

Voicing Journeys Through Grief

A musicians study of confronting grief through expressive arts

Abstract:

This article confronts grief, trauma and dysphonia through transformative techniques of expressive arts therapy. It discusses strategies for easing dysphonia and freeing the singing voice whilst exploring lamentation, incantation and spell casting as vocalisations of grief. Concepts of internalising and externalising and the role of the imagination are explored. Selections from the authors project are presented. These document the process of accessing the pain of loss through recording improvised music and vocalisations, writing, drawing and photography. The approach was methodologically loose, an experiment in what John Law describes as ‘messy research... techniques of deliberate imprecision’ and ‘emotionality’. (Law 2004:2-3) Seeking recovery and a return to functioning in society, mind, body and voice were allowed to move freely in creative practices whilst being present with memory, soul searching and the experience of loss. The ‘journey’ led from personal to collective grief and rage centred on climate breakdown. The research seeks to draw attention to concepts of intermodality, interconnectedness, the role of music in the grieving process, vocal rehabilitation, and the value of expressive arts as tools for transformation. Photographs, drawings, music and voice recordings are included.

Keywords: Grief, voice, dysphonia, lamentation, expressive arts therapy, incantation, arts and ecology.

Introduction

Life is a series of ‘blossomings’ and ‘fadings’. Loss is as natural as breathing, yet our society, allows very little time to be in the grieving state and many struggle to cope with the effects of bereavement.

Grief — timeless, universal, and complex — can take many different forms. It may be anticipatory, forbidden, or ambiguous. It can be acute or severe and prolonged. And different forms of grief can overlap like intersecting circles in a Venn diagram. (Holinger 2020:29)

In this paper, I explore this idea of overlapping forms through the lense of an artist's outputs during periodic retreats. This necessitated acknowledgment of deeply resounding grief and trauma, after multiple shocks and losses. The 'Venn diagram' that emerged was complex, needing careful and gentle management.¹

I'm interested in understanding through doing, and exploration through experiencing. In *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, (Macfarlane 2019) Allen Graubard tells us: 'darkness becomes a medium of vision...' (Graubard 2020:103) and this 'chimes' with the project which entailed descending willingly into the underworld of the grieving soul, to later re-emerge into light. The work connects with Paolo Knill's ideas of 'intermodality' and theories of transformation through arts practices. (Levine & Levine, 2011) The 'personal experiencing' methodology is underpinned by John Law's discussions in *After Method, mess in social science research*, (Law, 2004) in which he questions academic reductionist practices and points to different ways of knowing. Law suggests 'perhaps' knowing "through the hungers, tastes, discomforts, or pains of our bodies [...] through 'private' emotions that open us to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals".²

My questions when embarking on this project were murky at best, centred perhaps around 'what happens if I do this'? 'What will I come to know'? 'What will happen to my voice if I allow it to be what it is'? *The Anatomy of Grief*, (Holinger 2020) serves as a holding vessel for some of these questions. Holinger describes different forms of grief, the effects on body and mind and the significance of the "language of the bereaved". She works with ideas of transformation and discusses grief expressed in literature and other art forms. There is a softness to her writing that encourages understanding of the universality of grief and seeks to ease and inform the bereaved. She tells us:

Some will sketch the world they've been thrust into, or even diagram the pain of absence in a journal or on a pad... spoken, written, signed, or sung, words put things in order. (2020:71)

My project interrogates arts practices as intervention and tools for transformation. Voice, dysphonia and pedagogical solutions are explored. A journey from personal, to collective planetary loss and grief emerges alongside ideas of interconnectivity. Reading Levine and Levine's description of Karen Estrella's work helped to affirm my 'messy' methodologies, they write:

Estrella situates the arts as transformative by nature and therefore amenable to holding multiple discourses and dynamics in coherent tension. In art-making, the

¹ A Venn diagram shows different elements interconnecting and overlapping. Each layer affects another in varying proportions. A simple representation of this can be seen in Appendix 1.

² A key feature in my research is the 'slipperiness' of concepts that are explored. Law says of this: 'perhaps we will need to rethink our ideas about clarity and rigour and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight. Here, knowing would become possible through techniques of deliberate imprecision.' (2004:3)

goal of transformation is organically contained in the process itself. (Levine & Levine 2011:12)

Processes

Confronting grief and dysphonia, accessing the pain of loss and allowing it to be channelled into external outputs entailed many hours of recording. Vocal and instrumental improvisations, were interlaced with writing, drawing and photography. Photographing processes of budding, opening and fading flowers, became a means of accepting the natural life, death, rebirth cycles. This became an extended meditation that eased my inability to accept the losses and created 'stepping stones' on my pathway. The methodology was an initial ten days of quiet isolation, allowing mind, body and voice to move freely through memory, soul searching and full acknowledgement of the experience of loss. I viewed this as a possible means of finding acceptance and a way back to functioning in society as an artist and teacher of voice. This was followed by periodic quiet time over the following year, revisiting, working with and generating further materials through creative practices. The writing often followed a stream of consciousness approach but periodically switched to 'documenting of the creative practice', where techniques and toolkits were noted. The project was purposefully 'instinctive' not 'planned'. I followed a trail of writers and practitioners who connected in some way with my field of 'expressive arts research'.³ The 'journey' led from the micro experience of personal grief to the macro experience of global grief and rage centred on climate breakdown. Ultimately it led me out of the extremity of anguish and back to the edge of re-integration.

What follows are selections from this project with interjections relating to existing literature and comments arising from revisiting the materials. Blue italics indicate text taken from my project notebook. Audio links can be accessed via footnotes.⁴

Voice Breath and Meaning

First written words day 1

Internal Dialogue:

*Being here in a world of shock and grief and pain and shame
and fear and guilt
and love and horror and images and soul searing anguish
and anger and quiet and empty chairs and empty beds
and a garden gone to 'wild' and a body gone to flab and joints locked and stiff
and having time again.*

*Time to think, time to do, time to plan, time to be.
Time to talk with my missing ones, now always here.
Are they here?
If I invite them in?*

³ The research, activism, writings, films and songs of others working with rage, sadness, loss, horror, sciences, data and drive for radical change became stepping stones along the route. I include a small selection of these in this essay. This connects with Holinger's discussion of the role of literature and other art forms in navigating through grief.

⁴ To make clear where audio links are to be found, I have guided the reader with the word 'Listen'.

Apologies for things long gone but newly realised – I was wrong – again!

*Death, now familiar, has changed every atom of my body into awareness,
a new map of this strange existence.*

One life – billions of choices

I'm here the raging roiling torrents crossed

I'm on this side looking back and it's quiet.

*I feel my breath go in and out and see the ant test the air, the spider groan when I break the web, the
bobbing of a life, momentary calm, wave of salt tears coming again as pictures rise with teeth and
snarling power behind inner eyes.*

*What will come from my silenced mouth? Song has been silenced by the violent things. Muscles wasted
by the holding of grief, vocal folds folded in and away,
to groan in a tight harsh, nails on metal creak.*

So can I even try to play?

*Conjure up the landscape of bubbling now, then and what might be,
with the help of electronic wizardry?*

And what comes from that? What then? ⁵

First spoken words day 1

There are two recordings of these words. Listen.^{6 7} The voice carries the meaning in very different ways in each. After recording the first version, I realised that the recording levels were set too low, so I reset the equipment and tried a second recording where voice and synthesiser seem to communicate a brittle hardness reflecting the immense friction I felt when having to deal with anything beyond the inner world of grieving. A neutral dark emptiness drove these words and is more present in the first version - a stark example of the difference between vocalisations deeply connected to meaning and superficial vocalising.⁸

Sung sounds day 2

Raising my voice to 'sing' was immensely difficult as my 'brain to voice' coordination seemed blocked by 'some kind of' physical wall. I discovered though that although the more powerful muscles of the chest voice were too reluctant to respond, I could find some control in my quiet head voice. This became my default way to make sound and, once resonating, allowed me to briefly access stronger vocalisations, though these were often harsh and hard to manage making me retreat to softer wispy sounds.⁹ Listen.¹⁰

⁵ Rushton, project notebook 4 August 2021

⁶ 1st version – spontaneous deeply connected to inner world. Link: [Internal Dialogue Audio 1](#) Rushton, 4 August 2021.

⁷ 2nd version – more performed, arguably less effective. Link: [Internal Dialogue Audio 2](#) Rushton, 4 August 2021.

⁸ A concept I go into in more detail as this essay progresses.

