

Leeds Beckett University  
'creatively ageing' project

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**THIS  
IS NOT A  
REHEARSAL**

an anthology of writing



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## **Contributors**

Bonnie Meekums

Carol Grimes

Clarissa Kristjansson

Gerry Turvey

Irene Lofthouse

Jacqui Wicks

Jan Libby

Jo Weston

Julie Ward

Leah Thorn

Melissa Berry

Rebecca Robson

Siobhan Daniels

## Introduction

This is not a rehearsal. We only get one life. What comes to mind is the line from Mary Oliver's poem 'The Summer Day': 'Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?'

The title of our anthology reflects an urgent need to live life fully and express creativity freely—at whatever age or stage of life. This writing is part of the fruits of a research project, based at Leeds Beckett University, to examine and begin to challenge the workings of ageism in the cultural industries and its impact on women producers, performers and makers. We gathered together thirteen women from the cultural industries—broadly defined, and including musicians, actors and performers, poets, dancers, writers, as well as a former MEP. The group met online in three workshops held during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Participants stretched across the globe—from across the UK to Los Angeles and Sweden—and ranged in age between early 30s and mid 70s.

Funded with a grant from the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) in the UK, the project came about as we, the three researchers (Professors Susan Watkins and Jayne Raisborough, and Dr Rachel Connor) had planned to hold a series of in-person workshops to work with participants in the north and south of the UK. When COVID-19 hit, we had to pivot quickly to move to an

online format. While it presented some challenges (technical hitches and Zoom fatigue), there were, nevertheless, advantages (not least the greater geographical span). It soon became clear that the conditions of the pandemic itself could not be extricated from the reflections on what it was to grow older. As society and cultural life locked down, many of these women lost work and artistic opportunities; experience of isolation was acute. What began as a desire to explore the narrowing of work and career opportunities for older women in the cultural industries broadened out to incorporate wider, cultural contexts of loss. Unsurprisingly, grief, frustration and anger featured a great deal in the creative pieces generated by the participants.

It is difficult to find a way to describe the process of growing older other than using the shorthand 'ageing.' Some of the participants took issue with this label of 'ageing' and, in fact, the challenge to these cultural stereotypes; indeed, the ways in which they are embedded in language underpinned our creative explorations in the workshops. What emerged was an exploration of 'change', rather than ageing—which reflects a more positive reframing of 'ageing' as 'adaptation.' COVID, growing older: both necessitate a shift of understanding of the self, and a new narrative—what we referred to in the workshops as 're-storying.'

Using exercises from the fields of creative writing as well as life coaching and personal development, the



sessions explored key issues of identity and change: who am I? who was I expected to be? and—significantly, ‘I was always meant to be...’ We touched on our many personas and parts of ourselves that have emerged through our histories, excavating them through the act of writing. Rather than think of ageing as a linear concept, we celebrated the circularity of time and experience. We made use of the ‘change cycle’, a model borrowed from Harvard-trained sociologist and international life coach, Martha Beck. Through the change cycle, we constantly circle back through the grief and loss of change. We heal through an increase in self-knowledge, feeling the satisfaction of having coped with challenges with resilience and grace and by nurturing the imagination required to move into the future—however uncertain and difficult. We can adapt, we continue to grow. We don’t contract; and our stories, if anything, become amplified and even more layered. They spiral back to the past, take in the present and re-imagine the future.

We are grateful to the ISRF for funding this important project. We also must say a huge thanks to Alexandra Thompson, our undergraduate research assistant, who did a wonderful job of keeping everyone connected and providing excellent administrative support. Most of all, we are grateful to the participants themselves, for sharing so generously of their time and experience, and for being courageous enough to find it in themselves to express that experience and share it with each other. What was forged was a remarkable community and this

anthology is the legacy of that, proof that this—life itself—  
is not a rehearsal. We can all, at any moment, take our parts  
on that stage, to be agents, not merely observers.

*Dr Rachel Connor*

*Professor Susan Watkins*

*Professor Jayne Raisborough*

Leeds Beckett University

August 2022

## I REMEMBER

*Carole Grimes*

I don't remember a hug.

I don't remember love.

I remember the move to a children's home.

Bath time and 'Listen with Mother.' Auntie BBC.

There was no Mother.

