Chapter Three

Weaving stories: from lived to created story

Connection

Whilst being fully present in the moment and able to respond to the detail of what forms the moment, part of this mindfulness is understanding the many threads that lead from past to present and shape where we are now. It is possible to honour our personal and collective history whilst living fully in the present.

This chapter continues to explore the core value **connection** discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter Two considered the connection between a personal reading history and 'living theory', the growth of understanding and practice as a reader/writer and researcher. The chapter that follows explores the evolution of 'living theory' in its earliest incubation in childhood stories, memories and writings. It shall do so by interweaving three layers of story: the theorised position of the researcher and adult seeking to contextualise the specific and frame the passionate within the dispassionate: the autobiographical adult, whose retrospective on childhood is filtered through the 'glass' of memory, and thus both mirrors and distorts; and the passionately engaged child, writing for self and her invisible future audience, uncluttered by self-consciousness. These writings include:

- *My First Reading Book*: stories written aged 6 and 8
- *Making bamboo pipes*: my first venture into pedagogy, aged 9
- *Niassur*: my invented language, aged 10, written as a pedagogic grammar
- *The Musical Box*: songs and tunes for beginners, aged 11
- Poetry diary and notebooks aged 12 and 13
- *Gingerhoof Island*: full-length children's story completed, aged 12

In exploring these childhood writings, all produced between the ages of 6 and 12, I am also looking at why, and with what implications, I use the term *creative*. I also consider the process of how the child writer : adult researcher *transforms knowledge* in order to move from lived story to created story: how did this transformation come about and what knowledges and skills were deployed as a child, in order to do this?

3.1 Creative landscapes

In claiming to have been a 'creative' child, and subsequently adult, what do I mean? What debates am I entering, in using this complex, misunderstood and ambiguous word? We have only applied the term *creative* to the artist since the 20th century

(Oxford English Dictionary 1989), and even then, artists themselves rarely describe themselves as such: writers do not call themselves *creative* writers, and indeed I have only done so in this dissertation in order to differentiate two dis-integrated kinds of writing and being. Is this a term that has been generated by those who are not to describe those who are, for the purposes of assessment, funding and marketing? My position here is that I have needed to give a name to a phenomenon that I experience as a specific and powerful energy; and that this energy pre-existed the formulation of labels to describe it. It is both as a label and as a phenomenon that I discuss creativity in this section.

The word family (creative/creativity) derives from the Latin verb *creo* – to make, or do, and its range of synonyms: to generate, to give birth , to produce, to manufacture, to change, to invent, to transform. *To make* is the capacity of the life principle - to make artefacts which are both life's quest for survival and beautiful, as are hand-thrown pots, woven carpets, spiders' webs and birds' nests. Thus creativity in this sense does not privilege the activity to the specially gifted or the unique; on the contrary, it is the essential skill of the survivor. Other synonyms are ethically ambiguous; *to invent* semantically carries the idea of *to lie*, as in *creative accounting*, and indeed, the capacity of the storyteller to fictionalise the truth. *To give birth* suggests the notion of creation from first beginnings; whilst *to transform/change* assumes raw material, a pre-existing starting point (Pope 2005). Embedded inside this term are the core debates and dilemmas which attach to creativity as a phenomenon:

- Do creative ideas derive from the stimulus of the outside world, or do they spring from nowhere, *ex nihilo*, the unbidden voice of a muse? Sartre (1964) and Cocteau (1952) claim god-like inspiration which "comes from beyond and is offered us by the gods" (Cocteau 1952: 82), yet the creatively gifted are articulate too about the influences that shape them – cultural, social, psychological (Allott 1959, Conrad 1920, Ghiselin 1952, Allison and Gediman 2007). By unravelling the sources, influences and shaping forces, do we minimise creative uniqueness, or illuminate it?
- Is creativity part of the "natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community" (Pope 2005: xvi) or is the creative person

specially, mystically gifted? Do we still believe in genius, and if so what are the implications for those of us who are not? (Weisberg 1993, Miller 2000 and Nettle 2001).

- Does creativity ***do*** something, or is it merely decorative and luxurious? What is the artist's responsibility to the outside world, and what is the point of his/her work? Most artists have a powerful sense of the worth of their work: the composer Leonard Bernstein, in interview, said "I believe that man's noblest endowment is his capacity to change. --- we must know ourselves better through art" (Bernstein 2007: 21). To share this with the world is an artistic imperative: "what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don't give it away? Of having stories if I don't tell them to others?" (Allende 2007: 15). Yet how far does the non-artist share this view, and with what dangers and implications?
- Can we call all examples of human enterprise *creative*, or only selected and privileged examples? Some have tried to define what does or does not constitute artistic taste and how cultures ascribe values to creative outcomes (Bourdieu 1984, Negus and Pickering 2004, Carter 2006). An ethnographic approach, alternatively, values all human productivity as windows into the human condition and the culture/context in which it finds itself (Morrison 2007, Clifford and Marcus 2004).
- Can creativity be developed and trained, or does it spring fully formed for those privileged to do so? In other words, is it teachable, and to whom? In placing creativity within the curriculum, educators have made a commitment to its developmental capacity (Buckingham 2003, Balshaw 2004, CAPE 2004, Creative Partnerships 2007). Yet embedded in the myth of creativity, is the idea that it is effortless for the talented, and unattainable for others.
- What is the balance between the chaos/free association/unconscious phases of the creative process and the discipline of the craftsperson honing, shaping and ordering? Metaphors of this process include the potter throwing down the clay and then shaping it (Elbow 1973); "writing down the bones" and then fleshing them out (Goldberg 1986), playing, learning the rules and then playing ***with*** the rules (Boden 2001). What is the evolution and interplay between these

> two processes – or indeed, are they in fact one intextricably intertwined process ? (Pope 2005: xvi, Coveney and Highfield 1995, Hayles 1991)

In exploring the story of a creative childhood, I explore the capacity to *transform* the raw material of my life and experiences into fictional, metaphorical shape, to *make* 'something new' – whether this be a bamboo pipe from a strip of wood, or a new language with invented words. The story also explores my struggles with the issues suggested above – the purpose and value of art, whether art should be effortless, child writer as special or ordinary, and the artist's place in the world.

3.2 Interweaving the remembered, the lived and the created: the methodology of memory

The account of childhood that follows illustrates the immediacy and reality of the issues discussed above. As with all memory, this childhood story is subject to the slipperiness of invention: "each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships" (Gergen 1991 cited in Sampson: 2006: 15). This is especially the case here, since the memories have been written within several time frames: child and adult, reflecting on the same experiences; adult as storyteller/adult as researcher moving into and out of the stories at different times in my dissertation-writing process.

* * * *

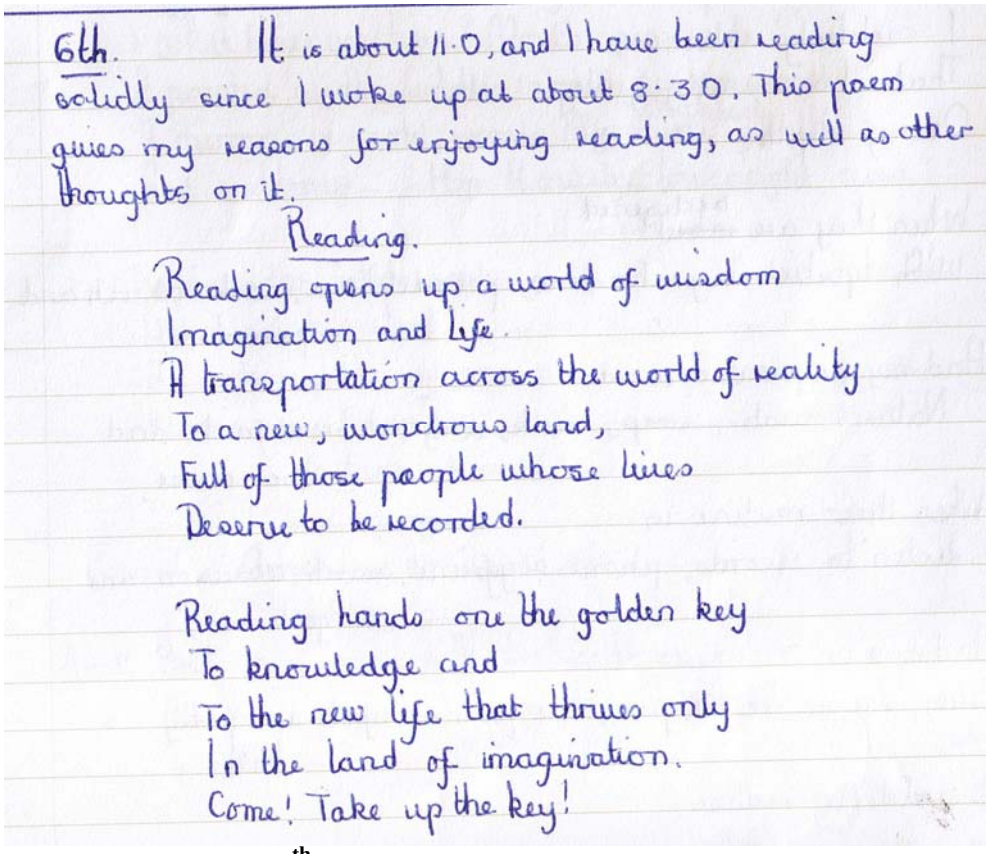
Even as a small child, there was a voice that said clearly: *Write.*

Nothing in my immediate environment encouraged such a voice. My father's family had arrived in England from Warsaw weeks before the war, saved through the foresight of a great-uncle who had transported his fancy button factory to Newcastle. Realising there was no market for fancy buttons in a post-recession pre-war Northumberland, they changed to paper, and throughout the war years were a roaring success producing the definitive war toilet paper (called ORIPS – backwards for SPIRO). Business and survival were inextricably linked: and paper was for selling, not for writing on. My mother's family had been in Britain one generation longer than the Spiros, having escaped the Russian revolution and pogroms in the villages at the start of the 20th century. This was a daughter-dominated family, and the destinies prescribed were classically limited female ones, in which personal aspirations were

regarded as self-indulgent and unnatural. A woman was primed from childhood to mimic the enclosure of the family home: sealed from the outside culture in a cocoon of ancient values. It was for the men to rise in the outside world: the women to preserve and sustain the inside one.

The family were pragmatists, and for them writers had no proper niche in any society. They were always at an angle from it, their success was to subvert. The private culture was, surely, too sacred to unravel or make public; and the outside one - how could you subvert something you did not belong to, something that took all your energies to enter in the first place? After all, this society I grew in was still being painstakingly interpreted by the first generation. Their observations were the partial views of outsiders: the people drank a lot, had their Sabbath on a Sunday, celebrated Christmas with irresistible shows of food and gifts, and may always be, under their politeness, anti-semitic. These were the half-truths established by the emigre generation, along with a number of others. It was the best society to escape to in the 1930's. English winters were better than Polish winters. In Poland, not one of them would have got to university, not one would have been professional. What more could you ask of a society? And what could a child of the second generation offer it, or say, that was worth saying? To try to do so, was entirely and dangerously counter-culture.

It was not that writing was a dream. The written word, for me, was a parallel universe. With a pencil, or eventually a pen in my hand, a window seemed to open like the wardrobe into Narnia. What I wrote as a child was a celebration of what I knew, what I heard, and what I read.



6th. It is about 11.0, and I have been reading solidly since I woke up at about 8.30. This poem gives my reasons for enjoying reading, as well as other thoughts on it.