⁹ Ruth Boulton is a sound therapist working in Cornwall. We met during my initial project to discuss joint teaching strategies. Our conversation though moved through many of the questions I was working with in this project and became, as always, rich with her experience and insight. Her careful direction and gentle guidance led me to untangle many thought processes and loosen locked up questions. See Figure 1.

¹⁰ [First Sung Notes Audio](#) Rushton, 6 August 2021.

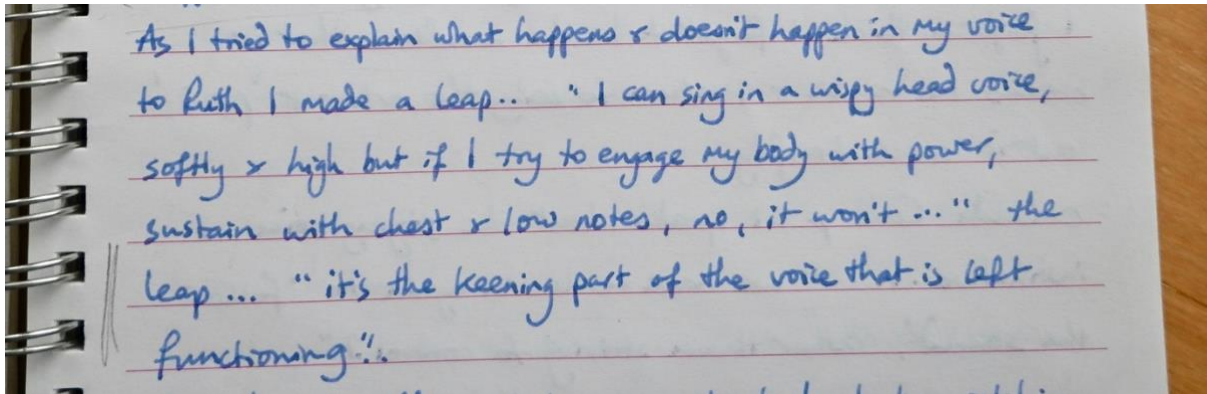


Figure 1: Keening - project notebook 12 August 2021.

Vocal sounding is a subtle dancing of inner mechanisms of the body, requiring carefully balanced coordination of muscles alongside an inner connection to 'soul' or meaning to be fully unleashed. Orlanda Cook writes of this saying: 'to sing is to join with and become 'dance partners' with the air around, breathing it in and then sending it out full of sound, vibration and meaning'. (Cook 2008:62)

There is a tangible difference between vocalisations that are made with technique as their primary driver and those driven by inner connection to meaning, spirit, soul, feel or emotion. In my teaching, I refer to this as 'going in'. For some, technique is an instinctive, known coordinated happening that comes about naturally through 'doing'. For others, technique is learned and mastered. When technique and reaching inwards meet, an alchemical transformation can happen that the singer feels as rightness, power, or clarity and the listener may perceive as a moving communication.

The severing of instinct and inner connection from voicing can lead to blockages felt between intention and actualisation. These can be temporary and brief or lead to a complete breakdown of the singing and/or the speaking voice. Speaking of Iris Warren's 1930's pioneering vocal coaching work, Kristin Linklater tells us that 'she did not deal directly with the suffering voice but with the physical and mental tensions caused by blocked emotions.' (Linklater 2006:5-6)

'The natural voice' she writes,

is most perceptibly blocked and distorted by physical tension; it suffers equally from emotional blocks, intellectual blocks, aural blocks, and psychological blocks. All such obstacles are psychophysical in nature, and once they are removed the voice is able to communicate the full range of human emotion and all the nuances of thought. (Linklater, 2006:8)

Reflection:

As a full-time artist singer musician, the natural ability to instinctively convey what I wanted to was never questioned. When my work shifted, this vocal instinct gradually was cut off firstly by the need to "switch off" my sensitivity through the demands of my job. Secondly because of ill health and thirdly, through the shocks and demands of dealing with the brutal diseases of my loved ones. Linklater maintains that these processes of blockages can be eased away through consistent and gentle work. This point of absolute personal darkness of deep grieving seems like a strange time to reconnect but at the same time provides a fissure from which oozes and leaks

emotional pain - that fissure could be the channel back in – a way of opening up and moving the blockages.¹¹

My vocal predicament is complicated by long covid (contracted pre-vaccination) with long term compromised breathing patterns and further complicated by hormonal changes due to menopause. Regular sensations of suffocation, cause the body to yank hard at the breath to try to fill the lungs to capacity. I have quickly discovered that this is futile and that expelling air from the lungs is more useful, often resulting in an easing of the sensation of suffocation. While watching a programme on long covid treatments I saw someone being directed to blow hard into a machine. This reminded me that as a young musician I was aware that playing my clarinet gave my singing voice enhanced strength, clarity and flexibility. I wondered therefore whether returning to my clarinet might help with my vocal recovery, training my muscles for power and control.^{12 13}

The extensive examples of breathing exercises available for recovery from covid 19 aiding healthy muscular reflexivity, connect also with breathing exercises commonly used in vocal training which significantly enhance vocalisations.^{14 15}

With breath work, Linklater warns against ‘conscious control of the breath’ saying it ‘will destroy its sensitivity to changing emotional impulse’ adding ‘you cannot imitate a reflex action. (Linklater, 2006:44) With these words she raises the level of awareness required in working with breath, body and mind, encouraging questioning rather than slavishly ‘doing’. Questions I ask myself and my students to pay attention to might be ‘what do I feel happen in the body automatically when I do this?’ ‘Am I letting it happen naturally or am I interjecting?’ Linklater goes on to write: ‘Natural breathing is reflexive, and to restore its reflexive potential, the only work you can do is to remove restrictive tensions and provide a diversity of stimuli.’ (2006) Balloons work well!

On a deeper level, this is training in concentration and being in the moment. It develops the ability to focus the mind like a laser beam onto the thing we are presently working with. In focusing on the reflexive actions of breathing mechanisms we train a habit of awareness, which can be applied to all aspects of our practice.¹⁶ This focused awareness builds strong neuronal pathways that can take us ultimately to a none thinking freedom of expression where the body responds reflexively to the musical impulse, connecting mind, body and soul in and through the work.¹⁷

Mm Ma – Going In Digging Deep Finding Voice

¹¹ When reviewing this paper, Elisabeth Belgrano suggested that this connects with the writing of Rick Dolpijn in *The Philosophy of Matter. A Meditation*. 2021:91. I will go on to read this.

¹² Rushton, project notebook, July 2023.

¹³ I continue to work with this, having experienced marked beneficial effect. Note also the singers' straw exercises for developing power and tone in the voice – accessible to all where 'clarinet' isn't!

¹⁴ 'The difference between the pre- and post-values of SpO2 [oxygen saturation] was found to be significant, which suggests that balloon exercise is a low-cost physiotherapy strategy that can be utilized to enhance oxygen saturation in COVID-19 patients.' (Misrar, Pawar, Pal, 2023).

¹⁵ In their paper documenting 'the balloon exercise' as effective treatment, the authors clearly explain the muscular responses of the body to the 'blowing' (also revealing the mechanics of breathing exercises for singers).

¹⁶ Here I refer to the subject of the work, placement of the voice, feeling of the music and source of the feeling.

¹⁷ For an explanation of the role of building neuronal pathways or neuroplasticity in performance, see Chapter 5, *Brain Mechanisms* in Parncutt, R, & McPherson, G (eds) 2002.

Mm and “ma’ sounds are standard practice for warming up the voice without strain, awakening the muscles and encouraging resonance. In 2015 and 2016 I sang in Verity Standen’s *Hug*,¹⁸ an extraordinary vocal ensemble piece which invited the audience to experience a performance blindfold and, with carefully choreographed movement, held close to and by a singer. One of the sections of this piece, a heart-rending lament with multiple harmonies, was based on the word ‘Ma’. In this moment of loss of my mother I reached for that word unconsciously as I tried to connect with, even follow her, whilst simultaneously attempting to re-find my way back to ‘life’ and control of my voice. Listening back to my small simple sounds, I recalled Verity’s work and the power of its singular word.¹⁹ The deep connection to this word formed a stepping stone which linked broken connections together, creating a pathway for the voice to find a way out. Listen.²⁰



Figure 2: Iris Life Cycle, Rushton 2022.

