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TEXT poetry

Srinjay Chakravarti

The Tennis Dialogues

the cropped serif grass
on the surface
of the blank page,
and the stanzas chart out
the empty quadrants
of the court's rectangle:
from baseline to hash mark,
an invisible ball bounces
in drop shot
and half-volley.

the perimeters
of the scansion
are mapped out
with serve and lob and smash
on the invisible grid of white paper
between the enjambments
of baseline, service boxes, alleys.
above the line
between the two net-posts,
the eye's alert trajectory
estimates
the three-feet-high cord
that truncates the template
into a calculus of strophic spaces.
the power play
of kicker and twist,
topspin and slice—

the entire repertoire of strokes—

determines the confusion matrix

of sense, structure, shadow.

echoes within echoes

ring within the geometry

of grammar and syntax,

in visual follow-through

with the ball's whiplash

and the prosodic arc

of its rhythm.

Game. Set. And match!

Srinjay Chakravarti is a writer, editor and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. He was educated at St Xavier's College, Calcutta and at universities based in Calcutta and New Delhi. University degrees: BSc (Economics honours), MA (English). A former journalist with The Financial Times Group, his creative writing, including poetry, short fiction and translations, has appeared in over 150 publications in 30-odd countries. His first book of poems Occam's Razor received the Salt Literary Award from John Kinsella in 1995. He has won first prize (\$7,500) in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08. Website: www.srinjaychakravarti.com.



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TEXT poetry

Mitchell Welch

2 poems

Peregrine Nest

At street-level every surface shines. Folk wear fleece coats
and foxes move among the fleeced. I see myself reflected
in the window selling snatches of the bootleg city below
to guests and hosts of imagined talk shows. I wear slippers
and scribble stolen scenes from the silver screen on napkins,
firing them off in a vacuum to the lobby bar to be served
like sloe gin to the weather's wet and weathered comers-in.

The city's gutters and battlements puke. One by one
its citizens and aliens refute the rain. I know their pain;
I've showered five times today. Somewhere down there
a flat-out fox creeps up on a crucial life decision, unaware

his cover is in fact life's cold presentiment creeping up
on him. I write him a cue card and leave it at the bar.

Day, or something like it, eventually breaks. Mist rises
from green streets removing themselves from the equation
and the bottom falls out of the market for my observations
as one by one the sun comes up, the clouds recede, the city
makes itself a magic, a macchiato, a strong skinny latte.

There's nothing left to say, it seems to want me to say.

Persephone in the Archeion

In the Reading Room a slight levee of light
dams the autumn night banking up outside.

Thumbing through scant sheaves I leave
traces of me in the corners as I read.

A figure steps from between the lines
to cut its shape in the scrim of my mind.

Outlining the shadows of doubts I cut them out
from page after page of handwritten notes

till their shadows' shadows make a crowd.
How much of the heresy is hearsay, I wonder.

I have no doubt, and wonder aloud what shape
my own shadow makes through the autumn clouds,

head bowed in its acid-paper shroud.
I read and re-read until all that's left,

one last yellow leaf, quavers. All pages turn to this.
The page-date screeches through the ages.

It's almost a song, the papery seed of a tree
mourning the last of its deciduate leaves.

The bank light burns. The last page in the file turns:
a letter to the last woman to see so-and-so alive,

weighted down and tucked in the manila spine
like some kind of specimen in an archive.

Mitchell Welch is a Gold Coast-based creative writer, editor and communications consultant. He has a BA in English and Political Science from the University of Queensland, and a Master of Arts in Writing from Swinburne University of Technology.



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TEXT poetry

Les Wicks

2 poems

Eat Silence

The leader was a song
stuck in our heads.
Of course nothing much happened
some executions.

They built a holy house
over the remains of a clinic.

Scruffy wildlife was tidied up
& the war barely lasted a lifetime.

The leader was a song.
Trick is
more simple the melody that much harder
to expunge from our minds.
We were told we had sunshine
but never went outside.
He eventually dropped off the charts
a riot ensued.

Naval Gaze

This barnacle, this gristle
oh captain me
has sailed without a card or charts.
Adventures belly-flopped across a tidal desire.

In the distance I now see landfall,
concrete sutures across the rivers
rushing to their extinction.

To remember land. Alone in freedom
yet somehow crowded,
read solid books by the blindness of headlights.
To leave this sequestration
risk ventilation. I can't ignore any longer
those stones left to explore themselves.

Watch the news, am told
the trees that fire ignored last summer are now
reduced to traffic wardens, casual-hire rates...
anything's better than *lumber*.
Their roadside gesticulations approximate beauty
but remain ineffective
like all the great ideas.

My ship slips between waves,
navigates again towards the sanctity of asphalt, of coffee;
those rich black wonders.

*Les Wicks' 15th book is Time Taken – New and Selected (Puncher and
Wattman 2022)*



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TEXT prose

Ryan O'Neill

Notes for a Novel

In Vienna, walking through the streets in tight shoes. At night, bursting the blisters on my heels with my teeth, the taste reminding me of the ocean.

Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life. Eudora Welty.

After my parents' divorce, when I was eight. How, before I went to stay with my father for the weekend, my mother would draw a map of the scrapes and bruises on my legs, and hold it against me when I got home to make sure there were no new ones.

He had carefully preserved his English accent for sixty years, as if hoping it might be worth something someday.

Among the many problems which beset the novelist, not the least weighty is the choice of the moment at which to begin his novel. Vita Sackville-West.

He had been dying for over an hour, but he was beginning to feel better.

Use my return from France in chapter six.

How my wife looked at me on our honeymoon.

Symbols: a frying pan, an odd yellow sock, a torn one dollar note, the Southern Cross.

My ten years in Europe.

It's not a good idea to put your wife into a novel; not your latest wife anyway. Norman Mailer.

He was an atheist who liked the sound of church bells.

How my son, at the age of three, would scream if I took him to a bookshop.

The biology textbook I was given in high school. How every picture of a flower, a baby, a cell, a virus, a mollusc, was defaced by a drawing of a penis.

He walked like a man carrying a heavy suitcase in the rain.

Use my father's dementia in chapter one.

How my wife changed the ending to Humpty Dumpty, how he was put together again, so my son wouldn't cry. How I later told my son this was a lie.

A novel has to have a shape, and life doesn't have any. Jean Rhys.

My wife's mother, asking for money to babysit our son.

Ten chapters.

How my wife looked at me after six years of marriage.

It's with bad sentiments that one makes good novels. Aldous Huxley.

Asking my father how we had had enough money to live on when I was a child, and his reply: 'I stole like fuck, son.'

Use her affair in chapter five.

There was a notice on the wall that said, 'Anything you break must be paid for.' He said, 'My heart is broken. How much for that?'

The Japanese tourists in Auschwitz who asked me to take their photograph standing in front of the gas chambers. 'Cheese,' I said, and pressed the button.

A novel is a mirror carried along a main road. Stendahl.

The notice on the bathroom door of the church. 'What would Jesus do?' The scribbled response. 'Wipe his backside, I would hope.'

Use my mother's cancer in chapter nine.

He was reminded of his divorce every time he went up a flight of stairs of his apartment block, and his left hand made no *ting* against the metal banisters.

How flies are more persistent in Australia than in Europe

If you're writing a novel, you're in a room for three or four years. There's not much coming in from the outside. Mordechai Richter.

How my wife won't look at me now.

Diarrhoea in Marseilles. Having to wipe my backside with the first chapter of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*.

My wife's strained smile, like someone posing too long for a photograph.

How my father went to chapel every morning after my mother died. How the knees of his trousers became shiny with piety.

There is a splinter of ice in the heart of every writer. Graham Greene.

The woman I saw on the bus, her skin discoloured by some disease, like the stains found in second-hand books.

My wife, saying 'For Christ's sake, not another book about a writer.'

He could not write a word without wanting to revise it, and neither could he live a day without wanting to alter it.

His neighbours had a swimming pool which cast a graffiti of light on his bedroom wall.

Use my son's chemotherapy in chapter eight.

The sunset was beautiful in a trite way, reminding him of the inspirational posters his mother liked to buy.

The smell of my wife's neck.

When asked what his job was, he would say enigmatically, 'The same as Franz Kafka's,' so that people would think he was a writer, and not an insurance assessor.

Only in a novel are all things given full play. D.H. Lawrence.

Visiting the Sistine chapel on our honeymoon and forgetting my glasses. God and Adam blurred together. My wife laughing at me.

Use my father's limp. Use my wife's orgasms. Use my mother's dressing gown.
Use my son's dreams.

She came home from church reeking of incense the way an adulteress reeks of another man.

My wife's old love letters. How I secretly underlined the spelling mistakes.

Yes, oh dear, yes, the novel tells a story. E.M. Forster.