I remember bubblegum splats on tarmac playgrounds,  
hopscotch and navy blue knickers.

I remember marmite sandwiches, I remember school  
dinners.

I remember warm, full fat-milk, crates of stubby glass  
bottles sitting on the tarmac in the sun, the stomach  
churning nausea, the smell.

I remember my first trip to the seaside

I remember a blue woollen swimming suit dragging  
heavily in the water as I pretended to swim ... one foot  
pushing me along on the sandy sea bed.

'I'm swimming,' I called, 'look at me.'

I remember the loneliness of red telephone boxes,

Four hot brown penny coins in my hand.

Press button A.

A link to the outside world.

A voice on the line.

I remember the radio in the 1950s, longing for a rock and roll record instead of the crooners of another generation.

I remember my first period,

stuffing shiny, medicated Izal toilet paper into my knickers in the school toilets.

I remember getting drunk on scrumpy cider.

I remember a coffee bar in Soho, the steam...the gurgling sounds of the espresso machine and the exotic smell of bitter, inky, black liquid topped with fluffy milk.

I remember Stevie Wonder and my body wanted to dance until dawn.

I remember the first time I opened my mouth.

I sang in an alley beside a pub in Hastings Old Town. Suddenly and without warning.

I remember the ferry from Folkstone, my first abroad.

Travelling with a Band, soon to become a living.

Singing for my supper.

I remember a Green Avocado, a Dinner Party, feeling  
sophisticated,  
expecting fruit, it didn't suit my taste buds.  
slimy and green with a pool of olive oil lying its stone dip.  
I wanted egg and chips and walnut whips, sausage and  
mash and beans from a tin.

I remember turning forty and thinking, this is it. The slide  
into old age.  
I forgot that thought and got on with living.  
I remember my children being born.  
Not so very long ago. Time speeds up.  
It was a long lifetime ago.  
I remember.

## **A momentary crossing**

***Bonnie Meekums***

I remember us downing cider and ploughman's lunch  
after tramping across Sussex fields, singing Those Were  
the Days, My Friend.

I remember day turning to night as we kicked stones  
under stars.

I remember wearing that mini dress, pulling its hem down  
over amber-coloured tights as we listened to the sounds  
of silence.

I remember us getting high in St Ives, holding each other  
close in two thin sleeping bags zipped together.

I remember carrying the blanket of your amity with me  
long after we morphed into friends.

I remember our paths crossing the tracks of time, then  
running parallel and casting off in an elegant country  
dance.

I remember presents of books and vinyl, your voice inked  
into them, shortening miles and years.

I remember our boys born five weeks apart - yours the  
colour of chocolate, mine vanilla ice cream - playing  
together as brothers.

I remember you telling me you'd had a funny chest all winter, and it wasn't asthma but you'd had an x-ray.

I remember holding breath and tears, my heart running like a wayward child, the day you told me the diagnosis.

I remember you walking uncertainly around Manchester's Christmas lights. I clung to our too-brief moment, wishing I could stow it somewhere safe as it slipped through my hands.

I remember wanting to lead you from the MacMillan unit so we could go on one last mad adventure. Instead, I said I'd look out for your kids, my voice snagging like nails on nylon.

I remember hugging you, the familiar contours of our bodies filling each other's hollows, conversing in a language all their own.

I remember peeling my body from yours, leaving my imprint in your spaces, and yours in mine.

I remember flying home to a halting message about things that needed to be said. But at the hospice the thought had butterflyed away from your morphined brain.

I remember splinters in my body left by the shrapnel spray of losing you; the needle stuck on my record-player, singing Mary Hopkin's song.



*Clarissa Kristjansson*

I remember Lynette's fake smile and half-joking tone as she belittled me for my anxiety.

I remember barely hearing the words but feeling their barbs cutting into me: 'Your anxiety makes others anxious and you come across as untrustworthy.'

I remember that beneath the denial and pain there was a kernel of determination to change this nightmare; to find a way to leave this place described as 'the marketing department with more testosterone than the Wallabies.'

I remember stepping into that dark hallway, my invisible mask firmly in place, hiding my uncertainty of what was to come.

I remember Tim, her brightness, her kindness and her gentle authority as she led thirty uncertain souls into a 'green' safe circle of non-judgement, non-striving and acceptance for who they were in this moment.