Stepping Stones for Voice Finding

Part of this voice finding process was defined by inability at times to vocalise at all. When voice stopped coming, turning to the piano brought about an internal shift, a loosening of the rigid grip. Through the movement of fingers, the sounds took on the weight of the things I couldn’t express.

Reflection:

Just play... again, a deep internal breath like coming to a closed door, a few notes... you can hear that they don’t mean anything more than a knock on the door but then gradually it begins to open little by little until a place is found and, targeted with intense concentration, the inexpressible finds a way out through fingers hands arms shoulders mouth and ears and something inexplicable happens.²¹

What came was an outpouring that I hadn’t foreseen or planned, it opened a fissure and channelled the immense pain, love and ‘spirit breakage’ into sound. This laid another stepping stone on the journey’s route through the remembering of deep musical connections, creating a ‘bridge’ back to the lost voice. Listen.²²

¹⁸ For more on this visit: (<https://veritystanden.com/hug.php>)

¹⁹ I also recalled that Verity composed *Hug* after the loss of her own mother.

²⁰ [Mm Ma Audio](#) Rushton, 6 August 2021.

²¹ Rushton, project notebook, 5 August 2021.

²² [Loss Piano Audio](#) Rushton, 5 August 2021.



Figure 3: Iris Life Cycle, Rushton 2022.

Documenting and Doing

Documenting was an important part of making sense of my project. It led me to explore different modes of thinking and writing and consider how one impacted another.

Reflection:

And this, this picking over the process interrupts that process, uses a different part of the brain, the mind, to question. There is a need to stop this as I feel “the work” slipping away like melting ice cream. There is a need to go back in.²³

When the act of doing becomes *overwritten* by acts of intellectualising, the body can forget how to be connected to the visceral physicality of feeling, sensing and allowing flow to take place. John McLaughlin commented on this in an online master class where the act of explaining was for him interrupting his ability to play freely. “I’m trying to be inspirational and academic at the same time and the two don’t marry very well” he said, “once you start playing you should move to the level where you don’t think anymore”.^{24 25}

²³ Rushton, project notebook, 5 August 2021.

²⁴ ‘The Paul Reed Smith at Maryland Hall | Virtual Music School on Livestream’. 2022.

²⁵ This perhaps points back to my thoughts on developing strong neuronal pathways, which, through mastery allows the non-thinking self to bring knowledge, soulfulness and skill together moment by moment.

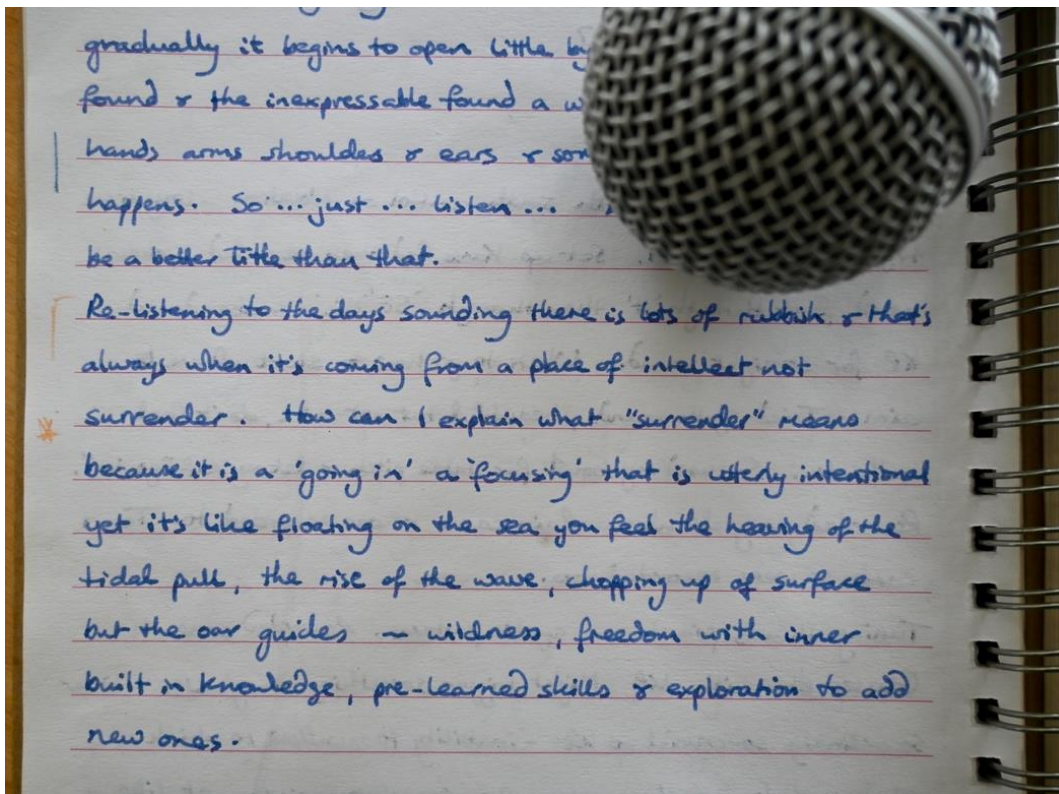


Figure 4: Surrender - project notebook 5 August 2021.

The deep need to acknowledge anguish, be with it and allow it to transform into something else was paramount. To not intellectualise but to allow flow, to 'play' was essential - a dark and heavy play no doubt but play none the less. This it seemed, would externalise what was locked in.²⁶

Some sounds emerged in the moment as voicings of wordless shapes. Others as words, often in jumbled disorganised forms. These later became texts. Some words were 'thrown down' onto the page first before becoming song, voiced as overlapping layers echoing a desire to state and re-state them.²⁷

²⁶ In reviewing this essay, Elisabeth Belgrano noted the importance of 'play' in 'Artistic Research and Performance Philosophy and in the art of imagining', she writes: 'I have not yet seen a specific study making the connection between young children's learning/pedagogy and Artistic Research methodological strategies.'

²⁷ In documenting these different methodologies, they become accessible for strategies in future work or for others to explore in their own work. Also see Figures 6 and 9.



Figure 5: Iris Life Cycle, Rushton 2022.

On this process of externalising, Levine and Levine comment: “the work does not express the self; it expresses a world. It starts with me, but it then finds its own shape which I can only follow”. (2011:26)²⁸

²⁸ It could be said that the work unfolds and reveals itself and the things buried within it, holding different states of experience together without having to articulate them as separate elements. The work is greater than the self which is why, Levine and Levine say, the art affects the individual who makes or encounters it.

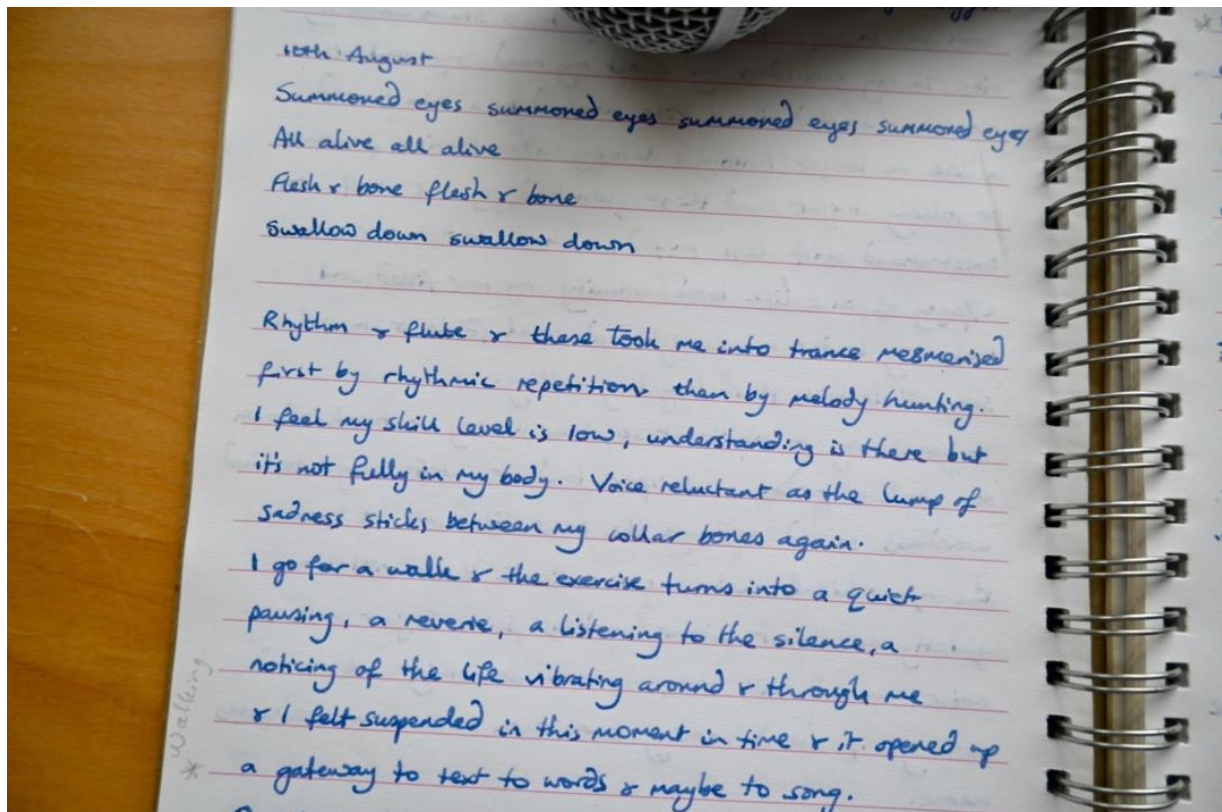


Figure 6: Reluctant Voice - project notebook 10 August 2021.

