TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

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

University of the Sunshine Coast

Jane Frank

Palaces of chance and bloodlines of influence: Existential currents and recurring motifs in the poetry of Nathan Shepherdson

Abstract:

This paper explores influences on and motifs within the creative practice of Australian poet Nathan Shepherdson, the author of ten books of poetry including, most recently, *how to spear sleep* (2021), *parallel equators* (2023), *axolotl waltz* (2024) and *soft meteorites* (2024). Shepherdson's poetry has been described as "a dynamic and singular voice" (Maier, 2024), "enigmatic … where the idea, the axiom, the paradox is paramount," (Lea, 2010, p. 35) and "like stepping into a painting by René Magritte … challenging to fathom … strange yet intimate, poignant yet playful" (Green, 2025). While Shepherdson's individual and collaborative output is significant, to my knowledge there have been no scholarly articles written about his poetic practice. In this paper, I consider Shepherdson's collaborative nature – his relationship with other artists, creative practitioners, historical oeuvres and artforms – as well as his vital relationship with his father, well-known Australian painter Gordon Shepherdson (1934–2019). I also discuss the motifs that influence his poetry, many of them cross-pollinating. In particular, I interrogate how existential themes and Dadaist and Surrealist philosophy influences his poetry. These include how he uses chance and how corporeality, body and mirror imagery feature in his work, as well as his innovative use of punctuation. This research aims to close an imperative gap in the literature, recognising Shepherdson's status as an increasingly significant voice in Australian poetry.

Biographical note:

Jane Frank lectures in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She is the author of *Regenerating Regional Culture: A Study of the International Book Town Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and three books of poetry, most recently *Gardening on Mars* (Shearsman Books, 2025). Jane has research interests in both poetics and cultural sociology, particularly literary culture and the ongoing significance of books and print culture in the Digital Age. She is Reviews Editor at *StylusLit* literary journal and a former director of Regional Arts Australia.

Keywords:

Poetry, Existentialism, corporeality, chance, avant-garde

Introduction

The genus of this research project was an unusual flurry of books by Nathan Shepherdson – four books published in four years: *how to spear sleep* (Shearsman Books, 2021), *parallel equators* (Recent Work Press, 2023), *axolotl waltz* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2024) and *soft meteorites* (Upswell, 2024). I had read Shepherdson's poetry and essays about visual art for years, but there was a sharpness about this new work and the poet's evident engagement with the Australian literary and visual arts, in particular, that stood out to me. I was interested to explore how his father's outlook influenced Shepherdson's aesthetic sensibilities and to critically examine the intergenerational dynamics at play, so this paper aims to elucidate how a familial relationship can shape thematic and stylistic choices. Shepherdson's poetics are further nuanced by his active interest in the avant-garde. His poetry invites readers to participate in a dialogue about existence, examining themes like chance, corporeality and silence. Part of this research is also about investigating and acknowledging the profound impact of locality and environment on his creative outputs. The Brisbane art scene and the artists, art dealers and curators – contemporaries of his father – that populated Shepherdson's early life, as well as Gordon Shepherdson's powerful presence, act as a backdrop and catalyst to Shepherdson's work, indicating how personal history, cultural heritage and collaborative practice have been significant in shaping Shepherdson's poetic voice.

Shepherdson is a multi-award-winning poet and creative practitioner from Brisbane and the author of ten books of poetry. He has won several significant awards including the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize, The Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Arts Queensland Val Vallis Award (ABR, 2016). His first book, *Sweeping the Light Back into the Mirror* (UQP, 2006), an extended elegy and memorial for his mother, received the Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and the Mary Gilmore Award. Shepherdson has been writing and publishing poetry since his late teens and his poems have been published in journals and magazines including *Cordite, Shearsman, StylusLit, foam:e, Overland, Social Alternatives* and *Meanjin.*

The process of writing this article began with a series of semi-structured interviews with Shepherdson, who agreed to discuss his lifelong creative interests in poetry, the visual arts, film and music, as well as his early familial experiences and the creative and intellectual interests he shared with his father, the artist Gordon Shepherdson. We also talked about his creative process when writing poetry. Shepherdson later embellished my written interview notes, elaborating further or filling in the gaps in my understanding. I also completed semi-structured interviews with poet Pascalle Burton and art dealer Bruce Heiser, both close creative associates of Shepherdson's. I sent Burton the questions beforehand but both Shepherdson and Heiser requested a more spontaneous approach. During these conversations, I explored a range of topics with the contributors' full consent.

Familial influence

Beyond his collaborations with contemporaries, the person Nathan Shepherdson shared ideas with most extensively was his father Gordon Shepherdson, even though there was never a formal collaboration between them. The poet speaks nostalgically about his father's art studio:

> a fibro ark moored in the backyard [of their Tarragindi house] since the ‘60s. Bullocks, the sky, the water, birds, figures, portraits, the inevitable silence … I still find different things in paintings I’ve been looking at since I was a boy. Essentially, he dealt with language and memory which is what I’m doing in a rudimentary way … he had system of existential colour coding … words already exist so the colours I mix are closer to transfusion. We’re all first cousins to the blood in perception. (personal interview, 2025)

Shepherdson says the most significant influences on his work are “all kinds of art” and his father’s outlook and artistic tastes. The two intersect because Shepherdson grew up in a household where he was exposed to literature, music, and significantly, the plays of Samuel Beckett. He also interacted with Gordon Shepherdson’s many contemporaries who were significant figures in the Australian art world – people like Gil Jamieson, Fred Williams, Jon Molvig, Lawrence Daws, Leonard French and well-known Brisbane art dealers Brian and Marjorie Johnstone, Philip Bacon, Ray Hughes and Rudi Komon (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025; Heiser, personal interview, 2025). Both Bruce Heiser and Pascalle Burton spoke of the profound influence of Gordon Shepherdson on Nathan Shepherdson – “Nathan revered his father. They were father and son, but Gordon was also his mentor and best friend. Nathan’s world outlook on art is from his father … and Nathan also influenced Gordon later on” (Heiser, personal interview, 2025). Burton, who understands Shepherdson’s reluctance to call himself an experimental poet, categorises his work as “falling into the experimental”. She attributes the origins of his highly improvised work and its Surrealist twist to Beckett and the European poets and to his upbringing in an artistic and loving household, fused with the “unconditional loving relationship” between Shepherdson and his father. This environment and other shared influences, she believes, undoubtedly shaped Shepherdson’s “remarkable love, and affinity with his father’s work” (Burton, personal interview, 2025).