Reading.

Reading opens up a world of wisdom
Imagination and life.
A transportation across the world of reality
To a new, wondrous land,
Full of those people whose lives
Deserve to be recorded.

Reading hands one the golden key
To knowledge and
To the new life that thrives only
In the land of imagination.
Come! Take up the key!

Poetry diary: Sep. 12th 1967 aged 12

* * * * * *

At six years old I began, and filled to the brim, my first 'book' – a red notebook bulging with stories and pictures, at first in pencil with writing not yet joined up, but as the book – and the years – progress, moving into a bold joined up ballpoint ink. The book is set out like a 'real' book, with a title page My First Reading Book, and a contents page on which I have written

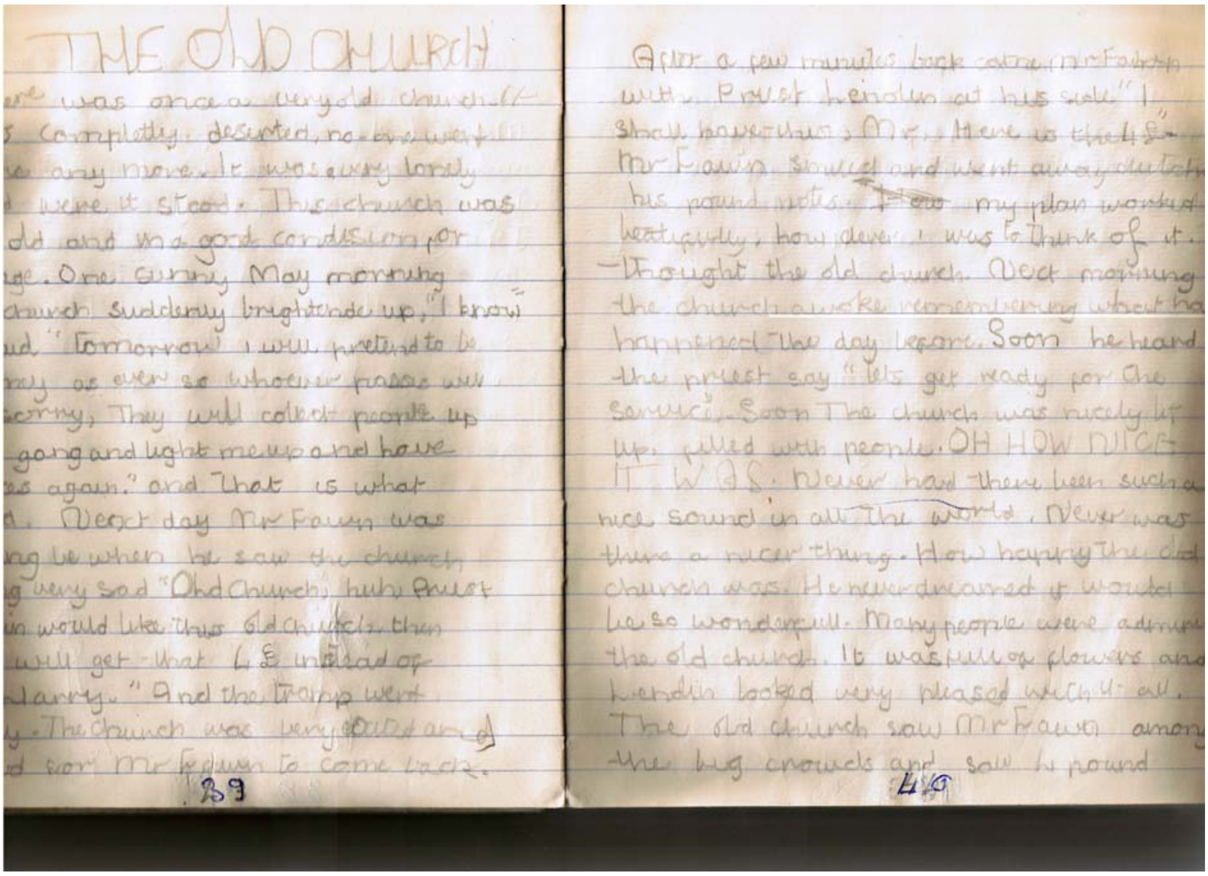
> This is the first book were we could do a picture story

The stories are about birthday parties, farms and animals, bus trips to the moon, buying new shoes and hats, school days, ballet lessons, but the presence of a spiritual curiosity and independence is already apparent. *The Old Church* tells the story of a church that has been abandoned by its congregation.

> There was once a very old church. It was completely deserted, no-one went there any more. It was a very lonely road were it stood. This church was very old and in a good condision for his age. One sunny May morning the church suddenly brightened up, "I know" he said "tomorrow I will pretend to be as lonely as ever so whoever passes will feel sorry, They will collect people up in a gang and light me up and have services again." And that is what he did.

The plan succeeds, and the story concludes:

> The church smiled and stood breathless with happiness. He felt so young, now the things which used to happen years ago had arrived again.

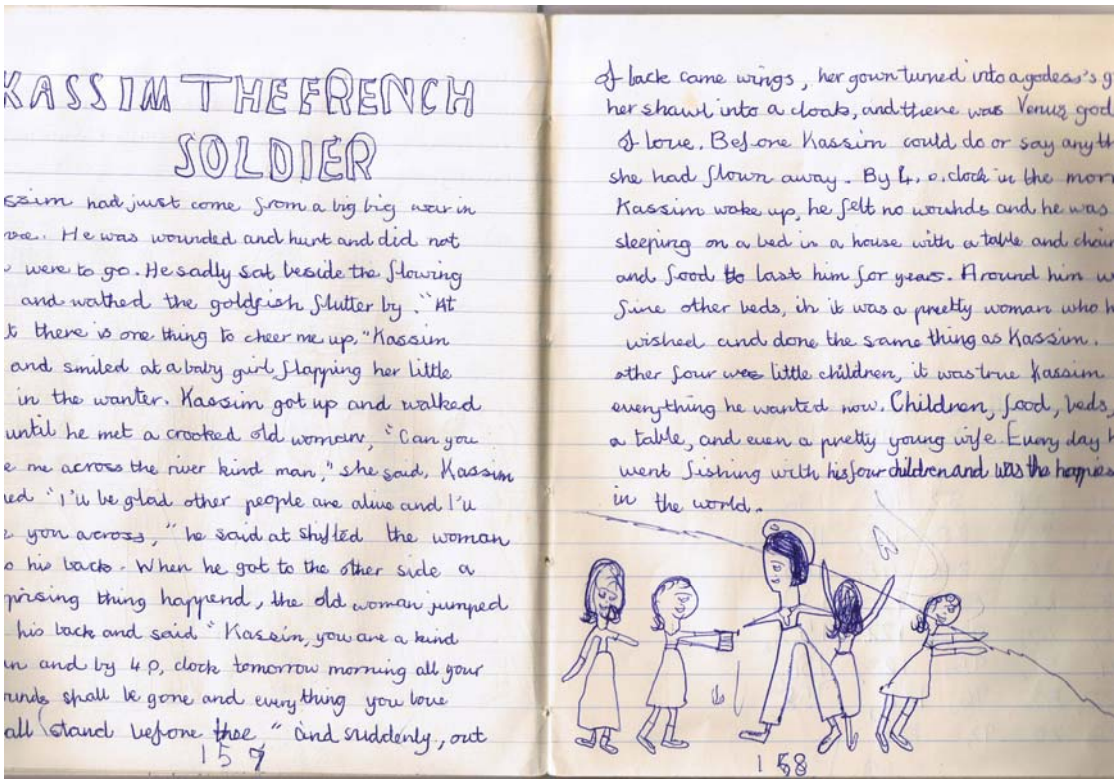


Pencil manuscript: The Old Church aged 6

My parents would have been astonished to note that the questions about the spirit I was subliminally asking, appeared to be answered from an eclectic mix of Christianity (churches seemed here far more mythical to me than the synagogues I knew and visited), Greek myths (stories I enjoyed), or indeed any spiritual nourishment I could find, including the sun itself (see prayer to the sun facsimile 6). In another story *Kassim the French Soldier,* Kassim is magically healed from his war wounds because he carries an old lady across the river, saying to her "I'll be glad other people are alive and I'll take you across." In thanks for his kindness, she turns into a winged Venus, goddess of love, dressed very similarly to pre-Raphaelite images of archangels:

> suddenly, out of back came wings, her gown turned into a godess's gown, her shawl into a cloak, and there was Venus, goddess of love.

Kassim the French Soldier: aged 7.



KASSIM THE FRENCH SOLDIER

Kassim had just come from a big big war in
He was wounded and hurt and did not
were to go. He sadly sat beside the flowing
and watched the goldfish flutter by. "At
there is one thing to cheer me up." Kassim
and smiled at a baby girl flapping her little
in the water. Kassim got up and walked
until he met a crooked old woman, "Can you
me across the river kind man," she said. Kassim
ed "I'll be glad other people are alive and I'll
you across," he said at shifted the woman
his back. When he got to the other side a
prising thing happend, the old woman jumped
his back and said "Kassim, you are a kind
in and by 4 p, clock tomorrow morning all your
unds shall be gone and everything you love
all stand before thee" and suddenly, out

157

back came wings, her gown turned into a goddess's g
her shawl into a cloak, and there was Venus god
of love. Before Kassim could do or say anyth
she had flown away. By 4, o, clock in the morn
Kassim woke up, he felt no wounds and he was
sleeping on a bed in a house with a table and chair
and food to last him for years. Around him w
five other beds, in it was a pretty woman who h
wished and done the same thing as Kassim.
other four were little children, it was true Kassim
everything he wanted now. Children, food, beds,
a table, and even a pretty young wife. Every day h
went fishing with his four children and was the happies
in the world.

158

She grants him everything he wants, "children, food, beds, chairs, a table, and even a pretty young wife. Every day he went fishing with his four children and was the happiest man in the world."

Somewhere in Kassim's story, the child of refugee parents has absorbed, and made acceptable the notion of war. Kassim has taken away from his experience an appreciation of the preciousness of life, and the possibility of starting again. The new family Kassim creates echoes my own 'real life' family with all its vigorous 'starting again', from the abandoned ghetto in Warsaw to the suburbs of north London bristling with Jewish social life.

