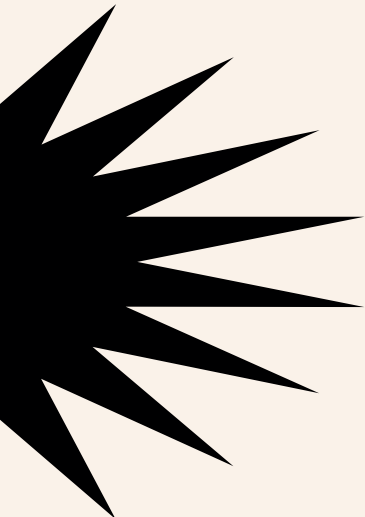


**A digital anthology of women's work**

# HEAR ME ROAR

**Part 1**

# PREFACE



**Hear Me Roar** was the Improving Me, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside women's health and maternity engagement campaign theme for 2023. This work grew out of the first NHS women's health strategy and the overwhelming feedback which said, again and again, *no one listens to us*.

## **For, with and by**

And then, *the 51%* workshops were born early in 2024. Dr Rachel New developed *the 51%* for Improving Me for women living and working in Cheshire and Merseyside. Rachel nurtured and expertly guided the class of 2023 in the art of the possible.

The 51% functions on two levels: to nurture and amplify women's voices and to call society and our healthcare system to account. It was commissioned and co-designed to enable women to explore, express and articulate their feelings of being a woman in a society; where women's health is characterised by taboo and stigma; and where myths and misconceptions are widespread. Put simply, to give women a voice, in a world where women's health is more often than not, secreted away because it is seen as intrinsically dirty and polluting, which impacts negatively on all women and girls in a myriad of ways.

## CROSS SECTOR

The 51% capitalised on a collaboration with the Liverpool City Region's libraries which have been developing resources with Improving Me to raise awareness of the gender health gap and by bringing women together through events, book clubs and writing groups to talk about it. Liverpool Central Library provided a welcoming, accessible and productive home to grow and spread *the 51%*.

## EVALUATION

Dr Kerry Wilson, Reader in Cultural Policy at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), has been a long-term collaborator with Improving Me, supporting the development of logic models and evidencing impact of work designed to reach women who are seldom heard. Kerry's evaluation provides testament to what can only be termed as 'profound impacts on participating women's subjective wellbeing, emotional resilience, and self-efficacy'.



# CONTENTS

**Page 4**

Foreword

**Page 5**

Introduction

**Page 7**

It's a bloody mess

**Page 14**

Your body isn't your own

**Page 31**

Babies, or not

**Page 43**

Identity

**Page 61**

Shame

**Page 67**

When the bleeding stops

**Page 76**

The 51%, by Jane

# FOREWORD

I'm a firm believer that history doesn't stay behind us. Our history or histories, depending on who has written them, helps us understand how events in the past made things the way they are today. With lessons from the past, we not only learn about ourselves and how we came to be, but we also develop the ability to avoid mistakes and create better paths going forward. Women's health is a case in point.

But looking back isn't enough on its own, we need to take time to reflect on the here and now. That's why *the 51%* is so important. By bringing women together to discuss and analyse their experiences in a group that reflects the 3 Ms (Menstruation, Maternity and Menopause) it helps support a better understanding of women's health experiences throughout the life-course and highlights the oppression that this all too frequently represents.

A long history of misconceptions about women's bodies and reproduction has contributed to women developing a sense of shame and stigma about their bodies; with this comes the many taboos which restrict discourse and promote a silence in which myths are perpetuated. Whilst stigma and taboos abound women will suffer unnecessarily but these taboos – the unwritten rules, off-limit topics, and prohibited emotions all require careful negotiation and above all else challenging.

Women need to be able to negotiate this terrain and move sensitive topics from taboo territory to a safe space where they can be explored without fear of punishment or moral compromise. Therein lies the beauty of *the 51%*.

**Jo Ward Change Maker**

**Creative Health Consultant, Improving Me, NHS  
Cheshire and Merseyside, women's health and  
maternity programme, 14th November 2024**

# INTRODUCTION

My name is Dr Rachel New, I'm a writer, broadcaster and workshop facilitator. I am passionate about exposing and reducing **the gender health gap** and encouraging people to use creative writing as a tool for improving wellbeing. Having previously run writing workshops for breastfeeding mothers, and menopausal women, I was excited by this opportunity to hear the stories, and develop the writing, of women from across their reproductive years.

This anthology is made up of work created by twelve of the women who took part in *the 51%* writing workshops in spring 2024. The aim of the workshops was to help women explore and express their feelings of being a woman, of having a womb, and all the often-unspoken pain and suffering that can come with that. Starting with the moment you first start your period, and the irreversible changes that brings, both to your body and to society's view of you, travelling right through the trials and tribulations of endometriosis, fibroids, trying for babies, losing babies, having babies, or not wanting babies, to the other side. What menopause brings and what might life be like on the other side of your reproductive journey? We take a look at identity, misogyny, grief, the sometimes-unsympathetic treatment of the medical system, body shaming and the many nuanced burdens that we carry as women.

I must thank the incredible women who showed up to Liverpool Central Library every Tuesday night for 6 weeks, and shared such revealing insights and experiences, supported each other and produced a stunning body of work which I hope goes some way to giving a voice to the experience of having a womb and all the baggage that comes with that.

**TORI, SARAH, RUBY, CHERYL, MANDY, ANDREA, KERRY, LAURA,  
JANE, RACHEL, CAL AND MICHELLE**

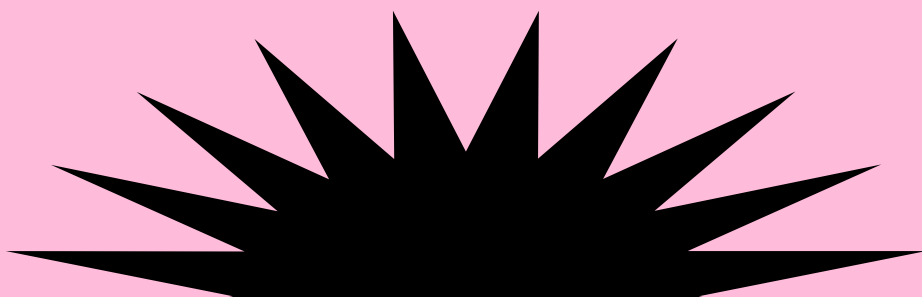
**You are amazing warriors, I thank you for your presence and your often emotionally hard work.**

Thank you to Improving Me for having the vision and ambition for commissioning and developing this exciting new project, and to Liverpool Central Library for giving us a space beautiful to work in.