Shepherdson recalls being privy to conversations with a whole range of his father’s acquaintances – artists, collectors and curators – and being able “to listen to where these conversations went. It’s about a consciousness. As a child, you are unaware but peripherally immersed anyway” (personal interview, 2025). He also remembers books around the house – Norman Mailer, John Steinbeck, Federico García Lorca, Russian poet Anna Ahkmatova. Particular titles have stayed with him – Penguin’s paperback series of *Modern European Poets* (1960s–1970s), *Polish Post-War Poetry* (1970) and Al Alvarez’s *Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955–1967* (1968). Gordon’s interests in poetry and plays extended to the German Expressionists and Shepherdson singles out Zbigniew Herbert as a touchstone for them both. Much poetry from Eastern Europe was written under political duress but Shepherdson’s recollection is that “observational humanity underlay[s] it all”.

Among many ideas which he was exposed to under his father’s roof was Existentialism, a philosophical framework that interrogates the human search for meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre defined Existentialism in a 1945 lecture as “the attempt to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism” (Sartre, 2000, vii), and it has a long list of proponents throughout poetry history, including T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Charles Bukowski, Robert

Lowell, John Clare and others who addressed themes of identity, existence, life's futility, nihilism and the inevitability of death. During our conversation, I asked Nathan Shepherdson about the connections to his father's belief system and creative work and their shared Existential views, and he told me of the "huge impact" of his father:

> the images, the conversations, the many years of observation … the big stereo interplay in the living room we call life and death. These conversations were always on the boil. Gordon was super-severe on himself. In terms of standards and self-criticism, he wrestled with the big questions, stared the mirror down. (personal interview, 2025)

Through his father, Shepherdson was exposed early in life to the "linguistic labyrinth" of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) and he learned to familiarise himself with the author's language games which involve a convoluted blend of human emotion and thought. The linguistic selections and structural experimentation in Shepherdson's work where, through figuration, repetition or silence, language itself works as a device for self-expression and self-discovery can be traced to this significant early influence. Beckett, a playwright whose work exposes the crises of the human condition, is lauded for his use of devices such as fragmented discourse, repetition and absurdist language. These devices draw parallels between linguistic and mental structures (Bhusal, 2024). Beckett used these approaches to express his view of life as absurd and meaningless, without purpose, and to highlight the incongruity of the human condition. Often in his plays, the plots go nowhere. The dilemmas encountered by Beckett's characters reference the philosophical ideas of John Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), foundational works that explore the human predicament and lay the foundation for Beckett's existential approach.

We can see Beckett's influence, as well as Harold Pinter's, in Shepherdson's use of non-sequiturs, or statements of actions that do not logically follow what comes before. In this way, his work parallels the absurdity of existence in plays by Beckett and Pinter. As with their works, Shepherdson's poetry is strewn with ambiguity and unresolved questions, mirroring existential indistinctness, where words become a medium to express internal turmoil. In these plays, Shepherdson first encountered techniques he has used in his poetry ever since – puns, double-entendres and other forms of wordplay that result in comical and startling effects. Shepherdson also links Beckett's outlook to ideas of time and failure he shared with his father:

> You're always going to lose. It's a Beckett idea – his idea of "failing better". Dad would say things like "I'm not quite old enough to do that painting yet" to which I would respond, "Do you do it anyway?" (personal interview, 2025)

To clarify, Shepherdson explains that art is something that can be bravely carried around until you're no longer brave enough. To illustrate this point, he uses the example of *Mammoth* (2017), the art/found poetry project undertaken with his serial creative collaborator, multi-disciplinary Australian artist Arryn Snowball. The project used Ern Grant's *Grant's Guide to Fishes* (1965), a book that had been "floating around for forty years, part of my upbringing, always to hand" because both Shepherdson's father and his brother Luke were keen fishermen. A question for Snowball was the catalyst for Shepherdson to use the book – selecting fish from

the guide, “I fed him poems”, improvising off the page to create each new poem – then Snowball would work up black and white collaged text drawn from the poems as they were created. This project, initially a month’s residency at the Museum of Brisbane in 2017, turned into a project that lasted five or six years, morphing into Snowball’s later series of exhibitions based on a linked project called *Slack Water*. Shepherdson emphasises that chance was central to this project – the chance of him mentioning the book to Arryn and the chance of Arryn being on a boat in north Queensland with the very book in front of him, so everything creative depends on circumstances and timing.

The process used in this Shepherdson/Snowball collaboration relates to an idea that Shepherdson shared with his father and calls “the use of chance as lure … a channelling of imaginative blood pressure into improvised panic” without much time to stop and consider what is being produced (*Slack Water*, 2023, p. 18). At the launch of *soft meteorites* in November 2024, he spoke of the experience of creative acceleration – a sense of time pressure that accelerates the adrenalin. This kind of acceleration relates to ageing and “finding your own mode” (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). Shepherdson mines his own subconscious as a way of channelling surreal ideas but does it “in the now. In this way, Nathan is like a jazz improviser” (Burton, personal interview, 2025). Burton also points out that Shepherdson captures the way the words occur to him in the moment, so the editing process is not necessarily of interest to him or part of his practice in the same way it is for many other poets. His father’s example thus underwrites a poetics in which risk and responsiveness are paramount. Whether alone on the page or working with collaborators like Snowball, Shepherdson treats each piece as a live conversation with chance rather than a monument to control.

Talking to himself and others: the need to connect

When I asked Pascalle Burton about *soft meteorites* (2024), Shepherdson’s collection of poetic memories, she described the poems in this book as “populated … written for or imagining people together” and said that Shepherdson has often spoken to her about poetry being a lonely exercise where the poems are “a response to the poet’s sense of loneliness” (Burton, personal interview, 2025). Despite his wide social circle, the writing of poetry is a lonely practice, and she referred to discussions – both in private and at the *axolotl waltz* and *soft meteorites* launches – where Shepherdson explained that it “keeps him company”. The poems in this book are written from memory and Burton highlights the generosity of this most recent collection when balanced with the loneliness of the poet and his need to connect with people he admires and loves. She points out that while *axolotl waltz* (2024) is still “populated” with his trademark poem dedications, “the focus is on odd stories and narratives”, whereas in *soft meteorites* (2024), “the emphasis is on gratitude”. At the launch of *soft meteorites,* where Burton was in conversation with Shepherdson, she framed a question about the motivation for the collection this way:

> I imagine a post-apocalyptic scene – possibly post-apocalyptic Greenslopes – and you are there alone, frantically gathering up items like feathers, rocks, sticks, mirrors, pine needles and leaves and creating sculptures of people you love and admire. I described it to you as “frantic gratitude” (Burton, 2024)

