

For the past 18 months, through various intersecting motifs in the fairy story of Rapunzel, I have been evolving a body of work prompted by the alteration of my life in order break the chain of SARS-CoV-2 transmission and mitigate against Covid-19 infection in myself, my family and my community.

Since the start of the pandemic, the fairy tale of Rapunzel, who was imprisoned in a tower separated from the world, has become a familiar metaphor for the lockdowns. However, restriction has continued for many: the millions of disabled and immunocompromised folks, those living with the debilitating conditions that make up Long Covid, and those who like me are Covid-Aware, since public health policies and mandated protections have been scaled back, narratives surrounding the virus' threat have been minimised, and society has been lured back to 'normal', despite the tsunami of data on the longer term and potential irreversible disabling effects of the pathogen that shows it disrupts the immune, vascular, digestive, endocrine and reproductive systems impacting multiple organs, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, gut, and brain, accelerating cancers and behaving in some ways similar to HIV.

I personally, have not consented to being part of “the greatest mass-disabling event in human history”ⁱ and refuse to play “Covid Roulette” the term George Monbiot coined in *The Guardian* in January 2023.ⁱⁱ I am still not prepared to risk catching or transmitting the virus, weakening, disabling or killing others, or becoming a Petrie dish for new variants.

As we approached the third anniversary of the onset of the pandemic in Europe at the start of last year, I felt a deep sense of despair and grief as my own knowledge and behaviours were swimming against the tide of the mainstream, and the attitudes of many of my friends and colleagues. These feelings I found increasingly difficult to bear, and so I began to recognise the need to take action, not to give up on my mitigations and give in to infection, but to become-with and accept the situation and to cultivate a way to survive in this new reality.

I looked to the natural world “taking my grief outside”ⁱⁱⁱ walking in my local commons, to observe, learn, and forage for wild foods. I turned to reading processing through reflective writing. I embraced a slowing down and began material explorations of growing my hair, plaiting, parsley cultivation and anthotype making. This presentation shares some of my written reflections and material processes and outcomes that explore entrapment, loss, and transformation.

The project is framed by the practice of *life-writing*, an “expanded concept of the autobiographical signature or trace”, which in *Luminous Presence: Derek Jarman's Life Writing*, Alexandra Parson's argues “encompasses every instance of cultural production that involves the representation of a body, relation of life stories or inscriptions that form a record of a life” (2021:10).

A central motif of the Rapunzel story is the enchanted plait of hair that is climbed by the witch to gain access to the tower. I had some inklings of how I might refer to the fairytale during the first Covid lockdown in May 2020 when I bought *Campanula rapunculus* seeds and began plaiting spaghetti (I was growing wheat and making strawcraft at the time). Living in a third floor flat, I envisaged a long pasta braid that would enable my lockdown escape.

Much later in January 2023, whilst walking in the woods on Esher Commons, I began conjuring images of monstrously long hair becoming ‘tied to branches, rooting and tethering me. Grounding me but also potentially trapping me’.^{iv} Knowing that my hair wasn’t long enough, I searched for images on the internet, started cutting them into wavy lengths and braiding them together. This activity gave me something material to do with my despair - exploring the enchanting action of plaiting, to lose myself in, growing excessively, binding together ideas, actions and emotions, to make an orderly braid from the horror.

Having previously worked with hair, I was aware of its magical associations, being as Kate Forsyth writes in *The Rebirth of Rapunzel* “a symbol of life and renewal” (Forsyth, 2016:17). I imagined reaching out to friends asking them to send photographs of theirs. Being distant from them, I wanted to feel connected and to weave them into my life. But I didn’t feel ready. I didn’t feel supported and often felt judged, being told because I was still masking, avoiding travelling and indoor gatherings, and still not prepared to catch or pass on the virus, they were ‘worried about my mental health’. I wasn’t ready at that time to expose the depth of my despair: how disappointed I felt that such intelligent and caring people no longer seemed to care about themselves, their fellow humans, or collective action and were mesmerised by the government and media’s minimising myths.