I remember thinking: 'Wow, I am not an outlier. There are other perimenopausal women like me who find it hard at times to bear this world.'

I remember feeling grateful to that initial spiteful, thoughtless, unnecessary encounter that had brought me to a place of healing. A place where I could let go of comparing my insides with other people's outsides and recognize that I was not wrong or broken.

*Gerry Turvey*

I remember the first slow turning.

I remember the apples all over the floor

I remember a new person to dance with each hour

I remember people arriving, people leaving

I remember slowly unravelling my knitted dress until I  
was in my underwear.

I remember the songs arriving and leaving.

I remember the space criss-crossed with the red wool  
unravelling from my dress

I remember being present for seven hours

I remember my body in the dance.

I remember time stood still, was endless, flew by.

I remember the end

I remember arriving back into the world not knowing how  
to be.

I AM

**I Like Who I Am**

***Siobhan Daniels***

I am a strong, opinionated, adventurous, loving woman

I am a positive ager

I am a campaigner for fairness

I am a mother

a sister

a friend

a speaker

a writer

I am a motorhome dweller

I am a traveller

I am a survivor

I am a strong, opinionated, adventurous, loving woman.

*Julie Ward*

I am the woman in a red coat knocking on doors

To ask your opinion about everything.

I am the eldest, know-it-all, bossy sister.

I am the abandoned, unforgiving lover.

I am the heartbroken, motherless child,  
my father's grieving daughter.

I am an expectant doting grandmother

I am a wicked white witch, conjuring good trouble

I am a forager, jam-maker, permaculture preserver.

I am a fearless fighter for humanity.

I am a voice for people who don't have a voice.

I am a game-player, a rule-breaker.

I am a cake-maker, a mover and shaker

I am an all-weather wild-water swimmer

I am a Yes person, never a No person

I am a pathological optimist

I am a 1950s girl-child now robbed of her pension

I am a world citizen from Huguenot refugee stock

I am a joiner, a remainer, a campaigner  
I am a rabble-rouser, a speech-maker, a listening ear  
I am an honorary Amazonian with an indigenous name  
"She who loves to gather castanha do Pará"\*  
I am a lust for life life-long learner  
I am a tap dancer, clog dancer, lost-in-limbo dancer  
I am a brave soul sailing single-handedly on the sea of  
60+

\* castanha do Pará are Brazil nuts from the state of Pará

**Acting my age**

***Bonnie Meekums***

I am the crone who craves  
Naked skin against mine  
Who yearns giving in to gravity  
The safe, strong cradle  
Of a lover's hold

I am the soul who dreams of freedom  
Who burns through barriers  
Cool wind on my cheek  
As silence enfolds me  
And yet

I am the woman who fears  
Handing in her keys  
When my few short moments  
Spent in the belly of bliss  
Are done

And will I still dream, when I've left this room?

And will I still smell the sweet scent of sex?

Or will I miss the pull of gravity

And naked skin against mine?



*Clarissa Kristjansson*

I am Clarissa, a woman who wakes up with this question:  
'how will I treat myself today'?

I am a woman who has accepted that my body and life  
need more quality time, food, fine wine and a little  
lubrication.

I am the woman who had no boundaries but has learned  
that NO can be a complete sentence.

I am the gardener of my life: grounded, bare feet on the  
soil; yoni close to the earth; pulling out the weeds and  
making space for ease, positivity and joy.

***Melissa Berry***

I am a soul who dreams of finding new paths that lead me  
not to fear.

I am a knowing deep inside. There may yet be space to  
fly.

I am a phoenix, still charred and burned, who cannot see  
her newly budding wings yet

dares to dream of their sudden flash in the light of a new  
and fiery dawn.

I WAS MEANT TO BE

*Melissa Berry*

I was always meant to be a good girl,  
a clever girl, a fast girl, a not-too-greedy girl, not a show-  
off.

A compliant girl, a don't-make-such-a-fuss girl, a don't-  
ask-for-what-you-want girl.

Then life said: 'you have to be a good wife, a good cook, a  
good fuck, a good mum, a good friend and the right one  
for the job.

All things to all people.

All parts of the whole.'

But the hole drops deep in the falling away of these  
things,

as we land at the bottom of our wishing wells.