I've tried to put the work into five categories, but it's an almost impossible task as themes overlap and repeat in unexpected ways, and some of the work defies categorisation!

THANKS FOR  
TAKING THE TIME  
TO READ THIS  
POWERFUL  
COLLECTION,

I HOPE YOU  
ENJOY EVERY  
WORD, RACHEL.





IT'S A BLOODY MESS!

# WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, BY TORI



I was 8 years old.  
It was a sunny afternoon, in the middle of the  
summer holidays,  
I was boxing with my friend Luke from across  
the street,  
Suddenly a warm wet feeling and I needed to  
run home,  
I lived 40 seconds away; it felt like hours had  
passed trying to find my mum,  
Trying to explain, confused, in pain.  
I was told to go for a bath, put clean clothes on,  
my mum giggled as she explained and helped  
me put on my very first pad.  
The memory of walking down the stairs,  
uncomfortable, that funny noise,  
My brother and dad looked at me awkwardly  
and smiled.  
I felt their gaze different, could they tell just by  
looking at me that I was bleeding?  
Would everyone be able to tell?  
I did not want to play anymore.

## A POEM, BY ANDREA

Just as my bloody journey'd started,  
I wanted it go away.  
But how afraid I was when  
the usual music skipped a beat.

## PERIOD STORY, BY RACHEL

I think I am becoming a woman!

This isn't a false start like the time in the shower a few weeks ago when I was actually having a nose bleed. That warm stickiness between my legs is real. I told Mummy about my shower period as soon as I came out. It felt like the right thing to do. She would know what to do. She told me I'd done well to tell her (because she could trust me to tell her if anything serious was to ever happen to me), and gave me a wad of rolled up toilet paper to put in my knickers. I felt responsible. Today is Christmas day though. I am 10 years old and our tiny 2 bedroom flat is filled with extended family.

## ALTERNATE REALITY PERIOD STORY, ALSO BY RACHEL



Welcome, this is a really important stop on your journey to becoming a woman! Come here, give me a hug. Can I get you a hot chocolate? Yes, I know it's Christmas day and the flat is packed with our family, but honestly, this is nothing to feel shame about. I will not let you feel ashamed. Are you uncomfortable? I know you've got those pads from that weird lesson in school – pop one of those on and I'll get you some pain killers, and a hot water bottle if you need it. How amazing would it be if we told everyone and they gave you a round of applause? How amazing would it be if we could make you feel special, supported, held, understood, normal in this moment? Let's do our best. Mummy is in the kitchen, let's start there; you don't always have to try and be so grown up and responsible.

## PERIODS, BY TORI

Pain.

Every Single Time I think  
“Is this real?”

Ready, ALWAYS, carrying knickers  
and pads.

Is this really a big deal?

Oh, Boys don't have this,  
how lucky are they!

Dream of the day it is over.

Stop!

## A HAIKU, BY ANDREA



Blooming and  
Living  
On and on  
and On.  
Don't you  
see how hard it is?

## PEARL, BY MANDY

**P**earl, love, love your body, its yours to love and to hold.

**E**njoy and celebrate how it all works,

**A**maze at it's power.

**R**emember, to be proud of it, always, and be grateful for all that it does, just for you.

**L**ove it, in all that it is, it's the only one you will ever have, how special is that!



YOUR BODY ISN'T  
YOUR OWN

# WOMB, BY TORI

She allows the uninvited guest to barge  
its way through, knocking the walls and  
leaving marks, lumps and scars.

She allows the guest to sit.  
Sit and swell and grow.  
Leaving a warm wet sticky smelly mess.

Feeling unclean, she becomes best  
friends with the guest.  
They find their time together most  
enjoyable.

They watch tele together, all the shows I  
do not like!  
All the dramas and sports.

They play music! If you can call it that.  
Drums, Crash, Bang. High screeches like  
the neighbour's cat!

# THE APPRAISAL INTERVIEW

## MY WOMB, BY MANDY



Well, you only worked well once, as far as I know – perfect child delivered - tick That's the only time, in what, 20 years you performed as per the text book.

Not only did you fail miserably to deliver, you spread yourself about, outside of your remit – what did you call it- endometriosis!

Who asked you to do that? it wouldn't be so bad if the so-called experts knew how to keep you under control but you surpassed yourself on that score didn't you.

Did you ever bother to read your job description?

There isn't much evidence that you did. You just caused havoc every month, hormones raging and the pain, well you asked for it.

You're out!

# TWO POINTS OF VIEW, BY JANE



## APRIL 2023

The womb: If I am honest, my pear-shaped self has been dormant for a while. I had the notion that I was put here with a life full of promise and purpose. The purpose of carrying children, to do something useful, to grow the human population. That never happened.

Recently, I have heard my host repeatedly telling our potted history. It's becoming tedious. I find myself wanting to shout, 'We know, we know, monthly menstruation stopped abruptly seven years ago'. The host had little warning, and neither did I. I was blissfully planning another 10 to 15 years of naughtiness. The pain and symptoms that I wreaked havoc with, I now crave.

## CONTINUED...

I can't remember the exact date it ceased. I do remember the poking and prodding. My extraordinary full, to overflowing neighbour, was determined to illuminate me during the scan. The same scan which seemed to confirm I was already in the process of decline.

My mood swings and red rage used to cause debilitating symptoms. I could flare at a moment's notice. I could incapacitate the host and render her useless in minutes. It was fun and rewarding, but it was over all too soon.

Quitting active bleeding at 40 years old, didn't seem right to me. I heard them blame 'the menopause', but I had serious doubts when that usually happens between 45 and 55.