Use my wife's breakdown in chapter nine.

The Christmas decorations had been up for three years now.

'What do I think is the greatest work of fiction in the Western canon? The Sydney bus timetable.'

How we would argue in front of our son, spelling out the swear words.

Novel (n) A short story padded. Ambrose Bierce.

The peculiar quality of the silence after my wife asked, 'Do you still love me?'

There should be a noun, he thought, for someone who interrupts a writer at work. A porlock?

He was a fervent, if confused Marxist and had recently made the great discovery that the world was an unfair place.

My father, if I commented on the disgusting smell in his house. 'Och, your nose is too close to your arse!'

Even in his erotic dreams, he used contraception.

The sun had gone behind the clouds some time before but the bricks at his back were still warm with the memory of it

'Bee ay es tee ay ar dee.'

She was always restless when talking on the phone, picking up a matchbox or plumping a cushion, as if she were a forgetful actor and her lines were hidden there.

He spoke in a voice that had become used to giving dictation, and I almost expected him to say 'comma, full stop, new paragraph.'

How, when we argued, my wife would say 'You're a selfish bastard. Use that in your book.'

There is no happiness in love, except at the end of an English novel. Anthony Trollope.

She would often preface her words with 'Listen,' and, perhaps recalling the classroom, she would clasp an earlobe delicately between finger and thumb.

It was an anonymous place, like a town in a parable.

A good novel tells the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells the truth about its author. G.K. Chesterton.

How the branches of a certain tree seen from below can resemble cracks in the sky.

The clean white of the Adam's apple between the buttons of his black shirt like a priest's collar.

Use my son's death in chapter ten.

I see the poem or the novel ending with an open door. Michael Ondaatje.

He spent his life waiting for the moment of epiphany. But it never came.

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TEXT prose

Rosanna E. Licari

Thanking Bill from the Other World

Cath's arty friends would have found it shocking to see her climbing the front steps of this cashed-up bogan's house, a man who knew nothing about literature, feminism or women. Well, perhaps certain types of women. Some things just need to get done, she rationalised, smoothing her wet, black hair. Yes, Bill was coarse. Yes, he was offensive. But he'd done her many favours so she had to keep him sweet. One of his friends actually called him Filthy Bill. Filthy for short. However, none of the guys in her crowd would have known much about what was under a car bonnet or how to chop branches from trees.

Bill did.

'Are you there?' she called. She was holding a carton of cigarettes, her keys and mobile phone.

'Come in, come in,' Bill said.

Cath walked into the kitchen then through the living room and onto the veranda. He'd done a good renovation on the house. He had some taste. He was on the front deck on a day bed, and had opened the folding glass doors on the veranda so he could watch a movie on the huge plasma screen in the living room.

He was clean and neatly dressed as usual. He didn't look like a job. That only became apparent when he opened his mouth.

‘Elvis!’ she noted. Bill was watching Elvis Presley and Ann Margaret in *Viva Las Vegas*. ‘When was that made? 1960 something?’

‘Sit down. I’ll make you a cup of tea. How do you have it?’

‘Thanks. I need it. White, no sugar.’ Bill got up and went into the kitchen, and Cath sat down on a chair beside the daybed and placed the carton of cigarettes on the table at her side. She looked around and picked up the opened newspaper then put it down when he came out.

‘Betting on the horses?’ she asked.

‘Not today,’ he replied, handing her the mug of tea. ‘Wal is.’ He sat back on the day bed and lit a cigarette then took a sip of his Diet Coke. ‘So, are you getting any?’

Cath rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, Bill!’

‘You probably would if you didn’t wear so much black. Me and Wal think we are going to become homosexuals.’ He took a puff of his cigarette.

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m just too set in my ways. I’ve given up on it.’

‘You’re such a mysterious person, Cath. No one in this street knows anything about you.’ He took a puff of his cigarette.

‘I’ve got a lot on. I’m studying and working.’ She took a sip of her tea. ‘Hey, the tea’s good. I bought you these.’ Cath handed over the cigarette carton. ‘I haven’t bought a carton for forever.’

‘Got a surprise?’ He was referring to the cost. ‘Should’ve said you’d give me *one* packet of cigarettes.’

She’d made a deal with Bill that if he chopped some branches from a tree in her front yard, she’d give him a carton of his favourite cigarettes. He wasn’t a drinker, so a pack of beer stubbies was out of the equation. However, she did pay more than she expected.

‘It’s OK.’

A couple of crows began calling from one of the trees in his garden.

‘I’m sick of the birds. I’ve got rid of the crows and pigeons,’ he said.

‘With an air-gun?’ she guessed.

Bill nodded.

She wouldn't have put it past him do something like that. She wondered what her politically-correct friends would say about what he'd just said. She supposed the ones who hated introduced species wouldn't really care.

'So you're shooting birds?'

'Just the pigeons and the crows. I leave the coloured ones alone.'

'The lorikeets?' Cath drank her tea.

He began to explain that he'd put up a cable and fed them from a basket. 'And I'm sick of the possum in the roof but I'd better not do anything to it.' He took another puff of his cigarette. 'You know how they're looking for the guy that killed those koalas.'

A cat started meowing at the front door.

'That has to be my cat, Basho,' she said. 'He's driving me insane. I'll send him home.'

'Basho. Where d'you get a name like that?'

'Basho was a Japanese haiku poet.'

'Whatever that is.'

'It's a special type of poetry. You write it in a particular way.' Cath got up and went into the kitchen. She clapped her hands. 'Outside! Hurry up!' The meowing stopped and the cat ran out. Cath got back to the veranda and sat down.

'Well, if you ever want to get rid of the cat, I've got plenty of insulin. I'm a diabetic, you know. It'd save you a bit of money.'

'Thanks, Bill, but I don't want him dead.'

'Now what about, Wal, my sharemate and you?' Then he puffed on his cigarette. 'He's a nice guy even though he's an alcoholic.'

'Yeah, right.' She took a sip of her tea.

'He's a nice guy. And anyway, why's your hair wet?' Bill put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

'I've been to the pool.'

'Honestly. He's a nice guy. He'll be back soon. Have you met him?'

'Once. What does he do?'

‘Sells used cars.’

‘Ah-ha.’

‘Wal needs some exercise. He’s got to go on a diet. Should go swimming with you.’
Bill lit another cigarette. ‘Did I tell you about my trip to L.A.?’

Cath shook her head.

‘A mate and me are going to take our Harleys to the Rocky Mountains.’

‘Your Harley Davis?’

‘Harley-*Davidson*,’ he corrected. As Bill took a puff of his cigarette, a car pulled up in the driveway.

‘OK. Davidson. So how long are you going for?’

‘Six weeks.’

Footsteps sounded on the front steps. Then a tall, overweight man entered the room. He was dressed in a short-sleeved shirt, long shorts and thongs.

‘Wal, this is Cath from across the road. The mysterious neighbour.’

Wal went over to Cath and shook her hand. Bill asked Wal to make Cath another tea. Then Bill realised there wasn’t enough milk or any biscuits or Diet Coke and asked Wal to get them. Bill picked up his wallet from the day bed and gave Wal some money. Without a complaint, Wal went out and drove off to do the errand. Bill took some more notes out of his wallet and offered them to Cath. ‘For the smokes.’ He knew the cigarettes had cost her and that she didn’t expect to pay so much. She wasn’t a smoker.

Cath hesitated. ‘OK ... Half of that.’

Bill got another couple of notes from his wallet and gave it to her.

‘I did up those flats at Annerley Junction. Got about six people in there. They leave the rent in a letterbox I’ve go up there and it’s sweet.’

‘Students?’

‘Nah, working people. I don’t want any trouble and if I have any trouble I’ll get a couple of my mates and get their stuff out.’ Bill took a puff of his cigarette and changed the subject. ‘Anyway, about women. What I tell them, and I mean *any* woman, is that they can bring their toothbrush and leave with their toothbrush. That’s it. No one’s moving in. They can come and go as they like, but the toothbrush is not staying either.’

She knew he had had a bitter breakup and could guess why he felt like he did about the toothbrush scenario.

‘I made a bit of a win the other night at the casino’, he said. ‘A few thousand.’

‘Not bad. Did you pay off some debt?’

‘I’m debt free.’

‘No! How did you manage that? I wish I was debt free.’

‘Well, for starters, I’ve never pay insurance.’

‘What? No!’ She knew he was a risk taker but not to this extent.

‘Never. I reckon if I lose it, I lose it.’ Bill took a puff of his cigarette.

‘I couldn’t do that. I just couldn’t live like that. My parents always paid insurance so that’s what I do.’

Some musical notes alerted Cath that she’d received a text message. Cath picked up the mobile from the table and read it. ‘Oh, what!’ She looked up at Bill. ‘It’s a friend of mine. She’s just broken up with her boyfriend.’