Look up, look up, look up.

See the sunlight frame the edges of your climb back  
towards the light.

Feel the footholds in the slippery sides as you haul  
yourself to the edge,

like a mermaid escaping a fisherman's clutches.

Take a deep breath. You are free.

***Rebecca Robson***

I was meant to be a happy place for someone else,

I wanted to be a happy place for myself.

I was meant to be seen and enjoyed, but I wanted to see.

I was meant to sit pretty and charm, make men feel Good,  
Powerful, Ecstatic, Alive,

I felt things that did not matter.

I was meant to compete with my sisters; fear them,  
distrust them, rob them.

I was meant to:

Entertain

Evoke

Emote

Be sane

Be wild

Be tame

Be free.

A rock,  
A success,  
A mother,  
A wife,  
A catalyst,  
An enemy,  
A friend,  
A listener.

I meant it when I said I wanted to be heard.  
I will hear.

*Melissa Berry*

It was always expected that I should behave a certain way:  
no-one to teach me what it means to be a woman,  
just flying blind and playing the roles I'd been cast in.  
Daughter, Sister, Wife, Mother, Lover.

I am all of these, yet none of these parts were written for  
me

I never learned the lines,  
just improvised.

***Gerry Turvey***

I was always meant to be a dancer.

Everyone said I should write but my body kept getting in the way.

It's written on the body,

always on the move, fidget, can't keep still.

Twirling in the net curtains, circling in my bath towel,  
running into open spaces.

Freedom, openness, feeling alive being upside down;

hopscotch, handstands, two ball, French skipping.

Restless legs and arms, wanting to fly.

What I should be now is Right.

It fits.

I am ME.



## CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR PERSONAS

## **Call and Response: Regrets**

*Siobhan Daniels*

### **I Regret**

I regret that, despite my age, I was too afraid to speak up for myself. I regret that I allowed myself to be bullied and broken. I regret that I put work first sometimes, ahead of my daughter's welfare, because you made me feel too afraid to make rational decisions in life.

I bitterly regret not taking time off work during the menopause, when my body was crying out for rest and nourishment. I regret I did not call out the bullies and leave earlier. I regret letting you take away my voice when I was involved in discussions about news agendas.

I regret that I allowed you to make me doubt myself and my abilities so much that I did not push for career progression when I should have done.

I regret that it took me until I retired at sixty to finally find my voice, my confidence and sense of purpose in life to become the woman I always should have been.

## **My voice to my regrets**

If I could have found the courage, I wouldn't have let you make me feel suicidal through your words and actions.

Every time you called me in to a meeting and started that meeting with the words 'this is not a disciplinary' I would not have let you crush me inside, make my eyes well with tears and my heart beat faster; a reaction I know you were hoping for and relished. I would have said 'Stop! How dare you speak to me like that? I've never done anything remotely near warranting a disciplinary and you know it! You're just being a bully and trying to make me feel afraid.'

I would go on to say: 'How dare you make me fear, as a single mother, that I could lose my job, knowing all the time that I had bills to pay and no-one to help me?' My daughter was doing so well in her school so I could not take her out. My other self should have said to him: "What if it was your sister, mother or daughter? How would you feel if someone who was their boss treated them the way you treat me, instilling fear instead of nurturing them through their careers.? Destroying any prospect of a career progression, just because you could. Even though they were good and worked hard."

I lost who I was for my job. I should have said to my boss: 'I will shout from the rooftops, to anyone who would listen, about what's going on in the newsroom. About how older women are being treated by you and spoken to by you. But

you know what? The vile way you've treated me has only helped make me who I am today.'

'I believe in myself. I like myself, I have a voice! I can say NO and mean NO, I can say YES and mean YES, I no longer feel afraid.'

'I will campaign as long as I have breath in my body to prevent another woman feeling the way I was made to feel in later life in the workplace.'

'You should be ashamed of yourself. I hope it haunts you for the rest of your life.'