* * * * * *

Synagogue visits, Friday night services, festivals through the year, must have haunted me: the prominence of the spiritual in everyday life, the language of worship - repetitions, incantations, the words half-sung, uttered in trance-like states, men rocking with closed eyes. Language was never tiresomely linked with understanding for me: there was too much Polish and Hebrew in the air for that to be the case. Neither were intended to be understood: they were a music, a set of rhythms, they

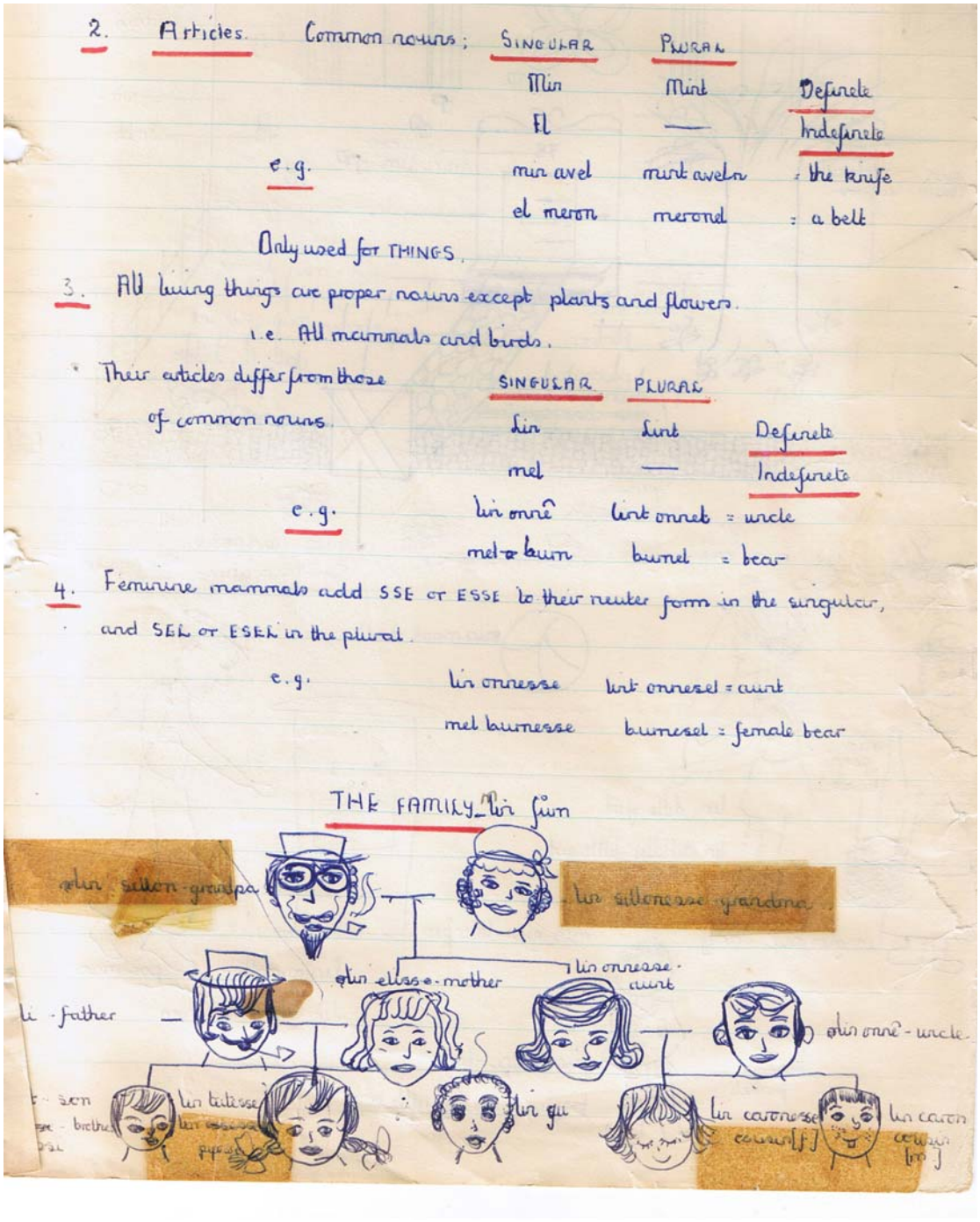
created groups, and excluded others: they were chants, rituals. Language was a set of magic spells.

* * * * * *

At 10 I invented my own language called Niassur: Russian mispelt backwards, which was the most exotic language I could think of (although it was my maternal grandmother's mother tongue). Niassur had a grammar book, explaining the position of definite articles and how to make words plural: and a vocabulary book with labelled drawings of the interior of houses and family trees. This grammar book reflects my own recent encounters with Latin, and Hebrew lessons with a family friend in which I was introduced to bewildering linguistic labels such as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Though I had no idea what these words meant, I could see – and was fascinated by the fact – that they described different patterns and shapes of words, words with different endings and different kinds of behaviour. I wanted to 'play' with patterns in just the same way. My family tree illustrates "just what – the rules enable one to do—They can be stretched, tweaked or even significantly changed. Dogged exploration shades into playing around, and playing around can sometimes result in fundamental transformation of the space concerned." (Boden 2001: 96 – 97).

Lin sillon: grandpa lin sillonnesse: grandma

lin caron cousin lin caronesse cousin



2. Articles. Common nouns; SINGULAR PLURAL

	Min	Mint	Definite
	Fl	—	Indefinite
e.g.	min avel	mint avelin	= the knife
	el meron	merond	= a belt

Only used for THINGS.

3. All living things are proper nouns except plants and flowers.
i.e. All mammals and birds.

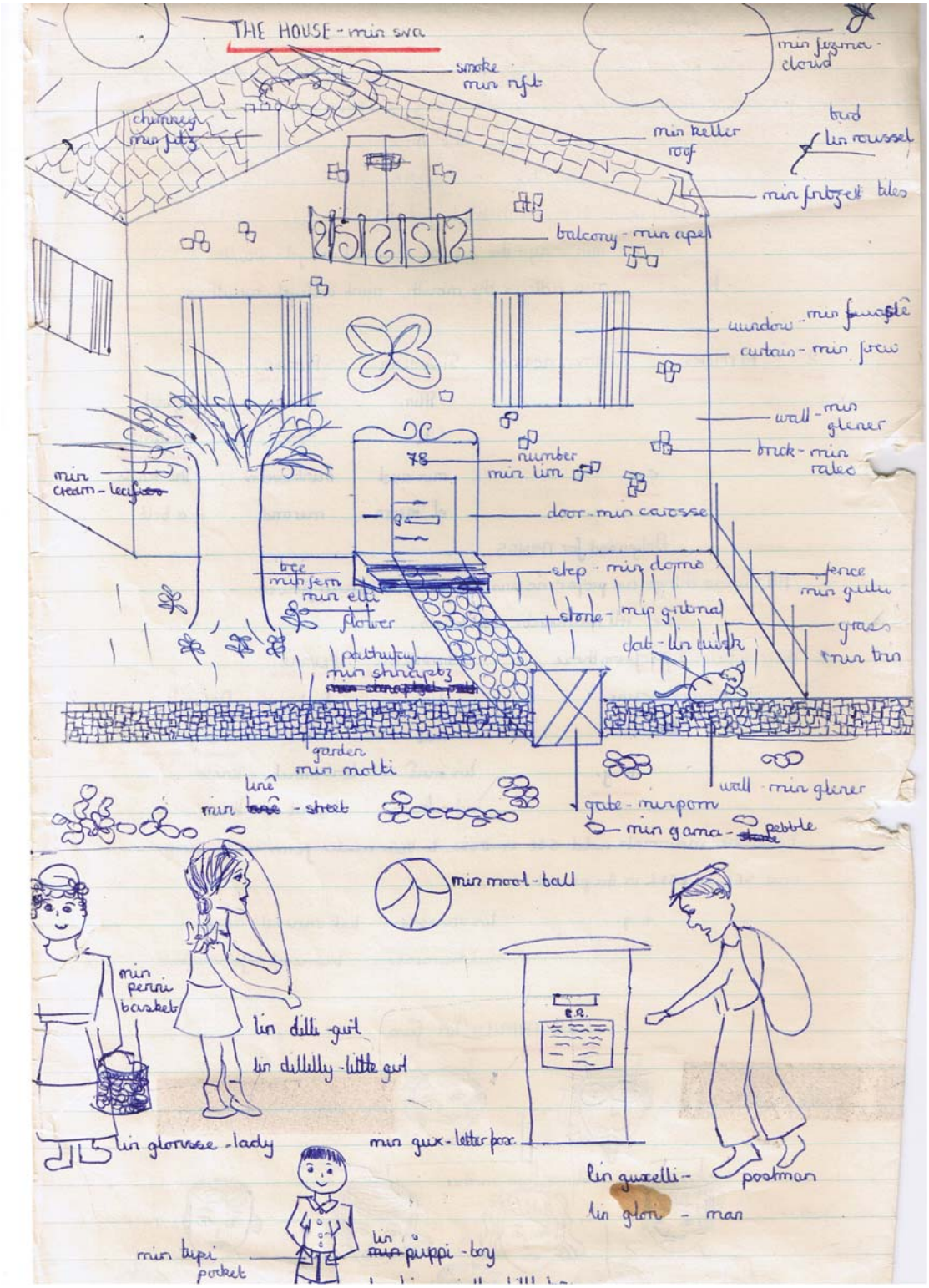
Their articles differ from those of common nouns.

	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	Lin	Lint	Definite
	mel	—	Indefinite
e.g.	lin onnê	lint onnet	= uncle
	mel-a-baim	baimel	= bear

4. Feminine mammals add SSE or ESSE to their neuter form in the singular, and SEL or ESEL in the plural.

e.g.	lin onnesse	lint onnesel = aunt
	mel baimesse	baimesel = female bear

THE FAMILY - lin fiun



Niassur: invented language aged 9: house and family vocabulary

The experience of other languages had helped me understand that specific sounds are not inextricably connected with specific meanings, but that every language makes new connections. So I had freedom to match 'things' and 'people' to the sounds/music they conveyed to me. *Min melodi* is a poem; *lin rubab* is a sheep; *lin april* is a lamb; *lin zuzza* is a bee; *lin chatterjee* is a word (actually the surname of a schoolfriend of mine). The different articles are not accidental: 'things' are differentiated from the 'living' as a central distinction in my new language. "Things" take the article *min*, "all living things" take the article *lin.*

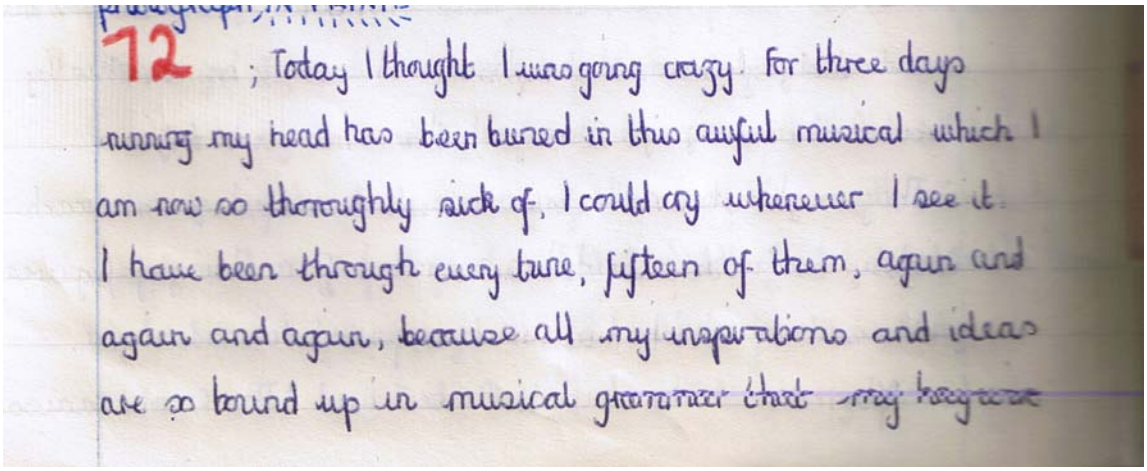
This joyful language never quite became the secret code I had intended: but I was safe in that few people wished to break into my secret world anyway, and even had they, I had the safety of being able to write in mirror-writing (as do a small percentage of all left-handed people). Although there was a high degree of control in the rules and strategies, and these derivative from Latin, French and Hebrew, it is also clear that I am projecting into this language my own values and sensibilities, and achieving a sense of flight and experimentation which transform the disciplines which informed them.

