VISIBLE WOMEN

Tales of age gender and in/visibility

Christine Bell
This work is dedicated to my mother, Dora Bell, who did not have the chance to become an ‘older woman’.

Dora aged 24
Dora and me (aged 3)
Abstract

This is a reflective, questioning, subjective, self-indulgent and often moving narrative and poetic exploration of the experiences of women growing older and not disappearing.

Questions posed – and not necessarily answered – include: What is behind the stories of older women becoming invisible and disregarded? How true are they? Where do they come from? What do they mean – to women and ‘society’? How might they be challenged? What other stories can be told?
Starting with a search for the anecdotal and mythical ‘invisible woman’, the writer’s own story is woven into, and becomes part of, the journey.

This initially takes us through the landscape of feminist and poststructuralist theory, existentialism, auto/biography, journalism, fictional writing, art, films, poetry, the internet and much more. In examining the bones of the tales of invisibility, the writer is motivated by indignation as much as curiosity.

The major part of the work is the poetic representation of the thoughts and lives of eight older women (between 50-70) drawn from the lengthy individual and group email correspondence between the writer and her co-researchers.
On my 50th birthday
during my ‘magic summer’
There are positive aspects of being a frightening old woman.

Though the old woman is both feared and reviled,
she need not take the intolerance of others to heart,
for women over fifty already form one of the largest groups
in the population structure of the western world.
As long as they like themselves,
they will not be an oppressed minority.
In order to like themselves,
they must reject trivialisation by others
of who and what they are.
A grown woman
should not have to masquerade as a girl
in order to remain in the land of the living.

(Germaine Greer, 1992)
There’s the Big One out front that everyone sees first – they may know there are others inside but they don’t know

♦ how many
♦ what they look like
♦ etc ...

So I used to go out there into the world as the big Mama Doll ... smiling ... confident ... knowing what’s what ... and all the others could stay safely tucked away out of sight unless safe enough to emerge ...

(Personal journal, 28 May 2008)
In the endless babble of narrative,

in spite of the daily noise,

the story waits to be heard.

(Jeanette Winterson, 2004)
Poetry and letters

... poetic representation reveals the process of self-construction, the reflexive basis of self-knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken of as a meaningful whole ...

(Laurel Richardson, 1997)

Poetic inquiry is ...

Monica Prendergast (2009) has produced a list ...
29 Ways of Looking at Poetry as Qualitative Research.

No. 19 reads:

Poetic inquiry is a way of knowing through poetic language and devices; metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery, emotion, attention, wide-awakeness, opening to the world, self-revelation.
When I was a child ...
no one supposed
that women over 50
were invisible.
On the contrary,
they blacked out the sky.

(Hilary Mantel, 2009)
Lynn

*It could be dangerous*

*being noticed*

*in our household*
LYNN
by Lynn

Aged 65 in June
plump
pink and purple hair
Married for 36 years
second marriage
first lasted 6 years
One son - married
One of four children
two of whom are stiffnesses
    Very family minded

Began life in a small town in Essex
    that place is the home of my soul
the woods and fields
were a marvellous playground

    My father was a binge alcoholic
I’m not sure what to say really
I’ve been counselling since I was about 4
and began training when I was 34
    I was a terrible rescuer
After lots of training
I became less intense
    I’ve done a bit of clown training

I love
the theatre and cinema – reading - playing bridge
the countryside – London – travel - staying at home
friends - family - animals
good food - nice wine
    and the odd adventure

Is that enough?
Val

I feel in control of my life
and able to do
what I like
when I like
Aged 66, will be 67 in November
don’t mind getting older
  just pleased to still be here!

I had a happy childhood
My parents were a loving couple
  an only child
they loved and supported me
so I was very lucky

Helped me to be independent
and like my own company

My first job was at
the Central Reference Library
I already loved books
  it was heaven!
helping people find
the information they wanted

  I married too young
When I realised it was a mistake
after six months
I didn’t have the nerve
to become ‘a scarlet woman’
and get divorced
religious parents would have been horrified!
I spent years compromising
  trying to make it work
Found out about
my husband’s affairs
just before my second son was born

When the boys were at school
I started work in local radio
and gained some independence

Eventually I moved out
and met someone
  who helped me regain myself

Regional Organiser for national campaign
then music librarian and producer
at the radio station
  which I really enjoy
27 years
helping organise a major music festival

Living very happily
with my current partner
for 21 years
despite or because of
a 20 year age difference
  We’re both independent
like travelling
and been all over the world together
My grandparents and parents
died of cancer
when not much older than I am now

My younger son
died after an epileptic fit
two years ago
so the only family member
I have now
is my older son