## CONTINUED...

The host wasn't too bothered by the news, she may even have been a little pleased. Me? incredibly frustrated. My access to regular und undivided attention was gone. No longer could I demand the soothing bath, the warmth of a hot water bottle, the quiet time, the focused attention and the familiar, therapeutic receipt of alternate paracetamol and ibuprofen.

Something doesn't feel right. I am suddenly fearful. The host is clearly worried. Tense, surprised, maybe a little shocked even.

The host's husband was the first to be told, he sounded concerned, encouraging contact with someone else immediately. I can feel the tension flowing through the host's body, but she is trying to refrain from worry or panic even though it is rising.

## CONTINUED...

The host is talking on the phone, she is recounting what happened when she went to the bathroom earlier this morning.

The phone rings, the host sounds relieved, like she has hope and a plan. Repeat, repeat, repeat, the same story, there is more poking and prodding. I don't think anyone knows how uncomfortable it can be for me. It's a blessing it's kept short and sweet, but I can sense that isn't the end of it. They are kind and explain what will happen next. A referral to Rapid Access Gynaecology.

## CONTINUED...

External ultrasound is painless to me, but I do feel like ducking out of shot, I am uncomfortable and exposed. The internal ultrasound is another experience altogether. The probe is pressing, rotating and seeking to explore my every layer and cell.

I thought the worst was over, but they are talking about me. My size, my shape, my lining, my behaviour in recent days/months/years. My lining has thickened? They are suggesting they try a biopsy? I think they mean of me? I am not sure which word worries me the most, biopsy or try? The sensation is excruciating. Is this payback for my mischief making?

## CONTINUED...

I feel exhausted, bruised and queasy. I was determined not to surrender to the scraping but once the speculum was inserted, he had the best possible view of me. Eventually they have what they need. What they need is to send part of me to the lab for testing.

## JUNE 2023

The Womb: There has been little news. I can detect a rising anxiety in the host. As we enter the building her heart rate is steadily increasing. I can't offer any comfort. I didn't expect to be back here so soon, and the host certainly didn't.

## CONTINUED...

There is a loud echo in here, the host is telling herself a story, she is running hundreds of scenarios in her head all at once. The fact that the host works in the NHS only makes her more suspicious, and she is struggling to silence the voice in her head.

Bang! There it is, my lab result, "Grade 1 endometrial cancer which is most likely to have arose from a spontaneous mutation" Mutation? Endometrial? That's womb, that's me. I am carrying a cancer. That was never my intention. That was never my purpose. The host is tearful, she doesn't know what to ask, she doesn't know what to say.

## CONTINUED...

There is shock, fear, disappointment, upset and anger. Shock and fear at walking out of the appointment with the label of 'cancer patient'. Disappointment at no one knowing her preferences. Upset at no one asking her preferences. Anger that she was reduced to tears when, had she, known in advance, (her preference) this would have been the ideal time to ask meaningful questions of her consultant.

The specialist nurse is taking her time to provide some comfort. Scans, blood tests, surgery, pre-habilitation, Macmillan, Maggies, laparoscopic, general anesthetic, transfusion. These are all words that the host is familiar with, but not in her own context.

## JUNE 2023

The womb: The scan revealed that my inner lining is cancerous. It's stage one. There is a 3-centimetre tumour, and I can't understand why I didn't sense it before. Surgery is imminent. I am going to be terminated, removed, disposed of after more testing. 47 years I have lived with the host, 'take the lot out' she says, ovaries are exiting with me. She doesn't seem to care.

Surgery day arrives. No one is allowed in the ice cold waiting room apart from patients. So, after the emotions of being left, the host is very clearly most worried about my neighbours. I hear her warn the registrar 'Please leave the bladder and bowel alone, I don't want any complications'.

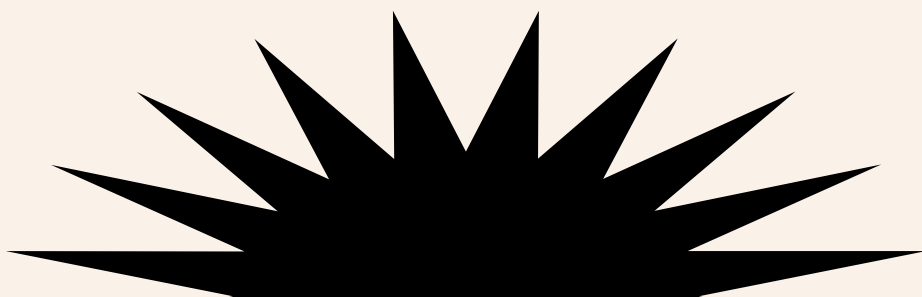
## CONTINUED...

As we patiently wait, I can feel the host silently punching the air. When a lone male voice in the female dominated anesthetic room corrects the consultant. The host is buoyant, feeling more confident and practicing some silent meditation. Occasionally opening her eyes to chuckle at something that has been said. Here we go ten, nine, eight, seven ...

Jane: I wake with a crick in my neck looking at the clock. It's 18:40, but the surgery was at 14:00, has something gone wrong? Just in time, before panic rises, I hear a voice telling me that everything went well. I reach out to feel my lower limbs, I feel sleepy, nothing is in focus and my stomach feels 20 times bigger than I recall. It's hot, it's stifling, and I don't recognise any of my surroundings.

SILENCE, HER PRESENCE  
HAS GONE AND THE  
CANCER HAS GONE WITH  
HER.

THIS IS ME, MY WOMB HAS  
NEVER DEFINED ME,  
AND NEITHER WILL  
THE CANCER.



# GIVE A NAME, BY TORI

To name my reproductive system is giving a name to sex organs like a musical orchestra.

A Vagina, Uterus, Fallopian Tubes, Ovaries, Vulva, Fundus, Perimetrium, Clitoris, Labia Majora, Labia Minora, Hymen, Blood Vessels, Veins, Cells, Womb, Lining and Hair.

Where is the conductor?

Who directs the performance of hormonal imbalance?

How does the piece start, how does the piece finish?

Where does it build and how does it flow?

How long does it last?

Will we see an encore?

# NAME HER, BY TORI

To name my womb, if it was to be given a name would be “Facetious” pronounced like a lady of nobility.

Fay-Shay-ious.

Catching in your throat, thinking distinguished and well put together. In truth, she is common, she is rude, ugly and unsociable.