Meanwhile I was letting my own hair grow. As many returned to their fast-paced life binging on the social engagements that they had ‘missed out on’, I was doing the opposite: slowing down, refusing, crippling time by embracing a “non-normative relationship to linear, chronological time, development, and progress,”^v embracing “grief time” and “dreaming time”.^{vi} I wrote in February 2023, “Growing my hair [which takes about a centimetre a month] would give me time to ponder what this work might look like and with it a new life in this pandemic world”.^{vii}

I explored plant symbolism in the earlier stories. Forsyth traced the history of Rapunzel to Charlotte-Rose Caumont La Force’s 1697 French ‘Persinette’ (79) via the Italian Giambattista Basile’s 1634 ‘Petrosinella’ (59). Both heroines in these Aarne–Thompson type 310, The Maiden in the Tower tales are named after the powerful medicinal and culinary herb parsley, *Petro-se-lin-um crispum* wedding her deeply to its folklore. Parsley is widely known as an aphrodisiac. It can bring on pregnancy and conversely bring about an abortion. In the brother’s Grimm’s 1812 German rendition, Persinette was erased, replaced with ‘Rapunzel’, an edible plant that has little folkloric associations. Rapunzel is sanitised, decoupled from parsley’s association with sex, death and the devil.

To evoke the earlier stories, I cultivated and tested parsley for anathotypes, a notoriously slow Victorian photographic process that utilises emulsions extracted from plants. Images are made by laying transparencies against paper coated with the light-sensitive pigment and placed in sunlight for long

periods days – weeks – months to develop. They must then be shielded from UV light, otherwise they will fade. My anthotypes of disembodied heads with a French plait, fashioned from an assemblage of images of my own braid floating across multiple sheets of paper that gradually lengthen over the series. The current one developing will be 185cm. I have been imagining it hung high in spaces with tall ceilings. The ghostly weave hovering untethered vanishing like the sacrifice of tresses made to Aphrodite by Berenice II, an ancient of Queen of Egypt^{viii} in order to protect her husband at war, that went missing from the altar. The tresses were later identified by the court astronomer, having been “divinely placed” in the cosmos.^{ix}

PAUSE

By slowing down and centring on material processes of growing hair, cultivating parsley with its delayed germination time, the durational actions of plaiting and the sedate process of the anthotype, I’ve found a different focus, a space to play, away releasing me periodically from constant risk assessment and the activism that I have taken on to challenge the minimising and misinformation of the dangers of the virus and its implications on every aspect of our lives.

At the end of January 2023, I began braiding the activities of walking-reading-reflecting. A few days a week, I would cycle to my local commons, park my bike and walk the forty minutes to Winterdown wood, to my reading log, a huge fallen pine. I first took Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005) which I hoped would be a literal manual for navigating my new reality and steering me in ways to embrace the unknown. I was feeling stuck and disorientated. I was not going into the city or socialising much in-person, and I'd cancelled an artist residency in Austria that would have meant several trips which was consuming me with dread.

On 29 January I wrote:

'I, like many others who refuse to accept and [conform] to the insanity of our current state, am experiencing the two forms of loss that Solnit writes of: "the familiar falling away" i.e. of all of the usual communal experiences and societal expectations that I am no longer engaging in, and "the unfamiliar appearing" (22), the discoveries in the landscapes that I am now regularly retreating to.'

Later in February I expand: 'I am also exploring my inner terrain, where lies dark thoughts and difficult emotions, which I am trying to stay with, rather than distract myself from'.^x

PAUSE

Rather than being cast out by the witch into the wilderness, an ordeal that happens to Rapunzel, I embraced my local commons as places of sanctuary where I felt held, in a different sense of the word. They became my support, my place of belonging, recalling philosopher Luce Irigaray's experience of "seeking refuge in the natural world" when she was professionally and socially exiled after the publishing of *Speculum...* in 1974. She declared that "the macrocosm welcomed me to save the microcosm that I was" (2016:15).^{xi}

PAUSE

On 29 January, I continued:

'Perhaps like a Pit River Indian, I am becoming a wanderer. Referring to Spanish storyteller-anthropologist Jaime de Angulo, Solnit speaks of what happens to a person who "under certain conditions of mental stress [...] finds life in his accustomed surroundings too hard to bear". She writes, "such a man starts to wander" (19). Since early in the pandemic, once my agoraphobia began to subside, I have been walking a lot, almost daily. [...] According to De Angulo "wandering can lead to death, to hopelessness, to madness, to various forms of despair..." (19). In the last few months since lots of the world has clearly had enough of the pandemic and is happy to suffer infection after re-infection with whatever consequence of illness and increase susceptibility to other pathogens not to mention increased risk of organ damage entails.... I am finding this situation too hard to bear and wandering keeps me from falling into madness. [It] helps dissipate the despair'.

'When wandering through these landscapes,' I write in February 2023, 'I am connecting on a different level to the plants that I find, another instance of Solnit's "unfamiliar appearing" (22).