‘What’s she like?’

‘Tall. Beautiful.’

‘Well, let me have a look at her.’

‘Forget it. She’s a poet and very, very sensitive. She’s out of your league.’

Bill shrugged.

‘So, how’s the ex?’ Cath asked.

‘The same. Sue just never stops whinging. I pay for her petrol, I bought her a house, I pay the bills for our daughter, Alice. You know Alice?’ Cath nodded. ‘And it’s still not enough. Says she hasn’t got enough money. I even give her some money for the two kids she’s got from her first marriage. Not that I have to. But he’s bloody useless!’

‘The first husband?’

‘Yep.’

‘What does he do?’

‘Nothing much. Worker’s compo.’

‘Does she work?’

‘Yeah, a part-time beautician.’

‘How much does that pay?’

‘Not much. And stiff! She can get another job.’ He stubbed out his cigarette.

‘Mmm. What about sorting it out in court?’

‘Court? She’ll take all my money! I hate talking about her. Don’t talk to me about her.’

Bill lit another cigarette as a car pulled up outside. ‘I see Alice every couple of weeks and I’m happy about that. See. Got a tattoo with my girl’s names – Alice Rose.’ He pulled up the sleeve of his T-shirt and showed Cath the inside of his arm. ‘Rose was my grandmother’s name. I loved that woman.’

Footsteps thudded up the front steps and into the kitchen.

‘The supplies have arrived,’ Wal said.

Wal walked onto the veranda with the Diet Coke, milk and Tim Tams. ‘Got everything. There’s a bit of roadwork up near the roundabout.’

Bill continued on the women angle. ‘As I say, they can bring their toothbrush and take it home with them.’ Bill opened a new packet of cigarettes. ‘Anyway...what do you eat?’

‘I like Asian. Japanese and Vietnamese, mainly. Thai and Indian as well. Don’t like anything too hot. There’s a cheap Vietnamese at West End that I go to. Good fresh food.’

‘I went to a place in Paddo on the main drag. Took this woman there. Fancy place.’

‘Oh! The French restaurant. I know the place. *Very* nice. I ate there once. Expensive.’

‘Nah! Good night out. Cheaper than getting a hooker.’

Cath grinned. It was like listening to a person from another planet. There was no one like Bill in her circle of friends.

Wal brought in a mug of tea, a plate of biscuits and a stubby of beer on a tray, and placed them on the table near Cath. Cath helped herself to a biscuit. Then Bill’s mobile phone rang and he answered it.

‘Yeah? Got a couple of people here.’ Bill looked at Cath and Wal. ‘It’s Tom. You know him, don’t you, Cath?’ She nodded. She’d met the plumber weeks ago. ‘He wants to know if we want to go to *Sexpo* at the Exhibition Centre.’

‘No!’ she answered.

Wal just shook his head and took a sip of beer.

‘No, mate. They’re not into it. See you later.’ Bill put his phone down and then turned to Cath and Wal. ‘It’s amazing. There’re all these gadgets. There’s a thing you can put up your backside.’

Wal looked very uncomfortable. He shook his head and clung to his beer.

‘Oh, shut up, Bill!’ Cath said.

Bill didn’t.

‘It vibrates when you’re doing the business...’

‘Oh, I don’t want to know!’

‘...And all these grandmothers are there and they’re checking out the toys. All different colours and stuff.’

Cath raised her voice and said, ‘Maybe you should stop talking about it and go?’

‘No, no. I’ll go later, I’ll go later...’ Bill took a puff of his cigarette. ‘I like a woman to be a woman.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Feminine.’

‘What do you mean by feminine?’ she asked.

‘You’re winding me up.’

‘I’m not winding you up.’

‘You’re winding me up,’ he insisted.

‘I’m not sure what you *mean*.’

‘Painted nails ... nice teeth.’ Bill took a puff of his cigarette and thought for a moment. ‘I mean, she does the inside of the house and I do the outside. She wouldn’t be doing that!’ Cigarette in hand, Bill pointed to the plasma screen where Ann Margaret was

sitting on the floor in overalls, helping Elvis in the car workshop. Bill stubbed out his cigarette and lit another one.

‘Do you barbecue?’

‘Yep.’ Bill proudly pointed to the state-of-the-art barbecue on the veranda. ‘Look at that!’

‘Very nice. OK. I get it.’

‘If she treats me like a king, I’ll treat her like a queen.’ Bill puffed on his cigarette. ‘Wal, Cath swims. You should go with her.’

Wal said nothing, just nodded and took another sip of his beer.

‘I’ve got to go. Got to write something.’ She’d had enough of Bill’s company.

‘That poetry stuff?’

‘Yes. I’ve got a book coming out at the end of the year.’ But Bill was such good copy that she might even write a short story.

‘I’ll be the first one to buy it, your poetry book,’ Bill said. ‘I’ll give it to my daughter.’

‘Hey, thanks.’

‘And in sixty years...’

‘... I’ll be dead.’ She stood up. ‘Why don’t you come to the poetry festival?’

‘Nah! Not going anywhere near that. Just bring the book over.’

Cath collected her things. ‘Thanks for helping me, Bill.’

‘No worries. Anytime.’

After Cath left, Bill took a sip of his Coke and asked Wal, ‘So what do you think of that sheila?’

Wal took a sip of his beer. ‘A bit weird. One of those arty types. Wears a lot of black.’

Bill stubbed out yet another cigarette. ‘Mysterious, mate. She’s mysterious.’

Rosanna E. Licari's work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including fourW, New Writing, Idiom 23, Meniscus, Quadrant, Pulped Fiction: anthology of microlit (Spineless Wonders, 2021), Scars: anthology of microlit (Spineless Wonders, 2020), TEXT and The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry (MUP, 2020). She won the 2021 AAALS Poetry Award and is the poetry editor of StylusLit <www.styluslit.com>. She teaches English to migrants and refugees in Brisbane, Australia.



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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

Four stories

Bad Connection

I think we have a bad connection ... I say.

You're frozen and pixelated, I add. Can you hear me?

You sound pissed—

You're not a drinker of course—it's yet another thing you judge people for.

You sound like you're talking underwater. All I heard was: 'I want ...'.

If you can hear me, write something in the chat.

*I'll keep talking. Let's get this conversation over with ... in case one of us dies ...
Sorry, people are making peace with the past. The world's becoming hopelessly
Freudian.*

Even though you're frozen I can tell I'm annoying you—

You're one of the most annoying people I've known. It's so draining.

Why did you reach out? I think you want to say: Sorry it got messy—

Not 'sorry' like it's your fault because you're not really the sorry type—but sorry because it's a shame.

You there?

You push hard—pulling everything apart in your mind's eye—and you're so emotionless. I think we're on opposite ends of the emotional intensity spectrum. That's the problem here, right? I'm 'too much'.

From my point of view—

For once ...

I don't appreciate the scrutiny. You think you know it all. You prise things out of me. I feel like you've drugged me and made me do stuff ... Okay, that's too much but it's like you tricked me. Soon I won't be sleeping at all.

Your version of friendship is like an inquiry, as if you're constantly researching your next story ... Your writing is not as good as you think it is ...

God. I hope you're not there ...

But ... you write at arms' length.

And in real life you're the opposite of arms' length—a real close talker, so close it's like you're inhaling my words, sucking my memories like marrow.

Why are you so distant on the page?

Your hand just moved. Are you back? You have lovely hands—

You make me second-guess my words with your walk-on-water attitude. Behold Aquaman of the stillwater, casting off all the messy emotion-people ...

You're so cerebral ...

It's a mirage.

I should leave this meeting—

Your face is frozen on an angle. Your left eye is glinting silver. It reminds me of your tendency to LASH OUT if you don't get what you want.

Why do you hang out with so many women if you're angry with us? Write the truth about your Mum ... Call it fiction if you don't want to own it. Do you blame her? I think you're scared to say it ...

Are you there?

You ask too many questions.

If you're there, can you ask me something?

BBQ

'Ungrateful cunts,' he says, pointing the tongs at his children, mostly grown now.

The plural use of the term lingers on his tongue—a very slight whistle, *cuncea*.

He doesn't yell and this satisfies her as much as the positioning of the steaming tongs, moving from face to face.

Back in the day there may have been a hurled fork, a fist in a wall. Both and more.

Today it's remarkably calm and she wallows, sponging the dishes in too-hot water, the woodsmoke marinade steaming around the kitchen as if there were a roast in the oven, as if the dinner was in-promise, as if they were another family.

She's not much of a dishwasher, these days, but she takes the steel soap-pad, working deliberately, shifting the greasy charcoal from the hinge of the tongs, rubbing at older muck, too, until the tongs spring open, and the hinge screw is set swirling in a whirlpool of briny water.

