

Life pushing through: Coming to writing and mining for deep reflexivity

Birgitta Haga Gripsrud¹

¹*Department of Caring and Ethics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Stavanger, Kjell Arholms gate 41, 4021 Stavanger, Norway.*

As a researcher, three of my fields of interest have been the breast, breast cancer and death. In 2020, life interrupted as my mother phoned to say that a CT-scan had revealed a small growth in her left breast. Having just published an article on policy guidelines for the integrated breast cancer pathway, I was thrown into this pathway as next of kin, accompanying my mother through diagnosis and treatment. With life pushing through in this way, I started writing about the experience. In 2021, life interrupted again: the tumor in my mother's breast had metastasized, her cancer is incurable. Increasingly, the writing became a lifeline for me. In this text, I develop a "creatography" to bring forth and give form to, by way of an assemblage of fragments, the struggles I've had with writing about this experience, as well as the pleasures I've had going off the beaten track. I highlight how we often have personal stories to tell about our relationships with professional research fields, yet we hesitate to give them substance or credit in our academic writing. I reflect on how we could and why we should engage in such emotional labour, while sharing my own process of coming to writing. I see this writing as an opening: to begin mining my own fields for deeper reflexivity.

Keywords: academic writing; creatography; intersubjectivity; deep reflexivity; the personal in the professional

Venturing into the *other* terrain

My attunement to this special issue concerns a scenario where life events interrupt the researcher and push through topics of interest in such a way that it marks a point of no return in the professional terrain. I wish to share how I myself have dealt with such an experience by going off the beaten track, slowing down my pace, coming to writing differently. Although this is a deeply personal venturing, my hope is that some aspects of my experience can be relatable to my reader. Beyond a need for personal expression, my wish is to encourage other people's writing when life interrupts, throwing us off our once familiar tracks.

On the beaten track

*The pavement stones broken
realigning themselves ad hoc
adapting to the ground
The terrain
the moss or stunted grass between the cracks
the broken glass shards and other debris
the other track next to it,
the wildflowers and weeds on its side,
is also beaten but made not with
concrete slabs but feet and paws and bicycle tires
all walking or rolling this track
to make way deviantly
challenging or accompanying the prescribed route
to make way more intuitively
It's easy but your feet get muddy when it rains
you slip or slide your way through the mess
away from home
or returning to it*

Mode of orientation

My text will take the form of an assemblage of fragments: stories, anecdotes, poems, scenes, dreams, slips of the tongue, notes to self, literary excerpts, song titles, excerpts from my academic writing – each related to my experiences as a next of kin, as a daughter, and as a human-being-researcher. I name this method of writing “creatography”, referring to my definition below.

Creatography: English: from the Latin *creare* + the Greek *graphia*: the process, acts and forms of bringing forth, making and assembling something in writing –

creating, not from nothing, but drawing on the stuff of life, of being and becoming;¹ making an entry into the unchartered field.

A core concern for me has been how I can open up to the possibility of – and represent in writing – making something out of pressing life matters when these matters are close to heart and therefore difficult to even think about, let alone articulate. How can I accommodate a nascent form of thinking through writing at this point, without imposing timeless ideals for analytic coherence? Can I resist the compulsion to tame this text? If I follow its inner intuitive logic, I may not be capable of providing my reader with one red thread to hold onto. In other words: how can I begin to play with the messy and entangled objects of my new reality through writing?

(b) [...] playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not in the external world.

(c) Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality.

(Winnicott, 2005/1971, p. 69)

What is my text to be?

What is it?

Parallelisms between life, relations, writing in research/for the researcher.

A biographic-relational event that pushes life into research (perhaps revitalizing the research in this way) – and which opens up for a new way to approach the research field (and life!) through much more explicit self-exploration and autobiographical writing than before.

¹ Or the “becoming of being”: “subjectivity as the total, substantive, acting, thinking and feeling, embodied, relational being” (Hollway, 2015, p. 21).

I have touched this life in writing previously, but always felt it to be transgressive, dangerous, embarrassing.

I want to grab hold of this transgression and begin to mine it reflexively in relation to the life event that interrupted my research field (finding life had already arrived there, even before this).

“Mystery as method” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011); “productive breakdowns” (p. 60) and puzzles in empirical research call on creative thinking (p.61)

Deeply relational: intersubjective

Deeply existential: I write because I have to

Writing (life) as com-passion (Bracha Ettinger, Wendy Hollway), com-pulsion

“Writing is making sense of life” (Nadine Gordimer)

Intergenerational-therapeutic?

Knausgård «Om sommeren», see yellow post-it note. Is it true that writing protects the author against relationships?

Through creatography, I want to confront the feeling of transgression. I approach this almost as an act of “cultural sniping” (Spence, 1995) not only to push against the impositions of scientific supremacy (Gripsrud & Solbrække, 2019), but to tease the rigid style guides and checklists for quality appraisal which inhibit potentials within the scholarly article genre in many scientific journals.

I expose myself in writing «to reveal *the process of navigating* one’s way through [...] the murky depths, when one’s vision has become clouded, one’s touch is tentative, and one is compelled to strain all the senses in order to perceive a path to follow or a way out [...]” (Beedell, 2009, p. 102, my italics). As such, I write while I sing a chorus “in praise of detours” from the worn-out ways and the tracks we already know so well as writing professionals in academia (Wegener, Meier & Maslo, 2018).

Off the beaten track

*The dry and wet grounds
inundated by rainfall or scorched with the sun's heat
flowing over or evaporating drowning
or burning
Coming through*

Life pushing through

With one hand, suffering, living, putting your finger on pain, loss. But there is the other hand: the one that writes.

(Cixous, 1991, p. 8)

“Is there such a thing as coincidence?”, my mother asks. Or sometimes she states it: “There *is* no such thing as coincidence”. It is not uncommon for researchers of illness and disease to have been close to such phenomena in their personal history. Personal experiences can be clearly be emotional drivers, more or less consciously, for working with – or within – the fields of health and medicine (see e.g. Moen, 2018). However, at first glance, I myself had no significant history to relate to when I started researching breast cancer. The closest personal experience I had with me into the field, was the visual memory of small pale scars on my mother’s breasts. These were from benign growths removed at different times before and after I was born in 1977.

