

JANIE CONWAY-HERRON

On Becoming Lillie Bloom

*You'd sing too
if you found yourself
in a place like this.
You wouldn't worry about
whether you were as good
as Ray Charles or Edith Piaf.
You'd sing
You'd sing
Not for yourself
but to make a self
out of the old food
rotting in the astral bowel
and the loveless thud
of your own breathing.
You'd become a singer
faster than it takes
to hate a rival's charm
and you'd sing, darling
you'd sing too.*
(Leonard Cohen, 'You'd sing too' *Book of Longing*, 2007:6)

There's a story I've often told over the years, about a cross roads I came to at a difficult point in my life many years ago. In this story I describe how, as a young single mother of a fourteen-year-old boy, I made some important changes in my life. I'd tell this story during orientation week at Southern Cross University (SCU) where I have taught creative writing for more than two decades. As part of a pitch to expectant groups of new students I'd describe how, after being a musician in a rock band, I needed to get a proper job and how I'd applied to come to university so as to do just that. My juxtaposition of rock musician and proper job was designed to make the students laugh, and to put them at ease. Then I'd tell them about my second career, – the trajectory from undergraduate student to teacher of creative writing – hoping that I might inspire some of the new students to take up a writing life of one sort or other. Over the last two decades, I've taught creative writing to thousands of students. Not all have become published writers,

but the majority, I would hope, have learnt a set of writing skills, from the team of teachers in the writing department at SCU, that have assisted them greatly in articulating their chosen worlds through the written word.

In another version of the same narrative, reserved for my friends and colleagues, I'd add the fact that when I decided to go to university in 1985 my son Tamlin and I were sharing one room at a friend's house with all our worldly possessions while desperately looking for our own place to live. The education reforms of the Whitlam government were still in place back then and miraculously I was not only successful in applying for university but also in getting a housing commission flat to live in. Set up in our own, rent-assisted apartment in Glebe, I could walk to the University of Technology (UTS) where I studied, without incurring fees, while Tamlin's high school was just a bike ride away. Suddenly our lives were so much more manageable than they had been and it was nice when people asked me what I was doing to reply, 'I'm studying at university'. Not long before this I had struggled to eke out an existence from music in the pub rock scenes of Melbourne and Sydney. A world so hard pressed to embrace a feminine sensibility and include family life it had almost broken me. This is the version of the story I have reserved for only my closest friends, for in truth, I've turned my life around in more ways than one since my rock and roll days.

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When I retired from teaching in 2014 I had three degrees all focused on creative writing; a BA and Masters from UTS and a PhD from the University of Western Sydney (UWS). During the time I've been teaching, I've had articles, poems and short stories published in academic journals and anthologies, I've also designed and written many of the course materials for creative writing and had a novel, *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, published. Over this period, the neo-liberal hold on universities has meant ever-diminishing resources for teachers and rising fees for students. I have never been able to reconcile those two things and the resulting burn out it has caused for many of my colleagues as well as myself. As retirement drew near I looked forward to having the chance to simply write what I wanted, when I wanted. I had ideas for several novels and a collection of short stories, but I wasn't sure where to begin. The creative work I'd written for my masters, back in the early nineties, seemed as if it would be the easiest thing to start with. 'Spotlighting'

was an experimental work centred on narrative and memory. I intended it to be a contemporary Künstlerroman exploring the subjectivity of a young woman artist, living in Melbourne in the 1980s. The story focused on the woman becoming a musician in a rock band and the struggles this entailed for her. As an experiment, the woman remained unnamed and I wrote the story as a discontinuous narrative in the third person present tense. Fragmented memories were bound together by linking incidents rather than relying on teleological narrative time. The work was successful enough for me to be offered a place as a PhD student at UWS and to have Allen & Unwin offer to publish the manuscript, but only if I changed the way I'd written the work. What they wanted was an autobiographical telling in first person, past tense: a continuous narrative mapping my previous life as a musician. For many reasons I wasn't ready to claim the narrative as a personal one, and, after careful consideration, I said no. There were many times in the ensuing years when I regretted that decision, but in retirement I was finally ready to delve into that material again.