**Lucy the Lost**

***Irene Lofthouse***

I'm that jigsaw with a missing piece.  
And every day, in every encounter,  
in every relationship,  
there's a different hole aching  
for the piece to slot into  
place to complete me.  
I'm the one you'll find under the bed  
in the dark where I crawl  
with Cat for company,  
my twin sanctuaries in a world  
that confuses and bewilders.  
Where I can sob silently,  
soaking and stroking Cat,  
nuzzling soft fur,  
feeling her heartbeat,  
the vibration of her purr.  
My well-bottomed voice shouting

'I'm here' is lost as a faint murmur  
when it reaches the air,  
blown on the breeze to  
the faraway land where everyone  
is loved, hugged, held tight.  
I want so much to fit in,  
be one of the boys,  
one of the gang, the group,  
the scene, the club.  
Always I'm in it but not of it,  
of it but not in it. Peripheral.  
I'm aching, yearning,  
reaching, searching  
for connection, but  
inside I'm always alone.  
Like Mr Cellophane you can  
walk right by me,  
see right through me  
and never know I'm there.

My carapace of characters  
camouflage fragility,  
create strength to stop  
weakness leeching  
into self-harm, into  
ways of controlling  
punishing, becoming  
the self-fulfilling  
prophecy oft heard-of:  
'Who'd want you  
you waste of space?  
Go on, get out,  
lose yourself.'

Dear Lucy

Thanks for your poem. I empathise enormously and I'm grieving as I write that Cat isn't with me physically, but she's always here in spirit. I wanted to let you know there is hope, even when we feel incomplete searching for that missing piece. You mentioned a lot of negatives when we last touched base, saying you were having one of those days again, life's a crock of shit, [you're] not in control,

feel lost swinging between highs and lows, feeling the atoms of your mental ill-health flow through generational genes, wondering where your childhood went, so heavy, [you can't] move.

You listed these as 'Cons' saying there were no 'Pros'. Well, I went over your life notes and found you'd admitted:

You've got a talent for writing

You've got a talent for storytelling

You have periods of intense creativity

You've learned to control feeling out of control

You realise feeling lost can be empowering

You realise your family will never 'get' you

You discover that 'missing' childhood means you're still childlike

You listen to your body when it's 'heavy' and curl up to sleep



You can use the 'negative' experiences in a positive way

Lucy, there's as many 'Pros' as 'Cons' here. I concede that even I, when in the midst of a downer, can deny there are any positives - but everyone does that.

Listen, believe me, there's a lot you've achieved as you've fought your way out of the miasmas that envelop you. Talents have emerged from the swamps you felt were swallowing you. Not in the clothes sense, obviously; you've never been the most sartorial savvy—though ahead of your time teaming trainers with dresses and ripped jeans.

And OK, so you go there and collect the bulimic T-shirt—but you get through that and move on, even getting a degree, though you don't know what to do with it for some time. Goes in the drawer of 'too soon for its own good'; there's a lot goes in there, but slowly they emerge into daylight and take you to new places, new ideas, new people, and even . . . big intake of breath . . . some confidence.

Remember, you confounded paternal expectations by rejecting the traditional 'daughter' role (albeit after running a household from twelve, being a stand-in mum for sister and missing your teenage years); school too was wrong-footed after initially rejecting you for sixth form when you were only one of two to achieve high A levels in history, one in five for French and one in twenty for literature - as well as being the first in the City to be

awarded a grant to stay on and live way from home. Then the degree: yes, you didn't know what to do for a 'JOB' (Just Over Broke) but it didn't stop you doing things: washer-up, petrol attendant, cleaner, gardener, non-teaching assistant, outdoor instructor, volunteer for social and health services. Which led you to co-found an award-winning training resource publishing company; become a freelance facilitator, a consultant, and advisor. Your childhood love of stories and performing (a shed roof your neighbourhood stage) has woven through everything. You've produced several one-woman shows, one at Edinburgh; books that are well received. You inspire people. You know this because they say so, write it in comments, emails, media posts—even if you can't quite believe it. You're realising some of your dreams; though yes, the crock of shite that is life continues to spill sewage at intervals. But you're much better now at letting others clean up their own turds, at turning them down when they want advice, at not rescuing them. They're adults after all.

You see, on reflection, that life has possibilities. You come to understand that 'insecurity' is the flip side of creativity, without which you wouldn't take risks. And you've always been a risk-taker—like when you climbed the apple tree age four. You have come to accept that you have to hit the bottom (nadir - remember having to look it up?) before you can rise again. You must feel that insecurity and lack of confidence because they are the spurs to new ideas, to pushing the boundaries, to

challenges, to let the sparking synapses create possibilities and connections that enable you to escape the routine, the dull, the everydayness.