I remember that when I was around six or seven, Mamma was hospitalized overnight because she had to remove a lump in her breast. I slept over at my uncle and aunt’s, indulgently cared for by my three older cousins who braided my hair and dressed me up in their big-girl clothes, I even have a photo of this: I am sitting on a rock in their garden in the evening sunlight, smiling with my lips closed to cover my gapped teeth. I recall this sleep-over, because it felt so special, like a lovely dream. In time, as a teenager or adult (?) I learned that for my mother this had not been such a lovely day. For her, the lump had been a veritable cancer scare. On that day when she

*went to the hospital, she did not know whether she would wake up from the anesthesia with or without her breast. This, despite the fact that she urged the surgeon for a lumpectomy, to save the inflicted breast if possible. Lumpectomy was then (early 1980s) a new and more gentle intervention that my Mum had read about in a US women's magazine. The senior consultant's response to her request was along the lines of "if you're not happy with the treatment we can offer here, find yourself another hospital." My mother kept the breast, because the lump turned out to be non-cancerous.*²

To the extent that I carried with me this memory of what could have been a potentially life-changing event as a preconception in my own research before this point of documentation in 2017, it must have been in my recognition that it is not with indifference that a woman faces the threat of losing a breast, and that as a woman you have to be prepared to defend your bodily integrity in the encounter with the surgeon's will to 'slash and cure' cancer. This very scenario was later thematised in a single case study on a research participant (not my mother) who had exclaimed to her doctors that "she would rather die than lose the breast" (Gripsrud, 2021). Looking back, I realize that I must have felt the resonance of my mother in analyzing this case, but at the time I refrained from reflecting on it in writing.

Cancer Mamma

One day in 2004, I opened the Weekend issue of The Guardian and was struck by an unusual photographic portrait of a woman. I felt it like a bodily blow and wrote about it in my thesis (Gripsrud, 2006), detailing what I had observed and absorbed in the portrait: this woman's lost expression, facing the camera's eye. Had she lost her way or lost her mind? There was the blood-filled plastic drain hanging from her pristine white

² This story was documented in my notes from 2017, indicating how I was already privately engaging with and reflecting over my mother while writing about breast cancer in my professional capacity, however this incident was not a topic of written reflection in my PhD thesis where I wrote about the breast (Gripsrud, 2006). I did write a lyrical narrative in my thesis about loving my mother's body when I was a girl, and how deeply I longed to have curvy thighs and full breasts like hers (op.cit), however I missed the opportunity to mine deeper into my archive of experiences with the breast and my mother.

compression bra, it felt to me as if her heart had been torn out and fastened to her side with a safety pin. The woman in this portrait is the actress Lynn Redgrave, and the photographer is her daughter, Annabel Clark. When Redgrave was diagnosed with breast cancer, it became the starting point for a creative project: the mother wrote a diary, while the daughter took pictures³ (Redgrave & Clarke, 2004).

Little did I know then that I would come to experience a repetition of this scene – when, in December 2020, I was facing my own lost mother, post breast conservative cancer surgery:

It's 7 p.m. We're on our way to pick up Mamma from the hospital and take her home to her apartment. It is dark and the wind is blowing cold and northerly. Due to the pandemic health and safety measures, I have to pick her up in the entrance section of the Day Surgery Department. We meet up in the strange space between two sets of automatic sliding glass doors. Mamma is standing there, she is so pale in the face, I immediately comment on it and reach out for her, "oh, poor you". The nurse who has accompanied her from the anesthesia care unit, quickly tries to ameliorate my concern by explaining that "it is the blue dye" that does it, it makes her skin so very pale and gaunt. But despite the blue dye that was injected into my mother's breast, the surgeons could not find her sentinel lymph node and had to perform a full axillary dissection. The nurse quickly shows me how to empty the surgical drain (we're still standing in a public space, between the two sets of sliding glass doors). The drain hangs in a green, hand-sewn bag made by volunteers, as if, for shame's sake, to cover up a grotesque reality: that newly operated cancer patients are sent out into the world on a cold and dark autumn evening with their bloody drains hanging on display.

Fish soup for supper. Emptied the drain, as directed. Restless sleep at night, Mamma was up three times on the creaking floorboards.

(My notes from the day of my Mamma's breast conservative surgery)

³ Many years before, the artist Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) made a photographic arts project on herself in relation to her mother's breast cancer, at a time when breast cancer was still a considerable social taboo ("Portrait of the Artist with her Mother, Selma Butter", 1978-1981).

Après-coup: take one

That my Mamma would get *Cancer Mamma* at the age of 78, is something none of us had expected or prepared for. But “why *not* me?”, as she kept saying. Being too old to be eligible for the mammography screening programme, her tumor had been a random discovery in a CT scan of the abdomen, which incidentally captured a segment of her left breast and the malignant growth within it.

Approaching middle-age I have been more concerned with (or superstitious of) the risk that I myself could get breast cancer, as the dream fragment below indicates – emerging at the time when I was writing about women’s experiences of breast cancer:

Dreamt I had breast cancer. “Nobody was there”.⁴ Wrapped in large bandages and hospital attire, pajamas, robe. Didn’t know whether I had lost the breast or kept it, kept the nipple. Didn’t know what it looked like. Numb despair.

[...]

Sudden shift to scene in a hospital room (?) with an elderly woman. Operated on for breast cancer. She met me with her despair, she reached out to me. We couldn’t comfort each other; we were both lost, disheartened. She wanted something from me. Pointed to her bandage, needing help. Breast conservative treatment. Intimate sphere. To enter into something involuntary, something that is not mine. Sticky hospital room. Strange.

(Extracts from my notes about a dream I had in 2016)

In the dream, I felt it – what it could be like to have breast cancer, to be lost in despair.

But who was the older woman in my dream?