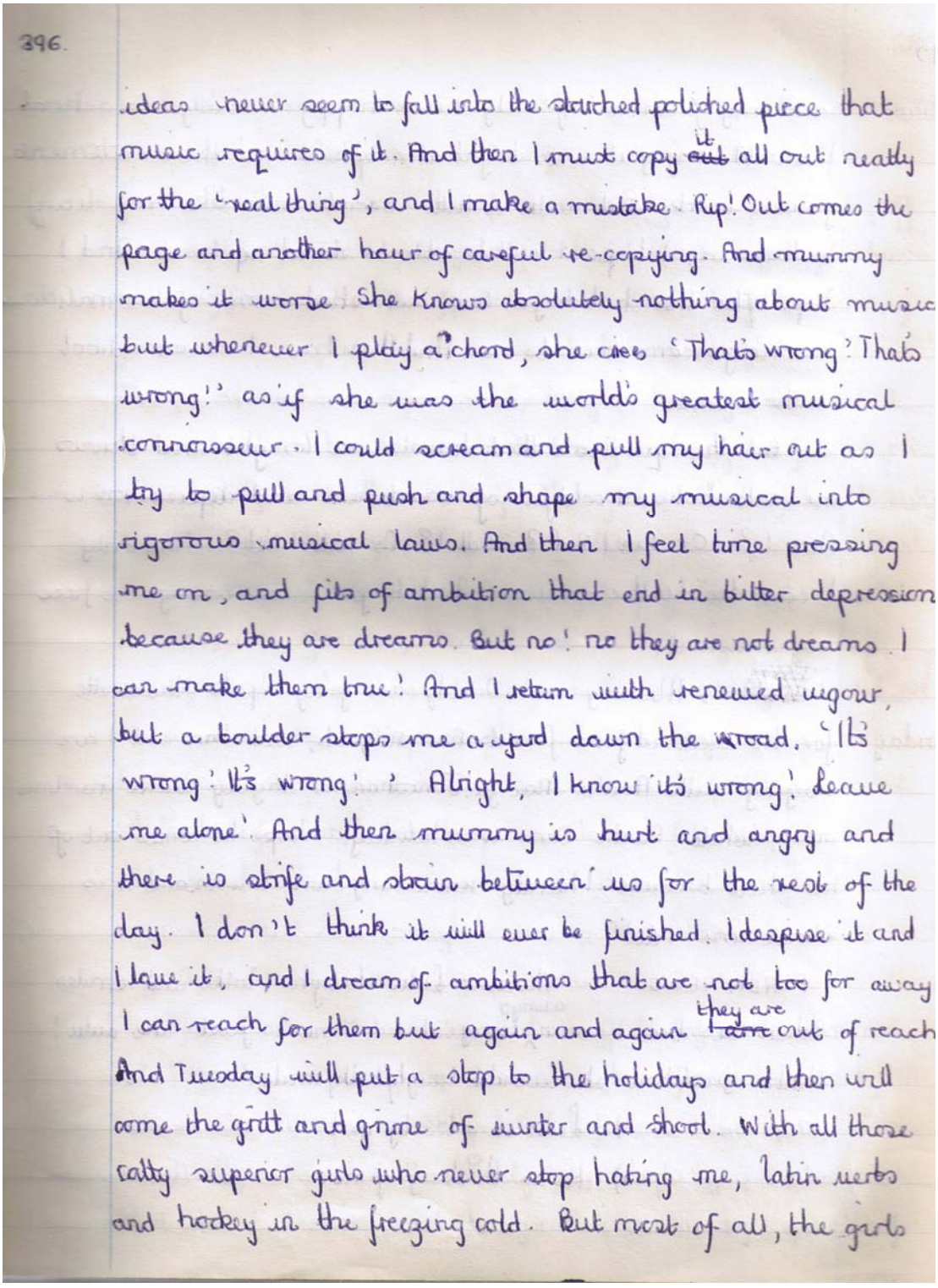
* * * * * *

My first 'book' spanned the years 8 and 9. A clear inspiration for this, was E.Nesbit's '*Five Children and It'*: the everyday world, with a magical friend dropped into it. It was about a 'secret five' of girls, who adopt a magical pet and see into the future. One of the girls grows up to become an opera singer; another grows up to be a professor and novelist. Another predicts that when she grows up "I would go to the library and get byographys once a fortnight". The stories are written in nine notebooks, with ballerinas on the front cover.

Did I share these stories with anyone? I have some recollection of reading them to my mother, who was my sole ally in an often harshly functional world. Yet I was alone in the artistic endeavour, and its pains and fulfilments were places I inhabited in isolation from parents or peers. My diaries record these struggles, which at 12 were already overridingly real. The extract below describes my experience of writing a musical to be performed at my local youth club.

Diary September 12th 1968: age 13


12 ; Today I thought I was going crazy. For three days running my head has been buried in this awful musical which I am now so thoroughly sick of, I could cry whenever I see it. I have been through every tune, fifteen of them, again and again and again, because all my inspirations and ideas are so bound up in musical grammar that may be



396.

ideas never seem to fall into the starched polished piece that music requires of it. And then I must copy ~~out~~ it all out neatly for the 'real thing', and I make a mistake. Rip! Out comes the page and another hour of careful re-copying. And mummy makes it worse. She knows absolutely nothing about music but whenever I play a chord, she cries 'That's wrong! That's wrong!' as if she was the world's greatest musical connoisseur. I could scream and pull my hair out as I try to pull and push and shape my musical into rigorous musical laws. And then I feel time pressing me on, and fits of ambition that end in bitter depression because they are dreams. But no! no they are not dreams I can make them true! And I return with renewed vigour, but a boulder stops me a yard down the ~~w~~road. 'It's wrong! It's wrong!' 'Alright, I know it's wrong! Leave me alone!' And then mummy is hurt and angry and there is strife and strain between us for the rest of the day. I don't think it will ever be finished. I despise it and I love it, and I dream of ambitions that are not too far away I can reach for them but again and again ~~are~~ they are out of reach And Tuesday will put a stop to the holidays and then will come the grit and grime of winter and school. With all those salty superior girls who never stop hating me, latin verbs and hockey in the freezing cold. But most of all, the girls

These were secret diaries, destined for a future audience. I was their creator, their ideal reader, their appreciative audience. They were time capsules, awaiting the right moment to emerge. But not all my writing was secret. At some stage in primary

school, I created a class magazine which came out weekly with comic strip stories, made-up letters from readers, cartoons, and an editorial. My parents helped me to buy a tiny banda machine where I rolled off the magazine at home in highly fumed purple ink, sold the magazine in class for sixpence a copy, and sent the proceeds to Dr. Barnados. In the same golden years, I wrote a play about an exploitative landlord, which I directed and acted with schoolfriends, performing to the class in school. It was a cornucopia of unselfconscious productivity, and school and family made space for this, even while not sharing or always understanding it.

So what was the source of this delight in language, this productivity? My surroundings were entirely suburban, without apparent tension, drama, conflict or even, cultural energy. There were few books in our house, as my parents had a dislike of clutter. Though my mother was a voracious reader as a teenager, motherhood had routed it out, and she now expressed little inclination to read. She protected us fiercely from the outside world, vetting our friends, clothes, language, hobbies, how much good about ourselves we were allowed to hear, how much bad about the world we were allowed to hear, what was written in our diaries and the way we prayed. This made me unusually cocooned, and the world of solid objects unusually remote.

My father, in contrast, was the opposite of indulgent. For him, I was a litany of disasters. I fell into ditches, cut myself instead of paper, threw myself off bicycles, was made spectacularly sick by car journeys and boats, and sat in chairs reading instead of helping in the kitchen. For all these, I was publicly vilified, my disasters recounted by him with relish the way most parents show off their children's successes. Most of all, he despised my aspirations: to be a writer, a playwright, to write books as big as the complete Shaw and the complete Shakespeare, which were amongst the few we had in the house. My aspirations were the things my parents were most exercised by: my mother to protect me from being disappointed by them, my father from being defeminised by them.

The following notions of success filtered down to me: getting in to Oxford or Cambridge, marrying someone who went to Oxford or Cambridge, marrying someone who went to conferences all round the world and took you with, being clever enough to find someone like this, being clever enough to get a job which allowed you time to

have and bring up babies. Where did my parents acquire these notions of success? Being survivors, both parents had sensitive antennae as to where the dominant culture placed its values, and which were achievable: and Oxbridge was not a difficult one to identify. That these goals were new untried ones in the family, made them all the more attractive. Yet the key outcomes of this success were, awkwardly, predominantly male: public and respected social positions, with academic credibility, involving long hours and international travel. This was the success of the person whose arena was the outside world: and yet the woman's destiny was most certainly not this, but the interior world. She was the one who built the home, and made it an environment that supported a successful husband and nurtured children. So an ingenious solution to the dilemma, was to find a husband through whom one could vicariously live the 'outside' culture: while continuing to nurse and nurture the interior one.

This had been my mother's solution. She had given up a degree in Horticulture at Newcastle University to marry and have children. Her choice of study had been a dedicated and vocational one: she wished to live in Israel and help to set up a kibbutz. She had talked her way into Newcastle University at a time when ex-servicemen were given first priority, worked on a farm in Thaxted, and analysed thousands of carefully pinned and dissected insects which contributed to the ecology of a working farm. Her role as housewife, in contrast, had been accidental and enforced. The story goes that she mistook the date of her final exams and as a result failed the whole degree. To compound this, once engaged to my father he refused to consider a move to Israel, and gradually disposed of all her study records and insect classifications. Having briefly struck out with her own vision, in time she became resigned to happiness deriving from the predicted and well-trodden paths: full-time wife and parenthood. My father, as a consultant doctor, offered her some of the experiences she may have found for herself: a high degree of social respect, a community of like-minded friends, a comfortable degree of wealth and stability, and some travel to international conferences. This, then, was the model which was communicated to us, her two daughters. Measure idealism beside the cold light of practicality and what is viable in a woman's destiny.

In terms of the dream world, amongst the family only my mother could see that some elements of it might fit the model of success. One could, for example, use the dream to become a literary Oxbridge academic. Or one could, alternatively, be a genius and thus become rich through writing. Shining role models were Shakespeare who became one of the richest landowners in Stratford, or Shaw who might have been a millionaire had he lived long enough to see My Fair Lady. When I projected into the future, I saw myself like them, with a large white beard and someone else to do the cooking. Mother acquired the works of my rivals so I could get to know the competition: the complete Shaw in a huge blue volume, and the complete Shakespeare with tiny writing on thin tracing paper. These writings added to my collection of language that was meaningless but magic. I learnt by heart what the fairies said, in Midsummer Nights Dream, and what the cockney father said in Pygmalion. They were sounds, like music: more magic spells.

My father, however, simply could not fit together the idea of womanhood, and the idea of the writer. He was particularly exercised on the 'what will it look like to men' angle of the problem. He reminded me that there were few choices for women writers. You could be mad (Virginia Woolf), an old maid (Jane Austen), or horse-faced (George Eliot). No woman writer he had ever heard of, had managed to be anything else but one of these. There were also dire consequences for the child prodigy: there was Daisy Ashford, who never wrote another word after 'The Young Visitors'; or the Brontes, who were physically burnt out and all died young and unmarried. (This latter turned out to be untrue in the case of Charlotte). But it was not only women who needed to fear the treachery of the writer's voice. Men who had pursued this as a career, starved in garrets, passed up opportunities for decent jobs and salaries, made themselves conspicuous and often died because of this (Socrates).

