monologues reflect the opposite of the other. (I considered them as representing strands in the structure's web: as one views her life from the perspective of NW, for instance, the other faces NE.)

Placed in a deliberately unspecified relationship to the protagonist, Bee, and in an undefined 'modern' setting, directs the focus onto the maturing years of a woman's life, and can be seen as silhouetting who Bee might become, as the further "tests o' the weave" that she may encounter in middle age.

The Centre of the Web

From here, Mary's *Kindling the Flame* introduces the grouping, *The Girl Web of Learning Pt1*, *Got You Pegged* and *The Girl Web of Learning Pt2*. The play is directed into monologues spoken by a pre-pubescent girl, and her story is told in two parts, before and after Bee's mid-point soliloquy. From this literal centre of the play, stems a mirroring of a woman's life, a radial vantage point over her days from birth, to girlhood, her child bearing years, to middle and old age. The dramatic present of *Got You Pegged* marks a structural crossroad for Bee and those who elliptically serve her story: Bee is at the midway mark of her journey and the concentric circles of the play's past and present, envelope her at this turning point/point of no return: will she go on as she has, or will she make changes to her course in order to survive and thrive?

Counterpointing Stories

Bee's story is driven forward in time by this imperative, while the stories that are worked around her's, in this second half of the play, now surface from the past: Mary's monologues, *Sweeping the Corners* and *The Return*, precede and follow the pairing of *Tilda and the Lost Sheep* and *Rachael Making Jam*. Tilda and Rachael reflect an opposite in the other and, rather than indicate Bee's possible future, in an inversion of *Something Blue* and *Maid to Measure*, they suggest a familial past from which she may have emerged. Mary's *Sweeping the Corners* forms the structured link between the central grouping of monologues and the play's passage into a world of those who have gone before.

The order of Mary, Bee, Mary, in the final grouping of monologues, mirror the first three of *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, and delivers the cyclical structure of the play's narrative line full circle, both literally and figuratively: as Bee prepares to leave for Scotland, Mary leaves Scotland forever. Bee's monologues at the beginning, middle and end of *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, are in some measure representative of a three act structure. However, I have aimed to combine this with a cyclic, non-linear form and it is the character of Mary, who makes this possible. Mary is the timeless voice of sagacity, who links the orbiting characters, the past and the future, who is mentor to Bee, and is the returning, circular stitch who sews their stories together.

In structuring *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords* on the design of a compass rose or web, in acknowledgement of my grandmothers' needlework, I have endeavored to map the course of the characters in the play across a cyclic narrative, each in individual passage, yet on a voyage that they share.

Monologue in the Structure

The structure developed in parallel with my writing and rewriting of the monologues. *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, is after all a theatrical script with a tale to tell and there were many challenges encountered when creating fifteen economic monologues that each contributed to the larger story of the play. While deliberating over the many drafts of the characters' stories and considering how to best employ them into the play's structure, I read and reread the works of playwrights and authors familiar to me (Alan Bennet, Sam Shepherd, Geoffrey Chaucer) and others that I discovered in the course of my research (Suzan Lori-Parks, Hella Haasse, Judith Hertzberg, Anna Deveare Smith).

Playwrights who used monologue were of particular interest to me: Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* series and Judith Hertzberg's monologue play, 'The Caracal', presented characters cast in minimalist settings to maximum theatrical effect, and Anna Deveare Smith's renderings of characters drawn from her research and travels through the United States (*Four American Characters*, 2005, URL posted 2007), were astonishing for her ability to find the heart and voice in each portrayal, without the aid of complicated stage production or props (this too was an intention of mine, to create a narrative that could be economically produced, with simple staging).

A short work for two actors, by Suzan-Lori Parks entitled, 'Now Gregory Hines is Dead' (2006:283), expanded my understanding of the theatrical dimensions that can be evoked by a

playwright: Parks' writes lyrical poise and stillness into her text, and employs verse, the tempo of it, to bring poignant resonance to the character of 'Man'. It reads like an uncharted song, and although a soliloquy, is staged in the presence of a wordless character, 'Shadow'. The use of verse in this characterization, the flow and economy of it, weaves the audience/reader into its rhythm and, like a silent chorus, the character of 'Shadow,' a lingering reminder of what is not spoken, draws the audience into the drama.

Parks' work influenced my early thoughts around structuring the play: I imagined verse and music almost as silhouettes of the monologues and, although not silent like Parks' character of 'Shadow', could serve to remind the audience of what dwelled beyond the characters' words. Changing the narrative's structure, shifted these designs: rather than music and verse being the theatrical means through which the audience are reminded of the characters' unspoken dimensions, Mary now assumes this role, in her returning, steady commentaries throughout the work.

