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Sue Hall Pyke

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University of Melbourne

Sue Hall Pyke

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Abstract

This work is a case of a worlding with every wording, where material textuality creates a poetic space for thick description that helps me see the world as textual material. A thing, the blue case, with a bare handle on itself, offers relations that write me as and to and with my family, creating ‘the blue case’ as another thing for us to handle. The actual and virtual matter forms and reforms in these relations.

As these relations unfold and refold, the blue case and ‘the blue case’ condense and expand, holding more and less than I expect. Those dull abstractions, the object and the objective, are not to be found here. Rather, I write towards ‘subatomic, atomic and molecular forces’ that are subjects in relation (Goodman, 2018, p. 11). Words, too, the call and response of language, are part of this relational material play. The work is carried by this force, where language is ‘etymologically calling forth what the tongue does’ (Campbell, 2020, p. 4). My tongue is untied and then, redrafted, tied again, as the blue case and ‘the blue case’ become differently attended and expressed.

Both cases in hand are as simple and as difficult as understanding myself as part of the shared body of this world, where time and words float in and out of me, as do the various bacteria of this world that form part of my body. A tenth of my weight, this bacteria, so much a part of me that they form a ‘body-shadow’ that cannot be excised (Flannery, 2010, p. 56). Here they come, tying my tongue, threading my fingers. Then what I know as my self flies off the flapping tip of my tongue, away from my tapping fingertips, sensing their way by ‘quorum’, leaving the continent I think of as me, creating new worlds I think of as not-me (Winans & Bassler, 2008, p. xvi). Bacteria and stories and writing, me and us and them, time and time and time again, every thing as uncontainable as family gossip, family meals, family fights. This is a case of my formative self/unself/no-self participating in haunting familial relations, those ‘ghostly matters’ of more-than-selves as I/we/they relate to not-quite-others (Barad, 2010, p. 246). My body, my words, this case, that case, they never truly close.

This gap creates a tension between my lean towards the em of written language, and the fluidity of the me spun in my mother’s stories. In both cases nothing is contained, things go in, are removed, are turned around and put in once more. ‘Maybe in the next draft’, Campbell writes, with a knowing wink (2013, p. 142). Each time my mother tells her stories, things change, and each time her story is true. It is a case of many versions, where things are kept differently according to the moment and the context. These shifting relations are present within the poem that follows this introduction, and in the

prose that follows the poem. Words follow words, as stories follow stories, as a little sister might follow her older siblings, as those wiser ones might follow their parents. Each taking steps according to the case in hand.

I send my parents and three older siblings an early draft of ‘the blue case’. I am ready, if they ask me, to keep this case to myself. We share blood, secrets, stories, present ourselves as an open book. When my mother reads ‘the blue case’, she corrects her own words. I tell her of her old story about a newspaper article by a professor who was arguing for accessible language in the academy. The one who closes the article by pointing out that not one word of his writing was more than two syllables. In the poetry of ‘the blue case’ the tell is one syllable for the whole show. Take that Mum. She took it with a laugh. So take this, Mum. The blue case and ‘the blue case’ can be told in this way, and the same thing goes for me. I am a thing, right now, and a new thing, in the time it takes to read this, and at the same time, I am not a thing on my own. All that I think that is me is not me as well. My words, too, go their own way. And these words take form on land that has the last word. I write on land that tells my words as cold theft. There is a chill white frost in this play, this thing of words.

Biographical Note

Sue Hall Pyke writes lyrical memoir, fiction, poetry, and critical scholarship. Her scholarly fields of interest include creative writing, literary animal studies, and critical settler studies. Her scholarly monograph, *Animal Visions: Posthumanist Dream Writing*, was published in 2019. She is part of an editorial collective for *Swamphen*, the scholarly journal for the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment, and Culture, Australia and New Zealand (ASLEC-ANZ), and a committee member for the Australasian Animal Studies Association (AASA).