Yet I stood by my belief that I could give something to the world through writing. It was, in fact, akin to faith, and gave me my first intimations of a God. I could not find anything like this in the murmurings of men at synagogue: or in the hieroglyphs of Hebrew lessons: or in the strange rituals of Friday night: or in the chanting of the Haggadah story at Passover. All of these seemed to be the rituals of others, designed to organise and control. They were far from being about individual belief. I wanted, tangibly, to talk back to the 'voice' that said 'write!'. My first experiment must have

been the little book of Bible stories. My second experiment was to kneel at the end of the bed, the way I had seen on television and in churches. I had seen people putting their hands together and 'talking' to God; and in this kneeling position, it did indeed feel like a new angle on things. This little personal ritual did not last many nights before I was 'caught' by my sister, who told me only Christians knelt, and thus that it was a bad thing for Jewish girls to do.

So I had my own cosmos entirely: my own idea of faith, of success and of failure. These were uncompromising. The only possible image of success: becoming a part of the sacred canon of literature, alongside Jane Austen and George Eliot, Shaw and Shakespeare. The only possible image of failure: being deluded. Actually being NO GOOD.

> I feel time pressing me on, and fits of ambition that end in bitter depression because they are dreams. But no! no they are not dreams. I can make them true! And I return with renewed vigour, but a boulder stops me a yard down the road.--- I don't think it will ever be finished. I despise it and I love it, and I dream of ambitions that are not too far away – I can reach for them but again and again they are out of reach.
>
> **Diary September 12th 1968: age 13. See facsimile above.**

I had a very real metaphor for this. Playing the violin, thinking the sound you create was divine, sublime, exquisite: but everyone else can hear that you are in fact, OUT OF TUNE. My sister and I played out this metaphor each time I played the violin. To me, I could create a sound that was the heartstring made manifest: for her it was ugly, intrusive and vulgar. The violin as 'vile-din' was my metaphor for self-delusion.

The danger of these images were that there was only one version of success: there were no gradations that allowed compromise or accommodation of disappointments. One could not be quite good, or even very good: one could only be divine. There was no deconstruction of the idea of fame and celebrity, no attempt to draw up a personal yardstick of achievement, to humanise it, to set it in the world I knew. Nor was there any understanding that the journey from first creativity to final product is not achieved in one short leap, but through a myriad of trials and errors, uphills and downhills, constructions and deconstructions. Of course, the path could only be set

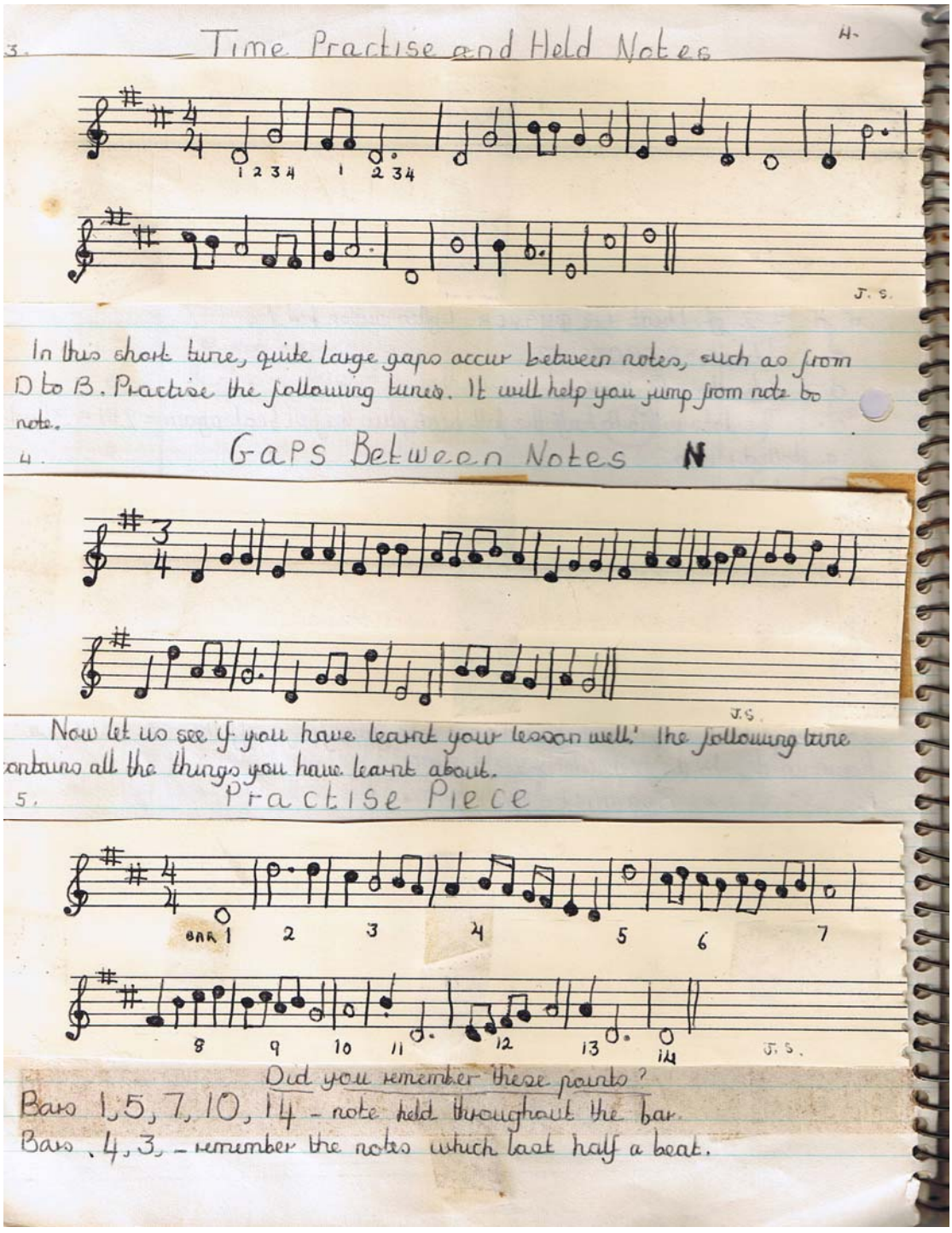
for disappointment. Not to be disabused of these myths and hopes, would be not to have grown up at all.

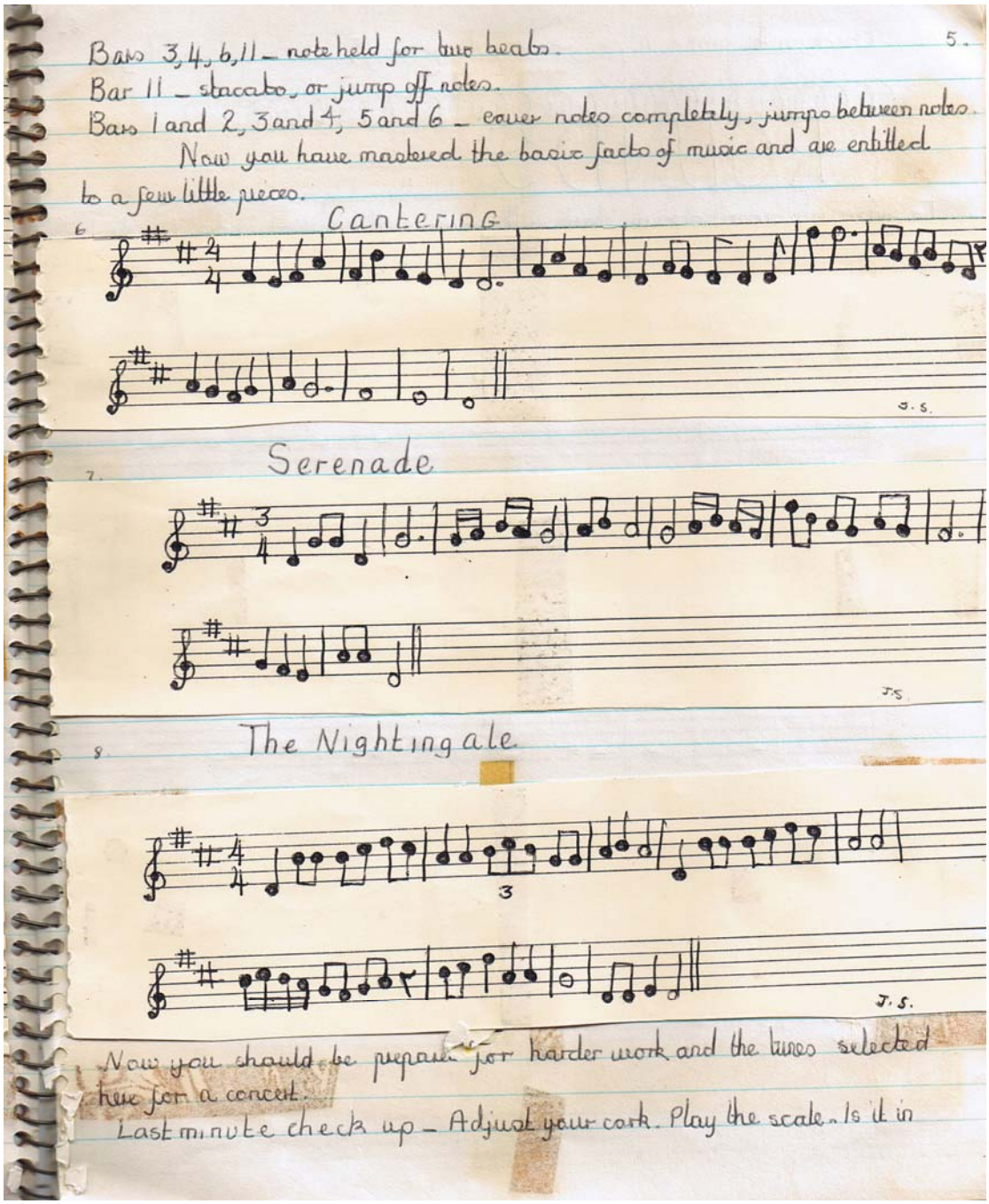
So I was constructing a persona for the artist, in an environment of pragmatists and scientists. Yet my parents too had had their vision. For mother it had been the farm in Israel: for dad it was music. In both cases, the vision was impractical, in their sense of the word: it did not earn them a living, there was no money in it, and it did not take them to the heart of the dominant culture. When father played the piano, he was not trying to assimilate, compromise, make money, prepare for disappointment, survive. In his own terms, there was no good *reason* to play the piano. Yet he worked painstakingly, practicing scales and repeating awkward phrases again and again, going round and round them until you would think the whole would be entirely lost. But it never was. When all the tiny work had been done, he was ready for the whole journey. A shy, modest, precise man who had been rendered almost speechless in his first years in Britain; who was completely at a loss with displays of emotion, who appeared to run tirelessly like a robot and expected others to: who had no tolerance of vulnerability or irrationality and who measured everything by its price and functionality: played a Chopin thrilling in its hugeness. The contrast between the talking father: and the speechless piano-playing father threw wide open his whole philosophy of survival and pragmatism. I knew that between the one and the other, was a mystery, and that this mystery was something to do with being an artist.