Between the Lines of Monologue

When Alan Bennett wrote of his *Talking Heads* characters: "None of these narrators is after all telling the whole story" (2007:39), he was speaking of the aspect of monologue where a character's view of the world can be exposed through what they *do not* say. In *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, this feature of monologue, where the speaker reveals her "conscious and unconscious thought processes" (Barranger, 2002:148) was aimed at exposing each of the characters in the headlights of their circumstances, so that they become artless narrators who "are telling a story to the meaning of which they are not entirely privy" (Bennett, 2007:40). I saw this as a means of inviting the audience into that area between the perceiver and the perceived, where "...the rest of the story...[is] peopled and pictured by the viewer (Bennett, 2007:40). This aligned with my desire to draw the audience into the small moments in the lives of the women and relegate any definitive, historical contextualizing of events in the larger world, to the margins of their stories. The individual perspective, the "...single point of view..." (Bennett, 2007:39) offered through monologue could highlight these 'small moments' in large focus, so that a character might reveal to an audience that which she avoids and speaks around. As Bennett said of his *Talking Heads* characters:

...Miss Ruddock in *A Lady of Letters* ...is not a public spirited guardian of morals...Lesley in *Her Big Chance* thinks she has a great deal to offer both as an actress and a person, and Susan, the vicar's wife in *Bed Among the Lentils*, doesn't realize it's not just the woman

at the off-licence but the whole parish that knows she is on the drink.”

(2007:40)

Like Bennett, Dutch writer, Judith Herzberg has created a character in her monologue play, ‘The Caracal’ (1997:63-94), whose words reflect one reality while her actual life is something else. The play focuses on a series of phone calls made and received by a woman in the course of one evening, all of which mirror the dysfunction in herself, her relationships and her life. Yet it emerges during the work, that she is the headmistress of a school for children with behavioral issues. She is articulate and confident in her conversations, but she is an articulate and confident mess. Herzberg said: “...what I try to do is make the audience feel the same confusion that I feel when I look at reality” (1997:2).

Through the protagonist of *Bride to Bee*, I sought to establish with the audience, these cross currents between the character’s self-perception and reality, early in the play’s structure. Bee opens her monologue with the line, “So. I’m organized,” and then proceeds to show us the opposite, as she becomes drunk, talks to her dead relatives, reveals that she is pregnant, and has given up her studies, as she prepares for her wedding.

Similarly, the woman of *Maid to Measure* believes that she is blessed with wisdom and self knowledge, although her views and actions tell us otherwise. Tilda, of *Tilda and the Lost Sheep*, criticizes the shepherd for leaving ninety nine “perfectly good stock” to seek the one “stupid enough” to become separated from the flock, yet it is she who has become divided from the mob. While Rachael of *Rachael Making Jam* believes it a sin to waste, she is preserving herself in another time and world, as life goes on around her. And the Girl of *The Girl – Web of Learning Pts 1 and 2*, attempts to correct the crooked seam which her mother has told her is “...like a lie in the garment that will be found out when you wear it”, yet she cannot tell her mother the complete truth of her hazardous life in the classroom. There are two exceptions to this pattern of self delusion and they are the character of *Something Blue*, who exhibits some introspection and consciousness of what her life has become, and Mary, who as mentor, is a guiding star across the work.

The characters and their monologues, were rewritten, edited and re-sequenced to fit the structure as it evolved. Weaving Mary’s returning monologues with those of Bee and the other characters into the narrative of the play, giving voice to seven points of view from women of different age and era and across fifteen monologues, demanded an economy of words to ensure that the play didn’t run into next week. It was an aim of mine to keep the running time of the play to approximately one hour, to not “...over egg the pudding”

(Bennett, 2007:40) and when wording the monologues I was conscious of crafting each to an average of six hundred words. To accomplish this, I have trimmed dialogue rather than added to it and in doing so, have adhered to my songwriting practice: a good song says a lot in few words. In keeping the monologues sparse, they reflect a musical equivalent of a song presented in simple voice and guitar arrangement.

Music – A Change of Tune

Changing the structure of *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, impacted on how I envisaged incorporating music/the ballad into the narrative: I began to think of the monologues themselves as the characters' songs/ballads (almost mirroring a song cycle), as continuing a Highland tradition of women singing their stories as they worked, with Mary's commentaries serving as their reprising chorus.

The interpretation and presentation of the music here, is only one possible version. It was written to adapt to whichever style future productions of the narrative may take and/or to accommodate future productions of *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, that may elect not to include the music, or where a theatre group does not possess the musical skills necessary to do so. The play script was completed with these possibilities in mind: the music can add another dimension if included in a production, but the monologues were written to stand on their own, should that be the preferred or necessary incarnation of the work.

The accompanying recording is a simple, folk-like melody, played over chords in drone inversions, that can be arranged to the style of a lament, a straightforward folk song, dressed in harmony, given a beat, or laid bare and lonely on the breath of a pipe. This reprisal of musical theme echoes Mary's presence through the work, creates a sonic landscape which reflects her Scottish origins and evokes a sense of belonging to an ongoing tune.

My intuitive moment at the ironing table instigated a restructuring of the narrative that reflected, in its cyclic form, the needlework of my grandmothers'. Like a song, where its lyrical imagery is composed in accordance with its melody, the shift in the narrative's arrangement, cultivated a layering of symbolism across the monologues that grew from and with my concept of a structure designed on a doily. The cloth, the colour blue, spiders, lace gloves, household objects, are symbolic extensions of the cyclic structure and the stories it holds in its web.