Shepherdson's "frantic gratitude" is to family, friends, contemporaries, members of the art world and those from the past and is a recognition of time passing and a period of substantial change. In poems like "liturgy in llama land" (pp. 30–32), in memory of Isma McGuckin (1934–2023), there is emphasis on the way seemingly insignificant daily practices or personal characteristics become the most important things in remembering people and the past. These can be the music that was playing or what was cooking in "the magic Italian saucepan":

> asleep we recognise each other.
>
> mackerel sky mixed in
> with caramelised words
> from the gospels according
> to Frank Sinatra.
>
> the day you met him
> on the Gold Coast … (p. 30)

In the acknowledgement sections of Shepherdson's books, he thanks a long list of friends and poets for "the conversations". Friendship and contact are an important resource to the poet for life and art. *soft meteorites* (2024), in particular, is a book of populated poems that are written mostly for friends or that imagine people together in the past or future or in dreamscapes. Poems in this collection have more in common with the book-length sustained sequence of meditative elegiac poems in *Sweeping the Light Back Into the Mirror* (2006) where the most poignant lines home in on moments of minutiae whether it is reading his mother's elegy "wearing the jacket you'd made for me" (p. 62), "seeing my name in your handwriting" (p. 58) or:

> a drawer full of socks
> all paired and folded by your hands
> immobile in their camphor dark
> each sock had been turned inside out
> time taken to reduce time at the point of use (p. 52)

He is drawn to collaborations with other poets and artists, explaining the process as a luxury that combines the challenge of working with the other person and their ideas and involving some guesswork, risk and trust as there are no guarantees that it will work out – a "planned chance" that can be very rewarding. Collaborations, for the poet, come out of friendships, so people come before process for him in these situations. He believes happenstance combines with "not being yourself to be in sync with someone else which is a good way to shed poetic egos" (Shepherdson, personal communication, 2025). Speaking about his collaborations with artist Arryn Snowball over the years, Shepherdson describes the process using a "next wall" metaphor: "we give ourselves permission through a common philosophy, a common approach, through friendship. To push that notion, it can feel that he draws a door for me to walk through, then in turn I draw the next one for him to walk through and so on" (Shepherdson, personal

interview, 2025). He compares this process to a taking of turns to play hunter and dog – a kind of creative "truffle hunting" (*Slack Water,* 2023, p. 18).

Over the years, Shepherdson has worked with many other people such as Sandra Selig, Alun Leach-Jones, Peter Hudson, Jonathan McBurnie and David Stavanger, as well as Pascalle Burton and Bruce Heiser (both of whom I interviewed for this paper). Pascalle Burton is a Brisbane-based experimental poet with interests in conceptual art and cultural theory, as well as a performer in the band The Stress of Leisure. Cordite Books published her poetry collection *About the Author Is Dead* in 2018. Burton met Shepherdson when they were both releasing chapbooks through Small Change Press between 2008 and 2009 and they have since collaborated on projects such as *The Outlandish Watch* (2012), *UN/SPOOL* (2015) and *irreconcilable ambiguity (after John Stezaker)* (Red Room Poetry, 2024). She remembers that in her first encounter with Shepherdson, he "complimented my shoes … he has always liked those kind of details" (Burton, personal interview, 2025). Bruce Heiser is a Brisbane art dealer and long-time friend of Shepherdson's. His art space Heiser Galleries ran from 2004–2017. Heiser wrote poetry in the early 1980s, an interest he shared with Shepherdson, and recalls them both enjoying European poetry at the SKOOB bookshop in Edward Street, Brisbane, during those years. Although he first met Shepherdson at the Institute of Modern Languages, he later was involved with both Gordon and Nathan Shepherdson through his interest in the work of expressionist artist Jon Molvig – a friend and contemporary of Gordon's.

Some of Shepherdson's other collaborations have revolved around found poetry, poems in which the words are not those of the poet but discovered elsewhere and organised into a poem, so the poet's process is one of recasting from text that may never have had creative intent (Huey & Kaneko, 2018, p. 193). This tradition is related to the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs in which real meaning is sought in shreds of banal text. Shepherdson's first foray into found poetry was almost twenty years ago with the sequence "listening at Giacometti" in *Apples with Human Skin* (2009, pp. 49–60) which was a direct transcription from the notes section of *Looking at Giacometti* (Sylvester, 1996) where the words were in a vestigial form, incomplete and read vertically: "already poems without my intervention" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). The artist Alberto Giacometti, who created art through constant erasure and reduction, is a "touchstone figure" to Shepherdson, a little like Shepherdson himself. Shepherdson quotes Giacometti from memory as saying, "I'd give all my work for just one conversation". In Shepherdson's found work, he prefers to use non-poetic texts as source material, an extension of his regular work or as "a counterbalance", describing it as "an associative, dissociative cohabitation for the self".

More recently, Shepherdson completed a found poem project taken from a conversation between Australian artists Gil Jamieson and Barbara Blackman, sourced from a three-hour tape housed in the National Library of Australia (Jamieson, 1987). This process took approximately 100 hours and, once typed, was 53 pages long. Shepherdson was "determined to capture each utterance, stammer, syllable, misstep" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). His next move was to make sure the transcription from sound to text had a significant impact on the final shape

of the poems. It became, he explained, "a bit of an urtext project" or one where later versions can be compared to an original text. The poet described the process as situational:

> The history of these two people, Gil Jamieson and Barbara Blackman had overlaps with my own history and knowledge, my family history. It was a case of rubbing their memory against mine. Stories I did and didn't know or the resolution of stories I half knew. Tripping over the needle in the compass (personal interview, 2025).

Another found poetry project Shepherdson has worked on includes a collaboration with visual artist Jonathan McBurnie called *Pfft* (2021) that the poet describes as "a good example of embarking on something beyond the comfort zone …" based on the extravagant hyperbole-driven autobiography of 1990s wrestler Mick Foley called *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (1999). In these visceral poems of the body, the constraint challenge was, according to Shepherdson, like "trying to slice butter with a chainsaw – violence, humour, accidental integrity" (personal interview, 2025).

In the same spirit of conversation and collaboration, festivals, readings and events have always been important to Shepherdson's practice, in particular the Queensland Poetry Festival that ran from 1997 to 2023 and involved foyer-type conversations with poets from interstate or overseas. Being embedded in the wider Brisbane arts community has impacted Shepherdson's world view. This began after winning the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize in 2004, when various people reached out to him and he was invited by Small Change Press to submit a chapbook. He elected to write a response to visual artist Marian Drew's artwork, calling it *what marian drew never told me about light* (2008). Shepherdson was fascinated by her process that involved what she called "light painting", using long camera exposures where the artist "painted" over an object with a torch, creating an aura and unexpected transformations in the final work. He aimed to replicate this in his work with a series of hyperextensions, using words in the way Marian used the torch (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). This transposition of a visual technique into language is characteristic of his broader cross-media practice.