Facetious causing Chaos and Drama wherever she goes, the uninvited guest to all the events.

Leaving stains, hijacking your ideas, telling you that you are ugly and unloved.

# LADY IN RED, BY RACHEL

Flighty.

Will she or won't she?

She's always made a fuss of anything she's done so far.

Likes to make an entrance.

Favourite outfit? A burgundy velvet bodycon dress, complete with a long trail, covered in wonky pompoms. Apparently, that's something to do with her matriarchal lineage – it's heritage, darling.

Inconvenient? Yes.

Dangerous? Could be.

But she looks bloody good so she doesn't care.

She absolutely loves the attention – until it's not enough. And then, only absolute chaos will do.



**BABIES, OR NOT**

# CHILDLESS AND 30, BY SARAH



Childless and 30

Are you pregnant? No, I'm just curvy!

Society deems it a crime

Yes, I'm aware I haven't got much time.

Dolls are the toy for every little girl  
Dreams of being a mother one day, swirl  
Society tells us motherhood is our goal  
It's the only way, it's our role.

Teenager and selfish, I can't be a mum  
Too much to do, not sure that day will  
come

Pregnant now would let everyone down  
Wearing the intent to be childless like a  
crown

# CONTINUED...

20s worrying you might get pregnant.

I'm busy building a career, I rant.  
it's just not the right time.

I'm just in my 20s so everything will be fine.

Now in my 30s where are the men?  
You see I'm no Barbie and where is my Ken?

Loosing friends with children as nothing in common

You see the story we're sold as little girls is all forgotten

CHILDLESS AND 30

ARE YOU PREGNANT?  
NO, I'M JUST CURVY!

SOCIETY DEEMS IT A  
CRIME.

YES, I'M AWARE I HAVEN'T  
GOT MUCH TIME.



# THE RELIEF OF THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL, BY JANE

Bleeding slows, frequency is known  
The relief of the contraceptive pill

Saying 'yes' regardless of the date  
The relief of the contraceptive pill

No more pain or swollen breasts  
The relief of the contraceptive pill

Shift work, fret free  
The relief of the contraceptive pill

The responsibility and burden of  
taking the contraceptive pill.

# 4000 KELVIN, BY RACHEL

Don't tell me what I already know to be true,

I stare into the cold harsh light above me, wishing it would blind me.

Stop searching for the heartbeat, but don't ever stop searching.

Somebody do something, I want to scream, only what is there to do?

Cry, I can't even let myself do that, but my body keeps on defying me anyway.

I keep staring, waiting for the words, I am floating now, has he already said it?

Trusting my body is something I can't do anymore, did I miss it?

I can't feel anything, I'm too full, and too empty.

# WITH CHILD WITHOUT (A TRIPTYCH), BY CHERYL



## **One: Us**

With anticipation  
and love  
and ulterior motives  
and calendars  
and diaries.

With careful watching  
and mathematics  
and biology  
and symptoms  
and no symptoms.

With emotions  
and hormones  
and over-thinking  
and hope  
and fear.

With my body  
and my heart  
and possibilities  
and counting days  
and waiting.

With trepidation  
and held breath  
and eyes closed  
and doors closed.  
And a 'negative'.

Without child.

# CONTINUED...

## **Two: Tribe**

I remember all these things:

When we giggled  
and gossiped  
and talked  
and planned.

When we were  
in love with music  
and in love for  
the first time.

When exams  
meant everything  
and when we got  
drunk for fun.

When we chafed  
and rubbed against  
each others' lives  
and were sore for a  
few years.

When we came  
back together  
and remembered  
how we laughed.

When you told  
me how you  
wanted a baby  
as we lay in the  
dark.

How my heart  
melted when you  
finally became  
transformed. A  
mother.

How you fell  
in love with your  
child, your  
Everything.

And how your eyes  
are now full of joy  
and light  
and someone else.

I think of all these  
things.

# CONTINUED...

## **Three: Her**

I'll never hold you in  
my arms or press  
your button nose.  
But I still love you.

I'll never buy you  
taffeta dresses  
or patent shoes.  
But I still window  
shop.

I'll never read you  
stories  
and see your eyes  
lost in fantasy.  
Those tales stay  
shelved.

You'll never whisper  
big-little secrets  
in my trustful ears.  
And yet my heart  
expands

My heart will never  
break  
in tandem with your  
first broken heart  
but the ache is still  
there.

I'll never wish you  
farewell as you  
leave  
for an adventure.  
But my mind still  
travels.

And I will always  
Look for you when  
you don't come  
home,  
my never-born  
daughter.

# BUY BABY CLOTHES, BY MANDY

Do you think it's too early to buy baby clothes?  
10 weeks along, starting to get hopeful, this time  
it's going to be ok.

11 weeks, its going well but a few pains so think  
will hold off buying baby clothes.  
Lying on my bed at home, painful internal given,  
not sure that was the right thing to happen,  
hope fading, glad I hadn't brought any baby  
clothes.

Hospital bed, don't look the Nurse said, but I did.  
There was two of them, who knew.  
One never made it far, but the other, well we will  
never know, but looked perfect to me. Would  
have loved to buy two lots of baby clothes.

Nurses station next to my bed, conversations in  
loud whispers clearly heard.  
The morphine's easing my pain but my heart is  
breaking in two.

It's all too much, I can't reach the pull cord, why  
won't they stop talking,  
All i can hear, is where they are planning to go  
and buy baby clothes...

# THE PASSENGER I NEVER WANTED TO CARRY, BY KERRY

I want to write a poem  
But I don't know where to start  
I want to write a poem  
To express the grief inside my heart

Grief is my passenger, albeit unwelcome  
Whose existence is alived by the chatter of  
some  
Grief is my passenger, albeit unwelcome  
I wish to its pain, I could become numb

I grieve for the souls I longed to exist  
For those whose presence daily I miss  
I grieve for the souls I longed to exist  
For the sweet-smelling heads that never  
got kissed

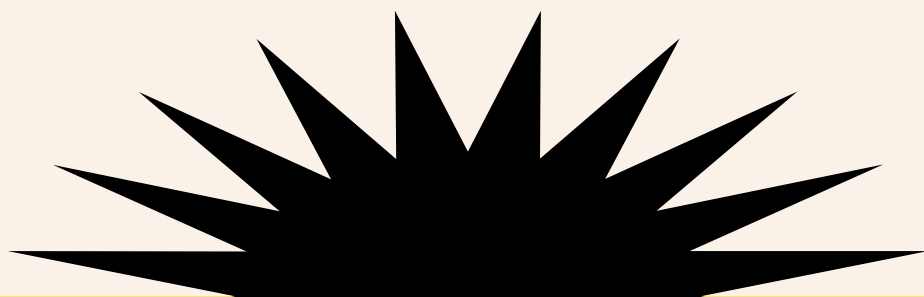
# CONTINUED...