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Catherine Strong, writing in *Perfect Beat*, discusses the missing women of Australian rock and how 'surprisingly few resources exist that commemorate the contribution of women to the rock music scene in Australia' (2014: 149). For Strong, examining 'how women are included or excluded from this area ... has implications for understanding the cultural citizenship of Australian women' (2014:150). Strong is interested in the way that Chrissy Amphlett has gained a place in the Australian Rock canon and she explores how the many tributes written about Chrissy, after her death in 2013, served 'to construct her legacy' while at the same time obscuring contributions from other women musicians and denying 'a need for women musicians to even be an object of discussion at all' (2014: 150). One of the exceptions to this was an exhibition at the Melbourne Arts Centre in 2010 titled, *Rock Chicks: Women in Australian Music*. As Strong writes, 'this exhibition and book demonstrated clearly that women *have* (author's emphasis) been present ... and active in Australian music, far beyond the standard four or five names that tend to be included in music histories' (2014: 151-152). One of the bands represented in that exhibition, and also mentioned by Strong, was *Stiletto*; a band I was a founding member of. *Stiletto* was not an all woman band, as it is often erroneously referred to, but a band that started out with three women musicians and two men. I played guitar and sang, as

well as contributing music and lyrics, along with Marni Sheehan (bass and vocals) Jane Clifton (lead vocals) Andrew Bell (lead guitar and vocals) and Eddie Van Roosendale (drums and vocals). When Marni left *Stiletto*, Celeste Howden joined on bass and later Chris Worrall joined as a third guitarist. Not long after Chris joined, I left the band. The reasons why and the effect it had on me is too big a story to tell here. However, to summarise, from my own point of view, the increasing masculinisation of the band as it gained popularity meant my particular creative sensibilities were not really appreciated by the other band members. Perhaps this was caused by the pressure of having signed with international record company, EMI, and the pressure that entailed. I don't know. What I do know is, I wasn't capable of playing guitar duels with Andrew on stage (nor did I want to). Chris fulfilled that role well. A wonderful guitarist with a history of playing in a number of well-known bands in what has come to be known as the Carlton music scene, he was an excellent musical foil for Andrew. I may have been one of the first women to play electric guitar but I wasn't a lead guitarist or a singer with a gutsy, rock and roll voice. I was a rhythm guitarist and songwriter, someone engaged with lyrics about women in society. A song I wrote with Andrew Bell titled 'Woman in a Man's World' which was the B side of *Stiletto's* first single, epitomises some of the other more domestic problems that being single mothers and musicians in a rock band presented for both Marni and myself in the 1980s. It's these things that I set out to explore in the novella 'Spotlighting' which then became the novel *Another Song About Love* in 2017.

One of the people who contributed lyrics for *Stiletto* was Helen Garner. Songs like 'White Eyes', 'Cream' and 'Charming Boy', co-written with other band members, including myself, were incorporated into our song list. *Stiletto* often rehearsed in the share house in Scotchmer Street, Carlton, where Helen lived. This same house would become the setting for Helen's first novel *Monkey Grip* published by McPhee Gribble in 1977. I read a version of the manuscript before it was published while living in another shared house, south of the Yarra River, in Prahran. I marvelled at how Helen had blended the attributes of people I knew into the characters in the novel and was given the unique experience of being asked to name a character in the novel based on a composite of myself and another member of my household. 'Call her Selina,' I told Helen, thinking of how I loved my grandmother's middle name. And so a part of my life became absorbed into Helen's fiction.