Keywords

hauntology – materiality – autoethnography

part one

the blue case. or as mum would have said,
once, the blue port. new the night she was wed and so
old now. for years, it's been up high in the back room.
down here at last with the help of my son, my big bro
on watch, with me
too old we are told by the young son
time to let him climb the steps

i wipe the blue case
dust off time and sand
made by my two boys, a hard grind
on the bare bone floor
boards
a big clean, up
on a chair, the blue case

on zoom, soon, the sibs, me, dad, mum
it will be mum's show, she tells, she needs to keep
dad, does not horde, his past is clear
he's not a show and tell kind of man
he's kind, plays hard
we all want to be on his side, when the cards are dealt

mum will talk a lot
dad might not talk at all
big bro will slap stick, throw down a wine
big sis will smile, up there, where it's warm
lil big sis will wise, crack a joke
i will show not tell, take notes

mum thinks there is a ball gown in the case.

says the love notes are in the tin tea chest
up high

there is no tin tea chest

as kids we got in those top doors from the top bunk
in with the blue case and the rest of the stuff
my chest made of tin
it took a leap, a dream
comes back now and then
i move fast, i'm last, hide up high, a drop to kill
down there, all that air
thick with fear
the jolt of the drop, i wake, eyes wet

there is a tin tea chest
in the book i gave mum with her mum in it, her good
looks. the home town
mum had to leave, up north.

part two

i play the first card, the tag from the big smoke to here
a click and slow
the lid. lift
a ball gown on top. not mum's glad rag days
this long dress in light and dark
blue of my drab teens

mum asks if i found the tea chest
big sis says, there was no tea chest
it's up there, mum is stern
not a chance, big bro says. he went up in the end, broke

the young one's rules
what else is in the case? lil big sis asks

not one note

i lift up a red dress mum made
when she sews she hates
that dress, can't bear to look at it. can't bear to throw it
in the case
a shirt of soft blue that big sis made
a bold shirt made by mum's cuz, big sis has her name
dress from a shop. dad's mum's good blue dress
a shirt i love. chic rose print in brown, green, and blue
a touch of brass

dad and big bro turn to chess
the big sis talks work. four beds and four of her team to nurse them
no one wants to be there
she's back at the books. hard case prep
in case it comes. the big bad flu.
lil big sis says her mums have been flat out
do it on zoom, big sis stirs, push. hard.
pick that up, says big bro. a joke for us kids. he's had a wine or two

i take our zoom out the back, show
stuff in the gloom of the half hid light.
a big doll on top, red curls cut to rags of dust
all round her, wet day games, toy bricks of red, green, blue
frames that hold the snap of time.

my job to do the chuck out
hard waste is how it feels
i want don't need. a trip

to the tip, to the op shop, to the fire
out front. fire ban lifts
soon. turn it to flame. all this stuff
this is how the first world fucks it up.

part three

i post the doll pic
big sis posts a claim
that's my doll
so, not mine. she's had her day in the sun, burnt
back she goes in the dark of the back room
she's right. my doll broke first. i dress
the doll that is not mine
shoes that went on the feet of big sis, then lil big sis, me
red hat that mum used to wear at a tilt over thick black curls

one day, the blue case
full, mum and dad's big bed
a mess. she'd had it with us, with him, with all of us
she's gone, time to go home, up north
big sis hid the keys
lil big sis and me took the case
out the back, to the side

big sis lives up north
now. close to where mum
had to leave. mum feels the cold
down south like the stab of a knife

mum takes the red dress she made, says she'll wear it when it gets hot.
her new friends have seen all she's got. she needs a change.
when you get old you need new friends.

friends pass, take your past with them
the ball gown goes to big bro's girl
she posts a shot, rocks it with the lush of the young
i keep the bold shirt for the big sis
the doll too. when she comes back
the good blue dress goes to lil big sis
her blue eyes came from dad's mum as well
the shirt with the rose print
mine

in the stuff out the back
i find the notes from dad to mum
quick sneak peek at a card. dad has dealt
sweet pearl words
the voice of big bro, first born
all the love that bursts from my small tight skin
to you
each word a choice. he takes his time
my dad. no tin chest
there is a tin box
i place it in the blue case. the card too
the notes. a dress. stuff it.
full with what i think suits us best

stuff. these white words
my life sags with them. i must burn it all
box on box of my own note
books, shreds of a page. burn the scrawl

when i break
my boys
hear the snap
their sweet hugs glue

time. i must let them
free from the wait of my past
play my dust close to my tin chest
let it go, give it back
close the case

part four

At the beginning of the Virus Times, I re-settle in the place where I grew up. I have brought my hard disc drive. There is a cloud around me, but the just-in-case red case is my back up; it says I'm here to stay. For the first time since I left home, I have come home for good.