This should have been something we shared. I too loved music. I started the piano at 6 years old, but did not truly 'fall in love' with music until the teacher in my second year of primary school taught the class to make bamboo pipes. The experience of turning a piece of wood into a musical instrument transformed my relationship with music. Once the pipe was made, it was independent enough of piano teachers and parents, to be something I could escape with, experiment with. I made up my own tunes, loved the physicality of the wood with its knots and holes and bumps, was fascinated by the way positioning of the holes changed the sound and pitch. With this as my inspiration and structure, I began to write my own tunes; and with the tunes, worked out a way to share the process of delight I had experienced. My solution was to develop a pedagogy – a 'bamboo pipe' manual for making and playing the pipes. It is clearly written with an audience in mind – the ideal learner/student who might share

the same enthusiasms as I did. It leads the learner from the basics of placing and forming notes: "When playing a pipe you must remember NEVER to blow down the cork, just breath (sic) down it gently all the time" (p. 2) through to the rudiments of rhythm, major and minor keys and scales: "3/4: What does this mean? Any signature with a 4 as the lowest figure, shows that the bar is divided into crotchet beats. The top figure indicates the number of crotchets. Remember, this does NOT stand for three quarters." (p. 3). and then practices what has been learnt with pages of graded tunes of my own invention: "Now you have mastered the basic facts of music and are entitled to a few little pieces."(p. 5). The little book ends with suggestions for performance: "Last minute check up- Adjust your cork. Play the scale. Is it in tune? Check on the piano. Wipe your cork, yourself, your music and begin" (p. 6). This concert, however, is planned by a budding educator, and is peppered with suggestions for audience participation: "No concert is complete without fun for the toddlers. No-one will mind joining in with well-known nursery rhymes and it will liven up the audience." (p.7). "Collected here are all kinds of tunes for all kinds of people. A few songs are old favourites, and the elderly people will be pleased to join in with these." (p. 11). As such, (and for a child of 9 in particular), it is a model of structured invention and principled pedagogy. Its tone is conversational, yet highly controlled so there is progression from where a learner might start, towards fluency and mastery. I see that my notion of a 'scaffolded creativity' began, not with my teaching career at the age of 25, but with my learning at the age of 8, and that my commitment to the notion of *knowledge transformation* has all along been fired by the memory of what it meant to me as a child learning to love music by transforming it into her own language.

Learning to make and play bamboo pipes: age 9.

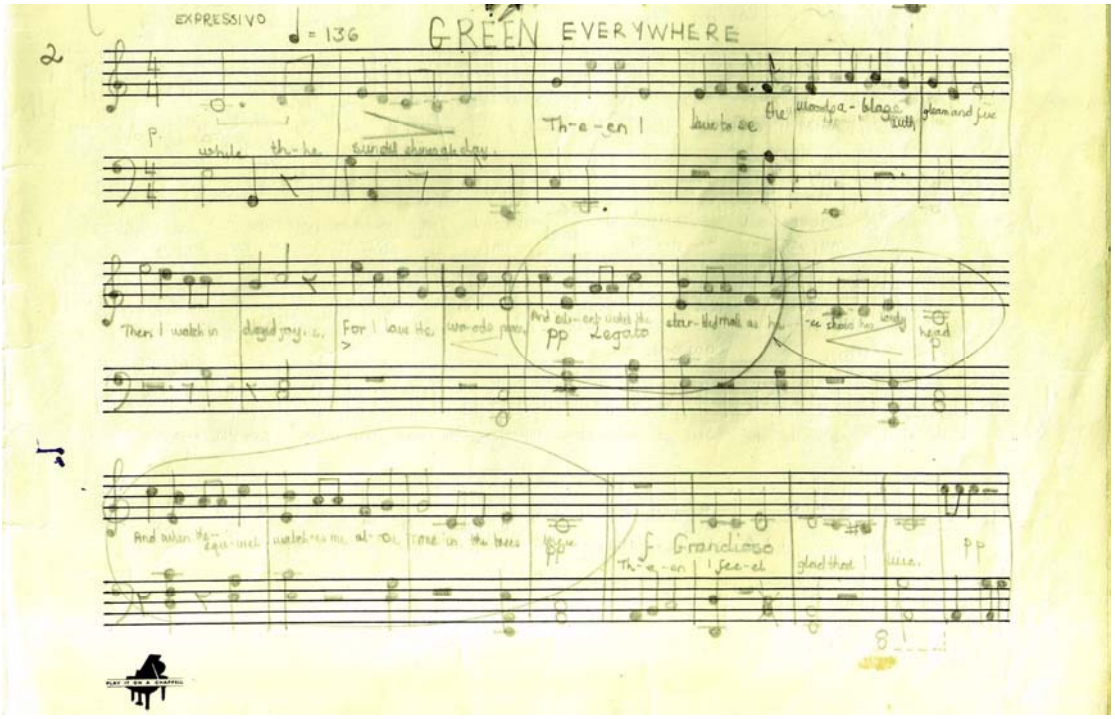




What it is also possible to see, in retrospect and as a learner, is that 'transformation' in one sphere of learning carries over into others. Because I had learnt to experiment with the bamboo pipe, I also began to experiment with, and delight in, the piano, song and eventually the violin. *The Musical Box*, as with the earlier notebooks bursting with stories, starts with pencil written songs of my own. They include a 'busy' song sung by mischievous dwarves, songs about mermaids and May Day revels, and two hymn-like songs in praise of the sun and the countryside.

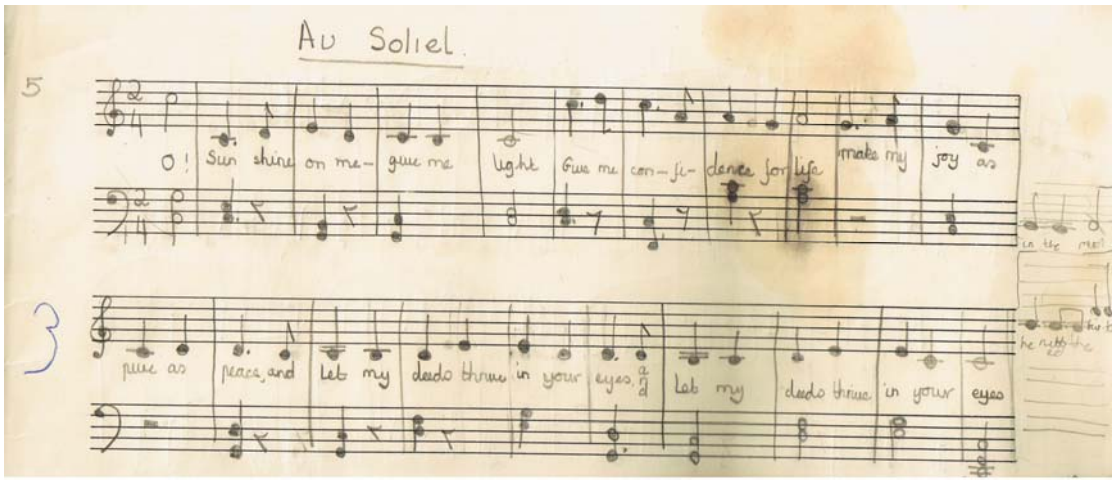
While the sun still shines at day/Then I love to see the woods a-blaze with gleam and fire/Then I watch in dazed joy. For I love the woods' peace.

Green Everywhere from The Musical Box: age 10.



O! Sun shine on me – give me light. Give me confidence for life/make my joy as pure as peace, and let my deeds thrive in your eyes/and let my deeds thrive in your eyes.

Au Soleil from The Musical Box: age 10.



Here, as mentioned earlier in this section, I am intrigued by the denomination-defying spirituality of the child I was, reaching out towards a life-affirming humanism, if not pantheism, in the face of the rituals and routines of north London Judaism.

My relationship with the piano teacher was an intense one: she would weep when I played with dirty nails. She was the one who noticed that I squinted at crotchets and quavers, and insisted I had my eyes tested; and she was the one who, through closed doors, forced on my parents the idea that I was an unusual child. I would listen on the stairs, hear their conversation, and my 'inner voice' would stand up and sing. I never admitted I had heard the conversations: and I enjoyed comparing the reported version, to the one I knew had taken place. Between one and the other, I was watered down to a child that needed to practice more and needed to take more baths. But music was never something that gave father and I a dialogue to share: more another area in which I should be disciplined.

From my father, I learnt about silence and self-expression, and the places where each were possible and preferred. In 'English' company, my father as a younger man was shy and blushed easily. At sixteen, he arrived in Britain with one phrase of English that an uncle had taught him, "I bicky par". This, the uncle had said, would be extremely useful in England. It was probably not long before my father realised his phrase translated as "I beg your pardon", and that it did not really get him very far. Luckily this first English lesson doesn't seem to have held him back.
Within a year he appears to have integrated into his school, learnt the language, and was getting top grades in all his subjects. But I did not hear of schoolfriends, and my interpretation of many of his stories, are that study was a full-time act of survival, pushing aside all other priorities. Whether or not this was a retreat from the abrasiveness of being foreign, I cannot be sure: except that the study strategy did indeed work, and gave him, in time, a role, a language, a community, and an income. But still, the culture he now lived in was a strange and dimly understood one, and he appeared to his neighbours as odd and alien, as they did to him. As an adult, on a trip to Newcastle I met a woman who had gone on a date with him when they were in their late teens. She told me she was shocked because he appeared to be carrying a handbag, and when he reached out to pay, appeared to have his money in a *purse*. Her embarrassment was acute, and she never went out with him again. There must

have been a thousand ways in which the Newcastle community gave him subtle messages that he was strange: socialising with his mother well into his twenties, his strong accent which no-one could quite place; ('He must be from down South' a Newcastle shop assistant once said to me), his strict Slavonic self-discipline. Through these years, he developed a second persona designed for survival: in which he made minimal conversation that might give him away. Once, when he came to visit me in Hungary, he heard a naive student of mine say, "Oh how nice, to talk to a real English gentleman." Through the rest of the afternoon, he refused to speak, just smiling benignly. "I did not want to be a disappointment," he said, when the students had left. He learnt how to make conversation, as a craft, by reading conversation manuals (I once found one beside his bed); and learnt when to be quiet.
In contrast, when he was with his family, his voice came back with all its vigour. The silencing experience must have been true for all the extended family who escaped, first to Newcastle, then moved to London. My grandmother opened her house every Saturday afternoon to the Polish community, their friends, family, lovers, boyfriends, girlfriends. These Saturday afternoons were a loud raucous joyful celebration of the mother tongue. On Saturday afternoon, the English-speakers were the downtrodden minority; and as little concession was made to them, as they made to the Polish speakers the rest of the week. This language was bellowed, blustered, bullied, bantered over the tea table, and to hell with the silent minority who didn't understand them. Occasionally, a word bobbed up that fixed the subject of the conversation: *dzindzobe A-levels djinkoia momonya bjoya dzinzobe exams.*

My mother attended most of these teas, every Saturday throughout her married life until my grandmother died. The resentment was enormous. Firstly, she didn't understand a word of Polish, nor wanted or tried to. Secondly, her own family were still in Newcastle, and visits to them were squeezed out begrudgingly once a year. Some of this resentment passed down to us: that Polish was a backdrop that had to simply be tolerated, not one in which we should ever choose to participate. The table setting reinforced this. Children (all of us English-speaking) were put at a little side table, with our own trays of honey cake, Carrs water biscuits and apple pie. Sometimes we heard our names bobbing up out of the Polish miasma, and knowing it was our turn to be talked about. There was no point trying to join in, ask for a translation to check the rumours and scandals that were passing around. The Polish

family speaking normally was like anyone else shouting: and all of them together made an impossible barrage of sound. Anyone less than operatic had no chance.