Biographer Bernadette Brennan describes Helen's writing as being galvanised by 'the glaring gap she feels between feminist theoretical experiences and her lived experiences' (2017: 43). A theme Brennan perceives running through 'Garner's life and work' is 'how to balance the desire for personal freedom with ethical responsibility' (2017: 43). The now ubiquitous novel, about the 1980s counter-culture in urban Melbourne, received mixed reviews at first. There were many high praises and awards to come but Helen also became 'Helen the Stirrer', 'a refugee from middle class conservatism' writing a 'controversial book about junkies and the counter culture' (McGuinness, J., in Brennan, B., 2017: 35). *Monkey Grip* was also written at a time when a particularly feminist style of expression prevailed, one that had also made *Stiletto* popular. Later, as an undergraduate student, I would learn to frame this aesthetic sensibility in a different way through studying French feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous who called for 'women to write themselves—their bodies, sexuality, desires— into their texts' (in Brennan, B., 2017: 42). While Helen may have been concerned about the gap between her lived experiences and feminist theory she certainly epitomised Cixous' appeal for women to write sexuality and desire into their texts.

As a Masters student writing my original, experimental story, 'Spotlighting' I was aware the narrative would inevitably be compared to *Monkey Grip*. It was natural there'd be similarities between two narratives covering the same era and geographical location, given the closeness of our lives at the time. While there should be room for more than one story written by a woman covering that same material I felt eclipsed by the fact that Helen had written *Monkey Grip* first. It's ironic to look back and see the way Chrissy and her band *The Divinyls* also eclipsed *Stiletto* during the making of the film of *Monkey Grip* adapted by Ken Cameron in 1982. *The Divinyls'* music featured in the film and Chrissy got to play the character from the novel originally based on our lead singer Jane Clifton. Not one of *Stiletto's* songs made it onto the soundtrack, even though Helen had written many of our lyrics. Ten years later when writing 'Spotlighting', distancing myself from an inevitable comparison with *Monkey Grip* was one of the reasons I chose to write the story in the third person. Another, more aesthetic reason, came straight from my university studies and theories of the gaze. The notion that women internalise the male gaze had become particularly important for me especially as I came to understand how the whole premise of 'getting an image' in the music industry was predicated on the voyeuristic way women's bodies have been viewed. While I had some sense of how and why men looked

at me in a particular way throughout my adult life, I hadn't understood the way I had internalised that gaze within myself. How this internalisation had influenced the way I saw and judged myself, were important aspects to my story. The title 'Spotlighting' symbolically invoked for me a timid rabbit trapped in a hunter's light and I saw this as a metaphor for the subjectivity of a young woman trying to make it in the music industry at that time.

Not long after I gained my Masters, I caught up with Helen Garner while sitting on the lawns of the Byron Bay Writers festival. I was enthusiastic about having my old friend back even if only for an hour or so. We talked intimately, just like in the old Carlton days, laughing at jokes mired in the dry wit of a 1980s urban life. As I described the ideas I had for my PhD, Helen looked up at me with those earnest eyes and said, 'You know, I think you've been in the academy for far too long.' I was too shocked to say anything in reply and it took me years to come to terms with the way I felt dismissed by her statement. Perhaps she was right though, because I remembered what she'd said when I came to rewriting *Spotlighting* and turning it into *Another Song About Love*.

When I first set out to rewrite *Spotlighting* I recalled how Allen & Unwin had been interested in publishing the manuscript if I turned it into a memoir, told in first person. Gradually, as I wrote into my original text in the first person, Lillie Bloom began to appear on the page. Lillie was a sexually active and desiring woman who loved to perform but who also had enormous insecurities that got in the way of her bid for success in the world of popular music. She would survive rather than burn on the pyre of drug and self-abuse common to such a narrative but her inner turmoil was the internal antagonist to her quest to make it in the rock and roll world. Once again, when I tried changing it to the first person point of view, the narrative seemed to turn on the edge of the narcissism inherent in such inward gazing, making for an uncomfortable and overly self-conscious voice for Lillie to tell the story in. It seemed better if an outside narrator viewed Lillie, who could then remain as oblivious as I had once been, of the ways she'd internalised the male gaze. This outside gaze looking in on Lillie, combined with telling the story in the present tense, symbolised the immediacy of performance and the way the entertainment industry is predicated on impermanency always living in the present, even today. At the end of this draft I sent it off to a manuscript assessor who suggested I

