

This Essay was the Catalogue Essay for A Darker Thread at Oriol Myrddin Gallery, Carmarthen 15 July – 21 October 2017. Please do not use in your writing without referencing it as my work. Thank you, Angela

In Between: A Darker Thread

I am knitting a jumper for my son. It is crafted from yarn that I have spun myself, including fleece he brought home from a holiday in Norway. On most days, I send him photographs of its progress and eagerly await his responses. He is a grown man, and yet I have come to call this the 'Jumper for a Boy', infantilising it and, perhaps, him.

This is my – not entirely unconscious – attempt to keep him close, to tie him to my 'apron strings'. For threads are like this, they act metaphorically and literally to hold things, and people, together.

String Boy, one of the DW Winnicott's child patients, must have known this when he tied string between chairs and tables and, more audaciously, to a cushion placed atop a fireplace; here was a boy spider spinning his own safety net.

When I spin and knit, I think of my 'boy' and of the ties that connect us, of how our joint act of making this jumper – the sharing of photos and whatsapp messages – has become a tie that binds, our continuing bond.

It's tempting to see textiles – those things made of threads knitted and woven together – as benevolent, soft and giving: the comfort of a blanket in sickness, the warmth that a good pair of socks delivers to winter chilled feet. But where they have the capacity to hold us together, to maintain our dignity and bring us from nature into culture,

they also threaten to undo us and to reveal our shame. So close is our attachment to the language of cloth that it has become part of who we are. Often in life we are stitched up, close knit, unravelling or coming apart at the seams. We are, all of us, cloth bodies held together by threads.

Tales of threads, shared in classrooms and at bedsides. A miller's daughter forced to spin straw into gold by the boastfulness of a feckless father; Elisa, who knits shirts from stinging nettles so that her swan brothers might return to human form; and Sleeping Beauty, mesmerised by a spindle. Then, in the ancient tales of mythology: Theseus, rescued from the terrors of the labyrinth by Ariadne's gift of a ball of red yarn. Patient Penelope, condemned to the endless reweaving of a burial shroud so she might stay loyal to Odysseus. Cloth bound tales of life and death, all edged with darkness.

For me the most complex is The Three Fates or Moirai. Sisters who spin, draw out and cut the thread that binds us to the world of the living: Clotho, who spins the life force; Lachesis, the allotter; and Atropos, with her appalling shears. Those blades...

I take some comfort in being Clotho – of being the one who brings things into existence. But we cannot do without Atropos, as terrifying as the void beyond her might be...we need to be reminded that we are held here, alone or together, as if by a thread. And that is why a mother might still knit a jumper for her boy.