Is there such a thing as co-incidence? (Mamma)

⁴ Association to a phrase from a poem by the Norwegian poet Ellen Francke (1947-1990) that I referred to in my PhD thesis (Gripsrud, 2006). Another phrase from the same poem inspired the title of the breast cancer study that I worked on, “I am not the same”. Francke writes evocatively about a woman’s embodied experience of breast cancer surgery: “and the milk glands died/ my white, rugged, sweet trees/the cold steel hacked them/and they fell/ and no one was there/not even You” (Francke 1985: 29-55, my translation).

Mamma – *Mamma*⁵

Throughout my work I have attributed fundamental importance to the infant's first object relation – the relation to the mother's breast and to the mother – and have drawn the conclusion that if this primal object, which is introjected, takes root in the ego with relative security, the basis for satisfactory development is laid.

(Klein, 1975/1997, p. 178)

So this is why, how, who, what, I write: milk. Strong nourishment. The gift without return. Writing, too, is milk. I nourish. And like all those who nourish, I am nourished. A smile nourishes me. Mother I am your daughter: if you smile at me, you nourish me, I am your daughter. Goodnesses of good exchanges.

(Cixous, 1991: p. 49)

In my home office, I have a framed photograph. Taken a sunny summer's day in 1977, it is an intimate portrait of the little family I was born into.



Figure 1: A family portrait from 1977, photographed then by Sigurd Haga. I have subsequently photographed the portrait on the bed of my PhD monograph.

⁵ Mamma is what I call my Mum/Mama in Norwegian. *Mamma* is also the latin term for the milk-secreting organ (breast, udder) of female *mammals*, or a type of cloud formation (meteorology), hence also the medical diagnosis *Cancer Mamma*.

Here I am, held by my mother and gazed upon by my father, suckling my Mamma's full left breast. I kept looking at this reassuring and idyllic motif in the days around my mother's breast cancer surgery on this same breast. Since she only gave birth to this one baby, and since my parents divorced when I was six and my mother has remained single, it was she and I that would be facing her new illness together.

Can it really be that there is a malignancy in this breast,
a poison in my Mamma's sweet *mamma*?

My mother, her breast, they have rooted me: materially, relationally, symbolically, psychically – and as such they constitute my “primary experiential structure” (Solheim, 1999, p. 28, my translation).

New position in the familiar terrain: From researcher in the field to next-of-kin

[...] it is true, that as a woman, it is hard not to identify with,
not to feel the pain of the friend, sister, mother, daughter with breast cancer.

It is hard not to think: what if it [were] me?

(Gripsrud, 2006, p.
277)

October 2020, two months before the inhospitable post-surgery scene with Mamma, saw the publication of an article that I had co-written with Ellen Ramvi and Bjørn Ribers. The article was based on material from my amputated ethnographic fieldwork in the breast cancer clinic (2016-2017). Getting formal approval to conduct this research became a longwinded process and, in the end, I had to give it up, realizing that I was running out of time, and that my fieldwork would be severely compromised if I accepted the medical ethics committee's terms, informed by an overly legalistic understanding of research ethics. What remained for me to write about in terms of data, were the policy and clinical documents that related to my research topic on integrated breast cancer pathways.

In the article,
we argued that in light of recent policy shifts in Norwegian healthcare policy,
«we are at a critical juncture for reflecting on what constitutes quality in integrated
cancer care at the experiential level»
(Gripsrud, Ramvi & Ribers, 2020, p. 250).

Indeed, two months down the road, I was placed in prime position to observe “the experiential level”, not as a researcher but as next of kin, accompanying my elderly mother through diagnosis, surgical treatment, post-surgical recovery and adjuvant treatment. During this time, mostly characterised by a state of shock for my Mamma and a confoundedness for myself, my colleague Ellen suggested to me: “maybe you should try to write about this, auto-ethnographically? And maybe your mother could write too? You are both people who write, aren’t you?”

My mother has worked as a journalist and editor, and has written diaries all her life. To me, the idea of us writing in tandem, is both intensely alluring and daring. After work that day, I go straight to a bookstore to purchase a notebook for my Mamma, who writes mostly by hand. I give it to her in the days after surgery and say to her, “take this notebook, and just see if you would want to write in it. There is no pressure, but it’s an opportunity, if you will”. Mamma looks a little skeptical at first. What is going on in her mind? I decide not to push it further after this. I just leave the notebook with her.

She has written in the notebook. “No great literature,” she says to warn me.

But she writes.

And I am writing myself.

At first, I did not think I would make it. I therefore started with short notes on my mobile, documentation of medical consultations where I accompany Mamma.

Then fuller texts appear on my computer.

For me to take on my own writing felt like a bidding *and* foreboding transgression, which involved the attempt at turning my mother and my self⁶ explicitly into a matter of research. Dealing with this has been a considerable emotional labour. I have had moments and periods while writing when I found myself almost anaesthetized (I wrote ‘euthanized’ first, as if wishing to put myself out of my misery) by tiredness, and at other moments – when trying to articulate things in writing – I found myself feeling torn apart, fragmenting. Yet I have kept at it when able to. Mamma tells me that she keeps writing too. So, there is a mother and a daughter writing, each for their own. We, I, don’t know at this stage what may come of this tandem writing.

I have not (yet) asked to read my mother’s writing.

What keeps me from asking about Mamma’s writing?

Politeness or care (I don’t want to impinge on her space for private reflections, I don’t want to push my research agenda because of her illness and suffering).

Distance (at this stage I want to keep my own writing free. My story will change if I begin to read her story, because we are so attuned to each other).

Defence (against the anxiety in asking for permission to read a private text, anxiety of reading her writing of the pain of the distress of the loneliness she is confronting and my distressing relation to feeling responsibility for her).

I am having a hard-enough time dealing with my own (written) stuff.

[all of the above are possible explanations]

For now, I decide that this paper has to be about *my* process of “coming to writing” (Cixous, 1991) – albeit through an event that is mainly my mother’s. I write, acknowledging that:

⁶ I’m evoking the title of Nancy Friday’s feminist classic from the year I was born (1977) *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter’s Search of Identity*. This book was passed on to me from my Mamma.

