

The pouch of Douglas

Early in 2014, journalist and media teacher Tracy Sorensen was diagnosed with Stage IIIc primary peritoneal carcinoma. She was treated with chemotherapy and radical debulking surgery, and is now in remission and writing about the experience. This is an extract from a longer work in progress. A version of this work was first published on her website, The Squawkin' Galah (<http://squawkingalah.com.au>), on 23 October 2014.

The pouch of Douglas is a small area in the female human body between the uterus and the rectum. It has a name and a shape, but the essence of it, the point of it, is that it is a piece of nothing. The territory of the pouch of Douglas is infinitesimal; because when all is well, the surrounding organs slide against each other like two slugs in a mating dance. The pouch of Douglas, like the pouch of a mother kangaroo or a coin purse, can expand to accommodate growing or multiplying things.

The pouch takes its name from Dr James Douglas, an 18th century Scottish man-midwife who wrote anatomical treatises and held public dissections in his own house. In 1726, a woman by the name of Mary Toft, who lived in Surrey, England, announced that she had given birth to baby rabbits. Her local doctor was astonished and ran off to let everyone know. She had been in normal labour, he said, with regular contractions. And then appeared the baby rabbits. The woman enjoyed her celebrity. But Dr Douglas smelled a rat. He went to see her himself, to put an end to the nonsense. He examined her and declared her a fraud. William Hogarth later made an etching of Dr Douglas standing at Mary Toft's bedside, gesticulating, with the rabbit children running off in all directions, unmasked and embarrassed.¹

Rabbits came to Australia with the First Fleet. Like currency lads and lasses, they grew healthy on fresh air and good eating. They eloped into the bush and ate the crops that were planted for them and built burrows in the new estates that opened up as far as the eye could see. Australia's emblem bore the kangaroo and emu, but the continent was in fact governed by rabbits. The anti-rabbit wars, when they came, were conventional and chemical; mass slaughter and hand-to-hand combat.

By the time I could walk and talk, I knew that rabbits had to be caught and killed. Even the family cat could do its bit. "Go and catch a rabby, Ginge", my mother urged the big hard tomcat that went with the dairy farm my parents worked for a while. That was in the south of Western Australia, where it was green and lush and muddy. That's where my sister and I had the job of herding calves. We always stopped to examine the hot pats of manure. We noted that some were sloppy, some firm. We wore plastic galoshes. Dad was always hosing out the stalls where the cows had been. Mum grew tomatoes at the back door of the weatherboard soldier's settlement cottage that we rented from the farmer.

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My partner Steve walks over land near Bathurst, in New South Wales, that was box gum, then eaten-out farmland, and is now a land care reserve. He stops at likely spots and takes coordinates with his pocket GPS. These are rabbit burrows. Rabbits eat the delicate native grasses being coaxed back onto the land. Someone else will come by, later, to gas the burrows. The rabbits will lie there, dead, under the ground. We go walking with our black Labrador, Bertie. Bertie is getting old and pretends not to see rabbits, because he can't be bothered to give chase. Kangaroos stand stock-still as we approach. The full, hanging pouch with just the joey's legs sticking out.

There's something in my own pouch. Cells are multiplying, well fed and happy, burrowing down in new estates. They're going wild, like rabbits.

Dr Douglas named his pouch of nothing. Nothing is like a magnet for something. Nothing is a big blank page with a pencil beside it. Nothing can be a blessed relief. *There is nothing there.* I slide on my conveyor belt into the big white donut machine. The warmth of radioactive fluid is strange at the back of the neck and around the bladder. "Breathe in and hold." Pause. "You may now breathe normally." At this point, I have never heard of Dr Douglas or Mary Toft or her baby rabbits. They belong to the new country on the other side of the donut.

My rabbits are multiplying. Rabbits need *Lebensraum*. Some must leave the pouch of Douglas for opportunities elsewhere. It's dark and wet and they can't see where they're going. They're like baby kangaroos, blind and pink-skinned, groping their way towards the teats inside the pouch. Only this journey is in reverse. They must burrow upwards, as if towards the light, but there is no light, only another soft place to grow. They slip between organs, like a finger. They make room for themselves.

Ginge moves stealthily through grass, his belly close to the ground. He gives his hindquarters a tiny shake, springs through the air, brings down his prey. He closes his jaw around the neck, drags his prize home.

Ginge stands at the back door, offering up his rabbit. "Good boy Ginge! Thank you very much. But you have it, Ginge." Ginge drags it behind the woodpile. The flesh is soft and bloody.

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- 1 University of Glasgow Library Special Collections Department. The curious case of Mary Toft. August 2009. <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/aug2009.html> (accessed May 2015). ■