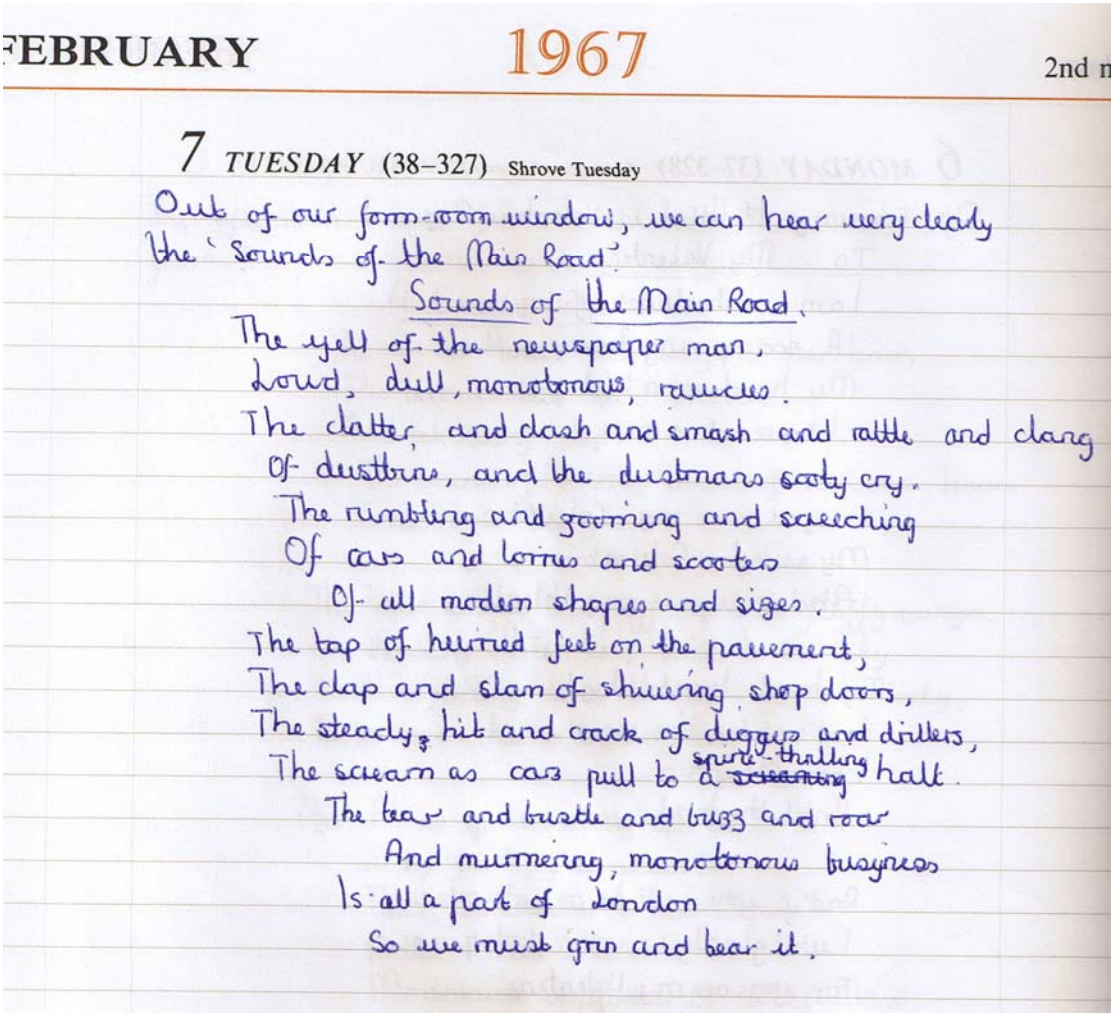
This archetypal setting was one that sealed the grandchildren into their fates: the cousins who learnt to join in and shout as loud as the others, and those who never again could raise their voices in a gathering of more than 3. It was at this weekly gaggle that our reputations too were forged and sealed: my sister as practical, well-behaved, myself the hopelessly impractical dreamer. I knew my father fed these images with episodes cherrypicked from our lives. Whilst most parents parade their children's talents and achievements, my father seemed to have a Chinese attitude to compliments: that to say something good may make the gods envious. So the family knew of my accidents, failures, inadequacies and acts of clumsiness. I would hear of these as they were relayed back to me via Polish-speaking cousins, but only rarely (and usually through visitors who did not know the house rules), did I pick up a sense of other kinds of conversations having happened, and kinder ways of being talked about.

What I understood from this was that I disappointed my father, and that being critical was an aspect of parental care. It was a problem I discussed with my mother, who had various philosophical standpoints for countering me. *He only does it because he loves you*. By highlighting one's weaknesses, perhaps they could be changed. Only someone so close will know so intimately ones weaknesses. Only someone who loves you, will want to change you and make you perfect.

You should not take things so personally. Most things were not directed at one personally, but at the world in general. Therefore, they weren't to matter: one wasn't to *feel* them. This had a certain rational truth which could be appreciated: a person who rejected you, your ideas or work, was a rejecting person. It was not you being rejected, but the world as experienced by that person. But it failed in its emotional truth, on two counts. If a person, for example, laughed at my father's accent, I could understand this was not directed at him or me personally. On the contrary, the problem was much bigger. It was directed at anyone different, strange, or foreign. In fact, to experience this emotionally was the basis of becoming radicalised, and seeing small injustices as part of a bigger framework. So being rejected as a dreamer felt like a bigger problem: dreaming, as a whole set of possibilities, was unacceptable –

whether my dreaming, or anyone else's. Secondly, if one felt crushed and diminished, then indeed one was crushed and diminished. The authenticity of this lay in the feelings left behind: not in the intentions of the outsider. It was clear that, at the end of the day, one had one's own self-esteem and inner world to deal with and to rearrange for the purposes of survival; and this task seemed a difficult one, as a child. Another unhelpful slogan was: ***you shouldn't be so sensitive*** which became a catch-all phrase to mean: you should not ***feel*** so much. This slogan was used to police all hopes, aspirations, excitements from childhood to adulthood. Jane must be preserved from feeling in case it leads to being hurt. Feelings must be minimised.

These slogans were uniquely tailored to what my parents felt I needed: there were other slogans for my sister, who fitted far better into the required roles. It became the steady drone which drove my aspirations inwards and turned them into a secret, at least in London, and with the Spiro family. Yet for all of this, writing made my childhood fulfilled and joyful. My poetry diary is full of celebrations to my daily writing life, and perceptions of everything in it: the first crocus, a robin in the garden, a tramp on the street corner, the dustbin man, the dentist, the school play, maths homework, the rag-and-bone man, the window-cleaner, tapestry upholstery on the dining room chairs, new shoes. I wrote a poem daily throughout the year 1967, and these are happily rooted in the spaces I inhabited. They also play with language: sounds, rhythms, different forms and settings, refrains and repetition, some rhyming, some with a playful internal rhyme, some capturing the voices of people around me. They experiment with stanza shapes and lengths, prose/poetry mixes and free verse. This is a writer's workshop, collecting images and ingredients of story, fragments of life as if for future use, experimenting with unconstrained delight to discover how words work and how ideas communicate.



FEBRUARY 1967 2nd n

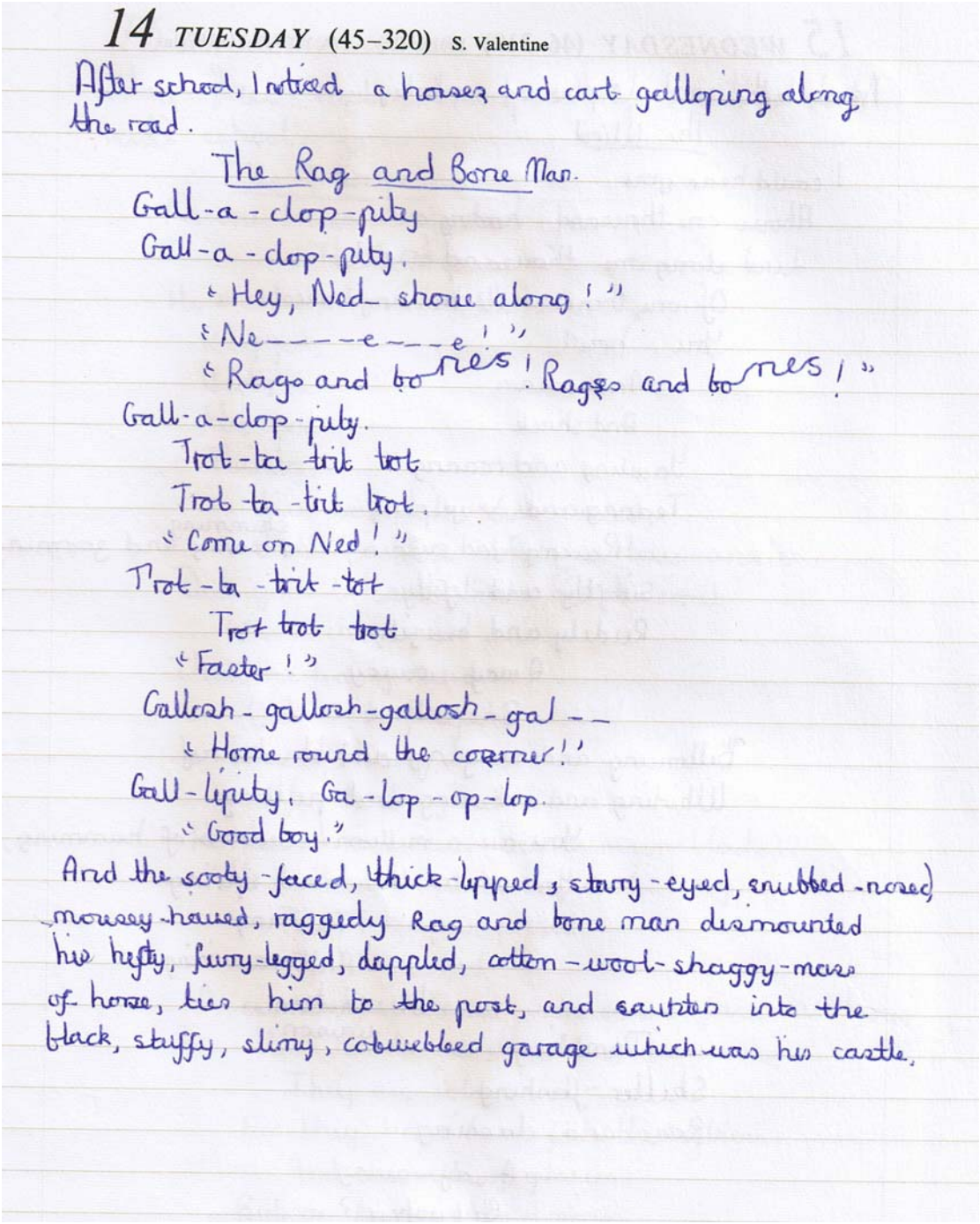
7 TUESDAY (38–327) Shrove Tuesday

Out of our form-room window, we can hear very clearly
the 'Sounds of the Main Road'.

Sounds of the Main Road.

The yell of the newspaper man,
Loud, dull, monotonous, raucous.
The clatter and clash and smash and rattle and clang
Of dustbins, and the dustmans scaly cry.
The rumbling and grooming and screeching
Of cars and lorries and scooters
Of all modern shapes and sizes.
The tap of hurried feet on the pavement,
The clap and slam of shivering shop doors,
The steady hit and crack of diggers and drillers,
The scream as cars pull to a ~~screaming~~ spine-thrilling halt.
The tear and bustle and buzz and roar
And murmering, monotonous busyness
Is all a part of London
So we must grin and bear it.