Shepherdson's poetry and inspiration constantly crosses over with other artforms and he clarifies that "everything can be part of everything else. Word and image. Interchangeable. I see art as a vat with different taps. Molecules wolf whistling for your attention" (personal interview, 2025). As an English speaker, he is drawn to sub-titled films where there is reinforcement of what is seen through a double effect. Burton explains that she and Shepherdson share the view that all creativity is energy and that when "energy comes to you, it tells you what it wants to be" (Burton, personal interview, 2025). Many of her collaborations with Shepherdson have crossed from poetry to other media, including UN/SPOOL and *A gram of ideas on art, form and film* (2015), that was based on the Maya Deren film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). This involved a "super-intuitive process" where the two poets wrote the work, made the books and performed the work live in sync with the film (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). The hand-stitched, dos-à-dos (back-to-back) book they created combined these twinned works that were at once tributes to and dialogues with Deren's work and ideology (Li, 2015). This was a substantial project that involved frequent meetings over

months and that was both complex and rewarding for both parties, providing an opportunity to observe how each other worked. This outlook they share, where poetry is considered an energy that involves other energies – films, music and artworks – has allowed them to enjoy a "huge simpatico" over the years.

This crossover extends to music and sound poetry. Shepherdson expresses a fondness for 20th century experimental sound poetry by Henri Chopin, Bernard Heidsieck, Raoul Hausman, Kurt Schwitters and John Giorno. He saw Chopin and Heidsieck appear in separate concerts at Metro Arts in Brisbane in the mid-1980s. Music, which the poet describes as an evaporative form (unlike poetry that he considers a distilled form), is important to him on a daily basis. He believes there is a significant relationship between music and poetry: "In poetry [music] is quite difficult to write about. Adding ink to its purity or chaos … a poem can be a version – maybe you're improvising on a particular time within the thing you create" (personal interview, 2025). Music contributes to Shepherdson's method of improvising, especially listening to jazz with modern, atmospheric ideas. When he is working on larger works, Shepherdson listens to the same piece over and over again, explaining that when he wrote *how to spear sleep* (2021), he listened to Morton Feldman's "For Bunita Marcus" (1985) for months.

Shepherdson seeks connection everywhere. Even his interest and enjoyment in reading interviews implies a collaboration or conversation. In particular, he singles out the Francis Bacon interviews with David Sylvester (1975) and Pierre Carbanne's interviews with Marcel Duchamp (1971) that he recalls reading while commuting by train from the Glasshouse Mountains to Brisbane. The whole idea of conversation is central to Shepherdson's creative output and by this, he also means conversations with himself, as he regards his work as conversational:

> To explain, I like bouncing things off surfaces. Will you skim off the surface? Penetrate the surface? In my cricket days, I used to throw a tennis ball across the surface of the water, a fluoro green atom. You're not sure what is going to happen. You need to be surprised by what happens. (personal interview, 2025)

Shepherdson's body of work is populated by conversations with himself and conversations with others. He is thus open to deep influences, inside and outside the person and the page.

Important motifs in Shepherdson's work

Mortality and memory

In our first interview, I asked Shepherdson about his recent extraordinary outpouring of work, and he explained that the publications were actually "a coincidence of dates" and that the gap of eight years since he had last published substantially was due to "life intervening" (personal interview, 2025). During that interval, he had been carer for his father up until Gordon's death in 2019, having returned to Brisbane after living for many years in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. The hiatus also had a lot to do with the way that Shepherdson thinks about time:

> The intent is always there. The conception of time. I deceive myself. I see time as like a giant smudge. It has something to do with Dad's death. When you're helping your father [in the nursing home], it's not difficult to see yourself. It's about changeability. Surprise rather than fear. It's about acceptance of the luck involved. In the next five minutes, everything can change. (personal interview, 2025)

soft meteorites (2024), a substantial volume, captured my attention for its focus on themes of time, memory, memoir and loss, its more intensely developed biographical lens and its celebration of remembrance. Sections of the book appear as numbered houses where people from the poet's past dwell. These named poetic beneficiaries and the grouping of people around memory is about "memory as substance, memory as strange animal, memory as life support" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). Shepherdson describes memory as an "improvisory sensation, about chemistry in the brain that allows us to be surprised about what's there" (personal interview 2025). For example, in "light never mended is never made" (pp. 125–128), an elegy for a friend from his youth, actress Allana Noyes (1964–2023):

> the shuffle of lips
> is an unopened drawer
> the easiest way to pull the string
> is a stiff bundle of whispers
> that turn puce as they flow
> out of our ears → to try
> to rehabilitate themselves
> as memories that'll never quite fit
> now that one of us
> is gone (p. 125)

Again, in "blue dust" dedicated to Australian artist Davida Allen, in memory of her husband, Michael Shera:

> edges do not forget
> where they are or how close
> you are to them
>
> the horizon
> a tugboat rope
> around your ankles
>
> as glass memory is poured from you
> into the corner of a giant eye
> buoyant in a still sea (p. 111)

Shepherdson describes carrying the poems in this particular book around in his head – it was a book that had been "at the back of the cupboard a long time" – and transformed itself not only through new pieces but also through the way these pieces interacted with each other. These poems are about mortality, supported by the book's epigraph that reads "*we were photographed / shovelling soft meteorites / onto our own graves*" (Shepherdson, 2024).

Chance

A major theme in Shepherdson's work is chance: the notion of games, expansion of time and fear of death collide to communicate the poet's existential life view. His work is characterised by a perfect storm of processes, practices and tropes developed over many years that present a world where the laws of natural existence are subverted, questioned and gently mocked. These include play with philosophical concepts, use of found texts, creation of his own constraints that become a poetic game, use of what he refers to as "mock absolutes" or pretend truths, and trails of information relating to Shepherdson's self-confessed curiosity. Gordon Shepherdson referred to his studio as a "palace of chance" (Martin-Chew, 2018) and Nathan Shepherdson has adopted similar ideas. His work often blends Surrealist and Dadaist ideals, though Suprematism and Expressionism have also had a profound impact on his creative practice. In our conversation, Shepherdson speaks of the "inward explosions to the outer world" he experienced when exposed to the art and the writing of pre-war Vienna for its "vertical slice of culture and ideas" … listing Freud, Schiele, Klimt, Kokoschka, Wittgenstein, Kraus, Loos and Schoenberg (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). Shepherdson incorporated their ideas.

