Looking at the construction of self in autopathography\(^1\) both proves and problematizes Paul John Eakin’s view that the autobiographical self is whole, stable, and continuous, as argued in his book, *Living Autobiographically*. On the one hand, the loss of a stable self through the disorienting experience of illness acts as catalyst for the search for a unified, whole self. On the other, the same experiences can be so destabilizing that writers’ sense of a core being is left damaged in many ways and identity as a shifting, flexible concept becomes necessary to understanding the complex nature of recovery within the sub-genre of narratives of loss that I call “memoirs of textured recovery.”\(^2\)

This kind of complex recovery calls for theories of subjectivity that allow for the performance of a shifting, fluid self even as it strives for wholeness and continuity. While Clendinnen and Mantel on the one hand engender a whole, solid sense of self through the autobiographical act, the tension between self as either fragmented and discontinuous or whole and continuous – a tension never fully reconciled, and these selves juxtaposed – is the basis for this nuanced, “textured recovery” that I am arguing forces us to rethink theories of the self, narrative, and healing.

This chapter traces the complex process of recovery throughout Mantel’s misdiagnosis of endometriosis and Clendinnen’s liver transplant, and continues the discussion of Gordon’s process of loss in trying to come to terms with the death of her father in *Shadow Man*. As Mantel, Clendinnen, and Gordon “write [themselves] into being” (Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost* 222) they attest to the fact that writing can heal a fragmented or destabilized self. Writing allows authors to make sense of things, construct themselves, discover what they are thinking and feeling, find themselves and their lives – in short, it is “a weapon for
the preservation of the self” (Clendinnen 168); it in turns emancipates, protects, identifies, memorializes, sustains, saves, creates, orders, and recuperates the self. These writers do much to build a solid sense of self from the fragments left by the experience of illness, and on one level conform to what studies between writing and healing show: narrative can heal. However, they also problematize the narrative self and complicate the recovery process by challenging the assumption that writing the self is always necessarily a healing enterprise.

The autobiographical act – writing the self – challenges postmodern theories of fragmented subjectivity by offering the possibility of the creation of a unified self through a process Eakin calls “doing self, doing consciousness” (85). It therefore potentially has enormous implications for female autonomy because it leads to “more self, more agency, not less” (Eakin 85), and chimes with what Nancy Miller has argued is “our desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author” (But Enough 12). This chapter tests Eakin’s theory of autobiographical subjectivity against Inga Clendinnen’s Tiger’s Eye, Hilary Mantel’s Giving Up the Ghost, and Mary Gordon’s The Shadow Man, examining the interplay between multiple identities and whole selves in a context where “[w]omen writers are beginning [. . . ] to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent effective identity” (Waugh qtd Cosslett et al. 6).

Eakin’s recent research into identity and autobiography uses Antonio Damasio’s focus on homeostasis (the body’s ability to maintain a condition of equilibrium or stability through its physiological processes – e.g., constant body temperature) as an analogy for the act of autobiographical writing itself: “I would extend this view of the human organism’s homeostatic regulatory activity to include our endless fashioning of identity narratives” (154). Ultimately, this “neurobiological story” translates into the creation of a whole, stable self: “As self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders [in Damasio’s words] ‘the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same’” (155).

This desire or need for a whole, stable self at first sounds much like the traditional male autobiographical quest for autonomy when Eakin describes “our need for a stable sense of continuous identity stretching over time” (77). He says that “When we talk about ourselves, and even more when we fashion an I-character in an autobiography, we give