Central to these images is the motif of the cloth, and in the following chapter, I will examine its significance in acknowledging the needlework of my grandmothers', the marginalization of women's stories, women's traditions and customs, and its symbolic function within the dramatic present.

References in the text to the colour blue, will be discussed in terms of its shading the monologues with associated imagery of bruising, the blues etc.; my studies of spider mythology will be explored in the context of the web, the myth of Arachne and Athena, how these led to an understanding of the marginalized Spider Grandmother of matriarchal myth, and where I have employed these investigations, in terms of spider imagery throughout the play.

CHAPTER 3

SYMBOLISM – CLOTH AND WEB

I often had the feeling, that the imagery housed within *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, chose me and my work and not the other way around; that while building the play's structure, its symbolism managed to sneak onto the premises in my tradie's toolkit, and found its way into the shape of the walls, the height of the ceilings, and the view through the windows of the text. Writers, both in and out of academia, have referred to a guiding, subconscious hand when creating their work. Author and academic Lelia Green said in her presentation at the 15th annual AAWP conference, *Strange Bedfellows*: "It can appear as though there is no process of choice, no sifting of possible alternatives: at least at a conscious level" (2010:2). Green considers the critical evaluation applied to the "visceral process" of creative writing in an academic exegesis, as an analysis only possible in hindsight – after the creative work is completed; after the writer has written "what they know they don't know" into form (2010:7). Novelist Anne Rivers Siddons reflects a similar view and accredits a devaluing of, and separation from, dreaming and myth as "crippling" (1993:243), attributing "that dark old country where dreams comes from" (1993:238) as providing the writer/artist a wellspring of imagery.

My response to the lace doily on the ironing table, for example, was intuitive and came out of "that dark old country" referred to by Rivers Siddons, with such force and conviction, that it prompted my reconsidering of months of work, and beginning again with a new structure. Trusting this impulse was akin to catching the moving ball of an image/impression/idea and running with it through draft after draft and working it into form. This process perhaps aligns with those of creative people studied by psychologist Sarnoff Mednick, who found that they all exhibited an ability to assimilate disparate ideas, images, facts, perceptions from the subconscious and draw them together in the formation of a project, to use these insights to satisfy a creative outcome (1962:221).

Pursuing an incipient acceptance of what I did not know, developing the cyclic structure (in itself symbolic of a web), invited layers of imagery that I associated with the doily/web/ the needlework of my grandmothers'. As the imagery emerged and took shape during the writing of the monologues, it highlighted that which exists in and between the lines of the text: what Robert McKee refers to as the truth of the script, that is "...located behind, beyond, inside, below the surface of things, holding reality together or tearing it apart" (1997:24).

The cloth, the colour blue, symbols drawn from, or references to, spider mythology, and stage props made up of household objects, mirrored aspects of lives lived in the margins of a larger world, what I both did and did not know of my grandmothers, the domestic realm in which they dwelled, and emerged in monologues, as representations of the "...dreams, fears and inner voices" (Barranger, 2002:77) of the characters taking centre stage.

This chapter will explore the imagery that I have developed through the play. I begin with a discussion of the cloth's representation of a tactile connection with my grandmothers; its metaphoric and literal use in the play to both indicate and subvert the silences around my grandmothers' lives; its significance and purpose within the context of the monologues themselves; and how it influenced my imagining of the characters as I wrote them.

In a later section, I will examine my use of the colour blue (my references to bruising, "the blues" etc.) as visual and metaphoric images linking the stories of the women, and finally, the influence of, and my research into, spider myths, how/why I sought to expose, within the narrative's text, the Olympian story of Athena and Arachne, in deference to the more ancient tales of the Spider Grandmother and where and why I believe this symbolism and imagery supports the work.

The Cloth – from Hand to Hand

The imagery of the piece of cloth reflected my tactile connection with the needlecraft made by my grandmothers'. It signified the fabric of their days and years, and the familial weaving of small threads and invisible stitches, that stretched between their worlds and mine. In its quiet folds, I heard the hush surrounding their lives, silences indicating an "...unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being" (Olsen, 1980:121), of the forces which can diminish dreams and muffle the expression of a soul and a life.

Placing the cloth in the hands of each character; retrieving it from a neglectful historic landscape - where author, Olive Schreiner, saw in a brace of embroidered fabric caught in a street gutter "...the passion of some woman's soul" (cited in Parker, 1984:15) - and employing it as the central motif of the characters' stories, was a symbolic inversion of the silences around my grandmothers' lives and a continuing visual allusion through the play, to the one known area of self expression afforded my women ancestors, their needlework.

Further, the passing of the cloth between the characters of the monologues, is an acknowledgement of customs of the past: where Highland women, would gather to collectively work the web and "...toss and tumble the cloth, passing the folds from hand to

hand” (Mackellar, 1974:24); it mirrors the intergenerational skills of needlecraft, where “...craft has been practiced by women throughout history... a tradition passed down from woman to woman” (Gandolfo and Grace, 2009:17), and reminds of the consignment of women’s crafts (like their stories and ballads) to the margins of what is considered first rate art:

Our creativity derives from non-prestigious folk traditions. It is diverse and integrated into our lives; it is cooked and eaten, washed and worn. Contemporary standards either ignore our creativity or rate it as second class...We share our images and experiences. (Ross as cited by Parker, 1996, 208)

Integrating the image of the cloth across the play represents a symbolic rescuing of these customs, skills and stories from the boondocks of historic and cultural recognition. This was a motivating force, when writing the monologues and the cloth became a portal through which I imagined the stories I desired to tell.