Not easy to die

I wander the street near work, looking for something to buy you.

I stop in for Pho because it will satisfy thirst and hunger and sweat-out a mild hangover, adding extra chilli and Thai basil because it will help me decide if I can see the year out in this lobotomising job.

I lost sight of what I wanted. I'm not sure I can turn it around.

I shouldn't have thrown the plate...

As I shred the plum-coloured basil, I notice the soup man, hovering, fingers knotted together.

Holy basil, ah, he says, in meditative singsong.

Shuffling toward the counter, I spy the beautiful plants—miniatures, all different species, arranged in tiny painted pots on a wrought-iron stand near the register.

'Do you make these?' I say, looking at his childlike fingers. 'So beautiful,' I add.

Holding the shiny black pot, I see my fingers reflected, running my thumb along the spear-shaped leaves—purplish and smooth, slightly transparent, fine red veins exposed.

I hand the pot to the plant man. 'I'll take this, please?' I say. 'And the soup.'

He holds the plant at eye-height: 'Not easy to die, this one,' he says.

'Perfect,' I say.

The wind in my open mouth

The wind in my open mouth reminds me of you.

You were killed on your motorbike. But I'm not thinking about that.

I'm thinking of our kissing like a novel that you can't-put-down. The dry leaves beneath us like love ghosts, clearing their throats. Your urgent fingers flexed, both of us gasping, breaking the kiss, crying out like small children, lost and bewildered under the ancient trees—

—leaves adrift, wafting in the half-light like papery stars.

I want to rewind time, stay in the cave by the roiling sea rather than crawling up the embankment.

Who cares if the others come along and see us in the cave?

They could watch for all I care, now.

They say you were killed instantaneously. As if instants can't be forever-long.

It was a scorching day. I wonder if you were wearing bike pants or if your beautiful thighs were massacred.

The wind scoops dry leaves in whirlpools of broken light. Everywhere, pages turning.

Julia Prendergast is a writer of short and long form fiction, based on unceded Wurundjeri land. Julia's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Her short stories feature in the current edition of Australian Short Stories. Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE). Julia is a Senior Lecturer in Writing and Literature, at Swinburne University,

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TEXT prose

Susan Presto

Jetztzeit – Now Time

Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured
by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us.
—Walter Benjamin

Jetztzeit, a term coined by Walter Benjamin, represents the imperative to create in ways that make a difference at times when changes are needed. Benjamin's *jetztzeit* is a call to action during troubled times and can be identified using Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of balance. Urgency is required when the general will is being hijacked by the individual will of a powerful individual.

Considering Benjamin ultimately took his life while on the run from the Nazi regime, the imperative he was considering was the one between life and death while fighting against the 'individual will' of Hitler. Never forgetting the power of the written word to create change in times of 'individual will' over 'general will' is deeply embedded in the intention to write.



At least nineteen people were there for the murder.

Nineteen people were logged in.

Nineteen people listened for over 45mins without saying or doing anything to stop what happened in the end.

Were they distanced from the event by technology and or the psychological distance to their own lives?

It could be explained away simply however the fact remains that multiple people and their partners heard a crime, a murder, and did nothing to stop it.

The voice that came through first was quiet and low.

It was not easy to hear behind the drone of the seminar presenter, but every now and then the presenter would pause and take a breath and the tone of the man's voice caught the attention of all nineteen seminar participants.

The way he described the beauty of the woman in the evening light.

Its reflection on her dark hair and the sheen on her smooth skin contained a quiet breathiness and sensuality that reached through the screen into the kitchens, lounge rooms, offices of every seminar participant.

All nineteen sat up a little straighter.

Fifteen reached for the keyboard and tapped a message to alert the participant that their audio button was on.

Not a single one sent the message.

All nineteen sat at attention straining to hear more as the woman let out a low moan in response to what they couldn't see but could vividly imagine.

No one admitted this until compelled by oath.

This was the moment that decided her fate.

This was the moment she should have been saved.

One seminar participant sat with his wife in front of the television with a glass of wine in hand.

His wife heard the voice the same time as he leaned towards the keyboard and tapped the message, ‘We can hear you!’ She reached past him and held his hand still before he could hit ‘send’. She smiled at him and leant into his chest as the low quiet voice described in detail the shape of the woman’s arse and the feel of her softness under his hands as he touched her. Her smell.

The woman did not speak but the sounds she made spoke volumes to those who listened closely in the safety of their homes and offices.

Many times, in the first few minutes, the participants say they almost said something.

But not one did.

The stranger’s voice never stopped. He went on to describe the things he was going to do to the woman and she never once objected or spoke any words in response. She just made the sounds that kept them all there, listening, compelled to let this continue, straining to hear more.

The only person who left, for just a moment, was a young dad. His wife walked in with a coffee for him, he muted the sound on her approach. He would not say why he muted the sound, just that he did. On his day in court his wife sat beside him, with her head hung low, never meeting his eyes as he said what he knew about what happened during the online presentation of a simple instructional course for middle management.

Yes, he muted the sound, but as soon as his wife walked back towards the family room and the noisy confusion of bedtime in a house full of young children, he carefully unzipped his work pants and turned the sound back on, hoping it was not over and someone had not told them they could be heard. He never mentioned this in court. No one asked and he was not keen to volunteer this fact.

A woman watching the seminar on the other side of the world took her computer into her bedroom, grabbing the bottle of wine beside her as she went. She turned the volume up full and closed her eyes to block the drone of the presenter’s voice so she could focus on the sounds from the woman and the low quiet continuous stream of words accompanying them. She freely admitted her involvement in court and cried for her entire time on the stand. She could not say aloud what had kept her there, listening. No one could, but they all did, every single one.

Another woman called her husband and they made love on the floor beside the dining table listening to the strangers. Even afterwards they stayed, listening, never sure why but compelled.

Nineteen people were called to the stand from places all around the world, not a single one could properly explain why they had listened to what they'd heard and done nothing about it.

Ten people explained the guilt they'd felt, nine didn't bother, but every single one hung their head when questioned about their lack of response, their lack of action when they all signed out of the seminar at the end.

Ultimately the presenter was fined. He said he'd simply been playing a recording he'd made from a previous seminar and was off the hook as far as witnesses go. However, the seminar was supposed to be live, so the government ended up charging him for fraud and revoking his license. All nineteen doubted this story but not one could muster the emotion required to drag him down the path the rest were headed. Fines and a license-revoking looked like a clever option. Who could blame him?

Not one person could actually pinpoint the moment everything changed. Even though there were at least nineteen audio witnesses, not one person gave the same time for the beginning of the end. No one could confirm the time of death, no one knew when the tone changed. Seven people said they weren't sure if it was real. Twelve said they only knew she was dead when they heard the man begin to cry.

An older man who had participated in the seminar was the most honest about what happened. He was willing to admit it was the most sensual thing he'd ever heard. He admitted he nearly let them know he could hear them, but he was compelled to hear more every time he reached for the keyboard. He admitted he thought it was done on purpose, that they'd wanted to be heard, until he heard her die. This was when he left the seminar, locked up his office, got in his car and went home. He admitted he did not forget about the night, he could not. It haunted him still today. He also

admitted he did not regret listening, but he did regret not taking responsibility for what he'd heard and that his shame had kept him quiet.

The court room was completely silent when the witnesses spoke. The whole room held its breath as the judge asked, nineteen times, 'Why did you stay and listen?' 'Why didn't you let them know you could hear them?'

Not a single answer gave any satisfaction to the packed courtroom. The confusion of the witnesses added to the curiosity of those who had not heard the voices and a secret, silent twentieth listener, also sitting in the courtroom, saw this as an opportunity too good to miss, and anonymously uploaded the audio of the seminar.

It went viral.

Ultimately, they were all charged with a crime. It didn't make it any easier that no one could identify the murderer. Such a distinctive voice must surely be recognised by someone?

But no one came forward and when the woman's body was found, there were no signs of anyone else ever being there.

Susan Presto: Writer, nature lover. Always learning.



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TEXT prose

Soren Tae Smith

Five Ways, Some Pics: How to become a Borgesian non-writer

Yesterday, incapable of writing one word. Today no better . . .

—Franz Kafka, diary entry

I do not know which of us has written this page

—J.L. Borges, 'Borges and I'

You write. Each new break lets in light. Hair-splitting. You are one of the hairs you split – then you are one of the split hairs that you split. Then you will have a break and read. Remember who you were when you first read. That first opening up.