It's colder here than in the city. Sweet timing, that rush in my body that heats me. Change of life and here I am, changing all over again.

My partner is with me, our oldest son too. More for him here, down in the middle of nowhere, than there is in the city. Our youngest son and his love come down, on their toes, stay until the city gives them back their own space. My nephew spends time down here as well. The house holds us all, in the thick of it, my beloved and me and the four young ones. It's been forty years since the house was lived in this pattern.

I am living the great depression my mother has been predicting for years. A precious time, and time runs out, even while it runs in circles.

I dreamt this place as a refuge for those of my blood and my inner circle not long after my two boys were born, after I bought the family home and a few acres of the farm. In the dream I am with my two sons, my beloved is close by, there are other children that are part of my life. We are surrounded by danger. We hide in the patch of trees that I have planted.

My dreams have a way of coming true when I read them like a poem.

Twenty years of paying the mortgage, but still mostly my mother's house, my father's shed. Not any more. My parents moved to town three years ago. They like their lawns mown well, and in their eighties, this place became too much.

It is almost too much for me in my fifties.

My oldest son is making the house good enough for his generation. Less carpet, more paint. He is breaking down Mum's cupboards, lining Dad's shed with the wood. In the space he makes I must reckon with my family's takings, their keepings, all the claims of yours and mine and theirs.

part five

The blue case belongs to our mother, but the bunny plates belong to the sibs. A different case altogether, these things, kept with other precious things, in the top shelves of the two kitchen cupboards. The top shelves are easier to reach than the top cupboards of the back room. It takes a chair, not a ladder. Recently, but before the Virus Times, I broke a precious plate of delicate china, my grandmother's gift to me from an aunt who made her special. I threw it out, swearing as blue as my mother. To heal it with molten gold, not a choice.

The bunny plates are made of sturdier stuff. To get to the bottom of those plates is to get to the matter that directs the materials in 'the blue case' and the blue case.

The bunny plates are a product of Beatrix Potter, the stuff of the white middle class. My working-class pretensions were proven false when my oldest son was gifted a bunny eggcup from a friend with money when he turned one. It felt right, and it felt wrong when the youngest son missed out because I was too broke to buy him one to match. I understand what it is to be the youngest, and still I play out parental patterns.

My grandmother hated rabbits like Mrs McGregor, but the plates came from her, a white educated woman. Dad's shed is loaded with rusted rabbit traps. My oldest son wants to throw them out and I say no. A protest art project, so I dream.

When? He sees all the other things I've yet to do. Life is short when you're young. He shrugs. He knows that in time I won't mind letting them go. He might recycle them or give them away. He might let them go.

The plates, the case in point, are keepers of the past. The preciousness of these things shows me being precious about my self. Thinking that I matter, not seeing my self as passing matter.

I text a photo of three bunny plates to the sibs. My two older sisters get back to me within hours. The big sis: Mine is the one with the green door. The little big sis: Ooh. I'm pretty sure I had the painting one. *blows a kiss*. My brother, who lives close, comes in for a drink that night, asks for the results. I give him the remainder.

It's got the most rabbits, he says. His picture is a shop.

Like a magpie, the memory swoops in. I am the pre-schooler dupe, falling for his game every time. Whoever's got the most rabbits wins. My brother, making me eat faster, getting down to my bunnies picking apples at the bottom of my plate. I count them. There is magic in my world; they might have bred like rabbits, bred like big families breed. And at last, the meal finished, we are free to leave the table. He's won again. Small wonder he's my hero.

I try not to be attached to things, but time reveals me as an old chook scratching in the dust, looking for a feed when my belly is as tight as a drum. So much scratching. I need to take my books, my notes, my diaries, my letters, and throw them on the bonfire. I want to be like Jeanette (Winterson). She did it, and wrote about it twice.

When will I stop my scratching? The moment they cut off my head. Here comes the axe, whispers time.