Often, when placing the cloth in the hands of a character, she would find a use for it: wrapping it about herself, setting it to cleaning, or holding it to her breast. Playwright Suzanne Lori-Parks, reflected on a similar experience when interviewed about her play, *Fucking A*, where she expressed the importance of listening to and observing the voices and images that visit when writing (2007). This did require that I trust the unexpected directions pursued by a character, as novelist Elizabeth Harwick noted: “... what you thought was the creative idea ahead of you vanishes or becomes something else” (1989:206). In *Something Blue*, for example, the character who I had envisaged as a focused and intelligent career woman, threw her leg up on a chair and tied the cloth around her thigh as a garter. I followed her in my writing, went with her, and from her opening Liza Minnelli pose, the cloth invoked her recalling of her own wedding, her thoughts on bruising, apples falling from trees, her fears for her daughter, forget-me-nots, the hollow knowledge of her in the workplace, her discovery and gentle release of the money spider and, eventually, her bitter tears.

In other instances, my research informed my decision making: Rachael’s advise on how to make jelly came from a Country Women’s Association cookbook (2009: 332 - 333), and I learned of the Highland wedding tradition, detailed by Mary in *Test o’ the Weave*, as a consequence of my field work in Scotland, where, at the West Highland Museum (www.westhighlandmuseum.org.uk) in Fort William (An Gearasdan), I studied an exhibit of a delicate woollen shawl woven in the Highland tradition. The shawl in this display was made

of the softest of fleece, taken from the chin and throat of the lamb, and the design and pattern to which it had been woven, was passed from mother to daughter over several generations. I found a combination of poetry and imagery in this custom that suggested to me something of the sacrificial lamb in the innocence of the young bride: I saw the fullness of the shawl and the mother to daughter knowledge in its design, crushed as it passed through the wedding band; the canniness of its weaving in surviving the test; the loss of girlhood to the confines of marriage; and the trials of strength that awaited the bride.

My imaginings of the cloth expanded as a result of this passage of research, and evolved so that the “one bonny thing” instituted a marriage theme across a grouping of three monologues: as bee’s veil in *Bride to Bee*, the shawl passed through the wedding band in *Test o’ th’ Weave*, and another constricting circlet, the garter, in *Something Blue*.

In all other monologues, whether flicked about by Tilda, tied to a chair as a jelly bag by Rachael, laboured over by the Girl, the cloth’s function in each scene, is aimed at deepening the pulse of the characters’ stories, so that the audience are invited into a visual dimension of language, beyond the words that are spoken. However, to do this, to establish the cloth as the play’s central motif, it was necessary to introduce it as such from the beginning of the work.

Just as Judith Hertzberg featured a telephone centre stage from the beginning of and throughout her monologue play, *The Caracal* (where it served as a quiet conduit for The Woman’s morphing from one manipulative/desperate conversation to the next), the cloth, in all its incarnations, is an axis through and between the monologues of *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*. Consequently, from Mary’s opening lines, as she wraps the cloth around her in contemplation of her life, I sought to accent the heart of the work (Mary with the cloth), to institute an underpinning of the stories that are to be told, so that by play’s end, the audience might reflect on the “one bonny thing”, having followed the thread of its significance when handed on from woman to woman, until its return again to Mary, in her monologue, *Voyage*.

The cloth is the shared and constant image through the play, appearing as a shawl, veil, garter, scarf, and apron, a baby’s nappy, a straight seam, a duster, jelly bag, swag and the “one bonny thing”. While other props are featured and then returned to the washing basket, the cloth is present in every scene. It is the visual and literal connecting thread that both acknowledges the unsung crafts, customs and skills of women, and integrates the characters’ stories across the play, in the dramatic present.

The Use of Blue

In another intuitive choice, I decided that the cloth ought to be blue. A primary colour, I associated blue with the vast skies of the Western District of Victoria, the blue/grey of their volcanic plains; with bruising; the 'blues'; the image of that little flower, the forget me not; with shadows, ghosts, bags under the eyes/weariness; with Mary's last vision of her mother and the oceans that separated them forever; with the predominantly blue *Saltire*, or flag of Scotland, and with Bee and her daughter's flying off into the blue as they embark on their journey to Scotland's Inner Hebrides.

Within the dialogue, I gave accent and layering to the colour blue, with the purpose that it emerge like a bruise that is unseen at first, but is slowly revealed by the women through the telling of their stories. It is in the third monologue, *Something Blue*, for instance, that the colour blue, bruising, forget-me-nots, are referred to by the character, in a projected fanning out, both of Bee's unspoken fears and of Mary's implied warning in *Test o' th' Weave*. Through her expansions on why brides wear blue, my intention was to introduce a subtle and underlying "blue note" to subsequent monologues, for although other characters may experience and exhibit their distress or inner bruising, the character of *Something Blue* is the only woman in the play to address her feelings around this, directly to herself.