Maybe in time my pain will fade  
And I'll stop pining for the souls that never  
got made

Maybe in time my pain will fade  
And I can stop living a life so much in the  
shade

Until that time, I'll keep pushing on  
And keep being Kerry who isn't a Mum  
Until that time, I'll keep pushing on

# AND HOPING THAT ONE DAY, MY GRIEF WILL BE GONE



# IDENTITY

# GIRLS CAN'T, BY CAL

Girls can't like football  
Or robots  
Or space.

Don't leave your drink unattended, walk  
home alone, wear that top, look 'frumpy',  
be clever, too confident

Girls should be polite, and silent.

Girls should like fashion and shopping and  
boys, boys, boys.

YOU CAN'T  
YOU MUST  
YOU HAVE TO

No  
No  
No

I won't and I refuse.  
To take on the role,  
To act your performative constraints of  
gender.

# CONTINUED...

I'll wear the clothes I like,  
I'll slouch, hands in deep luxurious pockets,  
full of sticks and bones and interesting  
stones

I'll spread my legs on public transport,  
nudging your thighs, while looking you in  
the eye, as you blush and shift.

I will not laugh at your 'jokes' that punch  
down, push down, suppress all those who  
are not 'you'

I hate, hate, hate, your banter, your  
mocking laughter, your easy nastiness.

My identity is mine.  
Your binary is not my reality.

I wish for a fairytale world of men in  
crinolines, with pirates in lipstick coming to  
their rescue

# CONTINUED...

I'll be a knight. My armor will deflect your  
preconceptions

I'll slay a million dragons, all called 'Dave'.

And in triumph, I will kiss whomever I like.

I'll swoop you in to my arms, sway with you  
deep into the night, a dance of defiance

# AND I WILL BE ME



# WHAT MAKES A MOTHER?

## BY SARAH

What makes a mother?  
It's an answer I should know.  
For I had the best mother  
Who sadly had to go.

Does biology really matter?  
To create a mini, me  
Is it the greatest experience?  
Is pregnancy the key?

Does biology really matter?  
If you didn't grow inside me  
If I didn't feel you kicking  
How strong will our bond be?

Does biology really matter?  
For a child that needs a home  
Surely, it's the love that really counts  
And a warrior of their own

# CONTINUED...

Does biology really matter?  
Or a home full of love and kisses  
For a child to feel safe  
For someone to provide all that's missing

It's the child who makes a mother.  
To be an advocate of their own  
to always have their back  
to ensure they feel they're not alone.

It's the child who makes a mother.  
who makes them feel truly safe  
To see the best in them  
Regardless of what we face.

What makes a mother?  
It's an answer I know.  
For I had the best mother  
Whose inspiration will help me grow

# ALL OUT OF SHITS TO GIVE, BY MICHELLE

I'm not depressed and I don't have ADHD  
I'm a 50-year-old woman

No, I don't need to attend a training course  
on 'insert name of random software package'  
I'm a 50-year-old woman

I don't care if my jeans are too tight or my  
hair is frizzy in this humid weather  
I'm a 50-year-old woman

No, I'm not nervous about giving my  
presentation this afternoon  
I'm a 50-year-old woman

Of course, you're entitled to your opinion, but  
I'm still right  
I'm a 50-year-old woman

Oh, and here's that word again...  
A big. Fat. **No.**

ME, A HAIKU, BY CHERYL

FUNNY AND LOVING.

VIVACIOUS AND  
CONFIDENT.

YES, I DO MEAN ME!



# CONNECTIONS FROM THE CHASMS, BY RACHEL

Don't overthink it. Just start writing, let the words flow from movement, to ink, to page. My age.

I'm 31, a baby, but not really. Because I have a baby, and another baby that will always be a baby because he didn't get to stay.

There was nothing wrong with him they said, when they'd finished all their investigations.

A perfectly healthy baby boy.

At least he said goodbye to me.

But he shouldn't have had to tell me that at 28 and 5.

My body failed me.

# CONTINUED...

I was split in two for a long time. Chasms remain in some places, and mere cracks in others.

Why did he not get what he needed in the one place that was supposed to keep him safe?

Our world is full of terrors and risks and danger, but I didn't feel warned about the danger, the risks and the terror that I couldn't see.

I've only ever been in the position to trust that my body would do what it was designed to do.

Do the thing that my whole identity, and place in the world, is centred around. If it can't, what does that make me?

Broken, unhinged, staring into the void of pain where no one will meet my gaze.

CONTINUED...



UNTIL SHE DOES.

UNTIL THEY DO.

UNTIL I FIND MY PEOPLE,

who clutch those precious fragments of themselves as their worlds implode.

Pieces that look like a smile, sound like a dark sense of humour, feel like a deep knowing and empathy when your eyes connect.

# ON BEING YOUR AUNTIE, BY LAURA



First, Vincent.

I didn't do anything to achieve this new identity, but your mum and dad did, and what a gift you were to be born, and what a gift now to be your auntie.

My little brother's son.

Now, as well as Laura, 'Laur' to friends, Miss Ferries to my students, I now have a new name to add to this list: Auntie Laura.

"Wauwa" to begin with.

The only person I've ever seen and held on their first day on this earth.

And how beautiful it is to be your auntie: we already have the recent memories of our day trips to Southport beach, the Empire theatre, Central Library, the Museum of Liverpool... my 3-year-old little mate.

You have a knowing look.

# CONTINUED...

Old soul, it feels like you've known this world before.