My eyes are now cured from years of plant blindness. Foraging has become an obsessive pastime, an additional prompt to get outside. Noticing plant friends, perceiving their differences, nuances, distinctions in leaf shape, hue and texture reminds me of what philosopher Michael Marder advocates as the “obscurity of vegetable existence” in *Plant-Thinking* where “plants flourish on the edge or at the limit of phenomenality, of visibility” (2013:9).^{xii}

And as a close to 50-year-old woman retreating, I am becoming more vegetal, as I bend and crouch and identify and gather: “To get in touch with the existence of plants one must acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn” (28).

On 10 February I reflected:

‘Solnit’s writes of the Tibetan word for track “shul”, “a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by” (51) the trace of a walker’s footprint for example, a scar. But also as an “emptiness [...] of something that used to be there” (51). I am trying hard to figure out how to fill this emptiness, [the] *shul*, left by my pre-pandemic life, a space of [relative] carefreeness [...], filled with a social life [...] of proximity to people. And certainly not a life filled with near constant risk assessment with the threat on one’s life and health’.^{xiii}

PAUSE

It was these “shuls” that became my escape routes. I imagined them imbued with the enchanted plaits that I was conjuring, that meandered through the landscape, strands, guides to follow, enabling me to lose myself and understand my loss.

I realised in early February 2023 that I must as Solnit offers, “lose [my] past to join the present” (75). In order to survive, I needed to accept that the situation is unlikely to change and that I would need to adapt to this, my new normal. I am of course surviving daily with the physical tools to prevent the spread of Covid-19: The FFP2 respirator mask, stoggles, CO² monitors, HEPA filters, dressing warmly so I can open windows, all of which have been working. However, “the real difficulties, the real arts of survival seem to lie in more subtle realms” (p. 80) Solnit asserts. I needed to experience a “psychological metamorphosis” to prepare the psyche in order “to deal with what comes next” (p.80), a “cultural metamorphosis,” which she asserts, “is far more dramatic” (p.81).

Solnit compares this culture shock for some as akin to “the anguish of the butterfly” in its metamorphosis. She refers to a doctor in *Regeneration*, the 1991 novel by Pat Barker, who, she quotes, “knew only too well how often the early stages of change or cure may mimic deterioration. Cut a chrysalis open, and you will find a rotting caterpillar. What you will never find is that mythical creature, half caterpillar, half butterfly [...] the process of transformation consists almost entirely of decay” (p. 81). For Solnit is a “violence” (p. 81). In mid-February 2023, I wrote:

‘Perhaps this is why I feel so bad right now. If you open my chrysalis, you will find that I am just brown sludge oozing out, formless and stinking’.^{xiv}

It was still too soon. Too soon to come out of the cocoon. I wasn’t ready.

Rapunzel is a tale of escape to become one’s true self. It takes the beholder on a “transformative journey from stasis and shadows to liberation and light” states Forsyth (7). It addresses anyone who feels, “trapped by their circumstances” (7) whether at their own hand, that of another, or of “their own ability to change and grow” (7). Through Rapunzel’s transformation from child to maiden to woman and via the witch’s “redemption”, Forsyth is guided by the work of the philosopher Heide Göttner-Abendroth, specialising in Matriarchal Studies, who posits “fairy tales as camouflaged matriarchal myth[ology]” (6?). The story’s threads can be traced back to the “ancient gynocentric oral tradition [...] of the three faced goddesses,” Maiden, Women, Crone (6).

PAUSE

By last winter 2023/24, as I continued to weave the hair ladder of the still captured Rapunzel, I had also begun developing and channelling the witch, the crone aspect within myself, in order to enable my own release. “The Crone is the general designation of the third of the Triple Goddess's aspects associated with old age, death, the waning moon, winter and rebirth,” writes Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Professor, Jane Caputi in her essay ‘On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking:’

“As a harbinger of rebirth, [her] appearance signals a call to profound transformation and healing” (1992:433).

In January, a friend sent me copies of woodcut prints of hair by fin-de-siècle Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, reminders that prompted a new avenue. I followed strands to discover the symbolist novel,

Bruges-la-Morte by Georges Rodenbach, where I traversed the protagonist's inner landscape in search of braid imagery:

“Leaning over her dead body, Hugues had cut off this spray of hair, braided during the last days of her illness. Is it not one of death's small mercies that in destroying all, it yet leaves the hair intact? Eyes, lips, all disintegrate but hair even keeps its color. So we survive by hair alone” (2007:18).

PAUSE

By focusing on hair and Rapunzel's braid, I have been able to survive (in a different sense of the word), whilst I felt such desolation. But like the characters, Hugues and Jane, the braid is now strangling me. My hair's becoming too long and heavy burdensome and is now tethering me to a place of limitation.