And so blue, via references to it in the characters' monologues and in the dye of the cloth, became another visual thread linking the women. It colours a shawl, veil and apron; it is snipped and clipped and worn next to the face in *Maid to Measure*; it shades a crooked seam, changes the hue of Mr Hedge's scar and appears on dubious weather poodles; it is the blue spark, the heart of life that Mary sees; it is the fastidious dusting away at Tilda's frustration and anger; it is the bruised fruit caught in the weave of Rachel's sadness and wasted life; it is a gathering up of stories, Bee's drawing together the strands of her life, as she prepares for her journey to Scotland; and in the one bonny thing, it represents the fabric and tone of the play's voyage and voyagers.

Mythed Again

Myth, in the words of Timberlake Wertenbaker's Chorus in *The Love of the Nightingale*, is "...an unwanted truth reverberating through time" (sc. 8, 31, cited in Roth, 2009:47). Reinterpreted by playwrights across centuries who employed the universal language of myth to "...speak to audiences..." of their day (Roth, 2009:42), this "unwanted truth" has inspired tragedians of ancient Greece, Shakespeare, Brecht, to writers of the twenty first century.

Among those who have reinterpreted the Philomela myth, for example, are: Ovid (*Metamorphoses*), Shakespeare (*Titus Andronicus*), Sam Shepherd (*Silent Tongue*), while feminist re-workings of it include, Timberlake Wertenbaker (*The Love of the Nightingale*) and Naomi Iizuka (*Polaroid Stories*) (Roth, 2009:52).

Wertenbaker and Iizuka, among writers such as Hella Haasse (*A Thread in the Dark*), Ellin McLaughlin (*Iphigenia and Other Daughters*), and Ariane Mnouchkine (*Les Atrides*) have brought to ancient patriarchal stories a feminist theatrical perspective: Helen Haasse considered her reinterpretation of the Minotaur myth, as an essential exploration of “people of a feminine sex” (Haasse cited by Kolk, 1997:2), and McLaughlin said of her reworking of the Oresteian legend that “the stories have a claim on us, just as we have a claim on the stories” (Malnig, 2009:31); that her plays “address the margin of the epic” which strike at “...some essential truth about women’s existence” (Malnig, 2009:32).

As a theatrical work about women, spoken by women and written by a woman, *Hidden Stitches*, *Silent Chords*, draws from a well of marginalized, feminine experiences, with each monologue carrying its own “unwanted truth” into the dramatic present.

Writing the monologues, I heard what Irish poet Eavan Boland refers to as, “...the noise of myth...[that]...makes the same sound as a shadow” (Roth, 2009:52). It echoed the enduring legacy and beauty of my grandmothers’ lacework; the doily-inspired structure of the playscript, and these images, evoked parallels with the spider and the spider’s web; of quiet spinning hands at work; of that which is hidden and relegated to the corners of our lives. Woven into the underbelly of these images, were the themes of repression, fear, isolation, poison, and danger, of being caught in the web, and the relentless working and reworking that is a spider’s life. Writing the monologues from this perspective, I felt that I had entered what academic and indologist, Wendy Doniger, refers to in *The Implied Spider* as “...the shared humanity, the shared life experience, that supplies the web-building material, the raw material of the narrative to countless human web-makers” (1998:61), that the characters were stepping out of, or I was stepping into, a larger story of “web makers” which appeared to spin itself into being, or at least into my awareness of it.

Jungian psychiatrist, Jean Shinoda Bolen speaks of this experience in her text *Goddesses in Everywoman*:

When a woman senses that there is a mythic dimension to something she is undertaking, that knowledge inspires deep creative centres in her...a

myth is like a dream that we recall even when it is not understood, because it is symbolically important...No wonder myths invariably seem familiar. (1985:6)

When exploring this “mythic dimension” referred to by Bolen, I trusted and intuited the images associated with the spider and the web as they appeared to me; I sought to catch them in my own web; to “...take the spider to be...the maker of culture...who spins the web of myth” (Doniger, 1998:61), and weave them into an illustrative and symbolic language throughout the play.

And so I began to research the Olympian myth of Arachne and Athena with the intention of developing “...open ended” (Friedman, 2009:8) layers in the text, which could invite “audiences to engage in the process of interpretation” (Friedman, 2009:8). My investigations expanded into an understanding of older, matriarchal myths associated with the Spider Grandmother, and these, presented me a new perspective of the Arachne and Athena myth, and ultimately impacted on how I developed the spider imagery within the play.

In this section I will give scope to how my thoughts around these myths evolved, and where and why I applied these new insights to the imagery of the text. However, I will begin with a brief version of the Olympian myth of Athena and Arachne, to lend clarity and context to the discussion.

(NB. My interpretation of the Arachne/Athena myth as presented here, is drawn from versions as told by Ionna Popadopoulou – Belmehdi in ‘Greek Weaving or the Feminine in Antithesis’ (1994), Sarat Maharaj in ‘Arachne’s Genre: Towards Inter-Cultural Studies in Textiles’ (1991), Janet Shinoda Bolen in *Goddesses in Everywoman* (1985) and *Goddesses in Older Women* (2002), and from my discussions with Jungian psychologist, dream therapist and author Peter O’Connor).