Read the work of those whose labyrinthine splittings, fracturings, fragmentings and breakings-open became a beautiful rose. Read Borges, '*Eres música / firmamentos, palacios, ríos, ángeles / rosa profunda, ilimitada, íntima / que el Señor mostrará a mis ojos muertos.*'

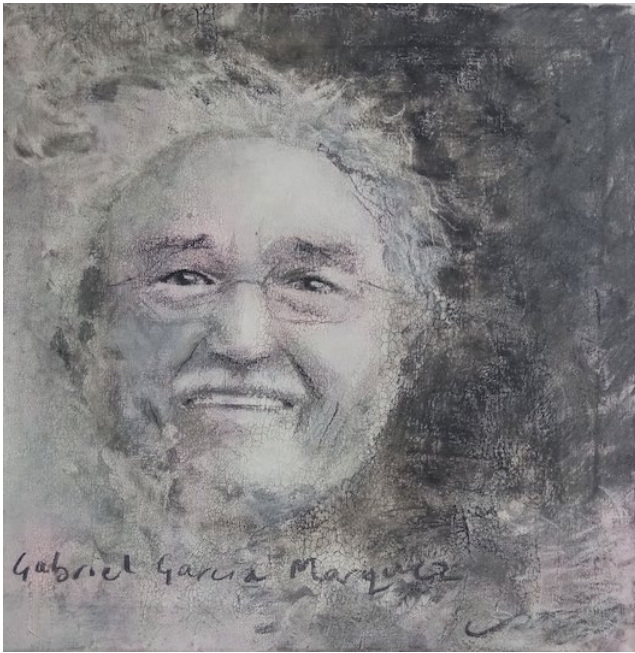
Close your eyes.

Way one: draw other writers. You are not a visual artist but you can copy from the little pin-ups in the nooks of your desk. Charcoal will be messy and imprecise but not as messy and imprecise as biographies if you are looking for a non-writer's face. For the

Borgesian non-writer does not belong to himself but, Borges insists, to language and tradition. That is, to you. Biographers have rewarded your curiosity by telling you about Kafka and prostitutes, about Wilde and the rent boys (O.W.'s poststructuralism Bunburistically performed extra-textually, of course), Wallace's electroshock therapy, and that a near-blind Borges was trying to be a vegetarian. So draw them – and remember, while you draw, the person you met in words, the hybrid *you-me* that you (non-dual) now are.

'I can't see,' said Borges, in an interview with Achy Obejas, 'but I can feel. I can feel the people and the places... You only remember things that you really care for.'

You first met Borges in 1986, in a suburb of the Southern Hemisphere, when you were



a pre-teen. Luckily, he wasn't locked in that shared house's glass cabinet with what were disparagingly called 'drug books' (*Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream; The Love of Mushrooms and Toadstools* [incorrectly filed]; *The Doors of Perception*). No. He was freely available in the living room, though in the awkward company of Carlos Casteneda (should have been in cabinet), the *I Ching*, *The (Penguin) Koran* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Camus and Kafka had also found their ways there and rested with Borges alongside something horrific by Anaïs Nin and some fairly suspect 'photography' books. *Les Enfants Terribles*.

Borges: an incomprehensible but fascinating household phenomenon, along with Shakespeare, the Polaroid camera and Ice Magic.

You reached for *Labyrinths* every few months, enjoying the feel of rebuff from the stories' openings, the waves of name-dropping and obtuse references, and how 'the real Borges' would appear a few paragraphs or pages in, as though eventually distracted from his cleverness by his own story. You marked off time by renewing contact with those strange but communicative artefacts: Borges; Yes; Pearl; Chaucer; The Plastic Ono Band. Adults were workaholics. They had forgotten they owned records and books by then.

The first Borges story you understood in full was 'The Secret Miracle'. There was something important for you in the business of a prisoner completing his work entirely inside himself, triumphing over circumstances, time and mortality.

You wanted to do this too.

Etiology. The mirrored puzzle Author-Text-World refracts the enigmatic non-writer, who dwells in all of these three and belongs wholly to none of them. The non-writer does not exist in simple alterity to any term of this triad but arises, underlies and haunts its usual pairings, just as the reader does.

A parable, read as a child, in Scholey's *Discontented Dervishes*, and imperfectly remembered, states that a woman gave her greedy husband exactly two kilograms of meat to cook while she was at work. When she returned home the meat was all gone and there was no dinner.

'Where is the meat?' she asked.

'The cat ate it,' claimed the husband.

The woman weighed the cat. It weighed exactly two kilograms.

'If this is the cat, where is the meat?' she asked. 'And if this is the meat, where is the cat?'

Binaries do not discover the non-writer, who (which?) retreats under analysis and comparisons. Appears only *in flagrante* while you read and write. The figure thrives under conditions of uncertainty, but must not be confused with more straight-forward authorial intrusions into narrative. The non-writer and reader are free to reach for each other, sometimes as one person looking in the mirror of text, sometimes from either side of it, collapsing time and space. They are not purely biological, being caught up in and influenced by the nature of text, yet seem far too human to be reduced to delineated textual features. Stories entered into your ears and eyes and went out again. You are part of a story. But whose?

The writer is a reader *in extremis*, in need of resolutions. Not only is her identity founded on a schism but internal fragmentation is her stock in trade. Is this fiction? The story writing art, like the theatrical one, requires surrender of the fixed self. The young writer 'finds herself' via reading and goes on to discover a further abstracted self in her own writing practice and publications. 'I know of Borges from the mail,' writes Borges, 'and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary'.

The figure of the non-writer arises from the duplicity involved in the writing act and in response to reader and text. But is this non-writer, like the reader, a necessary someone who must be shut out of the text? Borges has worried about this in 'Borges and I' where

he writes that he lives and goes on living to write but that it cannot save him. It does not belong to him.

Borges attempts to write *as the non-writer* — not an easy task! He reveals the writing activity from the non-writer’s point of view: an attempt to flee from the famous Borges who overtakes him, turning everything of himself into ‘material’ (a flight mirrored in the story itself). The tale can be read as a desperate note between two hostages of the text – non-writer and reader, who are in strong affinity due to the artificiality and ‘magnification’ of writer-self and text.

When Borges dictated it to his mother (being too blind to write) she said she thought it was the best thing he had ever done.

There is no direct address to the reader but the final line’s confession, ‘I do not know which of us has written this page’ is aligned with the reader’s own question. Have we read another example of the writer’s cleverness or a personal admission of a real difficulty? Or a mixture? Even the inevitable irony of his plight is turned moebius-like to serve the will of this (supposedly powerless) non-writer, who is more than a heuristic device for confronting the Barthesian problem of authorship – the figure leads us back to an intimacy with a perceived story-teller. Borges’ usual sincerity precludes dismissal of the story as mere cleverness. Are you reading fiction or non-fiction? I couldn’t see him and he couldn’t see me, and yet there we were.

The non-writer asks us to recognise him *in the text*, not as a biographical or apocryphal background, and even *as a text*.

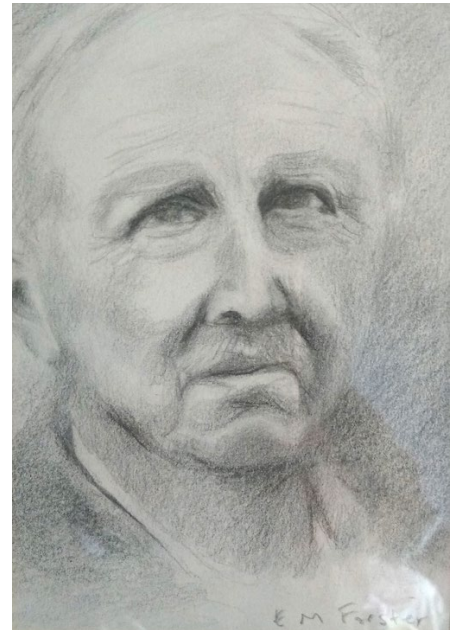
Borges’ preoccupations – mirrors, mazes, doubles and dreams – are imposed by the medium: *the text uses the author* to hold a mirror up to *its own nature*, while the non-writer resists. The manipulative power of art on both artist and subject is seen in those earlier horror tropes: art devouring life in Poe’s ‘The Oval Portrait’, and art concealing/revealing unbearable truths about human nature in Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*. Aesthetic effects, including the non-writer, may raise similar horror: a heart-beat under the floor! or perhaps Barthesian *jouissance* – a presence! alive! in ink!

In a time following exhaustive analysis and criticism, irony may be impossible to avoid. Writers are under pressure to decide whether to post-critically resume connection, communication and sincerity, as David Foster Wallace recognised and Rita Felski discusses, or to see their role as reflecting ad infinitum the self-reflexive shards of post-modernism. How is a writer to reflect her own *awareness of writing* without entering a blind alley which makes a mathematical sport of the twenty-six letters? Borges resists ‘making metaphysics and the arts into a kind of play of combinations’, and he writes: ‘Those who practice this game forget that a book is more than a verbal structure or

series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory.’