PAUSE

February next year, on my birthday, I will plait my hair and ritually crop off the braid. I don't yet know what form the performance will take - will it be cut or shorn - or what I will do with the relic, but I will cast my own shears in bronze for the act.

Forsyth interprets the cutting of Rapunzel's braid as “symbolic of both the loss of her virginity and a kind of metaphoric wounding, or death” (94). It can also be read as “the cutting of a symbolic umbilical cord” enabling her rebirth, as she is banished from the tower (94). Forsyth reminds us “hair is [also] linked to the magical thread of life which is spun, measured, and cut by the Three Fates of ancient Greek mythology” (94). The witch then, is also Atropos, the third Moira, who severs the thread of life, liberating Rapunzel from this phase of her being.

On the 1st February 2025, I will become my own Atropos: The “midwife, to [my] psyche” (197)^{xv} as my crone aspect comes into her power on my 50th birthday, releasing me from the enchanted plait of hair, and enabling me to fully accept this my new precarious pandemicene-reality.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Tsing suggests that “precarity is the condition of our time” (20). Last year, I feared that in my retreating I was restricting the possibilities for spontaneity, and that would prevent me from growing. But the precarity of the pandemic alongside the reckless governmental response was, at that point, enough instability to cope with. What I came to realise was that by reflecting deeply and engaging in the practices, some of which I have shared with you today, I discovered that I was on a whole new path: “thinking [and making] through precarity” Tsing asserts “makes [...] evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible” (20).

I do, however, recognise that I speak from a position of privilege. I live in a relative state of health and mobility. I am able to cycle and walk. But “everyone is on a journey to getting old and/or sick”.^{xvi} We put our health in jeopardy, risking becoming vulnerable with each infection and re-infection.^{xvii} In this country alone, as of April 2024, 232,112 people^{xviii} (likely to be a massive undercount) have been killed by the virus. In the same month, Long Covid sufferers in England and Scotland reached at least 2 million, approximately 1 in every 32 people, with over 111,000 of those being children. The stories of sufferers from across the world of over 200 million^{xix} long-haulers held captive by their debilitating symptoms are devastating. And with the removal of health protections in public spaces such as healthcare settings and schools, millions of disabled, immunocompromised and elderly folks continue to be confined to their homes unable to fully participate in society.

So today, in the fifth year of the crisis, with the ongoing denial,^{xx} the lack of airborne mitigations, and support, recognition, research and treatments into Long Covid, I join remotely at this conference, as there were to be no protections against aerosol transmission in place, and I offer this my act of life-writing, my creative and activist work, which like the wearing of my respirator mask, is resistance, tools, shears to sever us from the “dominant cultural scripts”^{xxi} and current powerful political and social myths that the virus is ‘mild’, and the pandemic is ‘over’.

Thank you.

ⁱ Long COVID patient and advocate Charlie McCone quotes by Jamie Ducharme 19 SEPTEMBER 2022 Time Magazine. <https://time.com/6213103/us-government-long-covid-response/>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/26/covid-roulette-clean-air-ventilation-long-covid#:~:text=Without%20clean%20air%2C%20the%20next%20infection%20could%20permanently%20disable%20you,-This%20article%20is&text=You%20could%20see%20Covid,others%2C%20and%20who%20was%20not%3F>

ⁱⁱⁱ (Ruth Allen *Weathering* talk)

^{iv} Find exact date...

^v <https://thepolyphony.org/2024/01/26/medhums-101-what-is-crip-time/>

^{vi} <https://thepolyphony.org/2024/01/26/medhums-101-what-is-crip-time/>

^{vii} 24 Feb 2023 - in email to Stacey

^{viii} (246 to 222 BCE)

^{ix} Becoming Alice Maher, Introduction, Sean K...p.19 (Intro) p19

^x (15 Feb 2023).

^{xi} Irigaray, Luce, and Marder, Michael (2016) *Through Vegetal Being: Two philosophical perspectives*, New York: Columbia University Press, ProQuest Ebook Central, p.15

^{xii} February 2023

^{xiii} (10 Feb 2023).

^{xiv} (15 Feb 2023).

^{xv} Post-Jungian psychotherapist, Nor Hall *Reflections on the Archetypal Feminine* 1980.

^{xvi} Late Professor Greg Philo RIP in Campaign 15 Jan 2022 Zero Covid Media Response Strategy meeting

^{xvii} Add reference here

^{xviii} Worldometer

^{xix} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qyoda6pVHTg> Unite to Fight conference -

^{xx} May 23, 2024 <https://thesicktimes.org/2024/05/23/how-to-make-spaces-more-accessible-during-the-continuing-pandemic/>

^{xxi} Parsons, Luminous Presence.p.11