



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Monash University

Julia Faragher

The sad little park

Abstract:

‘The sad little park’ is a work of creative nonfiction which explores the challenging emotions and tension created by a serious family illness and proposes how that tension and the hard truths associated with it can be alleviated through the comfort and familiarity of neighbourhood objects encountered on a night-time walk. Its narrative structure is based upon a father-daughter evening walk and seeks to use this common everyday occurrence to reckon with the difficulties of greater truths about life, anticipatory grief and having tough conversations.

Biographical note:

Julia Faragher is a writer from Melbourne/Naarm. She has a Master’s degree in Literary Studies and Creative Writing from Monash University. She won the Open Short Story Competition and the Keith Carroll Award from the Boroondara Literary Awards and was shortlisted for the Text Prize for Young Adult and Children’s Writing.

Keywords:

Creative writing, creative nonfiction, grief, cancer

At end of another suffocating day, my dad and I will walk to the library.

Our days aren't particularly predictable at the moment. If we're lucky, we will spend them in our offices and bedrooms. My dad will see his patients and I will write, either legal advice or something creative depending on my schedule. There will be a smattering of abnormalities: another appointment, a handful of phone calls and emails to medical receptionists or maybe some more paperwork to complete. If we're unlucky, we will both spend it at the hospital.

As I spend an increasing number of hours sitting in my childhood bedroom in Melbourne and staring at the dark pink feature wall, everything feels overwhelming. It becomes increasingly frightening to think about the future. How much longer can I stay in Canberra, really? Will my brother be able to go back to medical school? What will happen if he dies?

But for now, most days still end with the four of us sitting around the dining table, my brother for as long as he is able, and when we finish eating, I will ask my dad if he wants to go for a walk.

I don't remember how the walks started. It was long before my brother was diagnosed with cancer. But they certainly increased because of it. Our main destination has always been the library but as Will gets sicker and the walks get longer, we add more stops along the way.

My dad gathers the pile of borrowed books, tucking them under his left arm with the barcodes sticking out so he can use his right hand to open the front door, and I put on another layer before we leave because we are trapped in the depths of winter. The sun is long gone and the suburban streets are unforgivingly dark. I ask my dad how many of the books he has managed to read. The answer is usually about half.

By now, my brother is asleep upstairs. My mum is lying down in her room; I duck my head in to say goodbye to her.

As soon as we set off, we are plunged into immense darkness. The street is delineated into sections based on the territory of the street lamps. Our house sits in the shadow, a patch devoid of illumination. We turn left out of our driveway and walk through the alternating segments of lightness and darkness. The street lamps have a harsh white glow which doesn't permeate very far. Every time I make the mistake of looking directly into the light, it stings my eyes and I am forced to turn away immediately. By contrast, the grey light of the half-moon above us is much softer and doesn't hurt to look at. Occasionally our presence will trigger a sensor in someone's driveway and we will bathe in a new zone of light.

Before we have even left our street, we start telling each other things we wouldn't be brave enough to vocalise during the day. We can't see each other's faces when we are walking side by side, even in the light. We say things we're scared to say out loud in case they are true. These are thoughts which have already grown large inside our heads, too large to stay trapped inside there even though we are tempted by the idea. The listener will confirm that it's real.

There is a power in admitting that something is real, even if you do not like it. This is the moment in our day where we release that power and hold it between us. I know that for me it would feel like too much to hold by myself.

I usually still look both ways when crossing the street even though it's obvious from the lack of noise that there are no cars around. Sometimes I trust in the stillness and don't look at all.

When I ask my dad for advice, he gives an honest answer instead of a comfortable one. Comfort is rare and useless these days. He tells it to me straight when he doesn't know the answer. I believe him now when he says that. Sometimes it feels strange to me that my dad doesn't know the answer. He is supposed to tell me what to do. It is a reminder that we are in this together now. He has no more tricks up his sleeve.

We continue walking side by side along the dark streets, only leaving each other's side when the path gets too narrow for the both of us. There are some things in life for which there is no answer. We keep asking the questions anyway.

*

We never walk to the library in a straight line. The route is a little bit different each time as we cross the streets in different places and try to vary our path.

The first stop is the sad little park. It makes no sense that we keep going back there for a multitude of reasons, especially since it is in the opposite direction of the library, but it has earned a regular place on our walks.

I can't remember the exact time I first called it the sad little park. It probably has an actual name, but there isn't a sign and I've never looked it up online. All I remember is that one day I walked into my parents' bedroom, turned to my dad and said, 'Shall we go to the sad little park?' It was the most honest way I could think of to describe the park and these days I am much more honest, because honesty is the only way we are going to get through this. I now have a lot more appreciation for seeing things as they are. It allows me to find some solace in life, to ascertain what is true about the world. And the truth is that this park is both sad and little. My parents laughed and agreed that there is no better description for the park.

The name sticks and we grow fond of it. My dad and I are both bogged down in countless abbreviations and jargon at our workplaces and have developed a fondness for a particularly pointless TLA (three-letter acronym). This is an easy thing to complain about during the day. Quickly, the sad little park becomes the SLP and the question of whether we want to go for a walk becomes, 'Shall we go to the SLP?'

The sad little park sits on an empty block of land sandwiched between a row of suburban houses. The narrowness of the block makes it feel like a deep crevice at the bottom of the ocean. It is very difficult to see anything from the street. It's like a vacuum of light. Shining your torch

on it barely helps; it's like the park doesn't want to be seen. Even the night sky above is brighter. As you approach it in the dark, there is a vaguely threatening low-hanging tree lurking in the very front of the block next to an off-centre single-bubbler water fountain and a three-seater metal bench. You start to question why so much empty space is filled with merely a smattering of barely useful things. After a while, the familiar and friendly shapes of the park start to emerge out of the dark. The curve of the slide. The slant of the roof at its tip. You can hear the trams shuttling back and forth on a nearby major road. It's never truly silent but occasionally it gets close.