It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed.

(Rich, 1986/1976, p. 221)

My mother has made her own track through another landscape of writing.

My writing stays close to my heart at a time when I am mostly feeling dumbfounded by how cruelly life can push through into the ‘professional sphere’.

Après-coup: take two

At the time of my mother’s diagnosis, I had another article in press, bearing the ominous title “Mothering Death” (Gripsrud, 2021). I now felt torn about it and wrote to my editor, Alfred Sköld, to express the concern that this title now appeared even more uncanny to me because my own mother had got breast cancer. My mind was spinning. Could her prognosis be jinxed by this title? Could the paper in some way appear as a poorly concealed ‘death wish’ on my mother, who, after all, was on the curative spectrum, and who, with all the complexities of a close relationship, I love. Through dialogue, the editor and I agreed to keep the title on my paper, because however it resonated with me personally, and whatever fantasies it could evoke, it *did* reflect the psychic reality of the research participant with whom I had co-created data for interpretation. With the support of Alfred, I stood my ground on “mothering death”.

From the primary diagnosis of *Cancer Mamma* in 2020, there is an unexpected turn of events in the new year. In January 2021, life pushes through again, as a new CT scan of my mother’s torso reveals a growth in her spine, and with ultrasound other tumors are detected on her liver. With these images as messengers from the inside, Mamma leaves the curative spectrum and is diagnosed with incurable metastatic cancer.

I was overwhelmed by sadness when Mamma calmly phoned me on a Friday to tell me what the oncologist had told her that day. My son and I despaired

together, paralyzed from doing anything that afternoon and evening, barely able to speak for crying.

In the weeks that follow, Mamma is worried about her left breast. Will they take it? I have to be brave and tell her that the breast doesn't matter in the medical sense, it's already too late for a mastectomy because the cancer has spread to other organs. "You will not be cured of this cancer. You will probably die from it". This is a lot to take on board for Mamma, and we have to have this brutal conversation several times before the reality of this unreal situation sinks in.

I can see the phrase "Mothering death" in a new light now and as descriptive of the relational and intersubjective process of trying to come to terms with incurable disease: the final transition in life where mothering is indeed the very thing that is called for.

Asking for permission: Our experiences have taught us

Note 7 June 2022

Ask Mamma about consent to write about her.

She is open on FB.

Focus on my experience as next of kin and the process of writing about the experience.

Won't name her, but she can be identified if someone wants to.

Some details about her illness and my observations of treatment, etc.

Note 12 June 2022

Went to visit Mamma. She told me about a radio programme, where it was said that we have to talk about death. Sitting close to me, she looks me in the eyes and says: we have to share our experiences because it can open up for others to express themselves about what is hard for them and what they

struggle with. (She said this more beautifully and truthfully than I can relay here.)

After a while I initiate a new topic of conversation: “Mamma, I have to ask you something”. I feel like am I a kid again, asking my mother for something big. I dive into it before I lose my courage. Try to explain that I’m writing in new ways about myself and her for a special issue on writing off the beaten track, and that I refer to her and the breast cancer in my text. That she can be identified through my writing. I ask how she feels about it, if it’s OK with her, or not. She says, with little hesitation, that she has “no problem” with this. She says that she herself has chosen to be open about the cancer on FaceBook. I explain that I’m trying to write about when life pushes into the research field, and about the stories we bring with us into the field as researchers. I say that I feel I have carried her with me in my research always, there are so many overlapping interests and experiences between us. She remarks that this is something she has also thought about.

I say thank you to her for agreeing to let me write about her, we look into each other’s eyes. During this moment Mamma is her old self: calm, collected, dignified, brave, wise – fully and adequately present to me as my mother, as I have known her throughout most of my life. I feel her power over mine, in the fear that she can just turn me down and there will be no opportunity to appeal, reminding me of my childhood and teenage years when she was a single parent holding the boundaries in place for me. She could be so formidable! It is therefore a heartfelt thank you from me to her, and I feel tears pressing in my eyes as I utter ‘Thank you, Mamma’. I could sob but don’t. I feel a flow of gratitude, love, and emotional relief, because for me this was such a tough question to bring to her and I have been dreading the day when I would have to face her with it. Without words, I feel that she understands how important this writing is to me. I quickly feel the desire to go back into the work on my text.

Our experiences have taught us, and by sharing them we can comfort one another, ease suffering and aid each other’s healing. This is a principle that my mother has

practiced through much of her life, whether by telling her own story or listening to others'. I have been worried, though, that my 'agenda' to write about my experience of her breast cancer will usurp something or come across as an exploitative project. Looking in from the outside, is my work inappropriate because of the vulnerability in the situation? My mother is clearly the more vulnerable party, due to her illness, age and being made the object of my written reflection as a researcher. As my notes indicate, I am also feeling vulnerable as a daughter. I am also outing myself in this paper and it's daunting but I feel that I have to do it.

*I've thought about the courage of fiction writers
who write their lives and relations into their novels.*

They do it because they must.

Who is who?

We are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both.

(Rich, 1986, p. 253)

"As long as the ship can sail," Mamma says to me, sings to me.⁷ She is the ship, and the song reflects her outlook on life with incurable cancer. She is an orderly person and worries about what I am to do with all her furniture and things after she dies. She hands things over to me, and I keep them in my home, less orderly, but I hold onto them. She is clearing.