Reading books with you, planting seeds with you, and watching as the seedlings grow taller each week as you do too. Then, Billy, 7 months ago.

You took your first breath after your strong mum delivered you while I was pacing the floors of my classroom on a free period, awaiting your arrival.

Then, thankfully before my next class entered the room, a pixelated image flashed up on the screen of my Apple Watch which resembled a baby; a shock of dark hair.

I ran to my handbag, dug out my phone, opened up the WhatsApp from my mum, your grandmother, and saw your adorable face for the first time.

Bright eyes, my brother said you looked wise. 50/50 your mum and your dad.

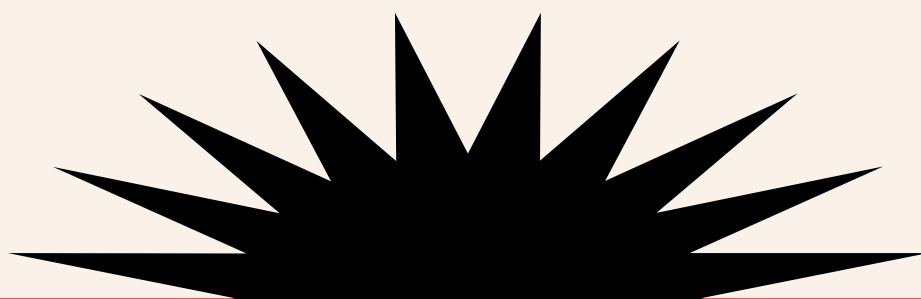
# CONTINUED...

Already a cool dude at 7 months with hair long enough for a ponytail, you feel the rhythm of music in your bones and dance in my arms.

We watch on as you communicate with your brother in a language only you two know. Vincent and Billy.

What a blessing you were both born, and how fun the years will be with you both here. I will read to you, be there for you, me in your life and you in mine.

One day, my nephews will be men and I will always be their proud Auntie Laura.



# MOTHERING, BY MANDY

As a child, I mothered  
Life unpredictable, frightening at times.  
Keeping my brothers and sister quiet,  
helping my mum.  
Keeping myself small, no demands or sense  
of myself.

As a teenager I mothered.  
The 80s, exciting, yet scary times, with too  
much alcohol, pill popping and late nights  
but for me, always aware.  
Looking after friends, no sense of myself, a  
job that felt familiar.

As a young woman I mothered.  
A marriage way too young, to a husband way  
to young. With a catholic road map and with  
only one way seen, the mothering continued,  
still no sense of me.

The gift of a beautiful child and a chance to  
truly mother, but lost, so very lost.  
Not sure how to do it, just knew the love felt  
for this little one was all consuming.

# CONTINUED...

As a woman in my thirties, I mothered.  
A daughter who missed her dad, a step son  
who missed his mum.

Trying hard to get it right but failing, failing,  
too many times to count.

Oh how I wish I could do it again, I know it  
could be better for her, I would be better

And now in my 6th decade, I mother.  
My mum.

Always trying not to overstep the line,  
fighting my need to wrap her in cotton wool  
and never let her go.

My anchor in this mad, mad world and at the  
same time, still trying to shake loose and find  
that sense of me, not mothering.

# PART OF MY IDENTITY, BY TORI

I am what I eat.  
Or should I say,  
I am what I shouldn't eat,

A shadow that follows me every minute of  
every day and night.

A pain, that stabs me in my back, kicks me in  
my gut,

An itch on my arm,  
A throb in my throat,  
A rash on my stomach.  
The swollen belly.  
A flush to my cheeks.

The list of foods that haunt, forever grows.  
Today I might be fine eating that, next week  
it will pin me to my bed.

# CONTINUED...

An inconvenience to dine out with, the awkward one, the choosey one.

The one who has to research, check the menus.

On arrival be greeted by the BIG allergen book.

This is not a choice, I did not choose to miss Bread, Doughnuts, Beer, all the good stuff!

Every day to pop pills, Antihistamines, Buscopan, Paracetamol, Gaviscon.

**It's exhausting, on my body, my head and my heart.**

SHAVE

SHAME, A HAIKU  
BY CHERYL



TURNED OFF BY MY FAT?

YOU STILL FUCKED ME,  
DIDN'T YOU?

WELL. YOUR SHAME, OR  
MINE?

# MORBID WEIGHT, BY RUBY



**February 2018**

These poems- no one will ever read  
Apart from me

They're memories, snapshots  
Show me more than a picture ever would  
Because you know  
Another photo of me staring into the distance in a pleated skirt

Doesn't show anything  
A fucking pleated skirt.  
My wardrobe is full of them

I've gone from the girl who's scared to eat bread to the girl  
who's scared of tight fitted jeans  
I used to wear tight clothes in my eating disorder days

That's the thing with recovery - it's baggy  
Sometimes it's just ignoring  
Ignoring that bump on my stomach I used to check everyday

Ignoring how many calories are in a slice of cake I long for  
I won't step on a weighing scale now  
It's meant to be a sign of strength  
But it's weak - I'm scared of the truth, it's all still in my head

The poison still penetrates my brain  
I think I always will be slightly infected  
I've just got to accept it  
Maybe I'll never wear jeans again

That's okay  
It's easy to say "I eat more than I used to"  
It's not easy to say "I never think like I used to"

# CONTINUED...



**May 2024**

I never said I was ugly,

You made me feel like that for as long as I can remember.  
Being a little girl in reception and thinking when I lose my  
“puppy fat”,

**when I lose it,  
When I lose it,  
When I,  
When I,  
When,  
then I'll have friends.**

You never said I was ugly,

**You sent a letter home to my dad saying I was too fat,  
You weighed me,  
You weighed me,  
You weighed me,**

Whether it was in the classroom by a teacher or mean girls  
asking me to step on scales they found in the street, when I just  
wanted to play out,

you weighed me up, and weighed me down.

# CONTINUED...



## **Was that little girl ugly?**

You put me in a group to exercise,  
For all the heavy children,  
Discussed dieting to be our dream,  
I tossed away my lunches,  
Anything to take the feeling of fatness away,  
And all because you branded a child with a weighing scale  
made by a man that studied stars.