Even today, in the strange confusion of the pandemic, when work nose-dived, bookings were cancelled, postponed over and over again, where you've dipped many times into depression, you've re-invented yourself, learned how to navigate/deliver online workshops, created podcasts, had stories recorded and broadcast by the local Beeb, been invited/commissioned for new contracts. All due to your resilience, your 'who says it can't be done?' attitude; your childlike belief that you can do anything if you just think yourself into that persona.

Even your thoughts of walking into the traffic are a positive—because thinking isn't doing. It's reflection about cause and consequence, which deflects the negative into a thread of a story about a woman who walks into the traffic trying to find a missing jigsaw piece ...

Yours with love, peace and hugs,

Skippy

## HOW TO FIND LOST STUFF

**This lady is for turning**

*Jo Weston*

Blonde hair descends  
like snow in winter,  
decorating the floor with  
distress.

My bald self a blank canvas,  
needing primer  
before the first  
stroke.

A wig, my shell to hide in  
until I grow  
stronger legs, build  
wings.

In the mirror—  
three cycles from emerging—  
I see only  
what is lost.

## **Losing My Memory**

*Julie Ward*

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
The people who held things together  
have moved on or are too busy, dying, dead;  
too ill to visit or to be visited.

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
I surround myself with mementos,  
certificates for cycling proficiency  
and winning the wheel-barrow race.

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
Yet I achieved—against the odds.  
The 11+ failure who gained a Masters,  
the factory girl who stood on a world stage.

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
Others remember more than me:  
my quirky gifts, my inspiring words  
Hannah says: 'You made me who I am.'

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
Yet, there are persistent coloured threads  
stretching back to an orange felt needle case  
embroidered by my infant hands.

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
I want to knit things together,  
darn the threadbare patches,  
tidy up the frayed edges.

My memory is ragged and full of holes.  
I regret not writing EVERYTHING down.  
Life should be a shopping list  
stuck on the fridge door:

1. Don't forget to breathe
2. Use your anger
3. Let the dust settle
4. This is not a rehearsal



**around, across, through, over and under**

**after Billy Childish**

***Leah Thorn***

Speaking as an old woman artist who hates aubergines  
and arguments and was never made a prefect  
[Ilford County High School for Girls, 1966-67]

Speaking as an old woman artist who wears  
retro clothes as old as her but who herself  
is no longer deemed to be of value, or visible

Speaking as an old woman artist who rides a trike  
from Folkestone to Seabrook [daily]  
and undulates in Raqs Sharqi, sensuously

Speaking as an old woman artist who froze  
in fear when she realised her mind was coated  
and lacerated with racism [The Bull Ring, Birmingham  
1974]

Speaking as an old woman artist who spurts and  
blurts words and creates filmic images [Shhh! 2018]  
whose voice is seven-decades distinctive

Speaking as an old woman artist whose body and  
thoughts  
have been assaulted, like that time in Paris  
[Rue du Faubourg St Denis, 1970]

Speaking as an old woman artist who has won awards,  
is powerful, significant, courageous  
- yet still doubts her goodness

Speaking as an old woman artist who will not deny her  
age,  
will not pretend she is unaffected by ageing  
or the death of her partner [Arike, 2020]

Speaking as an old woman artist who intends  
never to give up, I navigate my life by movement

around, across, through, over and under  
In the way a parkour traceuse touches the world,  
I free-run and engage, rather than shelter

**Earlier Doors**

*Jacqui Wicks*

I've been thinking a lot  
recently about doors.  
Closed doors, of all colours.  
Some wood, some plastic.

I'm never sure what's on the other side  
but the fact that there's a door  
means something precious  
needs to be kept in, or  
... out.

The worst ones are the glass ones,  
you can see what's on the other side,  
tantalisingly out of reach, but clearly visible.

And the worst thing about the worst doors  
is that you can see the 'others'.

I've seen them walking up to the doors  
and opening them with ease.  
I've seen them on the other side.  
Can they see me?

Perhaps all these doors need is just a good shove.  
Maybe if I tried harder, put my back into it,  
maybe then the doors would open.