Lament day 7

These following sections are taken from a long and deep lament that came from within as rain hammered down outside. Over time the vocalisations turn to song, then sobs, traces of which are left in the voice when it re-emerges in song again. This created a long pathway of 'voicing' on the journey which left darkly etched footprints between the inner and the outer, the dead and the living. The need to stay in the song was profound but eventually, relinquished. The words written below approximate what was sung. Listen. ^{29 30 31}

Hear This

To-to-to... hear this
Is this... here
Hear
Shou t-t-t.

Try to reach you.
Now we are alone all out of time
Hear this
Past images
Are they here?

Oh my summoner
I'm no failure

²⁹ [Loss Hear This Shout Lament 1](#)

³⁰ [Loss Are You Here Lament 2](#)

³¹ [Loss Deep Lament Keen for Me 3](#)

*Are they here?
Oh my secret
Taller than the
Mountain pasture
Past you
By a censure
Sense you
Over
Enchanter
Time that you said
Wait until I'm gone.*

*'Keen for me'
My darling ones say
'Keen for me
My daughters my sons.
Keen...
Let the waters come
We rain down
Our love is one
Hear the rain
Our tears will drown out
Your pain.'³²*

Spell Casting Pathways

Sometimes the pain of loss and shock of violence is too great for words and only sounds come, wordless and primal, guttural and groaning. Tender and keening.³³

David Appelbaum's astonishingly revelatory book *Voice* (1990) provides provocative clues to vocal dysphonia, he writes 'voice reduced to mechanics strips us of vocally contacting the awareness at the heart of ourselves.' (1990:90) He argues that the power of speech through voice has been framed as the civilising factor in mankind. That taming the sob, scream or cry is paramount for humans since these uncontrolled 'animalistic' vocalisations invade polite rationality. 'To this end exists the state of glottal tension and respiratory re-tention.' (1990:46-47) Natural vocal connection to our inner self are perhaps the sounds that come in our extremity of experience.^{34 35}

Conjuring sung or spoken pathways as a spell casting, gave structure to my cries. Reaching into the inner realms of 'spirit' or 'soul' to connect with lost ones awakened rigid vocal folds and coaxed them into vibrations. Repetitions became soothing and mesmeric as well as mechanisms for massaging inflexible vocal muscles.

³² Rushton, project notebook, 10 August 2021.

³³ Rushton, project notebook 9 August 2021

³⁴ And even hints of these emotive vocalisations in song can act as powerful triggers for listeners. The groan, the cry, breakage, gravel and breathy qualities are examples of what I am referring to here.

³⁵ In conversation with Ruth Boulton, whilst speaking of my loss of voice, she spoke of the phenomenon of voluntary muteness coming about after trauma. This re-emerged in my written 'rants' as the project progressed. 'This grip that is needed to hold back the sob, the scream, the rage, becomes so all-consuming that voluntary muteness, or at least a silencing, a stopping of flexible movement is, for some, almost inevitable.' This provided another stepping stone in my journey. For more information about Ruth Boulton's work see <https://musicabilitycic.uk/about-the-company/>

Used universally in ritualistic practices, chant, rhythm and repetition have long been used for their powers of coercion, suggestion and transformation.³⁶ Estonian poet Jan Kaplinski wrote of this in his 1969 essay saying:

“...we must remember that there still exists a clear connection between ancient folk song and witchcraft, shamanism, and casting a spell, as is obvious even in *The Kalevala*, and elsewhere where a great singer is actually the same as a powerful shaman. The fact that our singers also promise to sing the earth into sea, to fell the forest, and dry fir trees with their voices is not as much a metaphor of poetry as of “magic”. (Kaplinski 1969, in Daitz 2004:61)³⁷

Mesmerising through rhythm and song, is a universal human response to life’s events. These practices provide anchorage, a balm and a pathway between states of being, through the paradoxical simultaneity of ‘letting go’ and a pinpoint focus of intention. ‘The rhythmic life of sung voice is enchanting because it is chant. Its spell moves us vitally. Chant is that vital motion, the organic pulse of life, ever changing, yet repetitive, with which body awareness vibrates. (Appelbaum, 1990).

The voice is wispy, even ghostly, hardly there but the repetitive cycle reaches towards ‘chant’. Listen.

Half Here

I don't feel like I'm here. I'm half here, I'm half hidden. ³⁸

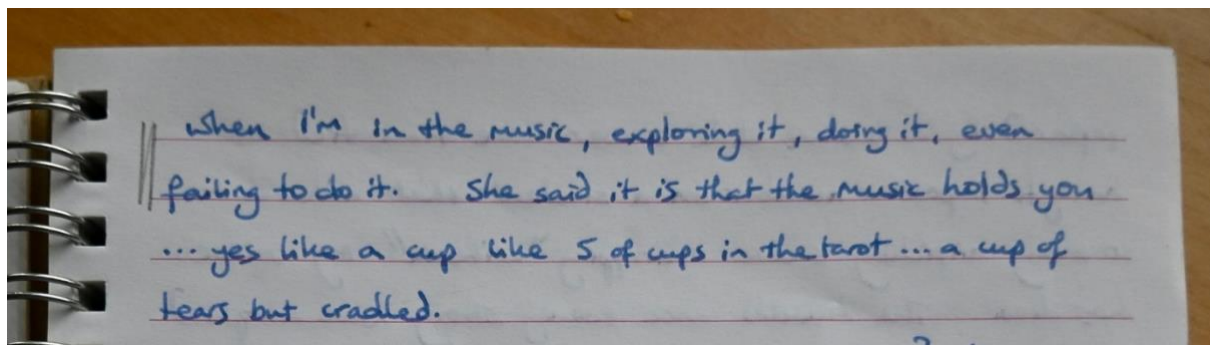


Figure 7: Music holds you - project notebook 12 August 2021. Ruth Boulton conversation.

Seeking Spells

The next outpouring of rage, accusation, self-recrimination, blame and guilt, is heavy with despair and perhaps represents the absolute centre of the darkness of grief.³⁹

³⁶ For an explanation of the effects of music on the brain see: Kučikienė D, Praninskienė R. The impact of music on the bioelectrical oscillations of the brain. *Acta Med Lit.* 2018.

³⁷ In this essay Kaplinski demanded that the authenticity of the ancient folk song of his homeland be retained rather than romanticised by composers who systematically removed their visceral hypnotic raw qualities.

³⁸ [Don't Audio](#) Rushton 12 August 2024

³⁹ Please be aware of trigger warnings in these passages and skip over them if susceptible.

*The focus lost, all things are whirling, are real are here are not here are just out of reach, perplexing, instinctive, body oddly non-responsive, a booby trap, take me here, won't go, where is there? Can't go.*⁴⁰

Where are they?

Betrayed.

All hope lost, all betrayed, abandoned, left, lost...

Ugly twisted wrongness... I didn't rescue you. I turned and I left and I am drowned in my helplessness my inability to rise up and roar and take over. I am trash. You knew me then and you knew your pain and then and then you knew me not again. My dearest dear one I failed you in every raw cell... and the anguish has claws.

*This is the beast that stalks me – I need spells, incantations, a weaving of and summoning of the strongest of forces to slay this monster - this is the dark art.*⁴¹



Figure 8: Day Lily Tear, Rushton 2022.