Arachne and Athena – the Myth

Although a mortal of lowly birth, Arachne was a fine and respected weaver who hailed from Attica, on the border of the Grecian Empire. Her mother having died, Arachne was raised by her father – a dyer of purple cloth.

Arachne was famous for her weaving throughout Hypaepa of Lydia. Her fame reached the ears of the goddess Athena, the Olympian deity of wisdom, weaving, strategy and war, who visited Arachne. Disguised as an old woman, Athena warned Arachne not to offend the gods

with a display of too much pride in her work. Arachne declared that she could better Athena herself in a competition of weaving. Athena stepped from her disguise and a contest began.

Athena wove a tapestry that followed an accepted form representing order: one bordered in olive leaves and depicting her defeat of Poseidon – a victory which prompted the population of Athens to name the city after her. Arachne’s tapestry broke from tradition: bordered in unruly ivy, it illustrated twenty one acts of infidelity and untrustworthiness committed by the gods – all acts involved the abuse of girls and women.

Enraged at Arachne’s lack of respect for those in authority, Athena destroyed the tapestry – although she was impressed by the work, which was superior to her own – and hit Arachne over the head, cutting the mortal girl’s face.

Rather than bow to the gods, Arachne hung herself. In a Mt Olympian version of compassion, Athena loosened the tension of the noose and sprinkled Arachne with the juice, Aconite.

This turned Arachne into a spider, doomed to weave until the end of the world. She was now a captive in her own web and would forever be a threat to, and threatened by, man.

My early readings of the myth, inspired a strong identification with, and sympathy for, Arachne. She declared a pride in her work and dared to challenge the behaviour of those in authority through it. Conversely, Athena’s reaction to Arachne’s weaving, left me in doubt regarding her Olympian attributes of wisdom and restraint. For it was not the quality of Arachne’s weaving that so upset the goddess, but its content that criticised the morality of those on Mt Olympus. In my writer’s mind, Athena turned into a power-suited, uncle-woman; the type of character who would step on heads, as she forged her career path, yet clothed her true nature in the disguise of order and moderation.

As a goddess of patriarchal myth, Athena was upheld in western culture, as representing an ideal of womanhood, an attitude reflected in the words of English art critic and essayist, John Ruskin, who deemed her “...a corrective, sobering force...the law, the norm...”(Maharaj, 1991:75). Or as Ionna Papadopoulou-Belmehdi contends: the story of Arachne and Athena is “...an ideal tale to scare young girls” (1994:52), for it points to the fate of those who venture beyond the borders of the norm, the marginalisation of those who are perceived, like Arachne, as primeval, monstrous or other.

Arachne is pitted against a “...male centred projection of the feminine” (Maharaj, 1991:70) in Athena; the goddess who, as the male ideal of perfect womanhood, “...sprang out of Zeus’

head as a fully grown woman” (Bolen, 1985:76). This, according to Bolen, mirrors a subjugation of the symbols of power and wisdom of older, mother-based beliefs, to the service of the now, masculine order (Bolen, 1985:20-21). In pre-biblical, pre-olympian times, *Chokmah* and *Sophia*, were names attributed to the spider/creator (Bolen, 2002:37). The Ashanti culture confers the creation of the world on the “Great Spider” (Michalski and Michalski, 2010:14), and the “Spider Woman”, “Thought Woman”, and “Grandmother Spider”, are divine figures in a number of Native American myths (Teorey, 2010:1).

The diminishment of the Spider Grandmother; this Olympian banishment of a mortal girl to hang from the corners of the world, represents for Popadopoulou-Belmehdi “...an unaccomplished feminine life...” (1994:52): the woman who watches the world from its parameters, and will clear the room, or be stepped on, if she enters into it.

Pondering the evolution of these myths, expanded and shifted my understanding of them into a more ambiguous realm, where they were not defined by “...any single version...but to...a series of tellings” (Doniger, 1998:3). I began to experience sympathy for Athena. Not for her ruthless application of the Olympian sense of order and law, but that the myth had reduced her to an aspect of the Great Mother/Spider Grandmother, to a virtual yes-woman, or personal assistant, to Zeus.

Like Arachne’s metamorphosis from creator of the universe to a tragic mortal, Athena too, had diminished according to her usefulness (or not) within a patriarchal construct. Having both suffered from the distortions of their story, they were now half starved versions of full-bodied, full-blooded women; their clothes had been cut from a pattern the size of a serviette, and they were expected to fit. They represented two sides of the same coin and, as I looked at the characters in my play from this perspective, I saw that I could employ the dynamics of the Arachne/Athena story, not as a means of revisiting the myth, but as a means of exposing it.

To do this, I set about layering imagery in concert with the structural groupings of the monologues, so that references to the Spider Grandmother of ancient matriarchal myth (be they to the character of Mary, or to symbolism in the text), were arranged to contrast characters caught within an Arachne/Athena definition; to provide the central character of Bee, with a mythic dimension in her journey towards Spider Grandmother wisdom; and, through the growing significance given to the spider as the play progresses, draw the audience into an expanded sense of the myth.