Above the park, the moon grows brighter the longer we are gone. Now it looks like it has a rainbow glow. The branches of the trees at the front of the park hang thinly like sticks.

Our favourite thing to do is to redesign the park.

'This really wouldn't be so bad,' we say to each other. 'If only that tree wasn't here.'

'If only they cut the grass.'

'If only the tanbark wasn't quite so vicious on your feet.'

We are locked in agreement that the park has a troublesome aura. I don't think my dad fully understands what an aura is, but he knows that the park is off. We talk a lot about feng shui. We don't know the rules and never remember to ask my mum what they are. But we know the feng shui of the park is bad.

We stand there in the dark, the park continually growing a little bit more visible with each passing minute, coming up with ways it could be better. We never have any new ideas. We rehash the same old ones. We are determined to fix it. We can see a world where things could be different, but we can't quite reach it.

'This really wouldn't be so bad,' we are saying to each other. 'If only Will didn't have cancer.'

*

The second stop is the library itself. We love our library. My dad must be one of their best customers. He looks up books on their catalogue and reserves them. He picks up stacks set aside for him and scans them through the self-service checkout machine. I am much less organised, wandering aimlessly through all the aisles. I need to see my options. I need to hold the books in my hands, to read their first lines, to smell their pages, even if I always go back to what's familiar in the end. Eventually, my dad will find me hovering by the same set of shelves and ask if I'm ready to go. And even though I know the books aren't going anywhere, part of me will want to stay. But I relent and nod my head, content with however many books I've managed to gather by then.

Sometimes the library is already closed and my dad returns his books through the slot onto the automatic conveyor belt. I ask him to hold the metal flap open so I can watch the books retreat from us and fall away into the storage box.

‘It’s pretty neat, isn’t it?’ one of us will say.

As we walk a circle around the building, we try to name all the plants lining the library. I barely know the names of anything. I recognise one of the trees because I saw it in a video game. It’s taller in real life. My dad can name many more than me. My memory is fading, both of ours are, so I ask him to remind me each visit. Maybe next time I will remember them and could tell them back to him. Maybe they will stick inside my brain instead of slipping out one by one because something in me has decided that the names of plants aren’t important right now. I refuse to accept it. Tell me again, I say to my dad. What are their names? We never look up the remaining plants which neither of us can identify.

*

We make our way back up the slope to our third destination. As we leave the library, eyes searching in the dark for a rogue possum lurking in the trees, we have to pass through a dark alleyway. The light vanishes when we get to the middle. Sometimes I have to psych myself up to walk through it, because the voice in my head tells me that someone could be hiding in there about to scare me, and I have to remind myself that my dad is right behind me, and, besides, the thing that scares me is not hiding in an alleyway. It lingers in my brother’s blood as he sleeps. It has to be burned out of his body, cell by cell. We have to hope that it does not take him with it.

*

Our third and final stop is an incredibly normal house of no significance on the corner by the oval. There is a line of holes in the ground in their front yard. The owners are about to put a fence in.

‘Careful,’ my dad always says as we arrive. ‘Don’t fall in.’

‘They’re taking their time,’ I always say.

With each walk, I look for signs that there has been any progress in the fence since our last visit. There are never any signs. Sometimes I kick loose dirt off the footpath back onto their property. Apparently, it is a painstaking process to build a fence. I can’t understand how there is never anything new for us here.

I become obsessed with guessing the colour of the fence.

‘I hope it’s green,’ I tell my dad. ‘Like, a dark green to match the front of their house. I think that would look really nice.’

I go through other colours in my mind but none of them look quite as good. Of course, I haven’t paid much attention to the house in the light. I must drive past this corner all the time during the day. But I can’t imagine what would be better than green. Green is a beautiful spring day. Green is a new beginning. Green is my dad’s favourite colour.

I become frustrated with the lack of progress on their fence. I curse tradies. I curse the financial crisis, if there is one right now. I want answers. I want progress.

I’ve never met the people who live in this house. They probably don’t care about their fence as much as I do. Probably nobody has ever been this invested in the colour of a fence in the history of human civilisation.

Eventually, my dad will keep walking back towards our house and I will have to follow him.

*

Sometimes we do extra laps around our house, forever elongating the circular route of our walk, but we always have to go back. My brother will still be asleep. My dad and I still won’t have answers to most of our questions. But it has helped to ask them. And we can close our eyes and accept that tomorrow is a new day.

With each new day, we get a little bit closer to the possibility that Will might not have cancer anymore. With each new day, we also get a little bit closer to the undeniable truth that he will die one day, cancer or not, and I will not know what to do with myself.

I say these things to my dad in the dark among other thoughts. I release the frightening truths out into the dark. I give the questions to the swing set which hangs stationary in the night, to the alleyway, to the possums in the trees. This is where they belong. It feels like too much to bring them back home with us, even though we always have to return back home after whatever I’ve said.

*

They painted the fence white. For Western people, white is innocence. White is unknown. White is new. White is roses and fresh linen. For Vietnamese people, white is death. White is the colour of the flowers you buy for the funeral. White is lilies and geraniums. White is crying while somebody holds you.

For everyone, white is the colour of my neighbour’s fence. When we are out on a walk and Will is freshly in remission, I gasp and grab my dad by the arm. ‘They painted the fence! Why didn’t you tell me they painted the fence?’

For everyone, white is clouds in the sky on a summery afternoon speckled across a blue tapestry. White is a blank slate. White is the collection of pills in your palm. White is a tablecloth and a hotel bedsheet. White is the airplane. White is the landing, knowing that my brother has come to pick me up.