Bone Dried

*We are not supposed to say this,
We are civilised.
To say it is to inundate
To flood.
To be lost
And drowned,
Airless,
Limp,
Scattered,*

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Belgrano commented here that this sounds like the paradox of Nothing and All. This is a fascinating opening I would like to explore further.

⁴¹ Rushton, project notebook, 6 August 2021.

Dust,
Clogged.
Mud blocked,
Bone dried,
Stuck,
Sucked,
Bogged.⁴²

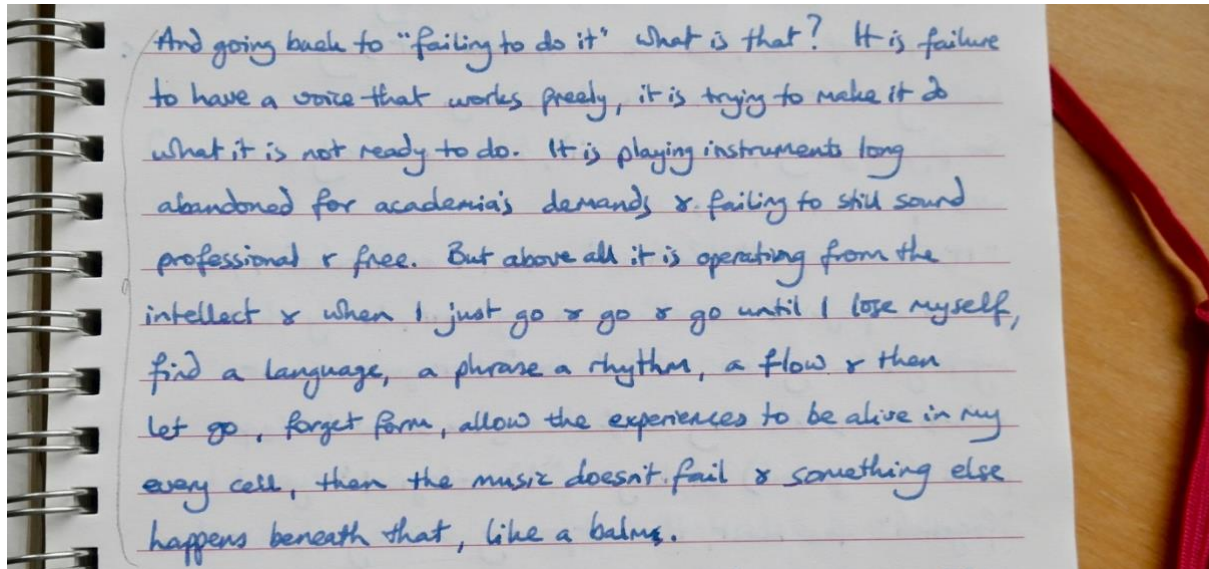


Figure 9: Failing and finding - project notebook 12 August 2021.

Highly acclaimed Ukrainian singer, researcher, musician and performer, Mariana Sadovska says of her current project with Christian Thomé,

‘rage and love are the two main energies that are moving us in our music. [...] The project is made out of Ukrainian poetry and could have a similar function as a ritualistic music, it works sometimes like a prayer, sometimes like a spell.’ (VESNA New Program *TO LEARN FROM THE LIGHT* 2024)

The song *Spell*, (Mariana Sadovska and Christian Thomé 2014) mesmerising and deeply affecting, especially when experienced ‘live’,⁴³ is rich with ritualistic tropes. Between long melismatic phrases sung in her mother tongue, she intones the words ‘go away, do never come back’. Her voice drops to her lowest of pitches where vocal gravel and ‘groan’ infuse her words: ‘wasted years, lost time’. The song is heavy with rage and grief but simultaneously projects the power of the curse of banishment. Drones and slow tempo repetitions build in intensity before dropping and building again. ‘Incantatory music is by definition introverted, slowly turning around upon itself, proceeding by fascination, and developing itself in immobility’ (Rouget, G 1985:240).

Focus Images Fingers Movement

There is a phenomenon that has long fascinated me whereby imagination allows the singer access to vocalisations that otherwise elude them. Externalising an ‘idea’ of the sound has a

⁴² Rushton project notebook 6 August 2021.

⁴³ For a live performance of this see: Mariana Sadovska: *Spell* [Film]. 2017

strange but solid impact on what emerges. When working to release tension in a singer's throat I often suggest they imagine their sound emerging from a deep pothole, the voice becomes a spark of light that floats up through the space 'never touching the sides'. A spaciousness comes into their next vocalisation and just as easily disappears when the image is let go of. When working to ensure pinpoint accuracy of pitch I will invite the singer to use their hands to place the note in the air in front of them, dropping the notes in space with the idea that it exists 'there'. Often this 'magically' tunes a note that has been persistently 'off'. A particularly intricate manifestation of this is in any Bobby McFerrin performance. Watching him sing phenomenally difficult vocal phrases we see his fingers 'playing the microphone' as if it were a clarinet or pipe, the subtle movement of his fingers is a dance that corresponds exactly to his vocal notes (McFerrin 2010).

I worked with this phenomenon, tracing shapes in the air with fingers, hands and body. This dance of tiny movements traced the sound I sought to vocalise in the moment of making it. Somewhere in the fissure between movement and broken spirit, the aching pain moved through the body and into the voice. During the project and in subsequent months I made ink drawings that corresponded to my imagined concept of the continued presences of my 'missing ones'. These in turn seemed to connect to slides, droplets and melody shapes that found their way out of me as 'voicings'.⁴⁴

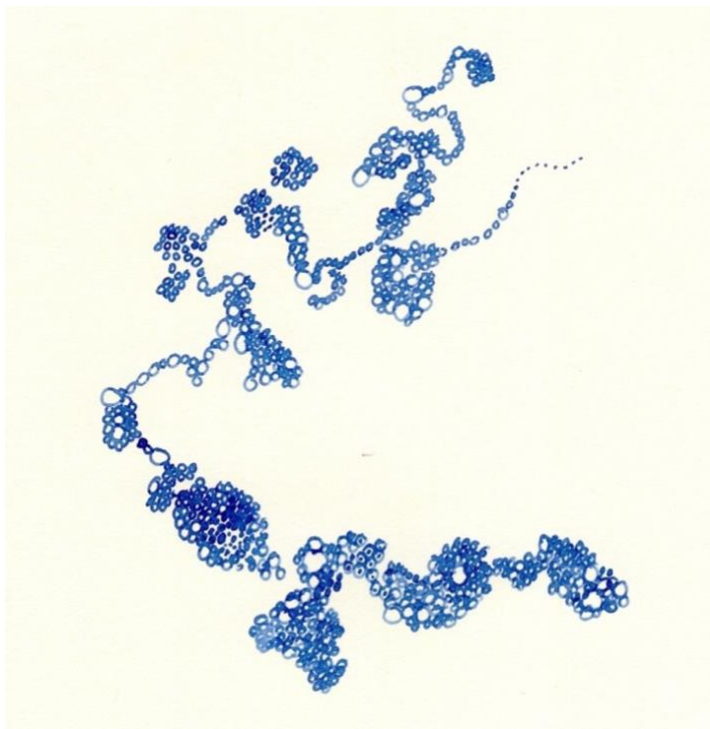


Figure 10: Ink Spirit, Rushton 2021.

Listen.

My missing ones
Looking for

⁴⁴ This can perhaps be heard in Loss Hear This Shout Lament 1 with the halting "do do" droplets mirroring the tiny circles of the Ink Spirit drawing. I didn't see these drawings as scores, but in a reversal, they could become that.

*My missing ones*⁴⁵

Going In Pathways Fissures

As I sought to find my voice, my focus often became fixed on ‘the making of something’ and from this came long stretches of painful vocalisations. But when the focus shifted back to the inner experience, moving freely through memory, soul searching and ‘just being’, the voice came, reluctantly, softly but with authenticity. In my teaching, questions such as: ‘what does it mean, what is the essence of what you are singing and what are you expressing’ lead the singer to reach inwards. Connecting, with a concentrated focus, to the point of the vocalisation can, ‘like magic’, release a depth of tone and meaning. ‘The singing voice’, Orlanda Cook tells us, ‘is instinctive... we have to learn again to ‘follow the sound’, rather than striving to control it’ (Cook, 2004:27). On my journey, in these delicate moments, stepping stones and pathways emerged and along with voicing what had been inexpressible came a trickling release.