The Spider Grandmother, Arachne and Athena: reflections in character

Representing both literally and figuratively, an older, distant culture, Mary is the Spider Grandmother of the piece; is the play's only character who accepts herself as she is; who is not diminished by life, and from whom all other lives are spun. Her progression through the play returns regular focus to the spider wisdom that she embodies and symbolises, and it is her fullness of self contrasting the fragmented characters of *Something Blue*, *Maid to Measure*, *Tilda and the Lost Sheep*, and *Rachael, Making Jam*, that exposes the splintering of the Spider Grandmother into Athena/Arachne versions; into women divided from their "other side of the coin". It was also my intention here, to suggest the shadow of that which they have hidden from themselves; to create, like the myth, an ambiguous tone, so that in appearing as an Athena or an Arachne character, they reflect something of the other in the course of their monologue, and align their state with Mary's wholeness.

For example, although the character of *Something Blue* speaks of marriage (a continuum and contrast to Mary's preceding, *Test o' th' Weave*), and although she presents as a career orientated, Athena woman, she discovers, in the course of her monologue, that she is cornered by life, like Arachne. Her expression of sorrow, instigated by letting go of the money spider, mirrors the ambiguous nature of her circumstance; of the small role Arachne has played in her life up to that point, and the small value of money/career in that moment.

In *Maid to Measure*, I aimed to show the other side of the coin: here is a woman who believes herself to be orderly and contained (like Athena), yet is solitary and strange; who recites venomous insights of the world of which she is not really a part, and who, like a spider, works day after day, alone at her web.

Similarly, Tilda and Rachael, of *Tilda and the Lost Sheep* and *Rachael, Making Jam*, represent what is missing/not allowed/feared in the other. I imagined Tilda as a woman who is terrified of spiders, who projects this fear into her persistent efforts to keep the world in check, in particular, Rachael, who, conversely, loves spiders. And again, I aimed to illustrate the other side of their natures, reflected in each other that which is not immediately evident in themselves. In Tilda's questioning of the parable of the lost sheep, for example, her sharp intelligence is caught in the act of criticising the order she works so hard to uphold, reflecting her Arachne self, lost in the night of her soul. And although Rachael literally builds an altar to Arachne on stage, while wearing her lace gloves and making her "ipsy wispy" juice (a reference to the aconite of the myth), she employs an Athena-like order and containment in her work. The symbolism and structure work together here, for in the respective pairings of

these women, they are preceded and followed by Mary's Spider Grandmother wisdom, my intention being to accent what is undermined and diminished in the patriarchal confines of the Arachne/Athena myth and remind the audience, what constraints this fantastical notion of "a norm" can place on a woman's life, and, in Mary, what dwells beyond it.

Further, the image of the spider, grows in magnitude as the monologues unfold. The money spider of *Something Blue*, becomes Sophia (large, hairy, scary and primitive), in the Girl's classroom. The Girl's misadventures parallel her awareness of Sophia's presence and captivity and it was here, in a literal classroom, that I wished to signify the wild, ancient and terrifying aspect of the feminine: that which is punished, locked up, or diminished in a girl; the point where she might learn to become a repressed Athena, who goes along with the law (like Noreen and Lorette), or an Arachne who disrupts the order (like the Girl hanging from the beam). However, in parodying the myth, it was also my intention to bring Athena and Arachne closer together. For, it is in the chaos caused by Sophia's escape, that steers the Girl to recognise Lorette, as she runs dishevelled from the classroom, as not too different from herself, as caught in the same web of containment.

The Girl's monologues precede and follow *Got You Pegged*, so that the imagery of Sophia surrounds the hub of the narrative, Bee's point of crisis. In alluding to the lingering presence of the Spider Grandmother, I painted a symbolic layering around the question of what Bee may or may not choose, so that the scary image of Sophia reflects where Bee must draw on what is yet unknown and undefined in her world. Bee's journey is accompanied by spider references that flank all her monologues, from the money spider to Sophia to the ancient grey spider on the beam. This shadowing image of the spider, and the magnitude that it attains, is proportionate to Bee's evolution toward her deeper, wiser self. With her swag of spider's eggs on back, in her final monologue, Bee is journeying towards her own wisdom; she has gathered together the things that are meaningful to her, and with her daughter, she embarks on a continuing voyage, to the home of her Spider Grandmother.

In these monologues, I aimed to depict the "unwanted truths", the hidden and not so hidden measures of repression which can prey on the psych and diminish the possibilities of a life, while linking the characters of the stories to an older culture of which they are a part. The references to the spider, the web and the wise old woman, were designed to invest the play with images, textures and layers, suggesting, like the ambiguous images in a dream, that the small spaces in which the characters dwell, belie the lives that they continue to spin. While considering the spider imagery housed in these monologues, my thoughts often turned to my grandmothers and their immigration from Scotland during the nineteenth century when

Ruskin's view of a "norm" reflected the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Did any of them dream of a life beyond the borders determined by Mt Olympus? Were some content with their lives, or did they merely appear to be so and simply (and perhaps sadly) accept their lot?