Dada and Surrealism, while distinct movements, both incorporate the notion of chance. Dada, emerging from the chaos of World War I, was characterised by its rejection of reason, logic and traditional artistic conventions, embracing nonsense, irrationality and chaos. Dada embraced randomness and improvisation, incorporating chance into the creative process, and often used found objects and unconventional materials. It featured nonsensical wordplay and performances designed to shock and provoke. For example, in *soft meteorites*, the poem "harmatiologist board game" (2024, pp. 100–106) is an example of Shepherdson's Dadaist leanings. In this poem, he uses a grid format where each blank space represents a letter and each word is scrambled. The spaces are read horizontally and, where a word contains a letter more than once, the blank space forms a vertical with the line below. The reader is initially asked to construct each poem as intended by the poet, however, in the notes to the poem, Shepherdson encourages experimentation. The poet provides a list of seven answers – one for each grid – that include "a fresh delivery of eyelids on the lawn you will not bother to open" and "your own recipe for jerky for all the ears you were forced to cut up" (p. 228). Again, in the poem "indelible watermark for birth certificates" (p. 107), the comma spacings represent "a long succession of coin tosses. Heads = 1 space. Tails = 2 spaces" (p. 228), and there are many other examples of poems that involve gameplaying and experimentation with Dadaist ideals.

Surrealism, which grew out of Dada, also rejected rationalism but, instead of pure negation, it sought to explore the unconscious mind, dreams and the irrational as a source of creative power. When Shepherdson bought a book of Eastern European Surrealist drawings edited by Šmejkal (1974) from a Myer sale table when he was 19 or 20, it helped him understand the way avant-garde ideas spread across Europe from their source in Paris and how Surrealism can absorb different languages and geography, even down to James Gleeson in Australia. This was his first encounter with the French writer and poet André Breton, co-founder, leader and principal theorist of Surrealism, and with Breton's ideas about opposites ceasing to exist. Importantly, it

helped reinforce Shepherdson's own sense of the nexus between feeling a particular way and writing about something aligned with these feelings (personal interview, 2025).

Shepherdson relies on this knowledge of the past combined with serendipity and happenstance to write creatively. The idea of serendipity refers to the role of the unforeseen, unplanned or even accidental achieving a creative outcome (Ross, 2024; Ross & Arfani, 2024; Ross & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2021). Luce-Kapler (2009, p. 75) points out that "serendipity carries a recognition that insight arises from preparation" and describes it as occurring only when there are the qualities of thoughtfulness and wisdom. Poet Charles Simic (as cited in Luce-Kapler, 2009, pp. 75–78) describes serendipity in poetry like a collection of objects on a table – pebble, rusty nail, tree root, torn photograph – that, after months of contemplation by the poet, reveal surprising relationships that hint at meanings, and describes an interesting poem as "an epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet". Shepherdson enables this process through amassing a trail of intricacies or "breadcrumbs" as Burton thinks of them: "Nathan is constantly amassing beautiful minutia that fill his brain" (Burton, personal interview, 2025).

Shepherdson acknowledges his uses of serendipity, categorising himself as someone who, from a young age, would always read every word on an album cover. He uses the examples of record covers by the likes of Pete Townsend or Frank Zappa and his interest in the lifestyle clues and other details of their equipment including the amps, guitar pick-ups and synthesisers they used. This piecing together of information continued with reading biographies and tracking associations between artists, poets and composers. An important text was the autobiography of Oskar Kokoschka (1974). Through it, Shepherdson discovered the work of Georg Trakl, purchasing a book of Trakl's (1968) poems at Lloyd's Bookshop in Brisbane for three dollars. This inspired the Trakl sequence in *Apples with Human Skin* (2009) that Shepherdson considers a turning point in his poetry (personal interview, 2025). The poet describes this coming-of-age experience like this: "Suddenly the air in young lungs transforms, you float inside your lungs, then breathe yourself out".

There are many examples in Shepherdson's work not only of his use of philosophy to have fun with the poetic process but also of his belief that there should even be answers to the questions he asks. At the *soft meteorites* launch, Burton listed her top three mock absolutes from the collection: "the wind does not tire of drawing self-portraits", "the cameras used to photograph ghosts are the ghosts" and "did you realise you are the horizon when you lie down?" (Burton, personal interview, 2025). Shepherdson's favourite prefix is "un – the reversal idea" which he explains creates a "visceral and enigmatic stutter. The undoing of the object, or the language, as if you can accept something while denying it … there's counterbalance in the mutual opposition within the thing itself, which makes it stronger" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). His friend Bruce Heiser describes Shepherdson's process as "folding in on itself" where he "takes a line again and again like a 'mantra', an unconscious thing where he'll make a statement, come in upon it and out the other side" (Heiser, personal interview, 2025) but Heiser also adds that Shepherdson likes obscure things on the periphery.

The whole notion behind the collection *how to spear sleep* (2021) is based on a dichotomy that could be considered a type of game. The idea for the collection came from a footnote in *Paul Celan Selections* (Joris, 2005) gifted to Shepherdson by poet and editor Felicity Plunkett, who had edited *Apples with Human Skin* (2009). The footnote related to Celan in later life where he hallucinated about the story of Abraham, believing he had to choose between poetry and his own son. Based on a conversation between French poet André du Bouchet and Celan's wife, Giselle, *how to spear sleep* (2021) became Shepherdson's own hallucination triggered by Celan's (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). In writing it, Shepherdson didn't want to simply copy the earlier poet's patterns, so invented his own system of indented curves and a rotational number system: "sometimes it's good to make your own web and lie in it". Due to the challenges he sets for himself, I asked Shepherdson if he is interested in or impacted by the French Oulipian poets that practised the creative potential of writing under self-imposed constraints. While interested, he explains that his processes do not have the same level of discipline: "my systems are contraptions. They don't really work properly, or necessarily, do anything, but that is the point". The Dada-influenced "pointed pointlessness" reflects the existential angst of existence, yet Shepherdson, in seeming contradiction, has a hunger for learning that informs his knowledge about visual art, music, writing and film. For this reason, Burton believes that Shepherdson's work can be read two ways, like watching a surrealist film: the quick skim – "watch it and walk away – or if the reader wants to dig deeper, they will be rewarded" (Burton, personal interview, 2025), not least in the dense corporeal imagery that underpins so many of the chance-driven experiments.