Sometimes the doors are in a circle,  
that's when it's really bad.  
Which is the first door?  
Where do I start?

Sometimes the doors are in a line,  
and you can see a path, a way through,  
a map, almost.  
You work through them, diligently, one at a time,  
learning how to pick locks,  
learning where to buy the keys:

a whole other world of locksmiths, key cutters, keepers.

Sometimes, someone gets a key cut for you,  
and on those days it feels like the world is blossoming.  
But sometimes behind the door, is another bloody door.

There are more doors now.  
I don't remember them from earlier.  
I remember open space, easy access, moving freely.

I've been thinking a lot recently about doors.  
Maybe I need to try a different house.

**To Singing**

*Jacqui Wicks*

When I sing, I am seen.

When I sing, I am heard.

When I sing, the vibrations in my body  
connect with those who care to listen.

I've been told that when I sing  
my voice has the ability to heal.

This fact makes me blush, but I feel it's true.

Sometimes it's not my voice.

Sometimes I reach back and sing  
for those who've gone before,  
who could not speak their truth.

Sometimes I sing for you, now.

When I sing, I am open

When I sing, I am honest

When I sing, I am truthful

When I sing, I hope that we will reach into each other's  
hearts

and see each other for who we really are.

Imagine a world where we all sing together.



*Jan Libby*

Who am I? I am staring down at my answering machine in 1989 listening to Mimi's uneasy voice shouting the distance from Maine.

'ARE YOU THERE? HELLO? IT'S MIMI. HELLO?'

She paused, and the answering machine's BEEP ended it. I didn't call my grandmother back. Too busy living my twenty-something life in San Francisco. A week later, at age 86, Mimi had a stroke and was moved into a care home. Devastated, I flew home to be with her. Every visit, over the next several weeks, was some variation of me gifting her a peanut butter cookie and staring into the care home's courtyard together while I told her my life stories. Mimi would happily nod and nibble on her cookie until I shut up. And then, after many minutes of silence, she'd mumble: 'Who am I?'. I'd answer by holding her hand and reassuring her: 'You're Avis Savoy. A-vis Sa-voy.' She'd nod and ask again. I'd lean closer and repeat her name and tell her an abbreviated version of her life story. And she'd grin and nod. Over the last year, I have found myself thinking about those visits with Mimi. I've also found myself repeatedly mumbling her question, 'Who am I?'

Who am I?

Who am I?

Faced with this existential crisis, I've done all the things you do. I've read the articles and the books and made all

the lists—triumphs, failures, etc. I've even whispered an abbreviated version of my life story to myself. But all this just seems to be a way for the shadow of my younger self to haunt my present self. The question isn't 'Who was I?

Who am I?

WHO AM I?

And, although my answer is not yet complete, this is where it begins. I am:

Changing whatever I believe needs changing,

Moving far, far away from what is expected,

Rushing into every burning desire,

Making things others won't and can't,

Allowing the shadow of my younger self to come along if she can keep up.

from 'The Singer's Tale'

*Carole Grimes*

I

Squinting into the mirror I saw a woman, young and voluptuous, a woman from the hills of Cadiz, a Flamenco singer: yes that's me. Pastora Pavon, La Niña de los Peines and the bathroom filled with my fantasy song. The Spanish singer tossed back her lustrous black hair that was be-pinned with gloriously decorated combs. Moving closer to the glass to apply black mascara, a Clown's face looked out, interrupting my song. I would have had to blow all my breath into a mound of balloons, red, yellow and blue, a never-ending pile of rubber in my clown's enormous garments, an elegant dancer's stance, but my shoes were too big, my trousers too long. I kept the smile on my red mouth, upon red mouth, upon red mouth. I am.... Clara the Clown. Ta dah!

I leaned forward, squinting, the wand of Mascara in my hand. 'Ole!' I said to my own reflection. A pale woman with red hair stared back at me through the mirror on the wall in the bathroom. The Singer had lost her voice, and the Clown was left behind with a scarlet mouth.

Clara The Clown: 'I am a clown, a joker and a knave: there is no grave face on me; I will smile my way to the grave.'