We are left to imagine who they were, what individual qualities they possessed. Were they like Sophia, raging against the glass case of the classroom? Were they driven mad, like Tilda and Rachael? Did they question the wisdom of marriage, like the woman of *Something Blue*? Or did they attempt to bury their loneliness in cutting to form and measuring up, like the woman of *Maid to Measure*? Did any, like Bee, say to herself, "I am going this way," knowing that her choice might bring wisdom but would certainly disrupt the order of things? And were any like Mary, who in my mind's eye, is the woman I would like to be; a force, a clear presence in a world so in love with straight lines, that it cannot see the curve on every horizon?

CHAPTER 4 IN CONCLUSION

From the beginning of this project, I have endeavoured to construct a play that is economic in both word and in production values; one that delivers to the dramatic present the small moments in the lives of its characters', yet portrays between its lines, the humour and pathos of a larger, ongoing story. My less is more approach to the work should not suggest that writing the script could be compared to a hundred yard dash. On the contrary, seeking economy tested my endurance; has required vigilance when considering every word, direction of structure; and a preparedness to *not* include most of what I have written. In this process, I have often felt confused, bereft of confidence, paralysed by writer's block, and my aspirations of creating a tight, cohesive and entertaining narrative, appeared hopeless. This exegesis has not alluded to these moments, at least not to many of them, and I consider it an important postscript to recognise the crucial role determination played in my weathering the creative storms and droughts encountered in seeing the playscript through to its completion.

When I could not find the clarity, encouragement or guidance that I sought through the works of theorists, other playwrights and authors, or through research, I turned to my grandmothers for inspiration: I imagined the many faithless corners they would have encountered in their lives; the endless, thankless tasks demanded of them, and this would reignite my resolve to craft my words like their neat stitches, to web the threads of my stories together, and to simply *keep going*.

Robert McKee wrote: "... when the conscious mind is put to work on the objective task of executing the craft... craft frees the subconscious" (1997:22). And the craft of completing the narrative involved showing up on the page every day; accepting and writing down a passage as it came to me, then applying to it clear, analytical thought with a view to editing any "conceits" and "false notes" (McKee, 1997:78) from the work. It is one thing to have a good idea but it may not be the piece of the imaginative puzzle required at the time. Sarnoff Mednick surmised: "... 7,363, 474 is quite an original answer to the problem 'How much is 12+12?' However...it is only when this answer is useful that we can also call it creative" (1962:221). Often I wrote what I considered a flowing, creative section of dialogue, yet when analysed and reviewed in terms of its effectiveness in an individual monologue and/or supporting the play as a whole, it did not measure up, and I would (reluctantly) put it aside, for another project, another day.

Consistently aiming for an economy and effectiveness of language in the monologues was a practice reminiscent of lessons learned from my mother as she sewed dresses for my sisters and I. Like a mathematician exploring a universe in the geometric folds of the cloth on our kitchen table, she would draft the pattern, study the weave of the fabric, match checks or stripes and figure a way to cut and sew a garment of perfect fit, without wasting a scrap of material. My narrative, like a garment, is designed to be worn, in that, I have given steady consideration to its shape, wear and fit, so that in the fluid moments of the dramatic present, it will come to life, to “completed form” (Barranger, 2002:83) in the mysterious terrain where text meets performance.

It is my intention to perform *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, as well as conduct readings of it, in the western district, and other regional areas of Victoria; to return to the landscapes of my grandmothers’ lives and take my “inductive leap” full circle, back to where my imaginings of the narrative began. Because the text, as presented for this assessment, is designed as a one woman show, the economy and practicality of its construction, will suit touring on a minimal budget. However, as outlined in the play script’s staging notes, *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords*, is devised to also accommodate a sharing of roles. With the assistance of family and friends in each region, I intend to invite women to select a monologue with which they identify, or one that they feel it would be fun to read, and through this performance practice, encourage and reveal interpretations of the stories that I have not imagined. Like my grandmothers’ sewing circles, we could draw our chairs together, and as each woman, takes the cloth in hand to tell her story, she could *talk*.

I have looked and listened for the unsung stories of my grandmothers’ in the lovely stitches of their needlework, across the paddocks of their farms and in the remote landscapes of Scotland’s Inner Hebrides. Yet, had I not the opportunity to associate their needlework, their beautiful names on the family tree, with the broad spaces of the western district in the context of that one day at the Bradvale Hall; had my mother not contributed her collection of their work to the clan memorabilia on display, I may never have conceived of writing *Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords* at all. As a custodian of my grandmothers’ needlework, my mother introduced to the gathering an honouring of her own, a quiet acknowledgement and tipping of the hat to the lives and stories hidden in the small stitches of the cloth.

Hidden Stitches, Silent Chords, is in turn, my acknowledgement, my offering to the gathering. My stitches are to be found as the cloth is passed between Bee, the women of *Something Blue* and *Maid to Measure*, Tilda, Rachael, the Girl, and Mary. I dedicate these stories to my

mother, to each of my grandmothers and aunts, and to my dear daughter, Daisy – to the girl, woman and old woman in us all.

Wha' wae th' span o' her dwellin'?
Had she spun her way across th' wold an' back again?
Or wae sh' born tae th' mother who had?

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