We have a very good relationship

I’ve survived
two car crashes
two hip replacements
and a house fire

I plan to make the most
of whatever life I have left
Alison

Transition seems to have been a constant in the last few years
I am a 65 year old woman
living in south-east London
Still ‘on the cusp’
of working life and retirement

I live alone
but people often come and stay
visitors to the
Buddhist Centre
round the corner

Sharing my house with others
is a pleasure to me

My garden is important
I love the process
as much as the results

Walking and singing
are enjoyable and fulfilling

Following a Buddhist path
is the most important aspect
of my life
I continually reflect on ways
to devote time and energy to that
while spending time
with ‘old’ and newer friends
Cindy

I love not knowing things

and exploring new places

and ideas
CINDY
by Cindy

I am a 53 years young professional in California near San Francisco.
A licences narrative therapist

Student Advocate
a friendly name for therapist
in a large high school

Previously in computer industry
and construction

Part of a happy family
with two adopted Chinese girls
a lovely Italian/American wife
and our dog Marley

We are political
and we are busy!
Soccer
track and field meets
violin recitals
running and tennis lessons
working in the garden
making arts and crafts
school projects
meditating
lots of reading
homework
seeing and writing to friends
Typical family activities too
Lesbian families
can be just as boring
as anyone else!

Recently completed my doctoral degree
and will return to surfing
and being a beach bum someday soon
Marie

I am big and untidy
as are my belonging
MARIE
by Marie

Current age 70
Born Chelmsford 1938

Father steel contractor
Mother employed by Bata shoes
and then taught flower arranging
a domestic goddess of the old school

Grammar school education
where I managed to attain
the lowest maths marks ever
in my first year exams

University of Essex degree
in Linguistics

A short spell with Which? Magazine
then employed in the NHS
from 1973 to retirement in 2004

Moved from London to Bath
and became an observer of folk

Married 1960 to R – marine engineer
Divorced 1984
Two sons
A married with two children
D married with no children
Likes
theatre – language – film
West Ham – England cricket matches
Tom Stoppard plays and the U3A poetry group

Dislikes
craft work and driving (because I can’t)
fruit salad for pudding
people who don’t listen
(because sometimes I don’t)
and long conversations on the telephone
It feels great to be this age …

So much more free

than I’ve ever been before
I’m 68 now
Can’t believe the years go by so quickly!

We live in an old house we rebuilt ourselves
in Middleburg
a small town in Florida

I’m a doll and puppet maker
and sell my work in our shops
at Renaissance Festivals
around the country

Between times here
we go to Texas for two months
then upstate New York
Pennsylvania
Louisiana
then start all over again

It certainly never gets boring
and with our nice big travel-trailer
home is always right behind us!

The travel helps us stay in close contact
with our three children
eleven grandchildren
and four great-grandchildren
It really has been an interesting life!
Being born during an air-raid
in the middle of a war
does tend to set things up

I was supposed to arrive in London
but the bombing was bad
my mother went to stay with family
in Bridport which promptly got bombed

My father went to India
after evacuation from Dunkirk
and apart from a few days at home
never returned to live with us

My younger brother and I thought
he’d taken one look at us
and decided we just weren’t good enough

My mother went out to work
my brother went to prep school
and I went to live with maternal grandparents
over their shop in London
until I was 14

Met R my American sailor boy
the love of my life
and we got married
aged 17 and 18
MUCH TOO YOUNG (everyone said)
Went to live in the US
and I followed R’s squadron around
with the children (as they arrived)
until we found this wonderful house

R was at sea much of the time
until he retired and said
“It’s your turn now”
and I started my small business
He builds the shops
and keeps our vehicles on the road

Celebrated our 50th anniversary
last year
with many of our large extended family

It’s such a great time now
working as and when and where I want
being with different parts of the family
There have been some really hard times
and sad times
but don’t think I’d want to change it

I feel very fortunate to have all this
Jane

The ways I now feel visible
in the world
are so incredibly comfortable
JANE
by Jane

I am 61 years old
and living very happily
with my civil partner N
in a house in Hampshire

Retired early
from a very busy and demanding
professional job
having been part of the health professions
most of my working life

Most of this time
spent operating out of my left brain

After being fortunate enough
to spend some months
in a Retreat Centre in the US Mid-West
I found my right brain again
which opened a whole new world!

Found a love affair with fabric …
and stained glass fascinated me …
so retiring early
has given me the time and space
to develop my self-taught fabric creativity
Now call myself a fabric artist
and create large wall hangings
like stained glass

I also enjoy
more earthy and ethnic pieces
which honour my South African origins
Christine

Almost there

Christmas 2009