She calls the cancer ward to book patient taxi transport to the hospital and tells the nurse at the other end of the line that she must notify the transport that there will be a "companion", "because I will be accompanied by my mother". It gets quiet on the other end before they both burst out laughing. "Well, I mean my daughter," Mamma says. She laughs when she tells me this and I laugh along. It is true enough that as a daughter, I have long been in

⁷ A translation of the Swedish song title «Så länge skutan kan gå», by Evert Taube. "Så länge skutan kan gå/Så länge hjärtat kan slå/ Så länge solen den glittrar på böljorna blå/Om blott endag eller två/Så håll tillgodo ändå/For det finns många som aldrig en ljusglimt kan få! Och vem har sagt att just du kom till värden/ För att få solsken och lycka på färden?"

the role of my mother's mother. At times her need for care and being-with has exceeded my capacities, leading me to feel like a disappointment to her (or myself). The role as mother for my mother is now actualized by the care needs of an elderly and single woman with metastatic cancer and a demanding treatment regimen, as well as other conditions that prevent her from taking part in the manic societal drive for "active ageing" (Liveng et al., 2017). Although the call to be good to and care for my mother has been strengthened, I have also felt, stronger than in a long time, that she is "my Mamma" (I begin to refer to her, childlike, as "Mammaen min", "my Mummy", in written communications with friends and colleagues) – with the love and longings this entails and the memories that are awakened day and night.

The foundations are moving in us both.

About coming to writing, as it were

Awake in the night, thoughts thickening, layering, driving me from bed, down the stairs into the kitchen and to my laptop in darkness. A childhood friend of my husband died yesterday. He had cancer but died of complications resulting from an accident.

A stirring pretext for this writing, of my compulsion to night-write.

*For who among us is untouched by cancer,
by the tragedy it initiates,
its brutal interruptions.*

*As I type into the computer, I feel myself entering a more cognitive mode;
the pressure of associative night thinking drains out, and I worry that its most
powerful content will slip out between my fingers.*

From this note, written in the autumn of 2021, I gather that I'm concerned with staying close to the emotional experience that kept me from my sleep. I must have wanted to write my mind, as my mind appeared to me while lying there sleepless in bed. The act of getting out of bed in almost total darkness, walking to the kitchen, logging onto the laptop and getting to writing pulled me further away from the intensity that kept me awake.

Making sense, documenting, “capturing the experience” (Gripsrud et al., 2016):

*Night-writing with slippery tentacles
while they are still capable of sucking onto
associative streaks
in night thinking, night swimming, night dreaming.*

This is one of several sleepless nights and early mornings I spent pondering this text. I am usually a sound sleeper. So, what then wakes me, pulls me, pushes my sleeping mind into consciousness, buzzing with energy in associative modes, what is it that is pushing me forward towards the text coming out of me. More than being inspired and desiring, I am becoming compelled, impelled or possessed by this invitation to write off the beaten track: I have to do it. I will do it. I must. Feeling called-upon by the call, as it were, I wonder how this writing could proceed. Below are two fragments, which speak of this internal process:

What is this paper about?

*It is about finding an apt language, even pushing boundaries to find expression
(expressive writing?).*

*It is about a developing auto-ethnography, except what is a mother-daughter
ethnography
(a duo-ethnography?).*

*It is about the many and complex overdeterminations in life – my research interest, my
relationship with my mother
(where do we start, where does it end?)*

It is a love story, with all the great ambivalences that love entails.

This paper is about writing

To write: to love, inseparable.

Writing is a gesture of love...Read-me, lick-me, write-me love.

(Cixous, cited in Gallop, 1988, p. 165)

Why do I write?

(girlhood dream documented in an old diary that we found in a box:

my mother wanted to become a writer)

As a six-year-old, I taught myself to read.

Waiting in a ferry queue to Denmark, I started reading aloud from a book and recall my mother's face, the expression of disbelief as she looked down towards me,

realizing that I was reading out words from the book I was holding in my lap.

My mother taught me to sing, singing to me, with me.

My mother and father must have taught me to speak as an infant. They read to me.

My mother taught me to write, writing with me.

It caused me rage and tears to learn to express myself clearly and convincingly.

Why do I write?

Why do you write, Mamma?

Stopping and slowing: the struggle with putting experience into words differently⁸

Entry, notes 25 March 2022:

Mourning – inability to write (period from before and including Christmas 2021 to February 2022). Tearful, tormented, I now know (as in really know) that my Mamma is going to die. I'm thinking about it. Every event with her feels like the last event. Unbearable, emotionally. I worry about what's coming.

Low energy, lethargic, tired. Tiredness as defence against reality, against emotional pain? I wanted to submit an abstract to this special issue but feared I wouldn't be able to do it. It was too hard. Reached out to colleague to see if we could write something together instead. She never responded. Day before deadline (31 January) I sit down to write the abstract. I submit it and apologize to editor for submitting it one day late. However, find out day after that I was not late. I did hand in before deadline. Dates shift in my head; I feel too late even when I am on time.

Editors' comments to my submitted abstract (8 February 2022, my translation):

“we were a little amused by, and found it really interesting, that you ended your abstract with reestablishing the academic mask with generic theory jargon that you had been brave enough to take to task and challenge by introducing personal narratives in your academic writing, whereby you experienced exposing yourself. Perhaps you can reflect on this...that you couldn't avoid rounding off your abstract with a completely impersonal ribbon of abstract concepts when what you wanted to write about was your own, personal, existential 'coming to writing'...”

⁸ As I repeat “writing differently” in this text, I become aware that I am paraphrasing a book that has been important to me as a psychosocial researcher, namely Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach*.

How to do academic writing improperly? There is no Dummies Guide to it. I have theory to shield me from exposing my self, or to authenticate this experiment: A fig leaf for shame, or a fig leaf for fear.

“Freedom. It’s just a feeling...

You *know* it when it happens.

I’ll tell you what freedom is to me:

No fears!”

(Simone, 1968).

Entry, continued, notes 25 March 2022:

Mid-late February 2022 – begin to write more on the first version his text. Feeling of pleasure, excitement, joy, creative abundance, relief. Share this experience with Ingvil over a lavish dinner. She comments, bemused, on the “counter-intuitive” nature of what I’m doing with this text. By that I think she means my writing in the midst-of raw experience. For me this IS intuitive – this writing pulls me into it. I guess the counter-intuitive aspect is that I’m taking this experience, this writing with me into the world by seeking to have it published in an academic journal.

So be it. I transgress.