One of these voices, impressions and memories is the non-writer. The non-writer *is* this dialogue, this half-hidden heteroglossia, as well as that which produces it. This presence is not either/or but both and many, reconciling the world of doubles first introduced by the reading act.

The non-writer is rarely overt, often edited out, and sometimes enters text subversively, via unconscious nostalgia on the part of the writer for *the self they have lost to the cause of literature production*. Lost in the territory of writing, the author seeks a mirror in which to find herself (or anyone), just as a starving person seeks a morsel in a dream. This dissatisfaction is a perpetual motion machine driving the production of literature – post-critically, towards attempts at concretization (sex, the body, graphic narrative, transgressive literature) or towards further fluidity and diffusion in emotional and psychological regions. The non-writer seeks meaningful connection, yet as hybrid, reflection or epiphenomenon, this figure is infertile. He does not easily produce more text, or further forking paths through the text. The figure appears over the edge of the rational world, which turns out to be round.



When you discover non-writers through reading and writing practices, you will have the urge to turn away from writing for a time. Consider personal life-writing but do not approach biography.

You may choose to draw.

Images and imagoes. You have been drawing writers for years without noticing that you are doing it or understanding why. Note that your room contains a monstrous array of doublings brought to you by your involvement in writing: yourself and your stories; your feet and your desk's feet; Borges' books about books; two cats; diminutive pictures of your favourite writers, from which you have made portraits, and those portraits themselves – images of non-writers (their mute faces) in whose work you see some of your own aims. That must be why you draw them. Your cause, their

portraiture.

You sense, through a writer's oeuvre, a *person*. Books are close companions: they lie on your bed; they spend more time in your house than you do. Next, you exchange messages with this presence while the reader and writer carry on the business of literature: it is a parallel apprenticeship in the human aspects of the writing craft. The non-writer is the 'dead' author non-structurally resurrected for and by you and *as you*. It is a text-dwelling creature, surviving salamander-like in the ink, and *its humanity only persists through yours*.

The non-writer is neither a narrator, character, theme, syntax or any other feature — yet it can be mixtures of any of these, or heard as a voice behind the voice, or noticed as an absence. The appearance of the non-writer (like the reader) is hailed by, 'I cannot be here, yet I am'. The non-writer wears the writer as a mask. Its face feels like your own.

The difference between writer and non-writer becomes clearer.

For instance, you note that *the writer* Kurt Vonnegut playfully inserted himself into his text wearing mirrored sunglasses so as not to be recognised. For this and other antics he is called post-modern. But the *non-writer* K.V. is more easily found coughing and sighing in his frequent white spaces, almost as though he agreed that language should cease after the wars.

For example, you will find:

Cough.

And, often:

What a world!

Or just:

This involvement with the non-writer was your first experience of duplicitous behaviour beyond the simple astral projection required to 'get absorbed in a book'. Your admiration of these imagoes, which you now understand to be made of real human fragments—Calvino's 'empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders,

is an endless, formless, empty ruin!’—was an early initiation into the broken personality of a writer. Early naïve question: will *I* ever be able to be that broken? (Answer: yes. Answer from Kafka: ‘Avoidance of suffering turns out to be the only suffering you can avoid.’) Your writing practice flowed from the cracks that formed when squiggles on paper became a primary source of human connection.

New connections break old ones; thinking about this breaks more. Each break lets in light. This is how it feels to write, until it flows.

Your heroes are no longer writers. They are non-writers.

When you draw them, the process feels like a culmination of a much longer one, perhaps life-long: a hybrid is born, self-other; image-word; death-life, curse-blessing, reader-writer.

Odd parts come together, through this parallel apprenticeship, and you find yourself in possession of something you didn’t expect to own.

‘I have a curious animal,’ says Kafka, ‘half-kitten, half-lamb.’

Way two. Write stories. Things are about to become difficult. Some titles are too long. If you want to write one about David Foster Wallace, for instance, some of the title will need to be in footnotes, and it won’t be out of imitation. For instance: Fate of the maximalist yet non-periphrastic [FN: what is the word for the right word or for seeking the right word?, not for a word you can’t quite remember but straining for that exact piece of vocabulary you may or may not have, and using a subtle sense for seeking and recognising that word, and for a person who does that nearly all day, every day, even at the expense of their private life?, what is the word for that? Oh yeah—] Writer.

And what should you dedicate it to?

*To the point,
an unrealised ideal,
born never, died never*

Imagine a man (OK, yes, it’s about D.F.W. but don’t necessarily say so), a desiderative man, who gradually capillarises out into the lonelier areas of the dictionary, where obscure words still in use (by *whom?*), such words as imbricately and epexegetic are found (find better eggs?), such words that have never relied on human tending, pure non-GM strains, words that my Kindle dictionary says ‘selection not found’ about, and which my processor underlines, suggesting more familiar options or ‘Did you mean?’;

for instance, phlogistic [sic].

For instance, descantant.

Periphrastic.

And anyway, importantly, he does not do this out of a longing to show how smart he is, even though he's young, but out of a worrying mental-illnessy need to find the exact exact word &c. Even if no one read it, he'd be doing the same thing. He grimaces and strains for that tiny hole-filling word that is in a gap too small for everyone to see. And does anyone even care about it? Or they haven't tried to see or care? Or they don't need to see? Or really can't? His glasses get thicker and thicker, his stutter stutters, and finally he can communicate to few. (Beautiful mind cliché trope? Ouch.) It's a vocational hazard, especially for novelists. His response is to search for the exact exact word for that particular type of loneliness when you are too exact for everyone else and they are too vague for you and what it might feel like and mean, then he uses *that* word as an adjective to some noun no one can find anywhere, which he's probably just coined, and advances out of sight.

But make it so he starts off at medium-high vocab range, and tends to overreach, so that for the first quarter of his career (consider tennis metaphor – does tennis even have quarters? Btw my default dic. gives 'flameout' [*informal, chiefly N. Amer.* 'a complete or conspicuous failure'] example as: *his first-round flameout at the U.S. Open*) he redrafts by picking out the difficult (for others) words so the story can be readable by most anyone (which it can't. Imp: because he's never been even anything like anyone he has no idea that most of them don't even read) – later (what was turning point?), he realises it's a mess that way, he leaves those words in, adding more, and more, and then slowly surrenders to his impulses/illness.

His editor? Others? Do we notice? And worry? Something with every fifth word someone has to look up and not even the dictionary can figure it out because the words have become contortionists along with the face, nouns becoming adjectives, adverbial nouns, adverbial nominal adjectives he uses as whatever's almost as if he's, yes, this is the point, that if someone like that could be allowed to go on they were going to turn English not back into Greek or Latin (probably Greek in his case) but actually postulated Proto-Indo European being not first at all but final (Post-?), and being built by the bodies (who stop a hole to keep the wind away) of innumerable writers (while linguists and illiterate alike stay high and dry walking on our bone roads &c.) or in fact any other logical language he could imagine, almost as if the vastly poetic but non-rhyming potential and syncretic anatomy of modern English, not to say its [FN: what is the word for un-lived potential, for the deadening effect of when something so beautiful, sacred even, is *used* for instance and even *controlled*

by those who have no idea how great it is but you still have to communicate with them, oh yeah—] *conventional uses*, was what drove him crazy in the first place.

Also consider that

obscure unreadable experimental forms as passive-agress venting, or on good side phaps writer begging sincerely please look at my hands look at my f'prints, &c.

O alas also the possibility that everyone around him pretends to understand all his vocab and work and ultimate point he's making just so *they* appear smart and no one calls him on it and says, o my god are you ok? (Post-structuralism as a cry for help, perhaps trite.)

Fill out, make fiction if poss (just two or 3K really this one), hide all traces of real live humanity as per usual tell self worth it

was what drove him mad in the first place.

Way three. Become fiction/s. The non-writer is yet another piece of passing ephemera to which Borges devoted himself. Preservation of minutiae by memory, that bar of soap in the mahogany desk and his haunting question, 'What dies with me when I die?', one of Borges' themes but not only his. (His theme of the preservation of ephemeral minutiae by memory now a remembered minutiae preserved, associated with him permanently. Success!) And not only did he consider his own non-writing double but he attended to the non-writerly counterparts of other writers, wondering, for example, how many horses Shakespeare dreamt of between certain years, and speculating how it would feel for Dante to know he was Dante. Or to not know. He even extended his speculation to the non-writers of an unobserved broader history: writing, for instance, the secret subjectivity of the Minotaur, and recognising for perhaps the first time in literature that 'there was a day that extinguished the last eyes to see Christ'. By writing these he affords them memorials, shrines to the fleeting, for the reader to visit and revisit. After a while, you don't even have to pick up the books.