Corporeality

From the very beginning, a major trope in Shepherdson's work is body parts. This is ironic, perhaps, as Heiser insists that Shepherdson is "'squeamish" when talking about "blood and guts" (Heiser, personal interview, 2025). At the launch of *soft meteorites* (2024), Shepherdson referred to the body as a "biological sculpture", later explaining this to me as "I like to dissect body parts … they are like luggage. They can be filled with other things". Just reading through the contents pages of *soft meteorites* (2024), I encounter poem titles like "an open door kneels sideways", "lips over a waterfall" and "library for paper tongues". Shepherdson is one of many writers throughout history who uses anatomical representation as a literary device and a window into notions of self and identity. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8/2004), for example, there were accounts of the body's transformation by the gods to highlight the power of human nature – an approach that changed when science usurped the gods as the reason for natural phenomena, resulting in a spike in fear of the body (Davis, 2021). The idea of science revealing mysteries about the human form underpinned Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818/ 2012), which relied on the fear of the body as "other" (Davis, 2021). While the body lends itself as a metaphor in art and literary pursuits and pervades figures of speech, Shepherdson takes the metaphor much further. In his work, it connects to the idea of the death of immortality where science can provide little comfort and where a constant dissection requires an acceptance of mortality. Sappol refers to a cadaver as "a reminder of our own mortality, our fallibility, our folly – the fragility of human life and civilisation" (2017, p. 51). The constant dissection that occurs in Shepherdson's work would also seem to represent a constant reminder and acceptance

of his own mortality. When I ask Heiser about this, he connects the use of body parts in Shepherdson's work with Surrealist and Dadaist influences, singling out Shepherdson's familiarity with poets such as Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), who worked in a morgue.

Shepherdson's intense readings of avant-garde texts mean he has exposed himself across many years to much art and writing centred on the interrelationships between body, art and society (Brzezinska, 2018, p. 182). His work also reflects a close relationship to the Surrealist's anthropological model that unifies body, time and space. The texts of the Surrealists examined narrative as part of human existence based on ontological questions that include "what kind of human being am I?" and "who am I in relation to others?" In other words, they addressed the body both as 'other' and as a connecting point between the inner and outer worlds of human experience (Brzezinska, 2018, p. 182). Shepherdson uses corporeal imagery as a way of being in the world. Like Vogvidik (in Brzezinska, 2018, p. 183) Shepherdson uses body imagery as a means of "being anchored in the world". As in Surrealist representations of the body, bodies in his work undergo fragmentation and hybridisation and can be reduced to amalgams of other objects. The Surrealist body can be balanced on a platform between dead and alive, organic and inorganic; it is determined by space and time, often falling in a void or being subjected to some kind of restraint (Brzezinska, 2018, p. 185). All of these scenarios occur in different times and places to Shepherdson's poetic bodies.

Shepherdson's work, like his father Gordon's art, is more expressionistic and figurative than abstract, though reading his work as abstract is understandable because the figures are constructed from memory and not as literal forms. Shepherdson has commented that "[my work] is … body parts sitting in white pulp, language in aspic" (personal interview, 2025). This particularly applies to eyes, a body part Gordon used in his paintings that were displayed in the *Ocean of Eyes* exhibition at Redland Art Gallery (2023). Nathan Shepherdson's essay in the exhibition catalogue discusses the way his father started using "eyes as floating images, clusters of them looking for their collective noun. Perhaps they had found their way in through the mirrors and masks … references to those who have perished." He goes on to explain that his father's work was gestural, "suffused thoughts, embedded anatomy, physically wrestled into place". This personal mythology was presented sculpturally into a "high voltage exploration of masks, mirrors, serpents and religion" (*Ocean of Eyes*, ex. cat., 2024, p. 20). Heiser (personal interview, 2025) identifies differences between the approaches of Gordon Shepherdson and Nathan Shepherdson, though he describes them both as being thinkers and observers. Gordon, he stresses, used a broader range of universal symbols (demons, carcasses, angels, other biblical figures) whereas Nathan uses images and moments that are coded but not in a sense that he hopes anyone will understand (Heiser, personal interview, 2025). Shepherdson expresses this as "a storing of things in plain sight, compression of the object, the observation of the event onto a flat page" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). Burton qualifies that, in his poetry, Shepherdson "doesn't just make body parts exist in their own world" and describes his process as more like manipulation or playing different roles. Sometimes this includes "Body Horror stuff" where he joins two body parts together that weren't conventionally linked. Sometimes, Burton believes, "there is a violence/autopsy vibe that belongs to Surrealist film … where he goes in, frees his mind, writes whatever comes. No morals, no ethics. It is just what is

happening. He doesn't necessarily consider implications or connotations" (Burton, personal interview, 2025).

In Shepherdson's work, fascination with the body naturally extends to images of looking at and through the body and is closely bound to the way bodies are seen, remembered and reflected. Right across his books, another motif that appears frequently is the mirror. Western art relies on the mirror as a tool and trope connected to visibility, gaze and gender that can be traced back to the ancient myths of Medusa and Narcissus (Goscilo, 2010). The first poem in *axolotl waltz* (2024, pp. 10–11) titled "our heads become glass", for example, addresses ideas of reflection and begins "if you turn the mirror / into a calculator / the light does not equal / your life". The mirror's reflective properties suit the mimetic properties of literature and film. In particular, Shepherdson mentions the significance of Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), one of the foremost proponents of the Surrealist avant-garde and Dadaist movements whose work explored the relationship between reality and fantasy through film, regarding it as the most suitable media to exemplify the link between poetry, dreaming and the marvellous. Shepherdson specifically mentioned Cocteau's *Orpheus* film (1950), where there are several mirror scenes. This element of surprise that Shepherdson returns to many times in our interview (2025) relates to not knowing or having any control over what you are doing. He recalls Australian artist Brett Whiteley's quote from the documentary *Difficult Pleasure* (1989) to explain this, where Whiteley says "if you know what you're doing, you're only illustrating". This remark encapsulates the attitude to risk and the unchartable process that underpins Shepherdson's improvisatory methods whether he is working with bodies and mirrors, or, as the next section explores, with the marks and silences of punctuation on the page.