Days after this, I succumbed to covid-19. My triumph in this defeat was that I did not infect my Mamma. I did not give her the dreaded ‘kiss of death’. With three vaccine doses, I got it like a heavy cold. But as week two came to an end, I was really not feeling well. Weeks followed after this and I am currently (May-June 2022) writing this text in a state of “long-covid” exhaustion:

I have had to stop, delay and slow down most things in life.

I can no longer pull myself together without cost to my (already limited) vitality.

I am forced further off the beaten track by fatigue and brain fog.

This text is the first writing I return to when I gradually return to work part time, and I hold onto it for dear life during a slow and tumultuous recovery process, jotting down notes here and there while unable to work on my computer for longer periods of time. I find solace in the state of reverie that this slow and fragmented writing brings me into. I get to dream and wander around in my writing, when this dreaming and internal wandering is all I am capable. I am returning to drink from the source, to where I come from as a writer.

I'm writing this mid-May 2022

For the first two months my illness experience was mostly in my body. “At least I am not feeling depressed”, I said to myself, partly savouring the opportunity to ‘just be’. Not more than a couple of weeks after, though, I go through emotional havoc:

I escape the city to seek refuge. Alone in the mountain and our cabin, isolated. A sunny day on the terrace, I cherish the moment. Being in nature, being among the rocks, water, trees, soothes my soul, steadies my sensitive, restless heart. Then, the abrupt interruption of long past events, good and bad: early childhood, my loving parents, their divorcing, Pappa making things good for me as a new single father, losing him when he moved across the country, Mamma remains the single parent and becomes ill when I am in my teenage years. The sadness of love, of loss, of unmet needs for care and parenting that I denied for many years.

Who takes care of me?

The embodied craving to be held. I have felt it.

“Sinking downwards into myself”

I go to the forest and arrive in the darkness,
the moon is green and dangling like a swing on the sky,
I light up the fire and lay myself down and sleep heavily,

sinking downwards into myself, not without fear, but confident
because you must will and dare what you must.⁹

(Hjort, 2020, p. 141, my translation)

The covid-body has paused me, and these are the floodgates opening to emotional experiences that are not new to me but the intensity with which they return to me now, in the mountain, is overwhelming. I write it all down, with two persistent streams running down my face.

I light up the fire and go to bed, sleeping for a long time. Days in a vulnerable state after this – is this a breakdown unfolding? An existential crisis? Is it mourning?

The next week, my mood is lifted. Still exhausted in the body but mentally lighter still. More creative, more hopeful and joyful.

Coming to writing: the pains and pleasures

In this paper, I draw on past and recent experiences of an autobiographical nature, which concern the ongoing labour of “coming to writing” (Cixous, 1991) off the beaten track. In doing so, I enter the push and pull ethics of *com*-passion (Hollway 2015, drawing on Bracha Ettinger). By exploring the mother-daughter relationship, I can allow a new sense of “feeling-with” to play into the depths of my experience of being a qualitative researcher engaging with breast cancer and death while also being the daughter of a mother who is living with incurable breast cancer.

Is writing for me a compulsion or a drive?

Do I feel pulled, or pushed to write?

⁹ “Jeg drar til skogen og kommer fram i mørket, månen er grønn og dingler som en huske på himmelen, jeg fyrer opp og legger meg og sover tungt, synker nedover i meg selv, ikke uten frykt, men fortrøstningsfullt fordi du må ville og tørre det du må.» (Hjort, 2020: 141). The word «fortrøstningsfullt» signifies «confidence» but also connotes comfort or being comforted (“trøst”) in Norwegian.

Is writing a need, a survival?

*Whose desires run through me, my writing, other than those I can recognize as my
own?*

[...] the art of storytelling is the art of exchanging *experiences*; by experiences he means not scientific observations but the popular exercise of practical wisdom.

(Ricoeur 1992: s. 164, referring to Walter Benjamin).

This text does not represent the “art of storytelling”, it represents the struggle to tell. I do not know if my creatographic assemblage represents “a fragmented totality” (Levine, 2009, p. 172) or is the germ of “practical wisdom” that can be told more artfully and analytically insightfully, given time. But this text is a steppingstone to thinking about how the emotional experience of accompanying my mother through the curative breast cancer trajectory and into her new life with metastatic breast cancer – consciously and unconsciously – will accompany me in my own life and my research interests. It is a fact: I cannot be unmarked by this experience. By writing now in this way I make myself taste my own ‘medicine’, I give myself a therapeutic writing intervention (Gripsrud et al., 2014; Gripsrud et al., 2016; Gripsrud, 2021). The writing action helps me to externalize things that impinge on me (Levine, 2009, referring to Winnicott, p. 172), helps me grapple with the complex and the chaotic. I lay myself bare through writing, hoping that my assemblage may reveal the painful tearing of tissues, exposing the bones and viscera of a “dialectical researcher subjectivity” (Fog, 1998, p. 154):

My research interests have never been separated from my life and my relationships.

*Least of all, have they been separate from my mother,
who is as inevitably in my elemental materials (my life matter) as I am in hers:*

Watching over Mamma in the shower:

*I see my body in her body,
recognizing her structure and substance in myself.*

Creatography, as I experienced it

Writing as emotional expression (exploring my innermost thoughts and feelings)

Writing as a creative and meaningful retreat from meaningless suffering and illness

Writing and taking the time to write as acts of self-care

Writing as a lifeline for persevering: I can stand what life throws at me if I can write

Writing as com-passionate relationality, feeling-with, thinking-with, self and other

Writing as a relation to an “imaginary reader” (Gripsrud et al., 2016)

and writing as defence against relations in that by writing one can indulge solitude (Knausgård, 2017, p. 130)

Writing as catharsis, no end to that one ever

Writing as blind-folded self-analysis, potentials and pitfalls to working things through alone

Writing as a battle between desire for freedom and feelings of shame

Nascent thinking about writing as mining for deep reflexivity

I went off the beaten track, to write about life pushing through into research. Through creatography, I have opened myself up to engage the personal in the professional. This text testifies to my alienated experience of being in this *other* terrain. By entering it creatively and intuitively, an emotionally challenging ‘bad’ situation has allowed me to establish a ‘good’ object: The umbilical of writing has kept me connected to myself, to my mother, and has sustained me in my relation to the text.