reorganise the chapters so the story started in the 1980s with Lillie and her friends getting a band together. This next draft began in the present tense but these chapters were interspersed with Lillie's childhood narrative told in the past tense. Each chapter was named after a well-known song so that the title page looked like a Top Ten Hit Songs list from a music magazine. Sometime during the writing of this draft, I came up with the bright idea of the chapter titles coming from songs I'd written myself. I managed to find fifteen songs about love that I'd written that fitted the fifteen chapters of the novel. One of the songs titled, 'Another Song About Love', was about the way musicians sing songs about love but can't seem to manage relationships themselves. It seemed to me this was a perfect title for the book as well as the collection of songs. But now, I needed to record the songs. Suddenly the project expanded while at the same time the worlds that my personal history encompassed, began to conflate.

In his essay, 'The Self as Other', Robert Folkenflik begins with an observation that the title of his essay is associated with 'the moment in autobiography in which the subject perceives himself, or less frequently herself, as another self' (1993: 215). The moment when Lillie Bloom appeared to me on the page was one such moment. Generally an autobiographical telling involves the classic definition of a first person account of a person's life written by that person. While any first person narrative will give the impression of being an autobiographical telling, a skilful fiction writer can write a story that will give an impression of a life actually lived no matter how fictional the story is. Folkenflik also writes about the way autobiography can be told in the second and third person and he cites this as a way for the writer to be able to separate the 'I' who writes from the 'I' on the page. I can see now that this splitting into self and other has been central to my writing Lillie Bloom, and writing in the third person was integral to the process of separating my own life from Lillie's. At times this conflation of self and other has been uncanny too. My own son Tamlin is a musician too. When I thought about who could record the song collection for *Another Song About Love*, Tamlin was an obvious choice. We spent a glorious Easter in 2016 locked in Zen studios in Marrickville recording the basic tracks. Having grown up with me being in various bands, including *Stiletto*, Tamlin knew exactly how I wanted the music to sound. Lillie's son Jesse also plays music, but the narrative trajectory for Lillie and Jesse is totally different to what happened to Tamlin and myself.

If I'd written this story as a straight autobiography it would have been very different. People like Helen Garner would appear in person, my brothers, Mic and Jim Conway, who were also well-known Australian musicians, would also have been featured. The members of *Stiletto* would be named and recognisable and there would have been a number of other bands that I'd played in described as well. I would also have been writing a first person past tense narrative as an academic teaching at a university on the north coast New South Wales looking back on her former life as a musician. Lillie Bloom, on the other hand, never goes to university and the characters in her band bear only a fleeting resemblance to any of the people I've played in bands with.

Playwright Louis Nowra writing in *'The Age'* in June this year describes his character Lewis, who appears in three of his plays as, 'not so much a doppelganger but a fictionalised version of me. His version of my life is neater, rearranged to create a narrative drive that reality lacked' (2017: online). Like Garner, Nowra's writing involves family and friends and he seems relieved when he writes 'The name Lewis separated me from veracity, even though some of the characters and incidents were based on real people and experiences' (2017: online). In the article, Nowra describes the differences between his writing of the character Lewis and the way he writes about his life in his memoir *The Twelfth of Never* where he endeavoured to tell the truth. Through Nowra's exploration of his own writerly process I came to understand Lillie Bloom as my alter ego. It is through her character that I explore the subjectivity of a woman of a particular time and circumstance that I know well. Lillie is an invented protagonist whose life has such an intimate connection to mine that I can write her with authority.