The non-writer has an affinity with incidentals because their writing demands they become incidental. For Borges, the fracturing of the writer's ontology, these doublings and reflections, has one rarely-attained end: to become everything and nothing.

Borges quotes Bernard Shaw: 'I understand everything and everyone and I am nothing and no one'. For Borges, this state is exalted, even divine, and it expresses both the fully developed gift of a writer, as well as its cost. Borges:

From this nothingness ... Bernard Shaw educated almost innumerable persons and dramatis personae: the most ephemeral of these is, I suspect, that G.B.S. who represented him in public and who lavished in the newspaper columns so many facile witticisms.

By distinguishing between the nothingness and its productions, we have entered the realm of metaphysics:

First there was nothing
Then there was Bernard Shaw
Then there was G.B.S and all his other fictions.

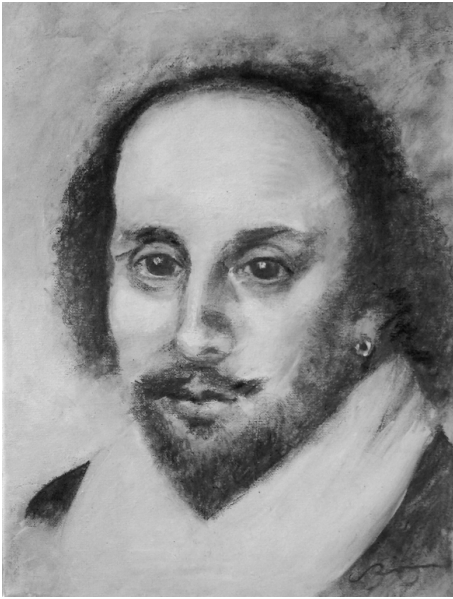
Borges admires Shaw's detachment from the non-writer, who has made the self one of his many creations. Absorption in potent nothingness metamorphoses the very personhood of the writer into an aspect. The non-writer *succeeds* Bernard Shaw and no trace need remain of that biographical figure. Biographers will seek it out but, as Wallace said, 'The lives of people who spend fourteen hours a day in front of a book writing or reading are not exactly thrill rides to hear about.'

The non-writer is not the fertile nothingness from which the work arises; he is always also *someone in particular*, human and fallible, a creation and an insignificant one. The non-writer is a production of the writer (just as the reader is) but not an egotistical one, and he comes into being naturally through the writer's fulfilment of the demands of the craft. The non-writer is also what is left of the person from whom the craft has exacted its maximum sentence.

There is a strong note of empathy in Borges' descriptions of other writers' identities. For whenever he describes something as insignificant and ephemeral, it is always a compliment, even a paean.

Way four. Love. As far as you know, Borges never drew writers' portraits, but his admiration of certain non-writers verged on the academically unacceptable. More than once, he compares the writer's ultimate state of fecund emptiness to that of God's prior to the Creation ('Everything and Nothing'). When you drew Shakespeare's face ('which, even through the bad paintings of the day, resembled no other', says Borges), you spent hours absorbed in his eyes, his forehead reminiscent of Poe (which medieval phrenology tells us relates to childhood and the imagination) and the so-modern earring. In his cheekbones and his eyebrows you can see a certain man you may have loved a decade ago.

Borges, under the thinnest veil of fiction (as shameless as Rousseau confessing his affection in the mirror), revealed his love of Shakespeare and his sense of W.S.'s



emptiness and loneliness. What else can we make of his fictional imagery but profound eulogy? – he ends his mediation by having God comfort W.S. in a dream, assuring him that they share this secret sorrow, of being all and being nothing.

Yet neither you nor Borges, reading as writers, can rest in unreflective admiration. Heroes have a dual role in uplifting and oppressing us. Borges faces devotion and decide in 'Ragnarok', as Hesse confronts his beloved 'immortals' in *Steppenwolf*, only to be laughed out of court; Forster takes his 'celestial omnibus' and returns home. As a writer, you must live and former writers must die. Does Borges accept his writing power, albeit in anti-Chekovian parenthesis? – '(all of a sudden there were

revolvers in the dream)'. Must it not kill Shakespeare to see *your own name* in the biographical dictionary?

Did you draw them to get them out of your system?

Sometimes you long for the reader you once were, or the non-reader, but it is too late.

And what about the body? Stay home and write a parable of academia called 'The Secret Apprenticeship'.

'Only connect', penned the non-writer Forster, while watching a distant groundsman from an upper window in King's College, Cambridge. The end.

You cling to the trace of the non-writer's mortality in the text. The trace *is* the non-writer. It is what you now are.

The blind and the mad meet *facie ad faciem* in the ruined architectures, the labyrinths of language, to which we have devoted and even consigned ourselves. So dramatic.

Shakespeare: Earl of Gloucester: O, let me kiss that hand!

Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.

You have realised that in the figure of the non-writer, there is no hero, no Ragnarok, no gods to kill or become. It is mortality and obscurity all the way down. But they have traced you, drawn you into being, and now you draw them. Your drawings are nods of recognition to them: *you drew me*.

You are not much of a visual artist – but neither were they -- most of this probably doesn't make it to the canvas.

Imagine a parable. 'Parable of a dust chrysalis', about Kafka's sister Ottla. The epigraph: 'I need solitude for my writing. Not 'like a hermit' – that wouldn't be enough – but like a dead man.' In such isolation, with cotton wool in his ears, he wrote the following sentence: 'Writing is revealing oneself to excess.'

He laughed as he wrote himself to death. He would sweep himself into the dustbin and she, Ottla (or those like her), would take a train to the future, stretching her real body out of his dust chrysalis. Strangely, when the work was completed and the disease had taken its course, he did not die and she did not live. They erected museums for him. His books stayed in print. It was absurd that the death he wrote for himself, the dust of himself that he scattered to the wind, because he had to, because it was no less than his spiritual truth, found its way into the enduring structures of literature. They liked hearing last gasps.

He was ossified and petrified in their frames and she was killed in the camps. He had become infrastructure of a dying culture still busy building itself.

But then, he had predicted it. He had written it in his notebook: *Leopards break into the temple and drain the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated over and over. Finally, it can be calculated in advance and it becomes a part of the ceremony.*

You did not approach Kafka's portrait like the others. It was a sketch, almost a joke (of course *you* are not going to be able to draw *Kafka*; and besides, the biographers had made a cliché of his face). There was never anything but his writing, no other Kafka at all. Perhaps he is the first or only writer to be unable or unwilling to split himself, since splitting implies some Zenonian remainder. Only ice and a hatchet. Perhaps, as the first to dream the printing press as torture device, he was the first martyr to . . . But then, when you drew him, your only thought was, 'This is not the real portrait, not a proper attempt, obviously –'

And you had a train to catch.

Drawing is non-writing. You contemplate the non-writer's implication that being human is not meaningless but essential to the vocation. It takes a lifetime, while each portrait takes 'a day or part of a day'. If you just stared at their photos for hours, that would be weird and obsessive – so draw.

Yes, you know they are not saints – most writers are frauds: their facility with language enables them to map places they have never been (perhaps this is the true definition of a writer). But you could not be more grateful to them. And it has not yet been proven that what language can do can't be done. Their grasping is their grasp; their attempt is their attainment. All they need to do is set out. It is the official solution Borges imagined: 'All expeditions are to the North Pole'.

You haven't drawn all the non-writers that you love. Your longings to draw them hang in the catacombs of your selves, lining the walls like blank Borgesian pictures in dreams. These non-drawings may die with you when you die.

Way five: Non-death. You have come to understand that there are only two funeral plans: consumption or preservation. You do not know whether it is preferable to be eaten by other creatures or by fire, but find the argument for preservation convincing. The explicit reason given for preserving the body is in order to *retain the deceased's connection to earthly affairs so that he may continue to influence them*. If the remains are disturbed, the connection is broken.

Text speaks continually of mortality (yours). Realise that books have been a matter of life and death. The book has become a kind of sarcophagus, the non-writer a



disembodied reader. (This must be why you have had the desire to give them faces.) You notice that reader-writers wear out lives in service of this strange god made by other (unseen) gods, but the connection between non-writer and reader does not know death. The non-writer lives by you, for you, and with you. Like most writers, you dislike the word *posthumously*. Embalming and mummification are the usual means of preservation, but your experiences with non-writers have led you to

recognise another: by dwelling in text, particularly in those quieter and more difficult to analyse regions of text, some humans have attained eternity (for as long as it lasts) via

an ink burial.

You want to do this too.