As my creatography attests to, entry into the unchartered personal field of study (for me) concerns facing the pains and pleasures of engaging “difficult knowledge”:

Lovely knowledge reinforces what we think we want, while difficult knowledge includes breakdowns and not knowing, which becomes the very force of creative research. (Wegener, Meier & Maslo, 2018, p. 4)

The piercing affective nature of my life interruptions were such that I could repress or split them off – or – I could begin the attempt to relate to them but not by rationalizing events that appeared as uncanny parallelisms (see *après-coup*, take one and two). Beginning to relate to the interruptions, has meant stumbling off to search for new tracks in writing.

Finding adequate aesthetic form to feelings, is a neglected area of qualitative inquiry, which, after all, is concerned with conveying embodied and emotional experience and psychosocial meaning-making. I myself, I am guilty of not having payed enough attention to this, though I have contributed brief experimentations (see Gripsrud et al. 2018 for collective scenic composition; Gripsrud, 2021 for lyrical fieldnotes), I have also emulated the stylistic genre of positivist knowledge production (Gripsrud et al., 2016). I am therefore grateful to the editors of this special issue, for braving the elements in their call for academic writing off the beaten track and for giving me courage to really experiment with this text.

I am not sure that I would be a researcher if research did not involve writing. Engaging in *this* writing I have ventured into wilderness, taking me out of routinized, pre-structured, formulaic academic article writing production. Writing off the beaten track has been an invitation: to bring me back in touch with myself and my desire for *and* need to write. Writing in this way is also bringing me back in touch with – and allowing me to articulate – my mother as a foundational material, a source of love and knowledge, as well as of mutual ambivalences and frustrations, “envy and gratitude” (Klein, 1997/1975). This is a move towards what I call “mining” in the primeval depths of reflexivity, working my way slowly downwards into the infinite hermeneutical abyss of “unthought knowns” (Bollas, 1987). Perhaps more aptly, this move is facilitating emergent knowledge of my maternal relation as “the most intimate and the most distanced unknown” (Ettinger quoted in Hollway, 2015, p. 85).

By being able to sink into writing at the time of my own illness, I have come into touch with my vulnerabilities and dependencies, summed up as an ongoing need of mothering. This realization contrasts a deeply engrained defensive tendency to be self-sufficient and get on with things on my own, a way of dealing with the challenges, disappointments and losses that life has dealt me.

*Is writing for me a way of satisfying a need of being alone
or is it a way of exploring relationality,
a conversation with the (m)other within me?*

Although my thinking here is still nascent, I hope that this text demonstrates that by mining researcher subjectivities and biographical experiences, we may begin to enrich our ways of “knowing” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013: 159), personally and professionally, while strengthening the trustworthiness and quality of both research and writing. I believe that there is also an ethical dimension to taking on this reflexive mining – as an emotional and expressive labour – in that by averting from the “murky depths” (Beedell, 2009) of our own experiences, as researchers, we may invite more risky forms of research, while sanitizing our writing practices. Risky forms of practice could include, for example, ignoring (the value of) non-verbal or hidden meaning or rationalizing the irrational, intolerance of intensive affects or taboos in the field or data, defending against anxieties by avoiding difficult topics, questions, or findings, projecting unconscious affects, fusing self and other in the research relationships; de-humanizing data analysis, instrumentalizing or idealizing research for one’s own partly conscious ‘agendas’. Risks such as these can never be entirely avoided, but as qualitative researchers we must strive to know ourselves better while we seek to co-create knowledge with others.

Venturing out of the *other* terrain

I cannot see myself as a researcher without writing. Looking back, it was “coming to writing” (Cixous, 1996) that was my rite of passage into ‘doing research’ and ‘becoming an academic’. Yet, despite this inextricable relationship between knowledge and writing, I have hesitated to bring my own stories into academic texts.

The moment my mother phoned me to say that a lump had been spotted in her left breast, and then phoned again weeks later to say the cancer had spread, there was no going back to a time of innocence for me as a researcher. As this creatography reveals, however, Mamma was already there in my thinking – and in my dreams – but I used to feel inhibited from exploring this more fully in my academic writing.

I am by no means the first researcher of to have a personal story to tell. Life is rarely separate from work, nor is research subject separate from the researcher. But life can get larger than life sometimes, and what are we to do then? I have ‘done’ writing, because that is what I know to do. Writing is my way of grappling with life, emotional experiences, and “difficult knowledge” (Wegener, Meier & Maslo, 2018, p. 4) evoking powerful psychosocial tropes: breast, cancer, mother, suffering, death, mourning. I am writing differently, hopefully, as a means to begin to more fully “access and develop my researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowledge” (Gripsrud, 2021 referring to Hollway, 2015). Writing differently has involved developing different forms of writing, as well as the indulgence of time and reverie due to illness, which has slowed me down. It has also involved the struggle to tolerate tiredness and to stay with emotional distress, the textual and psychic fragmentations – including the absence of words – rather than rushing in to create solace through narrative, analytic or theoretical wholesomeness.

How could my attempts at mining

the depths of the daughter-mother relationship

find expression and form,

were it not through writing into the wilderness?

29 April 2022. *Off the beaten track*

[Describe features of the other, non-beaten track. Metaphorical aspects of the nature track in my internal landscape, which is also my landscape of escape in real life.]

The downtrodden grass and moss there.

The natural footstep in the big rock.

*Leaping across the crevice from one rock to another
getting across the talus or stream.*

*The unpredictable slipperiness of these rocks when it rains,
the fear of falling,*

breaking a leg

not to be found.

The hidden holes that trap my foot.

The twines that trip me up, the clumsiness.

The soggy mire that sucks me down

Primeval layers of organic matter

I may disappear into the residues of time immemorial.

Or rather, is it the case that in this paper I try to convey how things appear – through writing (in writing) when the track does not offer a meaningful trajectory anymore. Nobody can give direction in this unknown land. No downtrodden track is there ahead, leading me towards a destination that others have inhabited before me.