Earlier this year I received some feedback from a prospective agent about the narrative in *Another Song About Love* having too close up a lens for the characters to stand. At first I was nonplussed and I thought about this feedback for a long time before coming to terms with the fact that this story had been crying out to be written in the first person all along. For example, I had wanted to write a detailed account of what it was like to work in a recording studio and so I decided that this kind of detail would need the veracity of the first person account. Reluctantly I sat down to rewrite the whole novel in first person past tense. The classic autobiographical telling Allen & Unwin had requested over two decades previously. It took me some months of working on that narcissistic voice to finally complete the changes but I still felt as if something was missing. I knew I hadn't

captured the first person voice adequately but I was so mired in the present tense telling that it was hard to break out of it. I sent the manuscript off for another reader's report from a different reader, asking for feedback on the first person voice in particular. What came back in that readers' report shocked me so much that I wondered if I knew how to write at all. What really bothered me was the personal judgement inherent in the criticism of my characterisation of Lillie Bloom. The report plunged me right back into the time when I was a single mother with a young son and a hair's breadth away from being on the streets. Lillie's supposed descent into drug addiction was mentioned often in the report, and the way she left her young son alone when she had to go to a gig seemed to shock this reader to the core as did the amount of lovers Lillie had, had and the fact that one was a junkie. Lillie was a flawed character, she wasn't likeable and I needed to make her liked by this reader at least. For more than a month I mulled it over and many times I felt vulnerable enough to consider giving up writing altogether. Sometimes I even toyed with the idea of becoming a poet. At least then I wouldn't have to spend so many years writing something that would end up invoking this type of criticism. Thankfully, I regained my confidence enough to address the pertinent things this reader had pointed out. After all, I reasoned, it was better to receive this kind of criticism now, rather than after the novel had been published. Like Helen Garner I had led a 'sheltered life surrounded by like-minded people' (Brennan, 2017:47). I too needed to move outside of my ghettoised existence and face the fact that the 21st century was, in many ways, more conservative than the 1980s.

I made a resolution at the beginning of 2017 that it would be the year of publishing *Another Song About Love*. I've finished the latest draft and sent the manuscript off to the first of what might be many publishers, but hopefully not. Having missed the students, I've returned to university to teach a unit called Writing for Performance. I still love engaging with ideas and theories that open up the world to my students as well as myself. Around me Australia is becoming more conservative than I can remember it being for a long time. Student life is also incredibly taxing, with fees and the rising cost of living making things very stressful. My own transition into academic study was life changing and I have had a marvellous career as an academic that I don't regret for a minute. But that rock and roll girl still hovers at the corners of my heart waiting to break out. How will I feel when I see *Another Song About Love* go out into the world? Great, I imagine, but anxious as well. Even though I'm turning 70 next year there's still a part of me that is

uncertain of my creative abilities, whether it's in writing or music. I've started playing music again and I often fantasise about getting a band together but wonder if I have the ability and the energy for the emotional roller coaster I know this can become. Women may still be a rarity in rock and roll, in Australia at least, but the numbers of women with their own bands have grown exponentially since the heady 1980s. Still, a seventy-year-old woman heading up a rock band and playing a pink Stratocaster guitar is probably still quite rare.

I've joined a choir too and the pleasure of harmonising with others still brings me great joy. Recently, the woman who runs our choir turned forty and had a big birthday bash in a hall near to where I live. 'Come dressed as your alter ego,' she said breezily to the choir members one day and I knew immediately who I was going to go as. On the day of the party I rummaged through the boxes of trinkets I'd hoarded over the years and found what I needed for the part of Lillie Bloom. Dressed in crimson and black velvet with bracelets up to my elbows and large hoop earrings in my ears, I teased my hair and applied dark eye make up and mascara. Even if no one at the party knew who Lillie Bloom was that night, one day I'm sure they will all know her name. And then she'll sing, darling. Oh yes she'll sing.

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Author's Biography

Janie Conway-Herron was a musician for twenty years. While senior lecturer at Southern Cross University she coordinated the writing program, published in journals and anthologies and appeared at conferences and writers festivals. *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* was published in 2010. Another novel and collection of songs, *Another Song About Love* is currently in production