In any case, the bunny plates tie me to the realms of the privileged. They are part of my s/kin. My grandmother also passed on her bookishness. Dickens from her father, a miner who went to school after a full day's work. The real gold mine, right there. Up he flew, in eddies of stolen privilege, gusts of it, more white flight, right up to inspector status. King of the dust heaps.

Family pasts encase me; my blood is in every thing in this place, from the fences to the house to the words that I write. My family, handing-me-down cups to be broken and books to be read and reparation to be made. Family, shaping every thing around me.

part six

The kitchen cupboards, that held the crockery, and the back room cupboards, that held the blue case, create a wall. My oldest son is going to smash the whole thing down.

I will let him burn it all.

I am a thing, and no matter the theory, this is the practice, I relate to things according to my thingness. I live amongst things ripped out from the earth, things shaped and baked and painted, and in particular, I relate to this thing of a house. It has been built and painted into something I call a family home and it is now a home away from home and now, it is being smashed down, its torn-off inner and outer skin is being piled on a bonfire. Nearly November, nearly fire ban season. No holding back. My past, part effigy, part pyre for a lost love. Up will go my heart, up in smoke.

My brother comes by, the rattle of the trailer behind him. Time for a glass of wine, food if it's on. I go out to the back veranda, tell him: Don't take off your boots.

The kitchen floor, stripped bare as the rest of the house. Gone, the sensible lino from the eighties that replaced the black lino, with those red and yellow and blue rectangles, as primary as the blocks we played with as kids. Still got the blocks. Still got a square of the lino.

The floor is pockmarked with staples that I can't budge. It's like walking on blunt nails.

My brother takes his rubber boots off at the lounge-room door.

The next morning, I enter the writing time that is there for me while everyone else sleeps. Stop, aghast. My oldest son has shed his rubber boots under the coffee table. I take them out to the veranda, think: Lucky Mum's not dead, or she'd be rolling in her grave. Later that day I tell Mum. Boots in the house. Lucky you're not dead. We laugh, as we do. We're all getting old.

The blue case has been forced out of the house. No bottom cupboard where I stashed it with the slides. No room for the past; no storage cupboards in this house my son is making. All he wants is room to live.

I must deal with the treasures from the highest shelves of the kitchen cupboards. Things that are too good to use. I must give them away, these barely used things, or put them to use. They will break; they will smash. But first, I hoard them in plastic tubs.

So much stuff.

My beloved has no time for accumulations. He is not a hoarder. They say daughters marry their fathers. But even he falls for the little coffee cups, black on the outside, coloured on the inside, given to Mum by a flash wheat-farmer's daughter whose kids had things that were on the television. Everything new, and always more things to have. Mum remembers the day the matching coffee pot broke. Instant coffee, what a dream, and so the pot is repurposed as an elegant vase on the ledge above the sliding doors. Mum loves things of beauty. A north wind had its way and there it was. Mum swears like her father.

If I swore like my father, I wouldn't swear at all.

The house shakes with heavy blows. Its worn-loose frame clatters like Mum's false teeth on a cold day. A house of sticks and the wolf is at the door. I tremble, feel cold. The high cupboards in the back room are under the hammer.

He's killing it, says my beloved, impressed. Yes, there is a death in my oldest son's hard work. A layer of musty creatures, bone and dust, between the cupboard and the ceiling.

I am a room away from the noise, a thin sliver of a retreat, this tongue-in-groove wall. Bad hearing, like my mother, but there's no getting away from the squeak and tear of the jimmy, the thud of the sledgehammer that turns a boy's arm to manly steel.

I lean on the window, gently. The glass is barely held by the rotting frame.

My breath calms.

Then a crash, louder than the others. The house shakes like a dying cough. It could be the back half of the house fallen in completely. No. A heavy slab of cupboard, that's all it was, and there's my son, and he's just fine.

He has guns, my son. He's been polishing them up, working on them in the shed, part of this refuge turned gaol. Inmate, toning himself for freedom. He is Thor.

I take a walk and Mum rings with the sixth sense that runs in the family. She is grieving the tearing apart of her nest, the best her champagne tastes could do on her beer budget. Those cupboards were marine plyboard, she says.

I tell her they will be reused to line the shed, the place where my father worked in peace.