With no track, arrival at the destination is an uncertainty.

Will others be able to trace my steps off the beaten track?

Will I be able to retrace my own steps back to a point of departure?

If I get lost, would I ever wish to return to the point that I set out from?

Going astray. Going wild.

Making detours or walking in circles.

Going native in the motherland.

June 2022

Creatography unfolded

fragment by fragment.

There is no end to this writing

only depths and beginnings.

References

- Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2011). *Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method*. London: Sage.
- Beedell, P. (2009). Charting the clear waters and the murky depths. In S. Clarke & P. Hogget (eds.), *Researching Under the Surface: Psycho-Social Research Methods in Practice*. London: Karnac, 101-119.
- Bollas, C. (1987). *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis and the Unthought Known*, London: Free Association Books.
- Cixous, H. (1991). *Coming to Writing and other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cixous, H. (1996, 1st French edn. 1975). Sorties. In H. Cixous & C. Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Fog, J. (1994). *Med samtalen som udgangspunkt. Det kvalitative forskningsinterview*. [The conversation as a point of departure. The qualitative research interview] København: Akademisk forlag.
- Francke, E. (1985). *Det dobbelte kyss* [The Double Kiss]. Oslo: Tiden forlag.
- Friday, N. (1977). *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Gallop, J. (1988). *Thinking through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gordimer, N. (2014). Nadine Gordimer: A life in quotes. *The Guardian*, 14 July 2014.
- Gripsrud, B. H. (2006). *Spectacular Breasts: Mapping Our Historical and Contemporary Cultural Fascination with the Breast*. (PhD Monograph). University of Leeds.
- Gripsrud, B. H. (2008). The Cultural History of the Breast. In V. Pitts (ed.), *A Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body* (Vol. 1), 31-44. Westport: Greenwood Publishing.
- Gripsrud, B. H., Brassil, K. J., Summers, B., Sjøiland, H., Kronowitz, S., & Lode, K. (2016). Capturing the Experience: Reflections of Women with Breast Cancer Engaged in an Expressive Writing Intervention. *Cancer Nursing*, 39(4), 51-60.
- Gripsrud, B. H., Sjøiland, H., & Lode, K. (2014). Ekspressiv skrivning som

egenterapeutisk verktøy ett år etter brystkreftdiagnosen - resultater fra en norsk pilostudie [Expressive writing as a self-therapeutic tool one year after the breast cancer diagnosis – results from a pilot study]. *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Helseforskning*, (2), 45-61.

Gripsrud, B. H., Ramvi, E., Froggett, L., Hellstrand, I., & Manley, J. (2018).

Psychosocial and Symbolic Dimensions of the Breast Explored through a Visual Matrix. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 26(3), 210-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2018.1482958>.

Gripsrud, B. H., & Solbrække, K. N. (2019). Correction to: Scientific supremacy as an obstacle to establishing and sustaining interdisciplinary dialogue across knowledge paradigms in health and medicine. *Medicine, health care, and philosophy*, 22(4), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-019-09906-6>.

Gripsrud, B. H., Ramvi, E., & Ribers, B. (2020). Couldn't care less? A psychosocial analysis of contemporary cancer care policy as a case of borderline welfare. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 13(3), 247-262. <https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15985348674895>.

Hjort, V. (2020) *Er mor død?* [Is mother dead?]. Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2013) (2nd ed.). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach*. London: Sage.

Hollway, W. (2015). *Knowing Mothers: Researching Maternal Identity Change*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Klein, M. (1997, 1st edn. 1975). *Envy and Gratitude – and Other Works (1946-1963)*. London: Vintage.

Knausgård, K.O. (2017). *Om sommeren* [In the Summer]. Oslo: Forlaget Oktober.

Levine, S. K. (2009). *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Liveng, A., Ramvi, E., Froggett, L., Manley, J., Hollway, W., Lading, Å. & Gripsrud, B. H. (2017). Imagining transitions in old age through the visual matrix method: thinking about what is hard to bear. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 31(2), 155-70.

- Lorde, A. (1980). *The Cancer Journals*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Moen, K. (2018). *Death at Work: Existential and Psychosocial Perspectives on End-of-Life Care*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Redgrave, L. & Clarke, A. (2004). *Journal: A Mother and Daughter's Recovery from Breast Cancer*. New York: Umbrage Editions.
- Rich, A. (1986, 1st edn. 1976). *Of Woman Born*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Simone, N. (1968). "Freedom is a feeling! Freedom is No Fear!". Interview excerpt from Peter Rodis' 1970 documentary on Nina Simone, New York. Accessed on 1 November 2022 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPD8f2m8WGI>.
- Solheim, J. (1999) Finnes våre kropper i våre hoder? [Do our bodies exist in our heads?]. *Kvinneforskning*. Vol. 1: 19-32.
- Spence, J. (1995). *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*. London: Routledge.
- Wegener, C., Meier, N. & Maslo, E. (2018). *Cultivating Creativity in Methodology and Research: In Praise of Detours*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Winnicott, D.W, (2005, 1st edn. 1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge.

Acknowledgements

To Mamma,
"my mother who circulates in me, my mother who is in me as I was in her, what a strange bond, strange and red, contained, and which does not collect itself, does not stop, which goes by, escapes, follows its course across generations, carrying colours well beyond ourselves."
(Hélène Cixous, 1996, p. 82).

About the Author:

Birgitta Haga Gripsrud is Professor of Health Humanities and Psychosocial Studies. Her research is broadly characterized by interdisciplinary engagement across the humanities, social sciences, health sciences and medicine.

Most of my life I have relied on writing for thinking and feeling, expression and making. I used to work as a teacher of creative and academic writing, as well as a freelance writer and translator. I have experimented with writing academically, as well as applying writing therapeutically for women with breast cancer. One of my longstanding research interests is the interweaving of culture and embodied experience, corresponding with my desire to wander off the beaten track and into the in-between areas of art and science, including writing differently.