You made me feel ugly,  
So I carried on,  
I did what you wanted,  
But I was ugly again,

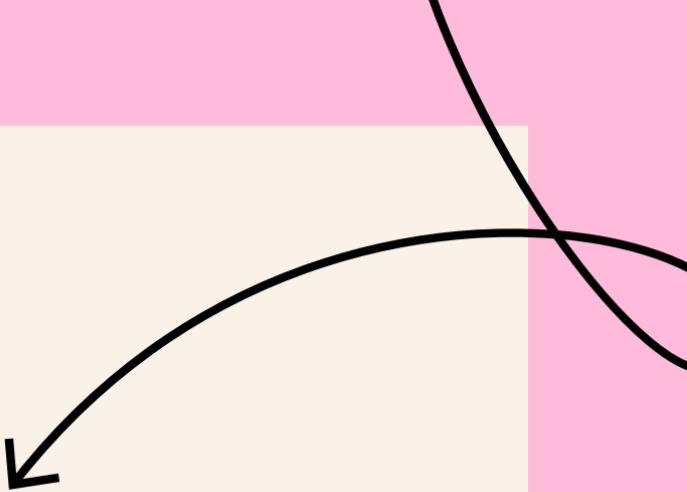
I was asked in front of people if I was starving when that's what  
you always wanted from me,  
While other girls still asked an ill girl for tips on how to shrink  
themselves.

So I found a medium and put on an ugly costume,  
A sack thrown over my body making my new rolls simply  
hidden potatoes,

A lifeless wall of fat coming towards you,  
And the hole inside the wall getting bigger and ready to  
swallow you, but now with the draping of an 80-year-old  
woman,

But ironically shying away from mirrors and anything that  
resembled tightness like that would hide the perfect crime,  
The fat girl that got skinny then ballooned again,  
Putting on the invisible cloak that would hide a sick girl getting  
healthy again,

But turning all the more ugly.



TWO HAIKUS,  
BY ANDREA

BEING A WOMAN  
GOING HAND IN HAND WITH  
SHAME,  
AND WE COULD BE STONED.

WOMAN. LADY. SLUT.  
YOU JUST WANT TO BE  
HUMAN,  
FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH.



# WHEN THE BLEEDING STOPS

# PERIMENOPAUSE, MENOPAUSE, OPTION TO PAUSE DECLINED, BY TORI

The itch, the scratch.

The hot, the cold.

The tame and the flame.

I am only just starting this journey; it looks long and with many trials to test my patience and time.

Losing parts of myself and gathering new parts that make up the me I am growing into.

# CONTINUED...

Head spinning in confusion, the unknown,  
Google searches for perimenopause only  
to find recipes for Peri-Peri Chicken. How  
is that going to help?

Thinking Hot flashes meant a new DC  
movie is coming out.

Brain fog, where are my keys? Where is  
my phone? Oh, it's in my hand.  
Ringing in my ears, mood changes.

I am a Bitch, and I hear dog whistles  
now?

Sleep. What's that?

Heart palpitations, am I going crazy? Am I  
over stressing? Over thinking?

# CONTINUED...

Sex drive that I was told would die has a new lease of life, she is hungry and is never satisfied.

My poor husband, he is only human.  
Mood swings taken on a walk to the park,  
on the roundabout spinning, cannot get off.

The swing up and down, not letting my feet touch the ground.

The slide, trekking the steps to the top,  
quickly sliding down with a crash landing at the bottom.

Blood, Sweat and Tears.

Gearing myself up for this marathon I did not train for.

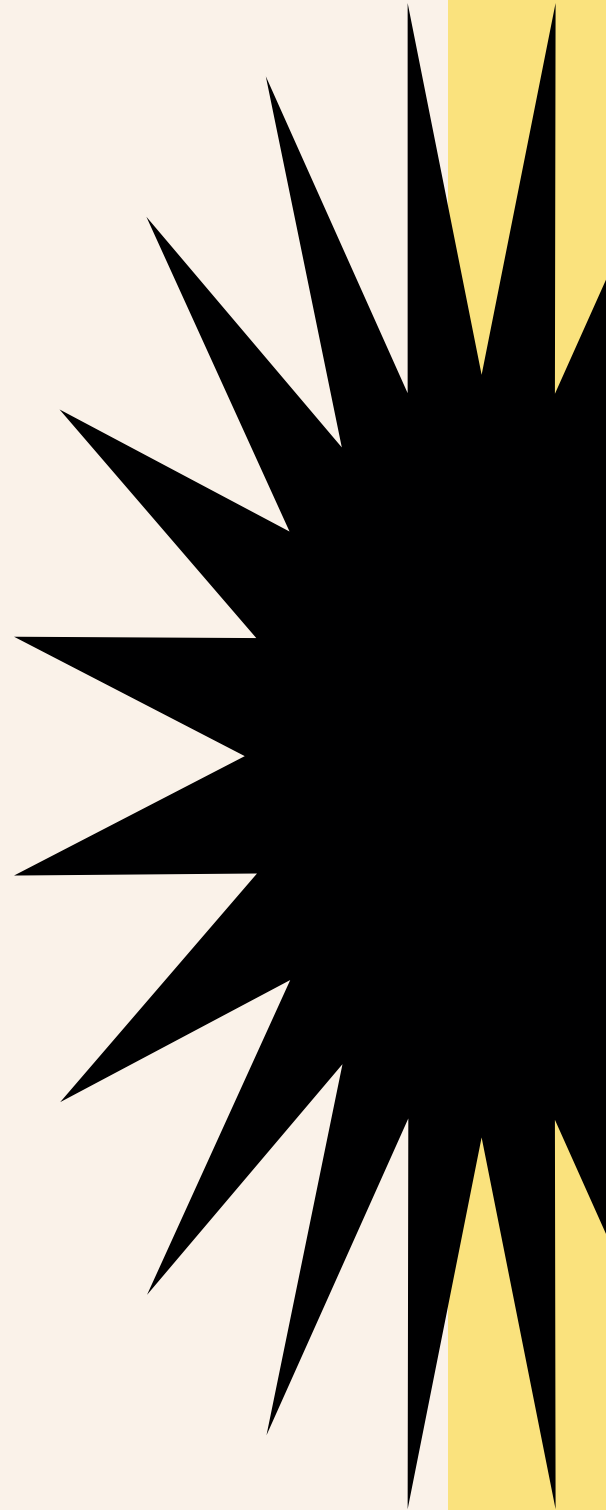
# PHEW! BY CAL

A volcano of heat  
From the seat  
Of my brain  
To the soles of my feet

Capillaries burst. I am cursed,  
And the fans  
That I make with my hands  
No relief.