Appeased, a little, she says: Well, those cupboards weren't there originally.

I say: The house wasn't there originally.

Mum doesn't hear me, so I say it again, to put me and her and every thing in context.

She doesn't argue. Our politics toe the same line.

She moves on, tells me that my beloved and my son are dogs peeing on a lamppost. Making this thing called house their own.

I move on too, despite myself, tell her that's rot; the place is falling apart; it had to be fixed before it all fell to pieces. It is in pieces. There is no peace.

Later I sit with my beloved in the open space that is no longer a kitchen and a back room. It's not your mum's house anymore, he says.

My mother, right again.

My brother pops by and I tell him it's hard and he thinks I'm talking about the work. The emotional side of it, I say. Poor-little-hard-done-by-baby-sister.

A pity-poor-you smile as he talks about the cupboards he crashed through in our grandmother's house. Always a step ahead. Five years the smarter.

My grandmother's cupboards, also once full of precious things. Every thing goes, in time. And in these slowing down times, every thing is in acceleration.

In the shed now, the blue case. On top of the blue case, the doll that my oldest sister knows is hers. The last doll, the oldest doll, the doll who lasted and she is lying in state, toes up. Mum's fancy red hat that I wore in the eighties. It felt like aplomb then and looks like it now. I want to keep it, decide to let it go.

If a blade of grass can crack a stone, then why can't a doll, laid flat in a boy's shed, break a heart?

Mum never had to throw out her mother's things. One thing from her childhood home, a jam plate that lasted all through our childhood. Dirt floor poor. Her mother, gone with nothing to leave. I fear that jam plate, fear I will be the one to break it.

Mum has piles of letters from her dad. Along with letters from my dad and others she saved that she can't give back to the writers. I take them, in the blue case, to town. No room for it here with all the cupboards gone. I prepare for Mum's ire. No, not more things. Throw them out; I don't want to see them. Tears in a foot stamp.

I rest her case outside and prepare her. Just while we finish the house. To keep it safe. We can look through it together.

She softens and in it comes. I place it on a stool, open it, stand back. She shakes out the dress I have placed on the top of all the stuff of her life. White background, green foliage, black flourishes to keep the flowers from the leaves. I smile as she cries: My social dress!

It fits me. Both my sisters wore it too. I lent it to a friend one 50s-themed school social and it split at the seams. I wore my auntie's dress that night, and wore it to my first date with my beloved a few years later. I have gifted it now, to my niece. She also finds it hard to throw stuff away.

It was our first real date, Mum says, talking to Dad. I got to wear lipstick, she says to me. The social leads Mum's story back to the first kiss. I know where my beloved and I had our first kiss too. I've told my boys, but I'm not sure they took note. The older I get, the more I'll probably tell them.

I write a note for the dress, and hand my mother the treasure box. She pulls out a half-finished piece of embroidery. I did this with Mum, she says, delighted and devastated. I write another note as she runs me through the stitches. She sees me writing them down, says: You don't know them? A drip of ridicule, a drop of bad-mother-me.

I remind myself to create a chain of thread around my hoodie, frayed at the cuff from being dragged around a keyboard. Things can be salvaged with skill and the right kind of thread and the right stitches. In time. Things can also be thrown away.

Mum lifts out the proofs of the wedding photos that made it to the album, one of the few things she allowed into this new place when they made the move. Not wanting a speck of clutter. Three years later, nowhere to put a thing.

Ooh, he was a handsome man. She's looking at Dad in sepia, the one where he's peaking, peeking over her shoulder in a flash car heading off for the consummation.

The wedding dress is Dutch satin simple, not a loop of lace or a rogue of ruffle, scoop necked with a skirt so full that when lifted high by the wheat-farmer's daughter, the dress still falls solidly around my mother's thighs. Long and skinny legs, like mine. A hint of mutton in the upper sleeve, the lower sleeve like a glove, buttoned along her thin arms.

Where did it go?

Mum only remembers that it cost seven pounds to sew it, that the fabric cost more, that she went to an Italian seamstress in Collingwood that everybody knew. She looks at me. It would have fitted you.