## II

In fact, it was to The Job Centre on The Euston Road by 10 a.m. April 2004, a decade past my half - century. In my hand was a copy of my birth certificate. It identified me as Carol Ann Higgs, a surname I have never used, not as far back as my ever. Now I was in the new Millennium and I was sixty years old and, as usual, I was short of cash. I wanted my pension, what there was of it. I hadn't paid enough into the government coffers for the full amount. I needed money but I didn't need sixty. Clara the Clown: 'Look at me, look at me, one two, three, Mother caught a Flea... you can't catch me.'

It took several months to prove that I existed, let alone born to anyone. I tried; I really tried to convince the departments that deal with who you are. Hours on the phone. The conversations were ridiculous. The problem was my name—or rather names, plural. Blip. Numbers 347. 348. 349. It was like waiting to be sentenced. Blip. Numbers 423, 424, 425. 'Shit, that's my number.' I gathered my stuff, dropped my glasses, picked them up and couldn't find the case—so I shoved them into my bag where they would probably break. Quickly now, no time, no time. Hurry! Hurry!

The Boss: 'Stay cool and think very carefully before you speak. Don't blabber and bluster, mutter and stutter. And do not swear.'

I rushed to my allocated cubicle.

'Can I help you? Your name is?' asked the woman behind the glass.

'Carol Grimes.' I said, pulling a big balloon blowing breath of air into my lungs. When faced with Authority, Bureaucracy and Forms, I panic, stutter, fluster and blabber. The Boss: 'Get a grip woman, what are you? A Mouse?'

An explanation was given, tales of fruitless conversations with various departments were described.

'Do you have your birth certificate?'

'Here it is.'

'So who is Carol Higgs?' she said.

I hesitated, for a second or two. 'Me.'

'I see, so Grimes is your married name?'

'No, but it's been my name since 1969.'

'But you need your birth name on a birth certificate,' she said.

'I am that person, but I have never been known as that.... I ...' I trailed off, in some confusion. If I am confused there is no hope for the woman behind the desk. With a perplexed look, she interrupted my feeble attempt at clarity.

'Do you have a marriage certificate?'

'Here it is. The first one, 1967. The second from 1987.'

'It says Freeman here. Freeman, married to Lawrence Smart, and Smart married to Hrybowicz.'

I gulped, swallowing so the saliva went down the wrong way. Gathering myself and my spit I said, 'Yes, Freeman was my Stepfather. I went to school with that name. I don't remember ever being called Carol Higgs, at school.'

'Right, so Higgs was your Father?'

'Actually,' I said, 'I don't know. I never met him. But my Stepfather was Freeman, as I said—and Higgs, my Mother was with a man called Higgs before I was born, so his name is on it, but I was told he wasn't my father and ..... I... ' My words were tumbling, free fall, making no sense.

'So why Carol Grimes?'

'I wanted my own name.'

The woman sighed and sucked her teeth loudly. 'Grimes by Deed Poll?'

'No, but I've paid tax in that name, Grimes I mean, since 19...I mean L. well basically, you see, it's like this, that is to say, I mean, my Mother does not live here, I mean she is British... but I ... she is ... ' My voice was as tight as a soldier's snare drum. I felt like I was being throttled. Tax details, work contracts and letters were shown to no avail, confusion. We began at the beginning.

'I'm afraid you must have a birth certificate in that name in order to receive your pension.'

'What name?'

'Grimes.'

'I don't have one. I just told you.'

'But your tax details are in the name of Grimes?'

'Yes,' I said.

'So, where is your father? Do you have an address?'

'No, I said no, I don't know L..'

'Who is Carol Grimes? Who is Carol Freeman? Who is Carol Smart? Who is Carol Hrybowicz? Who is Carol Higgs?'





your mother, your father, the touch of your late lover,  
make a mental note of how each sounds.

Then commit them  
to your skin.





# An anthology of writing about change, grief and growth

*This Is Not A Rehearsal* reflects an urgent need to live life fully and express creativity freely—at whatever age or stage of life. The writing contained here is part of the fruits of a research project, based at Leeds Beckett University, to examine and begin to challenge the workings of ageism in the cultural industries and its impact on women producers, performers and makers.

The work of the thirteen authors included here demonstrates how, in times of change and grief, it is possible to adapt and continue to grow. Our stories, if anything, become amplified and even more layered. They spiral back to the past, take in the present and re-imagine the future.