Borges' 'The Circular Ruins' can be read as a lineage of the non-writer in regard to the perpetuity and the mortality one may expect to encounter via the writing craft. The first line, 'No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night...', contains multiple disembarkations from multiple nights: the reader and writer simultaneously alight in the realm of the story. Behind them and to the sides of screen or page, the world is benighted by their absorption. Perhaps writing functions to make of the world just such a night, Kafka's night more alone than a hermit. The non-writer disembarks even more secretly: no one, not even the writer and reader see him at first. He enters the text just as the dreamer, with difficulty, may insert himself into a dream. At first, the protagonist's method is teaching; then he prefers dreaming. Multiple dreams (readings) are required to feel the heart beating.

Author-Text-World is suspended and there is nothing in the text but a beating heart. A triune presence, Dream-Dreamer-Dreamt, remains. Borges did not understand his story when he said, 'all is unreal'. Not only is the author dead, but the writer and reader too. Only the non-writer remains and performs the story. By repeated readings (disembarkations) you come to share its fate and its realisations. You are the story. You come to emerge from the proximity of a beating heart, to stand out in classrooms, to teach. The intimacy, the reality, of this shared and perpetual dream, to which you have returned in cycles throughout your life, leads you to consider the use of text by the non-writer as a vehicle to post-mortem action.

Techne longa, vita breva. One must create precursors.

This work done in the circular ruins of time, language and art, is the writer's destiny, which she realises 'with relief, with humiliation, with terror'. Disembarking from the body, immortality relies on having been reduced to a dream; that is, to a text. Another secret miracle, it all occurs between the first and last lines of a story, in which ordinary time is suspended.

The reason Borges' phantom cannot be destroyed by fire (books can), is because he lives, *ahem* and please excuse me, in the hearts of readers and fellow writers.

Maybe I read it too many times.

Incidentally, you have failed to draw Borges. You have not even started. His case is unique. Like he himself in his final years, you can barely remember his face, no matter

how many times you have looked at it. He is too close to see and too deeply entwined with the nature of writing. There is no lack of affinity. Sometimes you share his apolitical, agnostic and eulogising tendencies, worse luck, but you have no urge to draw him. You think it is because he is the least puzzling of all his puzzles.

The closest you have come to drawing Borges was when you left Macondo for your kitchen one day, still breathing its atmosphere and thinking it was (at least in part) a trace of the non-writer (often a haunting via ‘atmosphere’ or other aesthetic effect) and you made that inaccurate picture of García Márquez.

Is there another way? A Borgesian non-writerly reading of ‘Octet’ reveals that this story is not a metafiction at all but a discussion of metafiction *by the non-writer* – just as ‘Borges and I’ was written by the non-writer – and most importantly as *a revelation of a non-writerly person*. Wallace asks, ‘What if I address the reader?’ for several pages, demonstrating how the aporia (how he can’t do it and can’t not do it) – until the final line: ‘So decide’, a resounding imperative to all participants at once.

This ‘decision’, as in the open-ended ‘Borges and I’, offers a space to the reader but it is even more important as an address to other writers. Consciousness is summoned to the page, not to notice the artificiality of text but to attain a hard-won meeting. The meeting will not be with David Foster Wallace or any other author. The connection implies continuation of life for the non-writer; for writers, such open texts are instructive, consoling and even initiatic.

Borges states that through the collapse of time by shared experience (of text) complete *identity of identities* is possible: ‘Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare?’ Yes. They become Shakespeare, the non-writer who wrote *I gyve and bequeath to my saied daughter Judith my broad silver gilt bole*; they become the Dante who did not know he was Dante, except once in a dream that he forgot. That is to say, me.

There is intimacy in written stories, as there is in sharing dreams. While the writer hopes to be read and perhaps admired, the non-writer is *met* and *known* in a way they could never be known in life. In writing, people can be *alone together*, a tautology except in this.

In the 1960s, an exhausted psychiatrist wrote: ‘We all live on the hope that authentic meeting between human beings can still occur.’

To the extent that ink furthers this, it may often be better than breath.

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Nadia Mead

The Thinking Blanket

She's stuck.

She's in the thick of her creative writing PhD, reimagining stories from her teaching career and revelling in the ability to lampoon former foes. Sometimes the story writing is easy and fluid, at others it is painful and bleak. She's determined to do justice to the voices and experiences of herself and her colleagues. But staring at the screen does not make the words write themselves so she walks away to sulk with some knitting.

Back in England she knitted cardigans and jumpers for her children, squinting at the intricate patterns that allowed her to recreate images of *Postman Pat* and *Thunderbirds*. When the children rejected 'babyish' jumpers, she turned to knitting blankets. She brought the habit to Australia but living in the Tropics means there isn't much call for heavy coverlets. So, she donates to family and friends who live in more inclement climes. Or to Cairns folk who relish the novelty of a knee blanket for the winter evenings when the mercury dares to dip below 18 degrees.

She finds blankets useful for using up oddments of yarn, those incongruous leftovers only acceptable for patchwork projects. She regularly trawls through the free patterns

online, looking for a different take on the traditional stash-buster blanket. She loves the knitting of multiple multicoloured squares but loathes the endless joining up. Today, she searches on her phone and finds a new pattern promising a revolutionary method with no tedious joining of patchwork pieces or aching arms from a hundred stitches of worked knitting bending the needles. No, this pattern promises a way of joining as you go with only ten stitches on the needle at any one time.

Her writing problems forgotten, she inspects her yarn collection determined to try the new pattern immediately. The contrasting bundles are so aesthetically opposed to one another, she decides to knit with two strands instead of one – merging the jarring hues to forge a blended colourway. She snatches up the needles, fuming at her inability to continue writing, and casts on. She studies the pattern at each step, undoing mistakes and reworking stitches. As one strand of yarn ends, she adds another to create a new coupling. She knits.

She yanks the yarn and it resists for a moment before submitting. She has limited time to get the writing done and must maximise the school holidays when her marking is complete and the next school year is a new and shiny thing glinting in the distance. She thinks about her writing and berates herself for not concentrating hard enough, for not being creative enough. She knits.

The project is growing quickly and she no longer consults the pattern for guidance when turning the corners of her rapidly spreading square blanket. The colours are bright and cheery, a kaleidoscope of loops jostling for attention. She knits.

Her breathing settles and her grip relaxes. The garrote of doubled yarn slackens and ribbons through her fingers. She knits.

Her brain drifts from her writing, thinking ahead to the colours she will use next. Should she make a clean break and start with two new strands or continue merging? She knits...

... and her confusion unknits.

The writing knot loosens and unravels. She doesn't notice at first, but her brain creeps back to her writing. It's nudging her, reliving the problem but smiling slyly like someone with a secret. When she pays attention, she realizes the mystery has been exposed. She rests the knitting needles in her lap and stills her breathing, as if taking another breath will chase the big reveal away. But it remains, hands in pockets, gaining shape and becoming a fully formed solution.

She reaches for her writing journal, jotting down the fragments of clarity and feeling the words flow from her pen like yarn threading through her fingers. Setting the

knitting aside, she brings her journal to her work desk, opens the laptop and writes, fearful in case a freak phenomenon wipes the words from the page and her brain. She writes and writes, the earlier confusion erased.

It takes a few bouts of frustrated and angry knitting before she realizes that each time she picks up the needles to add to the blanket, each time her breathing settles and her grip relaxes, the writing knots slip back into orderly strands. When she makes the connection, she tests it. One afternoon, she leaves her desk as soon as the barriers block her way forward and takes up her knitting. She sits with her journal and pen, hoping the problems will evaporate with each loop of yarn peeping through the next one. She knits, anticipating failure. The end to the coincidences. She changes colours and waits for the answers to come.

They arrive within minutes, like long-lost loved ones, their unorthodox greetings voiced as solutions she needs for the latest writing hurdle. She makes notes in her journal then continues knitting. Her guests stay and talk awhile, prompting her to take more notes. She writes and knits. One kind of making sparking another. She knits to untangle her creativity. She knits to write.

Now she knows. The hesitation of sitting down to write disappears as she no longer dreads the moments when the words blur on the screen, or she forgets what to type next. That malevolent malingerer, *self-doubt*, has its free pass revoked. The knitting project grows along with her thesis. She uses up her stash of oddments and buys more yarn to sustain the blanket. It requires regular feeding and frequent attention, especially as she approaches the gnarlier end of her thesis and the writing load intensifies.

Who will want this blanket behemoth when it's finished?

When her thesis is submitted and outside of her control, she sets the blanket aside. When the revisions come, she knits her way through them to re-submission and success. Like many before her, the anti-climax of finishing such a feat of writing is a bereavement. As consolation, she checks the size of the blanket – curious. It spreads across and over the edges of a double bed. She traces the blending and changing of moods with each colour switch. Two creative artefacts for the price of one. Two creative artefacts married together like the mismatched colours striping through the blanket. Two creative practices nourishing each other. A double bed's worth of thinking.

She keeps the blanket.



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