Poetry diary age 12: Sounds heard through the classroom window



14 TUESDAY (45–320) S. Valentine

After school, I noticed a horses and cart galloping along the road.

The Rag and Bone Man.

Gall-a-clop-piby
Gall-a-clop-piby.
"Hey, Ned shove along!"
"Ne-----e---e!"
"Rags and bones! Rags and bones!"
Gall-a-clop-piby.
Trot-ta trit tot
Trot-ta-trit trot.
"Come on Ned!"
Trot-ta-trit-tot
Trot trot trot
"Faster!"
Gallosh-gallosh-gallosh-gal--
"Home round the corner!"
Gall-lipity, Ga-lop-op-lop.
"Good boy."

And the sooty-faced, thick-lipped, starry-eyed, snubbed-nosed mousey-haired, raggedy Rag and bone man dismounted his hefty, furry-legged, dappled, cotton-wool-shaggy-mane of horse, ties him to the post, and scuttles into the black, stuffy, slimy, cobwebbed garage which was his castle.

Poetry diary age 12: the Rag-and-Bone Man and wordplay

There was another half of the family, the Newcastle half. Rumour had it that my grandmother narrowly escaped the Russian Revolution, that her past was unspeakable and we were never to speak of it; and that my grandfather was already almost an Englishman, being second generation and actually born in Britain. He was such an Englishman that he spoke geordie, his co-workers worked on a Saturday (though he never did), he ran his own stained glass company under an Anglicised name, and he supplied the leaded windows on all the front doors of Newcastle, and some of the churches too, that had been blown out during the blitz. His hands always smelt of putty and nicotine, and were covered in scratches. He would arrive home late, in his working clothes, and be shouted at by the grandmother. His work was dirty, his hours were long, he wasn't rich, and his acceptance of his family was unconditional. In the whole constellation of family, he represented the place of uncritical love.

My Newcastle grandmother's past experience was dimly known, but the actual values that passed down were all too clear. The first and foremost was the sanctity of the Jewish home. This she protected with the ferocity of a mother tiger. All the actions of childhood and adolescence were to lead towards the creation of this ancient home, sanctified by the Pentateuch and the Torah: all the actions of adulthood towards the preservation of one. There must have been a clarity and single-mindedness in this, which made life manageable, congealed as it was into a single goal. Whatever life had to offer, was either accommodated within this vision, or was utterly ejected. Nothing, and no-one, was exempt from this demarcation. As children, I at least was warmly cossetted inside this nest of acceptance, and had not yet judged it or been judged. I was later to see the consequences of this conditionality for my uncle and cousin, in the course of their exercise of free will.

* * * * * *

I started my first 'full-length' book at the age of 11. I now wrote in Osmoroid fountain pen, with blue-black ink and a gold nib. The flow of the ink onto white paper was a physical joy. I wrote fluently, with hardly a word crossed out and without a smudge. The book was inspired by my new eiderdown, which was splashed with lilac blossoms, and the first handwritten version was called 'A Violet Bed'. I transcribed the notebooks painstakingly into typewritten manuscript, counted the words (56,828), renamed it *Gingerhoof Island,* packaged it and sent it to a publisher on my thirteenth

birthday. But the process started with the same spontaneity and unself-consciousness as all the others. I simply opened the first empty notebook, and waited to see what would emerge from the pen. What emerged was surprising. The main character seems to derive from a primary school curriculum obsession for Medieval London . My little boy is Medieval too, with soft shoes and a tall cap. The Medieval markets are described, and villages with wooden houses and cows in the streets. Here is Dan, who befriends the main character, Jess:

> When I was a lad, I lived in a little fishin' village off the coast of Cornwall. Me and me pals, we did everything together. There was Taffy an' Drissy, Dick an' Gordon, and all of us lived along one little winding cobbled road, playing jousting in the market square. Twas the centre of the village in the market, and surrounded by little shops where men from all around came to buy and to sell, with fine silks, meat and fish, sweetmeats and spices. My! My! Jess, what a treat twas to smell the cloth and to sit among the apples and oranges and listen to the apple woman the oldest in all the village, tell us stories of her youth.
>
> **Gingerhoof Island, p. 9: age 12.**

From his happy childhood, surrounded by the sights, smells, sounds and people he loves, Jess is whisked away in his sleep, and in the rays of the setting sun, to the magical Gingerhoof Island.

> --- the fang of whispy red seemed to take on a form – the form of a magical creature, a creature with a glossy red back and a head, raised and proud. On the head an ivory crown formed. It was a mass of antlers – antlers like spreading branches glistening crisp and white in the half light. Its hooves like fiery starts lit the room like lanterns embossed with rubies. The creature crept closer to Jess's bed. Its eyes swirled like comets, and flakes of red sparked onto Jess's drowsy head. His eyes flickered open; the air of dreams rustled in his ears.
> "A dream! A dream!" (Jess) murmured, as he stepped out into the rosy light that flooded his bed. His heavy lashes drooped over his eyes: a mist of sleep blinded him and lightened his brain. As if floating in airless space, he glided onto the sleek curved back. And with a lurch, he found himself surrounded by night, and his little room was lost far behind him in the haze of distance.
>
> **Gingerhoof Island, pp. 3 - 4: age 12.**
>
> **Please see Appendix Reading 1 for the complete first chapter.**

Gingerhoof Island is a land inhabited by reindeer, and forever at the point of the setting sun. But this land is no vague landscape. It has a newspaper, a constitution,

an education system, ancestral families, a Parliament. Every feature of this fantasy world strives to be workable and internally coherent; every aspect that I have perceived as part of a healthy (or ideal) community has been reconstructed in reindeer terms, for a land in which the sun is always setting. The characters have names such as White Cloud, Frost Dust, Red Alain, Orange Sun, High Rectordeer. There is a publishing company "which has become inundated with books and novels: a large percentage of these are from Cavalier Cherry and Red Arrow who writes instead of going to school". (*Gingerhoof Island* p. 134). The school includes "teaching in every trade, and lessons are taken by experts in each field, " and the local newspaper includes job advertisements for a miner and "a qualified farmer" to teach there. The houses "consist of four or five trees, well spaced out to form a shape as circular as possible." (ibid pp. 135 – 136). There is no defined religion in this reindeer world, but there is a culture of enjoyment and activity: "Each separate village and valley has a committee whose work it is to make you and your family enjoy your leisure time." One such committee organises a music festival: "The success of this music concert stimulated a love of music in all the villages and since then there has sprung up choirs and orchestras consisting of pipes made from reeds, drums from tree bark, triangles from ice and harps made from grasses." (ibid p. 136). The forests are inhabited by a myriad of other creatures: berys "small birds, with brightly coloured wings and very sharp red beaks" who "crow exactly as the Firmament Cloud passes each Watch Mount"; leons, claudine and yorts – "plump animals with tall white ears, large eyes and a fine ability for climbing trees."

In this fully realised parallel universe, Jess's task is to solve the problem of an angry mountain which, at regular intervals, rises up and swallows passing reindeer. In return for solving their problem, and after many trials that take him back through Medieval England as well as throughout the landscapes of the magical island, he is crowned as the Prince of Gingerhoof Island. However, and no matter how happy he is as prince of this new world, he misses his home and longs to return.

> "You are a boy and a human. You want things out of life that we cannot give you. It was foolish of us to think you could grow up among reindeers. Of course you want to go home. I understand, but will all the other reindeers? Jess, maybe you can slip away quietly and I could break the news to the nation."
> "And yet I don't want to go. I like it so much here."

> "We have been foolish. We have been selfish. There is your home, your parents ---"
> "Please, please, I want my home."
> And Jess felt the tears rolling hotly down his cheek.
> "Then, my prince, you shall go home."
> (ibid p. 176).

So the novel ends, with a brief coda describing the dreamlike return that parallels Jess's arrival in the opening chapter. In a way, the world Jess leaves behind is the imaginatively rich world of my own childhood, because adolescence began almost as soon as the last words were typed.

3.3 Where we have reached, where we are going

In exploring the stories of childhood, it is possible to position myself amongst the several debates connected with creativity at the start of this chapter and to formulate my own definition of *creative* for the purposes of this dissertation.

- **Do creative ideas derive from the stimulus of the outside world, or do they spring from the unbidden voice of a muse? By unravelling the sources, influences and shaping forces, do we minimise creative uniqueness, or illuminate it?**

My account suggests that I transformed every encounter with knowledge into something newly shaped. Hebrew, French and Latin lessons become my own language, Niassur; several years of building Roman and Medieval villages out of egg boxes, became Jess's adventures through medieval England; practicing scales on the piano became transformed into graded tunes for the bamboo pipe and humanist hymns to the sun. Trips to the synagogue are transformed into stories about talking churches and old ladies sprouting wings. Echoed from the age of 6, are the rhythms and vocabulary of 'writerly' language; an understanding of how language is shaped for an audience, the ingredients and shape of story, the generic features of different text types such as pedagogic grammars and textbooks. Unravelling the sources/resources of this childhood writing elucidates the creative process, in the same way as one might unravel a bird's nest and in so doing be in awe of the eclectic breadth and inventiveness of its maker.

- **Is creativity part of the "natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community" (Pope 2005: xvi) or is it a mystical gift?**

It must be said that the data suggests a child of extraordinary precocity, in that there is a prophetic sense of herself as a future and fully-grown writer; a sense of an audience-in-waiting to whom she speaks directly and confidently. The capacity to grow towards an aspirational sense of self, and the capacity to hone our voice to an audience are natural skills, but these appear early in my own development and well in advance of my actual life experience.

- **What is the interplay between the chaotic/free and the controlled/disciplined phases of the creative process?**

Much of the creative flow appears to be unplanned – or at least, not consciously so. There are no planning notes, and few crossings out or rewritings. Yet the creative processes I describe above have been tempered by a dogged attention to detail, a passion for internal coherence and for effective communication. The invented tunes for the pipe, the Niassur vocabulary lists and the detailed constitution of Gingerhoof Island, all suggest that rules and patterns are an important part of the creative mix. This child writer struggles to craft her ideas so they sit within the conventions of their form – novel, story, pedagogic music or grammar – and speak clearly to the audience she fully anticipates.

In terms of this current study of *knowledge transformation*, what emerges from this lived story, is that my beliefs about teaching were shaped by experiences of learning. The 'learning' here can be characterised as a kind of passionate engagement. I did not ***learn*** about music through the bamboo pipe experience, but became engaged with it in such a way that it has informed my life ever since. I did not ***learn*** about Medieval England but, through story, began to live it through my character Jess. The aspects of the natural world that I noticed and loved, such as the sunset, the forest, animals, became the sources of my parallel universe. Importantly, the reading, the stories that absorbed me became the ground and catalyst for my own writing.

Thus, I arrive at my own meanings of *creative* as I describe myself throughout this dissertation as a *creative writer*:

- the capacity to transform knowledge (knowledge-as-experience) into something new, unpredictable and unique
- an inner drive to continue doing this
- a belief in the value of what I am doing
- an awareness of audience, and the continued tuning of my message for this purpose
- a dedication to the discipline of writing as craft, and to a process of perpetual self-improvement

The next chapter will look at how these definitions of creativity are manifested in the writing of my first published novel, *Nothing I Touch Stands Still*, and how the emerging beliefs described here found their voice in the writer I became and am.

.