I'm sweltering  
Under the double-barred  
Electrics of the shards  
Of my neurons  
That light up in their trillions.  
Brilliant stars  
Each clapping  
Their energy zapping  
With stifling,  
Cloying, sweaty,  
Sahara sultry.

I wonder if anyone detects  
My distress  
Is a moment  
Of blazing  
Briefly meteoric.  
I crash frigid back to Earth.



# NOTES FOR WHEN THE MENOPAUSE REACHES ME, BY LAURA

Dear Future Laura,

You may have recently felt differently, off-kilter, not quite as the you that you knew.

With information and the conversation on menopause being more available and open now as I'm writing in 2024,

I imagine you will know more.

You may be recognising signs, ticking off symptoms from the 34, or the 64, or the evermore (so it can seem).

# CONTINUED...

Now, I see women at work wearing fans around their necks and the children, and I, thought they were headphones. Once we learned what they are and what they are for, I feel glad that I know for the future, and that not only those girls at school know for their futures, much further ahead than mine, but the boys too. Those boys can understand better, and empathise with mothers, aunties or nans, and when they're men, they will have better understanding and empathy for their peers going through the menopause.

Yes, the word is loaded with fear and dread and the unknown, but you have the women of your today and my today, to thank for raising awareness, sharing their stories, and seeing that although it may be a very testing time, you've seen how they came, or are coming, through the other side, and in fact, it isn't a long stage to skip through but another phase of life to learn more about yourself and others, just as all the other stages, fortified from all those stages that came before.

HOT FLUSH, A HAIKU,  
BY MICHELLE

BURNING IN MY TOES

CRIMSON RED AS FLAMES  
TAKE HOLD

SWEATING LIKE A PIG!

LAST WORDS...

SWADDLED, BY CHERYL

I AM SWADDLED IN  
THE LOVE OF ALL THE  
WOMEN  
IN MY LIFE. KEPT SAFE.

# THE 51%, BY JANE



First night is mind-blowing

Relationships are born from  
listening, understanding,  
empathy and supporting

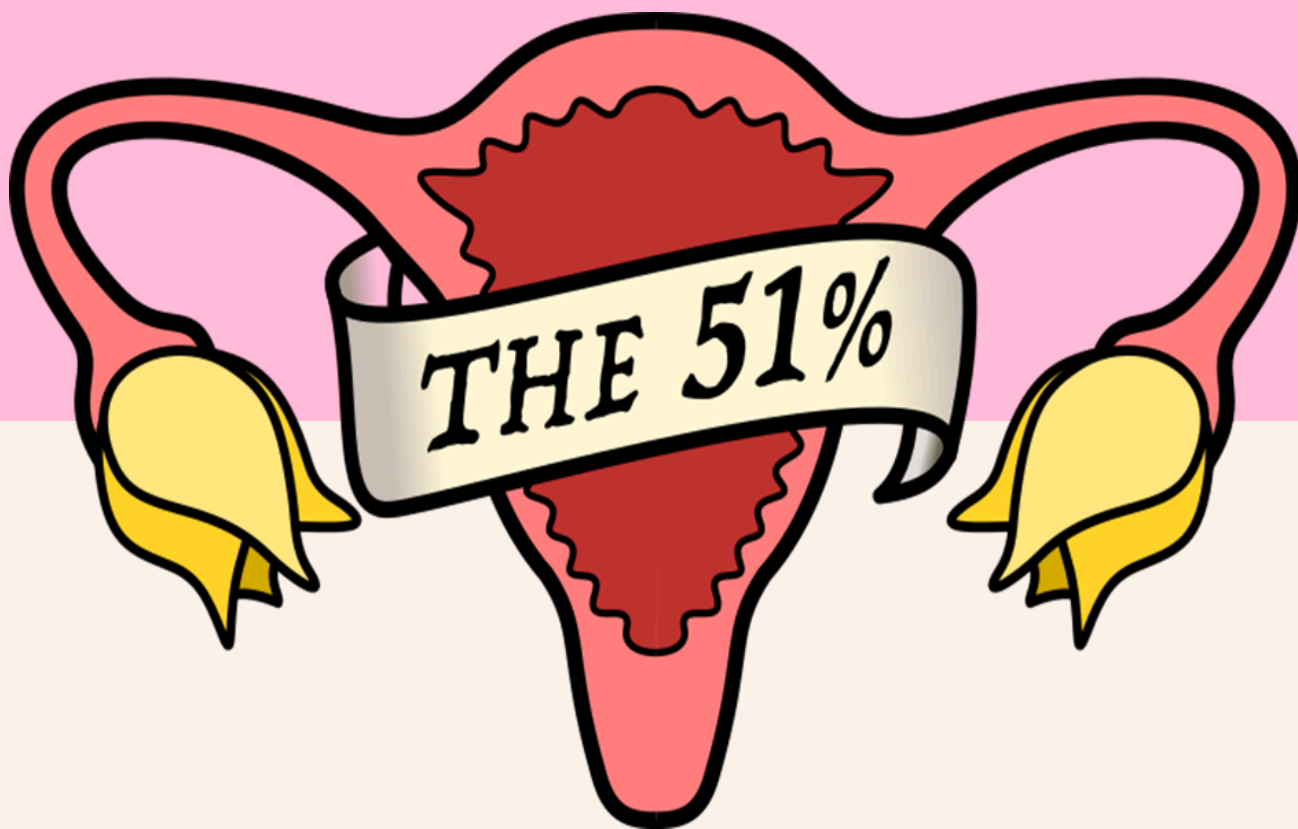
Earnest conversation is amongst  
us

Emotionally connecting us

Dabbling in the writing

Organising our feelings and  
thoughts

Moving us into next week when  
we can build on the stories that  
we are already sharing.



# THE END OR IS IT THE BEGINNING