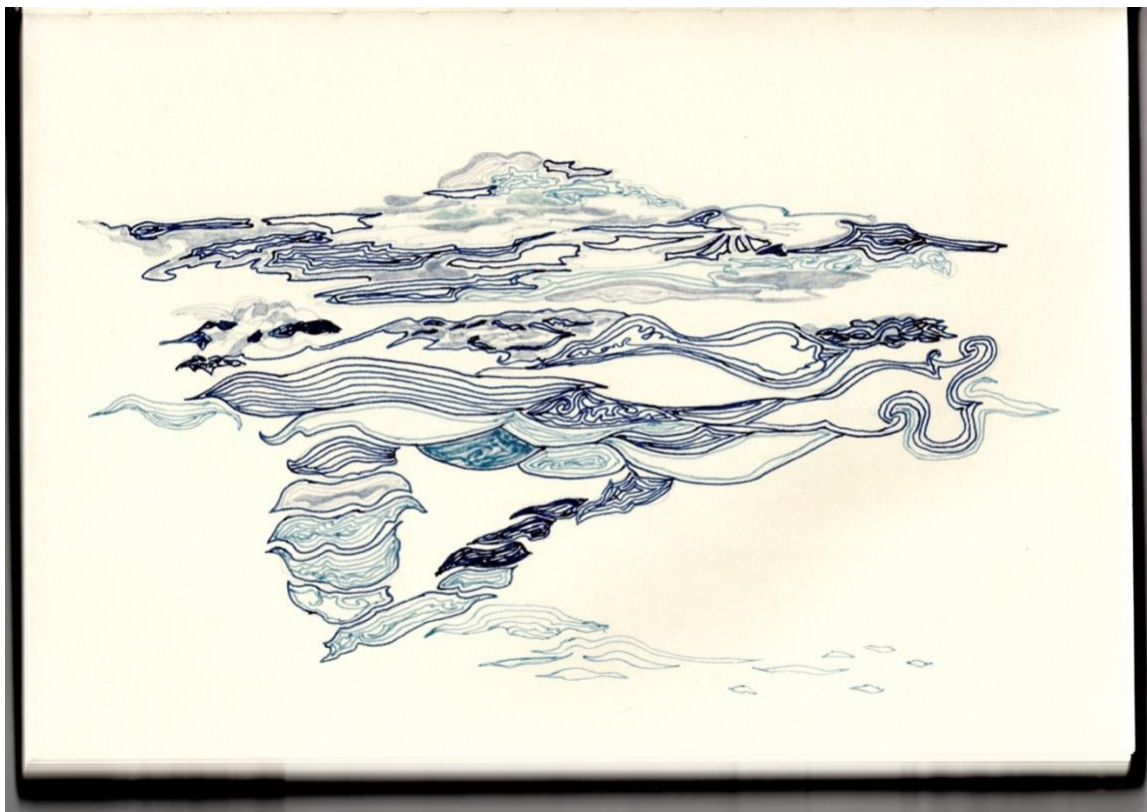


Figure 11: Ink Spirit Coagulation, Rushton 2021

Renowned spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

life today is organized according to ‘reason’. We participate in life with only part of our being – our intellect. The other half, deeper and more important, is the store consciousness, the foundation of the roots of our being. This part can’t be analysed by reason. (Hanh 2005:152)

⁴⁵ [My Missing Ones Audio](#) Rushton, 6 August 2021

This holds some correspondence to concepts of 'reaching inwards', connecting also with Law's desire for a reimagining of ways of knowing.⁴⁶

Man today [...] trusts his rationality so much that he is uprooted from his true being. From this comes the feeling of alienation from which he suffers and through this, little by little, his humanity becomes more and more mechanical. (2005)

In my journey through grief, the sense of alienation eased when I set aside rational thought and allowed instinct to take the lead. In broader issues, the need to re-balance rationality and instinct or 'true being', is, I suggest, urgent.

Interdependency - Existential Planetary Howl day 6

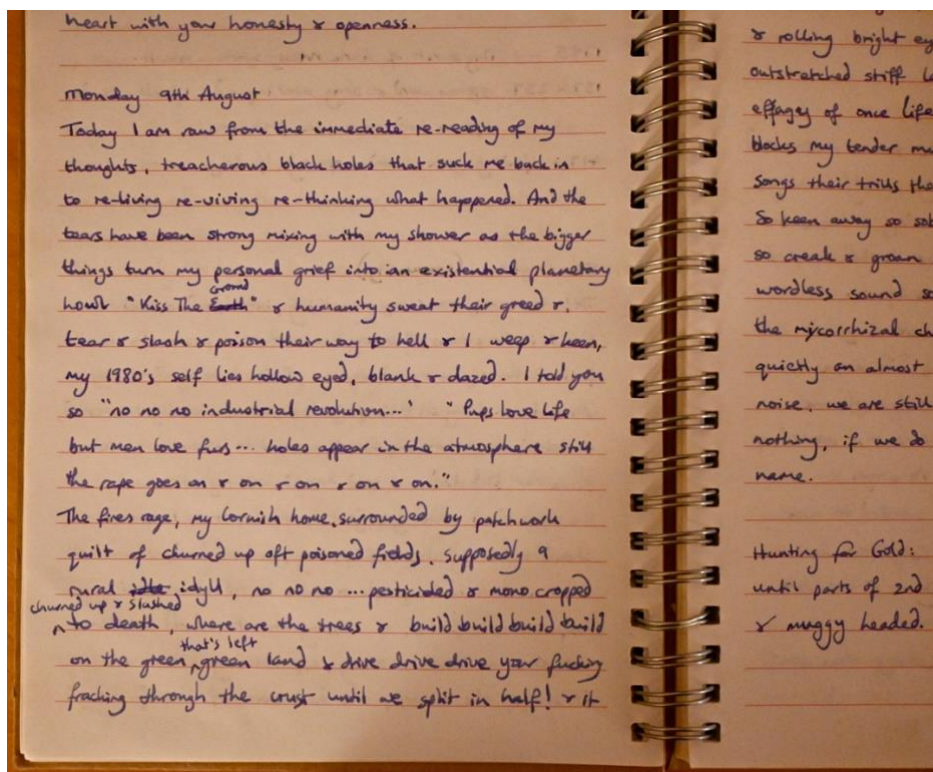


Figure 12: Planetary Howl - project notebook 9 August 2021.

The shift of focus from personal to planetary was a key moment in my journey, leading to a 'loosening' of personal darkness. Destruction and poisoning of interdependent life forms experienced across the globe has created a state of collective grief. Voicings of loss and outrage from others became my point of connection. Our plight is summed up here:

As the scale of economic activity increases, until capitalism affects everything from the atmosphere to the deep ocean floor, the entire planet becomes a sacrifice zone, we all inhabit the periphery of the profit-making machine... This drives us towards cataclysm on such a scale that most people have no means of imagining it. (Monbiot 2021)

⁴⁶ This is too complex a suggestion to be thoroughly explored here but included because of its influence on my journey.



Figure 13: Bright Poppy, Rushton 2022.

Listen.⁴⁷

No Not Dancing

*Voice is stopped by tears stuck under ribs,
in shoulders throat and head,
my soul is swollen,
bloated like a kite attached by thin thread,
a kite no longer twisting,
no, not dancing
flexible with pleasure
and rolling bright eyed thirst quenched joy.
But stiff,
arms outstretched,
stiff legs puffed,
a shock lost,
horror struck effigy
of once life loved humanity.*

*My tear-filled soul
blocks tender muscle tightened vocal folds
and stops their songs
their trills their long, long calling.*

*So keen away so sob it out so clear a way
so break it down,
so creak and groan or whisper loud,*

⁴⁷ [No Not Dancing Audio](#) Rushton, 13th August 2021.

*or quiet, tongue touched wordless sound.
So hum the bees delirium,
so buzz the mycorrhizal chain,
communicate their violation
quietly,
an almost silent wordless pain.
So just make noise
we are still here,
we can't do nothing,
we can do nothing,
if we do nothing
burn,
burn
and drown our memories name.⁴⁸*

Words can be just words: inanimate, built of shapes and spaces that we can alter and explore internally in throat and nose, mouth, jaw, cheeks and tongue but something else happens if we **deep-dive** into the meaning. The kite metaphor for the broken, grieving soul-self turned rigid, is focused on its stiffness. Rigidity, and vulnerability to disconnection from the earth emphasises the 'lack' of the beautiful things we might associate with a kite. Colour, movement, flexibility, twisting, dancing, swooping could also be metaphors for a life with loved ones or a planet full of health and diversity. And in that emphasis is held the loss of these precious things and the darkness of that loss. The deep-dive is simultaneously taking the inanimate words whilst infusing them with these meanings, allowing them to manifest as 'knowing' turned to voicing. Then and only then does the voice start to open, loosen and find its resonance and freedom. This is instinctive to the healthy singer but when blockages occur, the voice stops 'singing'.