I don't think so, I say, patting my paternal grandmother's gift to me. That and Dickens. No regrets now, not when I see the gouges in the shoulders of my heavy-breasted friends. Good things in small packages. So many packaged words on my bookshelves.

I had the same measurements as Venus de Milo, Mum says. Good things in large packages, too.

Were you wearing a corset? I ask.

No, I don't think so.

You had to be. Look at your waist, Mum. It's not natural. My son's unearthed some old newspapers in the upheaval, dating from the forties and fifties. My younger older sister and I mocked that vicious push to take the breath out of women, those

sketched models, all bust and no waist, part of the things for sale. The things that women did. The things we do.

A good thing that the wedding dress disappeared. My younger older sister not tall enough, not sentimental enough. My elder older sister not thin enough, not biddable enough. All on me. That thing might have made me live differently. None of that wearing black pants and a white shirt like my beloved and my two baby sons.

Mum pulls out a letter from Dad, written while away from our family home, playing district cricket. He writes that he had to take her blue case. His overnight bag was too small to do the job. The blue case, the going-away case; it just won't go away.

I pass Dad an older looking letter, written in his hand. It's from before they were married. Before the blue case. He's doing national service. He reads extracts, softly. He's never been loud, but now his body is almost done with making platelets, and it makes his voice a shadow of his gentle baritone. He deals with his body's new inabilities like he deals with Mum's blue language. My brother is taking care of his football and cricket trophies. Dad watches the games with his body now, says he can feel the tackle, the catch. Statistics are one of his things. He deals and he doesn't miss a trick.

I look over his shoulder, follow as he reads of lying awake, waiting for breakfast, listening to the footsteps of others as they move to their duties, rank, foul jobs. Then, the last line. I step back as he delivers it to Mum. I will never change in how much I love you.

His voice breaks and my heart breaks and Mum's tears break.

Things like this break me, break my relations of time, break the relations of mine. Nothing elemental here to hold these fragments whole and so I treasure the breaks as once I might have treasured gold.

Coda

The poem, the prose, the case itself, hold more than what is left at this close. Things have many versions. Barely a trace remains of my first hot flush of words. I have scoured my work clean, scratched it dry. And again, time and time and time again, and the blood remains like a spot on the hand. Every day, me too, a little older, a little more worked over. It's been a year since I spilt blood.

I repack, again and again and again, give up material in 'the blue case', give up materials in the blue case, make room, repack, give up, make room. Just as the blue case is ajar, for now, with old letters, a tin treasure box and a precious dress that must be dealt with, this shifting draft breaks each time I read it again. It will not be done. The relations of my familial collaborations re-release themselves with an alchemy that reminds me of putting a coin under thin paper, then pencilling, softly, with a grey lead. Revealed, patterns of the 'world's variegated poesis' (Stewart, 2016, p. 35). Designs that have nothing and everything to do with me and my

pencil. The form is already-always there, and not-yet and never there. The work of inscription makes it something of me, and then I press too hard and the point breaks. Language trips and falls and takes me for the ride.

As I close ‘the blue case’ I find myself white-sided, blind-sided, undecided. All this wor(l)ding taking up room. I know I must stop my scratching, let all this dust be swept away by the surge of sovereign ‘docu-memory’ (Leane, 2017, p. 248). My writing of such things gets in the way of sovereignty’s right to be heard. To write my case closes off my readiness to attend. This whitestream of there and then in this here and now gets in the way of this truth: these words were written on Tyarcoort Woorroong Country, and the illegality of my presence clamps my white words, cramps my claw-like hand around my thingdom. The case for keeping has closed like a rusty trap.

Three things remain. A worn children’s book, a cup chipped from overuse, a plate barely used for being special. I place them, with caution, in a brown paper bag. I am at a loss and have nothing more to gain. Destiny might once have taken them, but the potentiality for that relation has passed (Deacon, 2020). Perhaps, in time, the brown bag might open to another past that can play its part in shaping my future relations. There is so much truth left to tell and shadows all around. I give up that tin chest that holds the heart of my family story. The words beat to their own pulse, a bigger pulse that drives my teeny chook-scratch, my tiny stitch in time. When I attend to that deeper living breath, this material matter beyond me, this wor(l)ding hold-all makes my speck of dust a no thing at all. And so, I let go.

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