Playing with punctuation

Shepherdson is drawn to punctuation – especially the comma – as a trope, but often also as a subject in its own right. In our interview, he explains that "punctuation are a set of marks other than what they are. They are sculptural. I see a full stop as a black sphere. They are 3D objects" (Shepherdson, personal interview, 2025). Ironically, when Shepherdson first started writing, he was reluctant to use punctuation, rationalising that poetry is not something that "we think with" but his view altered as he grew to see punctuation as an element that can be used in tandem with space and time to "unload, or alternately, to ask it to carry all kinds of ideas". He confesses to:

> [using] it in ways it is not really meant to be used. This can be a fulcrum, a counterbalance, or a basic seesaw on which words, meaning and images are stabilised or destabilised. You can map the wobble, the uncertainty in what you're trying to capture. They are a set of very powerful marks. Road signs without the road. Entire languages within themselves and their silence. (personal interview, 2025)

Burton highlights the significance of punctuation to Shepherdson's work, categorising its multidimensional use into three scenarios – punctuation as material or sculptural; the figurative use of punctuation and its application in a narrative sense; or personified punctuation, as if they experience a life of their own (personal correspondence and personal interview, 2025). In

axolotl waltz (2024, pp. 82–84), in the poem "William and Catherine", fresh commas are used as an aphrodisiac. We encounter the Blakes "shelling commas / an intricate task …" but their industry also produces "… invisible sinkers / needed to weigh down the smiles / they throw in front of each other / the kernel is separated from the husk". In other Shepherdson poems, commas are bombs or swing through the trees of his sentences. In "a full stop reaches the end of its sentence" (pp. 94–97), full stops have feelings – "a full stop / never understands / the need to understand / what words are for …". Gillam (2009, n.p.) perhaps identifies a fourth scenario when he describes Shepherdson's imagery as "merging elements of the physical and the linguistic, frequently referencing punctuation to uncover the pliability and slipperiness of language". Similarly, Green (2025), in her review of *axolotl waltz* (2024), regards Shepherdson's "close attention to language and punctuation … to suggest the way that language accounts, or fails to account, for change and loss".

Other punctuation marks that draw Shepherdson are the equals sign, parentheses and brackets. Shepherdson explains that "my interest is in the space between the two lines … it's a demarcated space where you can 'see' what is not there. It's temporary accommodation for whatever thought chooses to inhabit it" (personal interview, 2025). In "i cannot be here" (*axolotl waltz,* 2024, pp. 85–86), for his daughter Ariel, for example:

> his continued presence
> has caused the top line
> of this equals sign
> to bow
>
> to a point
> where the bottom line
> of this equals sign
> no longer believes
> in the parallel virtue
> or for that matter
> this matter that once was
> two philosophical crossbeams
> safe in permanent separation … (p. 85)

He uses parentheses and brackets to "encase" a word and then "take the word out", clarifying that in this instance, the word is still, in fact, there but has been removed so that the brackets "still carry the absence of the word like a canoe, or sometimes a coffin", as a "shadow" or "a vestige of that word". Braune (2007) understands this process as a game or interaction with the reader where a reader creates text in a space like empty brackets, becoming essential to the interactive way the poem is read. The poet is asking the reader to play the game, a game of chance, as referred to in the previous section.

Shepherdson connects punctuation with silence and absences, silence being a theme he returns to many times in our conversation. He speaks about silence as "the real privilege" in terms of his father's approach and his own. Punctuation marks are what he believes opens an important door to "the spaces between", the quietude of the mind and the importance of negative space

to poetry. Green (2025) states that Shepherdson uses different types of marks, including line breaks, slashes, dashes, arrows and lines "both to give shape to his words and as a way of exploring the implications of pause" that emerges in *axolotl waltz* (2024), in particular, "as a matter of necessity: as breath, suspension, separation, interruption, anticipation, silence or inexplicable termination". She sees commas in his work as delicate and "transformative", connecting to themes of Existentialism through parts of human existence such as unconsciousness, silence, desire and stillness that are often required to submit to death's finality.

Time, questions and silence are three constants that relate to how Shepherdson regards the page. He likes ample white space around short poems and thinks of turning a page as "a type of punctuation in itself". When I ask him about the sparse anecdotal language in a collection like *how to spear sleep* (2021), he responds with another question straight back to me:

> Maybe there's a metaphoric ratio to the number of words required to hold an image? A micro-architecture. Once named, the object sits on the word. On the page, you can move the word around. All that negative space you can dive into on the page. Of course, the other side of that is the turbulence or the darkness that can seep into it, or up from the surface of the page based on the handful of words the page carries. (personal interview, 2025)

It strikes me as he is telling me this that there is always a sense of the darkness and the light in Shepherdson's poetry. The personification of punctuation, of course, extends from the personification of words where Shepherdson believes "every word carries the entirety of its meaning, its context, and its time, within itself, then as an external manifestation of design and purpose, it lays itself down to invite survival. One word planted on a page … all that information in a tiny capsule". The page as a white field where words are planted reinforces not only this idea of dark and light but also the idea of writing as an activity that occurs in a multidimensional chrono-realm or hyperverse. The white field in Shepherdson's poetry becomes, then, a meeting ground for the legacies he carries and the shifting cultural conditions in which he writes.

Conclusion

While Shepherdson's work is unquestionably interconnected with his father's familial influence and their shared, broad-ranging intellectual life, there is also a level of complexity in his work that responds to daily engagement with artforms of all types and the fast-changing contemporary times we are experiencing. His work is often nuanced and has an undertone that does not tolerate injustices. Heiser (personal interview, 2025) describes this as a wryness and a gentle use of cliché that undermines the reader's sensibilities, "targeting that polite, middle class social thing. He likes to create a bit of havoc with people's mores. He likes to question people's complacency and their middle-class attitudes. Raise a red flag as a little bit of social terrorism. Society needs that". Shepherdson's work builds a bridge between philosophical concepts from mostly 20th century art and finds current scenarios for their application. His increasing significance to Australian poetry can thus be attributed to several key factors – an

inherited sense of existential inquiry that extends not only to tropes of chance and corporeality but also to ideas of presence and absence, linguistic and structural experimentation, spatial notions of language and incorporation of his own unique response to contemporary human experience marked by rapid change and uncertainty about the future.

References

About Nathan Shepherdson / States of Poetry Queensland – Series One. (2016). *Australian Book Review*. https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/poetry/states-of-poetry/states-of-poetry-queensland/174-states-of-poetry-queensland/3107-states-of-poetry-queensland-about-nathan-shepherdson

Alvarez, A. (1968). *Beyond all this fiddle: Essays 1955–1967*. Penguin Books.

Alvarez, A. (Ed.). (1992). *The Faber book of modern European poetry*. Faber & Faber.

Bhusal, D. (2024). Realism at the philosophical level in Samuel Beckett's selected plays. *Kaladarpan*, 4(1).

Braune, B. (2007, May 15). Review of Peter Minter and Nathan Shepherdson. *Cordite Poetry Review*. http://cordite.org.au/reviews/braune-minter-shepherdson/

Brzezińska, A. (2018). Atmosphere of societal anxiety and representations of the body: The image of man in surrealist works of Vítězslav Nezval in the twentieth century interwar period in Bohemia. *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, (1), 181–189. https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs20181.181.189

Burton, P. (2018). *About the author is dead*. Cordite Books.

Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus*. Hamish Hamilton.

Carbanne, P. (1971). *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. Da Capo Press.

Cocteau, J. (Director). (1950). *Orpheus* [Film]. André Paulvé Films; Films du Palais Royal.