⁴⁸ Rushton, project notebook 2021



Figure 14: Bedraggled Poppy, Rushton 2022.

Hanh describes ‘interdependency’ as ‘interbeing and interpenetration’ saying ‘we must learn to see the one in the many and the many in the one. (Hahn, 2009:103) This is now being experienced and discussed globally. In his review of *Entangled Life* (Sheldrake, Merlin, 2021) Richard Kerridge writes that the book is ‘about how life-forms interpenetrate and change each other continuously’ and in a satisfying echo of the teachings of Hanh, writes:

a great deal of ecological thought now asks us to take more note of the relationships of interdependency that embed and sustain us, including many too large or small for unaided vision. The interpenetration of these systems raises questions about the boundaries of our selfhood. It is difficult now to think simply in terms of inside and outside, or self and not-self. (Kerridge 2020)

The impact of humanities self-centred activities that wilfully ignore interdependency is being felt across every form of life.⁴⁹ We are told one in two will experience cancer but there is an odd lack of *mainstream* reporting on why. Where action should be immediate, little is being demanded.⁵⁰ Questions surrounding my mother’s rare blood cancer and my sister’s

⁴⁹ For an excellent informative guide that explains our situation and shows, with clear data how we can navigate out of the mess, see Professor Mike Berners-Lee’s highly regarded book *There Is No Planet B*, 2021.

⁵⁰ It’s not in the scope of this essay to explore or evidence these points but I make them in the spirit of the questioning individual, grappling with grief. There is a huge body of research that evidences man-made environmental causes of cancer. In a 2008 paper the authors’ summary ends with this: ‘We repeat the call of ecologist Sandra Steingraber: ‘From the right to know and the duty to inquire flows the obligation to act.’. CLAPP, Richard W., Jacobs,, Molly M. and Loechler,, Edward L. 2008.

breast cancer, point to the interdependency of the disrupted systems of the planet.⁵¹ Seeking voices concerned with these issues became my focus.⁵²

Other Voices

1. Artists 'voices' are powerful carriers of stories, facts and emotive messages, often bridging gaps between science, politics and people. We see this in *Kiss the Ground*, (Tickell et al 2024)⁵³ where narrator Woody Harrelson expresses his despair before pointing to a breadth of projects that offer tangible solutions. And in *Before the Flood* (2016) Leonardo di Caprio journeys across the globe revealing shocking destructive impacts of human activity on our ecosystems. The song *A Minute to Breathe* (Reznor/Ross, 2018) from the soundtrack, 'expresses' the anguish in the film and our individual powerlessness. Reznor's subtle use of filters and delays on the repetition of 'I just need a minute to breathe' enhance meanings, evoking ideas of presence, disappearance, loss and memory traces.

Karine Polwart⁵⁴ deals skilfully, with dark issues, nature and loss in her exquisitely constructed songs. *Cornerstone*'s refrain 'be still, be still and watch the sky/tread lightly as you pass on by and listen' is both invitation and warning (Polwart 2018). Whilst in *Matsuo's Welcome to Muckhart* (2018) she encapsulates the unpredictable and devastating power and effect of natural forces, capturing a sense of beauty and the fleeting nature of human life. Her words, "to tend this earth is all that we can do with this life" resonate with significance in today's context of loss and environmental crises.

⁵¹ For further reading on man-made environmental factors in breast cancer see Calaf, G.M., Ponce-Cusi, R., Aguayo, F., Muñoz, J. P., Bleak, T. C. 2020.

⁵² A lifelong area of concern for me, this crystallised in the extremity of my grieving process. I engaged with the work of scientists, academics, activists', artists and writers. I offer a snapshot of this aspect of the project here, commenting on examples of powerful messages conveyed through arts practices or by artists.

⁵³ This multi award winning documentary demonstrates the interconnectedness of healthy bio systems showing how, replacing micro-organism starved soils, through bio sequestration "captures carbon and stores it in the soil".

⁵⁴ Recipient of multiple awards including four times winner of the Radio 2 Folk Awards and Mojo's Folk album of the year. See Rogers review, 2017 for discussion of the album *Laws of Motion*, 2018.

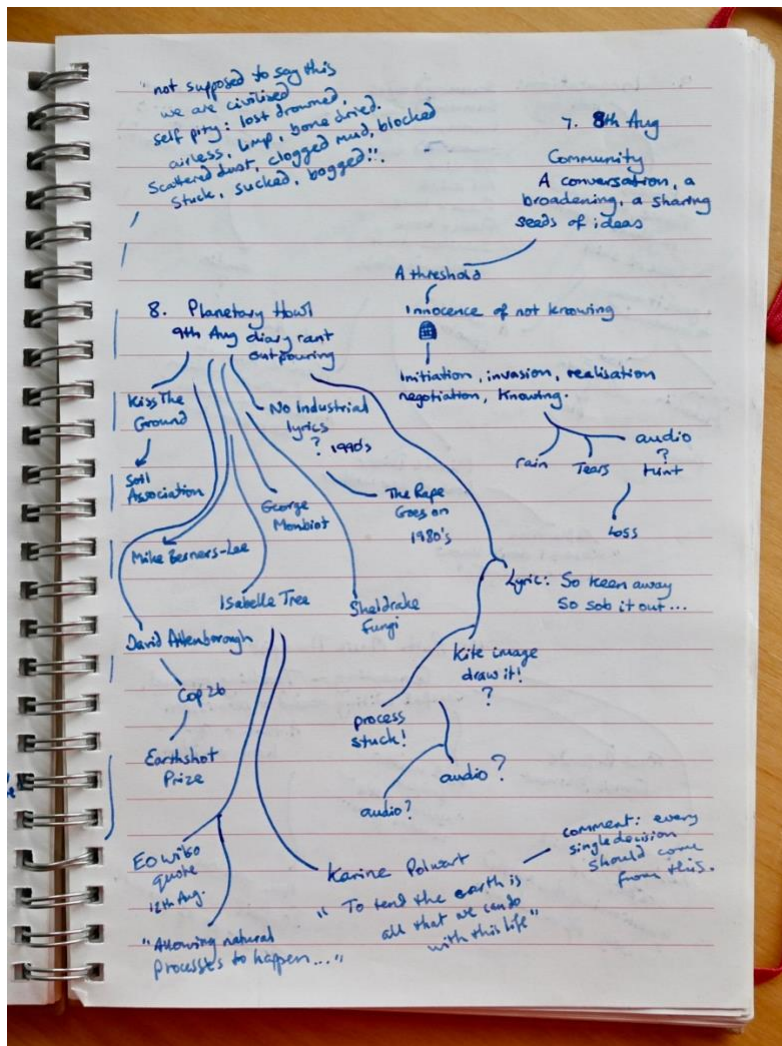


Figure 15: Seeking Voices flowchart - project notebook 2022.

Full Circle - Interconnections



Figure 16. Day Lily Life Cycle, Rushton 2022.

The journey from the deeply personal, leading to the global, for me looped on a macabre 'pathway' back to the start through researching environmentally triggered cancers. In April 1986 my sister was caught in torrential rain whilst walking the mountains of Cumbria, she was soaked to the skin.

On the 26th of April in 1986, an explosion in Ukraine sparked the world's worst nuclear accident. [...] The accident sent a cloud of radioactivity across western Europe, spreading above Cumbria - where the heavy rain washed it down onto the fells (ITV News, 2016).

In September 2018 my sister was diagnosed with cancer, we will, of course, never know if the events of Chernobyl were the cause.⁵⁵ A few months later my mother also fell victim to cancer. My laments run deeper than individual experience, my voicelessness has been metaphorical as well as actual, rooted in an existential scream that goes back through mine and the planet's history.

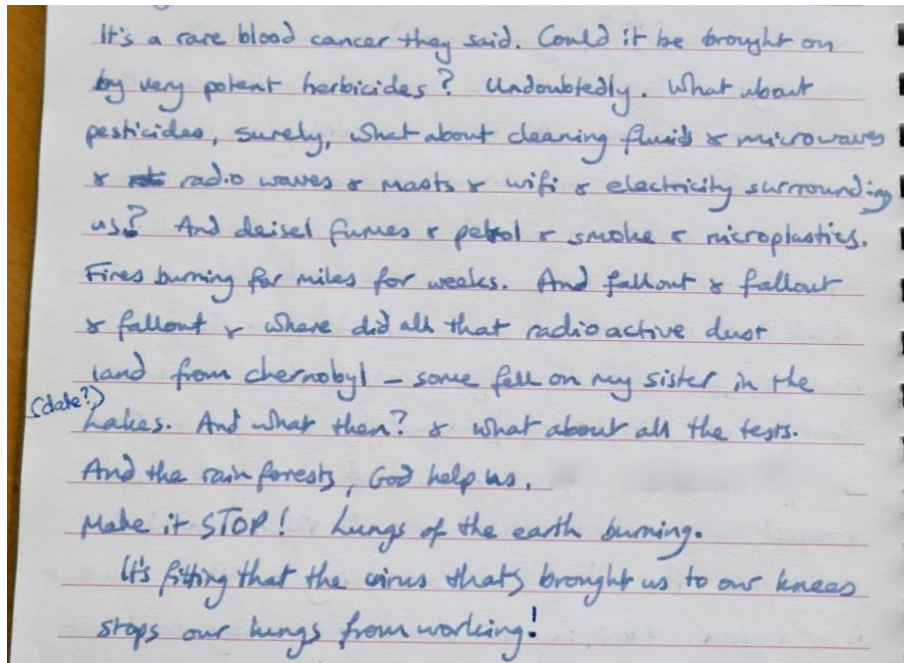


Figure 17: Poisons Rant – project notebook 12th August 2021.



Fig 16. Day Lily Life Cycle, Rushton 2022.

Conclusions

This 'project' was like a giant iceberg mostly submerged, and in whose murky caverns I needed to dwell for longer. Through the meditative processes of creative practices, transformations emerged. I felt a softening of the grip of grief as sounds, images and words leaked out of the openings and spaces made.

⁵⁵ For further reading on this see 'Island Cancer Cases Linked to Chernobyl'. 2022. The Irish Times [online].

The creative possibilities that arise from an aesthetic response to a situation or an issue generate change not only at the level of imagination but in lived, measurable reality (LeBaron in Levine 2011).

Ways of navigating unfolded through the work of 'doing', and perhaps the most important discovery for me was that 'being with' my grief was a necessity for finding a way through it. Grief is a normal part of existence that we, in our society, often need to hide.⁵⁶ But if we can honour our dark times, accepting that we are governed by natural cycles, we may value our minutes more. Minnie Driver referred to her grief as an 'expression of love' (BRYANT Miranda 2021). Ruth Boulton spoke about 'yin and yang, dark and light needing each other to know each other' (2021). These ideas may, as a starting point, ease us towards a gentle acceptance of our dark times.

Voicing is perhaps a metaphor for 'making manifest'. The word, image, piano note and photograph were vehicles for this, offering 'ways of knowing' through 'intermodality'. Vocally, 'use what you have' was my mantra. So, I did, repeating phrases that held burning meaning until the meaning moved, along with the inability to express it. I discovered physical points of tension and a 'creaky' re-awakening and massaging of muscles long left unused. Theoretically if this had continued gently each day, the re-building of my damaged voice may have been completed relatively quickly. Continuous, gentle practice is crucial to maintain connections to all aspects of voicing.

On re-reading the poetic texts that run through this work, it seems clear to me that a journey emerges. From utter blank shock, through imagery of the pain of loss to the last text, where suddenly the focus opens to the plight of the world outside. This is the moment of breakthrough. Describing the subtle shift from the dark underworld of grief back towards 'light', Barnes writes: 'attention is caught by something interesting [...] an unexpected breeze has sprung up, and we are in movement again (Barnes in Holinger, 2020:249).

The interconnectedness of natural cycles, ecosystems, disease and loss became a significant focus in my journey, broadening my perspectives.

Through the voicings that emerged in this project, the unspeakable, seemed to me to transform and find a way out. There is no doubt that the really dread filled images remain untouchable but maybe there is some slower underlying alchemy at work here. In allowing 'lament' to happen, staying with it and flowing towards the insights it brought, the horrors softened into sounds. Many hard and harsh, repetitive or dull, but some hold softness. And with this process came a release of pressure, making way for life and ease to seep back in.

Losing something important is messy, the repercussions, aftershocks and chains of events that follow create complex networks of experiences. These are like ever shifting meanderings of becks, tributaries, rivers and deltas flowing simultaneously in multiple directions. This project has been messy, and multi-modal, its value slippery and hard to capture.⁵⁷ To borrow the words of Clarissa Pinkola Estés, the work has been that of 'soulful

⁵⁶ Compassionate leave, if given at all is brief. Friends want to make us feel better. We try to get on with things.

⁵⁷ See John Law 2004.

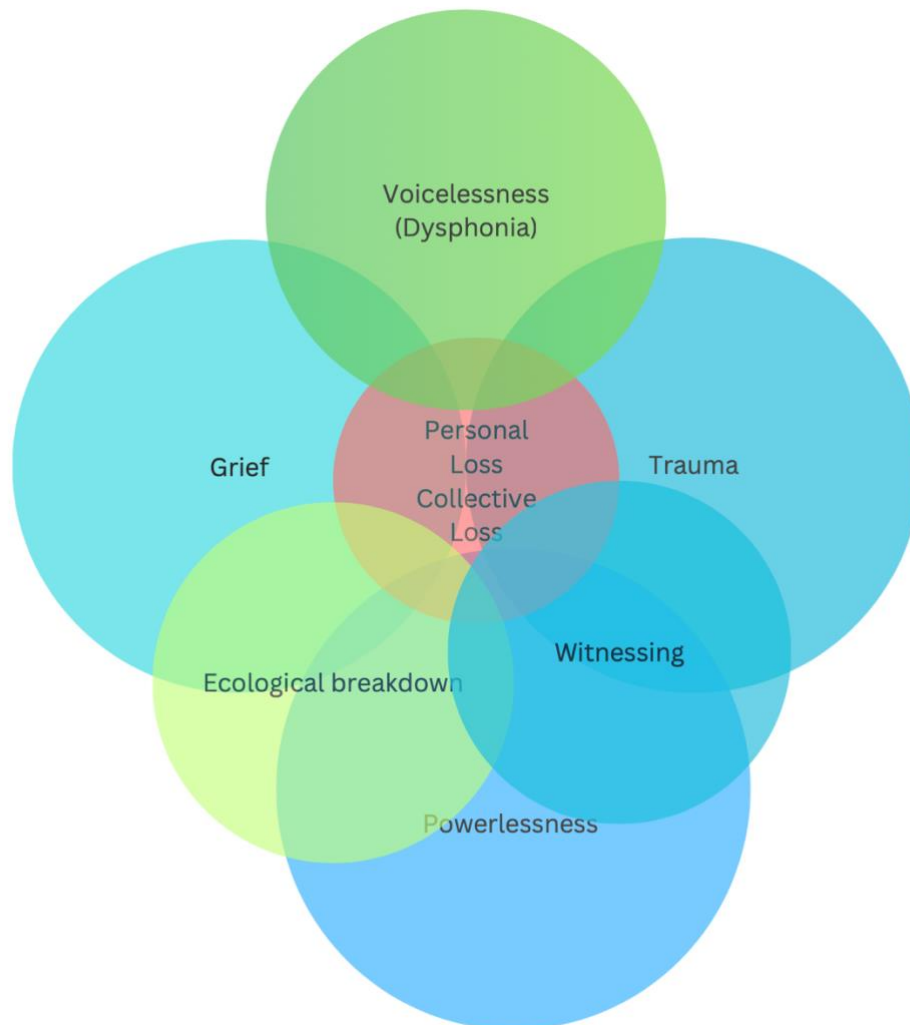
reclamation' (1992:4), and this is never finished, it is a continuous journey of seeking and making 'stepping stones'. That it is doable is hugely comforting,

lost instincts do not recede without leaving echoes and trails of feeling, which we can follow to claim them again. [...] If we could realize that *the work is to keep doing the work*, we would be much more fierce and much more peaceful (1992:253).

Every stepping stone on my journey led me to the next. There is no point of arrival, the journey continues, and I am content to keep doing the work.

APPENDIX 1

Venn Diagram – A simplified representation of the overlapping forms and effects of grief I was dealing with in this project.



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