Davis, C. (2021). Body as metaphor: Literary representations of identity. *The Macksey Journal*, 2, Article 84.

Deren, M. (Director). (1943). *Meshes of the afternoon* [Film]. National Film Registry.

Feldman, M. (1994). *For Bunita Marcus* (H. Kleeb, Performer) [CD]. Hat Art.

Foley, M. (1999). *A tale of blood and sweatsocks*. Harper.

Gillam, K. (2009, November). Shards of meaning. *Australian Book Review*, (316). https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2009/november-2009-no-316/287-november-2009-no-316/11024-kevin-gillam-reviews-apples-with-human-skin-by-nathan-shepherdson

Goscilo, H. (2010). The mirror in art: Vanitas, veritas and vision. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 34(2), 291–318.

Grant, E. (2014). *Grant's guide to fishes* (Original work published 1965). E. M. Grant Pty Limited.

Green, S. (2025). Axolotl waltz [Review of the book *axolotl waltz*, by N. Shepherdson]. *StylusLit*. https://styluslit.com/reviews/axolotl-waltz/

Heiser, B. (2018). Gordon Shepherdson. *Artist Profile*, 42. https://artistprofile.com.au/vale-gordon-shepherdson/

Huey, A., and Kaneko, W.T. (2018) *Poetry: A writer's guide and anthology*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Jamieson, G. (1987). *Interview with Barbara Blackman* [Audio recording]. National Library of Australia.

Joris, P. (Ed.). (2005). *Paul Celan: Selections*. University of California Press.

Kokoschka, O. (1974). *Mein Leben*. Thames & Hudson.

Lea, B. (2010). Annual poetry review 2009–2010. *Westerly*, 55(1), 21–38.

Li, B. (2015, October 1). Bella Li reviews Pascalle Burton and Nathan Shepherdson. *Cordite Poetry Review*. http://cordite.org.au/reviews/li-burton-shepherdson/

Luce-Kapler, R. (2009). Serendipity, poetry and inquiry. In M. Prendergast, C. Leggo, & P. Sameshima (Eds.), *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences* (pp. 75–78). Sense.

Maier, H. (2024, October 8). Dancing as a salamander and commas as aphrodisiacs: It's poetry in motion. *InReview Queensland*. https://inreview.com.au/inreview/books-and-poetry/2024/10/08/dancing-with-a-salamander-and-commas-as-an-aphrodisiac-its-poetry-in-motion/

Martin-Chew, L. (2018). Gordon Shepherdson. *Artist Profile*, 42. https://artistprofile.com.au/vale-gordon-shepherdson/

Museum of Brisbane. (2018, February). Conversations fragments inspire Arryn Snowball during MoB residency [Media release]. https://www.museumofbrisbane.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Media-Release-Arryn-Snowballs-Mammoth-now-on-show-at-MoB.pdf

Ovid. (2024). *Metamorphoses* (R. J. Tarrant, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 8 CE)

Ross, W. (2024). Serendipity: The role of chance and accidents in creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2024.2313898

Ross, W., & Arfini, S. (2024). Serendipity and creative cognition. In L. J. Ball & F. Vallée-Tourangeau (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of creative cognition* (pp. 46–64). Routledge.

Ross, W., & Vallée-Tourangeau, F. (2021). Microserendipity in the creative process. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 55(3), 661–672.

Sappol, M. (2017). Art, science and the changing conventions of anatomical representation. In J. Ebenstein (Ed.), *Death: A graveside companion* (pp. 50–52). Thames & Hudson.

Sartre, J. (1949/2000). *Nausea* (J. Wood, Intro.). Penguin Classics.

Sartre, J. (1956). *Being and nothingness*. Routledge.

Shelley, M. (2012). *Frankenstein*. Penguin Classics.

Shepherdson, G. (2018). *Portrait of an artist: Gordon Shepherdson retrospective* [Video]. State Library of Queensland. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDmcHuIGlig

Shepherdson, N. (2006). *Sweeping the light back into the mirror*. University of Queensland Press.

Shepherdson, N. (2008). *what marian drew never told me about light*. Small Change Press.

Shepherdson, N. (2009). *Apples with human skin*. University of Queensland Press.

Shepherdson, N. (2013). Light is not dark until it's light until it's water. In *Gordon Shepherdson: Ocean of eyes* [Exhibition catalogue]. Redland City Council.

Shepherdson, N. (2021). *how to spear sleep*. Shearsman Books.

Shepherdson, N. (2023a). *parallel equators*. Recent Work Press.

Shepherdson, N. (2023b). Two men work three lines. In A. Snowball, *Slack water* [Exhibition catalogue]. Perc Tucker Regional Gallery.

Shepherdson, N. (2024). *soft meteorites*. Upswell Publishing.

Shepherdson, N. (2024). *axolotl waltz*. Puncher & Wattmann.

Shepherdson, N., & Burton, P. (2014). *UN/SPOOL*. Wigfarm Press.

Shepherdson, N., & Burton, P. (2024). *irreconcilable ambiguity (after John Stezaker)*. Red Room Poetry.

Shepherdson, N., & McBurnie, J. (2021). *Pfft.* King of Nails Press.

Šmejkal, F. (1974). *Surrealist drawings*. Octopus Books.

Snowball, A. (2021). *Slack water* [Exhibition catalogue]. Perc Tucker Regional Gallery.

Sylvester, D. (1975). *Interviews with Francis Bacon: The brutality of fact*. Thames & Hudson.

Sylvester, D. (1996). *Looking at Giacometti*. Henry Holt.

Trakl, G. (1968). *Selected poems*. Jonathan Cape.

Whiteley, B. (1989). *Difficult pleasure: A portrait of Brett Whiteley—The beginning of yourself* [Film]. National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/97960-difficult-pleasure-portrait-brett-whiteley-beginning-yourself

Unpublished sources and personal communications

Burton, P. (2014–2016). *UN/SPOOL* [Poetry performances].

Burton, P. (2025, May 7). Personal interview [Interview conducted at Queensland Art Gallery café, Brisbane].

Burton, P. (2025, May 8). Personal correspondence [Email].

Heiser, B. (2025, May 8). Personal interview [Interview conducted at Annerley, Brisbane].

Shepherdson, N. (2010). *The Outlandish Watch* [Performance, vinyl recording and zine; with D. Stavanger & P. Burton].

Shepherdson, N. (2024, November 30). *Launch of soft meteorites and interview with Pascalle Burton* [Public event at Avid Reader, Brisbane].

Shepherdson, N. (2025, May 6). Personal interview [Interview conducted at Paddington, Brisbane].

Shepherdson, N. (2025, June 15). Personal correspondence [Email].