Dedicated to Dr Sandra Burr

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University of Canberra

Sandra Burr

Love Myst and other poems

Biographical note:
Sandra Burr was an honorary academic at the University of Canberra where she taught creative writing, and creative/cultural research. She was on the editorial board of the journal Axon: Creative Explorations and Project Manager for the Australian government Office of Learning and Teaching-funded Examination of Doctoral Degrees in Creative Arts: process, practice and standards. The holder of a PhD in creative writing, Sandra was a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra, and managed the ARC-funded project Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case Study in Poetry. She was also a longstanding member of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and had been a key part of the committee organising two of their annual conferences. Her research interests focused on the cross-disciplinary field of human-animal relations.

Keywords:
Creative writing – Poetry – Animal studies – Women/horse bond
Love Myst

You are waiting at the paddock gate
as I arrive and when I call – you call
we sing together
walking by my side head low
your nostrils blow warm across my wrist
the roundness of your barrel swells
against my inner thigh
muscle against muscle
I feel the lift,
the tiny outward swing and little drop
of my legs
in time with your legs
the view ahead
is framed by your fluted ears
broader at the base,
inward turning at the top
as you listen out –
for me
sticky grasses sweep your fetlocks
and mustard-coloured
flower heads rebound
as you carry me
two as one
damp fronds brush my boots
tiger-stripping their elastic sides
and your dappled breast
the dry slither of a startled lizard
darting to the sanctuary
of a fissured granite crack
sends a tremor scything through you
and my nerve ends flutter
for one moment
we are not synchronized
until I place my palm
against your shoulder
and we exhale
in unison
Mares in Spring

Overnight the apple tree blooms fists of white and flossy pink
At last my winter feet wear sandals.
Roadside grasses stand tall, fields of ripening wheat beckon in the wind
while safe behind their paddock fences mares browse
fit to burst, tugging blissfully at abundant clover,
fuelling hormones, feeding urges.

Remnant wisps of winter fluff adorn their rounded bellies
where secret follicles like buds unfurl.
Soon they will back up to puzzled geldings and beg,
with soft eyes and soundless mouths
for the one thing that the horses cannot give.

Kookaburra

At dawn, currawongs and magpies gargo in the treetops
their song lines plummet and drown in a half filled water trough
where a disintegrating kookaburra silently floats, beak down
Touched by his waterlogged beauty
I lift his hollow bones from the treacherous pond
and placing him in a grassy nest,
smooth his fading plumage with its tinge of iridescent blue
He is ready for the ministrations of ants and beetles,
dust and time.
Research statement

Sandra Burr died at the end of September 2014. For this submission, her colleagues have compiled a brief statement of her research ethos and epistemological basis from her notes and other writings.

Sandra worked in conventional modes and in creative practice on the issue of the relations between human and non-human animals. As a lifelong horsewoman, she maintained a particular focus on human/horse relationships, and contributed knowledge to the apparent bond between women and horses. She said of her research into the issue:

My interrogation of the horse-woman bond is situated in the expanding field of animals and society (Franklin 2006). I was concerned not to objectify the horses in my research, and to afford them an ethos of respect that reflects my own thinking about human interactions with horses. This sentiment is echoed by US sociologist and horsewoman Kerri Brandt, who advocates redressing the ‘pervasive specieism that values human life over non-human animal life’ (Brandt 1995: 13). It is always confirming to find other researchers who concur with your point of view.

Acknowledging the importance in her research and creative practice of embeddedness, and the value of accommodating a subjective position as a researcher, she quotes poet Alicia Ostriker’s claim that ‘the self in its innermost regions is plural’, that ‘the “I” is a “we”’ (Ostriker 2005: 78); and that in consequence, her research was committed to ‘reinforcing the notion of research as a personal, professional, methodological and theoretical journey’ (Fisher and Phelps 2006: 153).

The products of this journey were essays on human/animal interactions, artist books comprising photographs and other visual explorations of animals in the national capital and, always, poems. Her poetry aspired to what she particularly admired in other writers: ‘their use of the conversational tone which is simultaneously personal, subjective, self-reflexive and intimate’. Through this tone, she observed:

They achieve a sense of fellowship with readers through the use of informal language and structure and are often quirky and funny with an off-beat approach to their subjects. I like those undercurrents of gentle persuasion, their humour and self-deprecation and respect those inflections of authority which I believe result from lived experience, observation and intelligent reflection.

Her many colleagues, students, family and friends can attest to the fact that in her work and in her life she reflected these same qualities.

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Central Queensland University

Donna Lee Brien

Vale dearest Sandra: death and digital afterlives

Biographical note:
Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries and Chair of the Creative and Performing Arts Research Group at Central Queensland University, Australia. Co-founding convenor of the Australasian Food Studies Network, Donna is the Commissioning Editor, Special Issues, for TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, on the Editorial Advisory Board of the Australasian Journal of Popular Culture, a Foundation Editorial Board member of Locale: the Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies, and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Donna has been writing and researching genres of creative non-fiction for the past two decades.

Keywords:
Creative writing – personal essay – obituary – Burr, Sandra
A dear friend died recently.

I became aware of Sandra’s death when another close friend, one of my best, Jen Webb, posted the terrible news on Facebook. I didn’t, however, see Jen’s original post. It was a busy day, even more than usual. I was away from home attending a research conference, and ducking out of sessions to meet with colleagues with whom it was a pleasure to touch base with face-to-face instead of our usual staccato interactions on video- or tele-conference.

After my last such meeting and a casual and noisy dinner when, unusually, no-one checked their phones or tablets, I was happily tired in my room, packing and half watching a television series set in the 1960s. The chief detective racing back to the police station to make a phone call reminded me to charge my smart phone. When it flashed into life, a long line of emails noting comments on a Facebook message made it clear that the worst had happened. I scanned back – and saw Jen’s original message. I immediately tried to phone her and noted a number of missed calls that evening. When we spoke, I finally heard the news in person. Then my husband phoned and I heard his digest version of the messages on Facebook before, later that evening, eventually sitting down to read them all myself.

That was last Friday. It is now a week later. Sandra’s Facebook site is still online and operational. This reveals she was posting images and reposts until close to her end – all her final messages are to do with animals, including a heartrending post about shutting down puppy farms. She abhorred and campaigned tirelessly against cruelty to animals, especially native animals, dogs and the horses she so adored. Her dry sense of humour is also evident. Her post on 11 August 2014, only six weeks past, is a photo of a gorgeously fat green tree frog, lying back, with his little hands crossed over his belly. The (now heartbreaking) slogan on the image reads ‘So much to do …’. The second part, ‘so little desire to do it’, is not at all representative of Sandra – and that was probably the joke she meant. For, ever since I have known her – more than a decade – Sandra was one of life’s doers. Whether it was managing a major grant project, completing her own creative work, moving house or organising a conference, exhibition or wedding – if you wanted something to ‘go off’ brilliantly, you asked Sandra to take charge. Those posts also show that, in the days before she died, she was still ‘liking’ the posts of her friends and colleagues, supporting our endeavours and (mis)adventures as she always had.

Then, her posts stop.

What follows is a series of shocked messages from family, colleagues, friends and representatives of professional associations, all attracting further commiserations and every one lamenting a sense of dreadful loss. The general tone is disbelief together with an outpouring of how much everyone valued Sandra. Posts came from Sandra’s home, Canberra, from all over Australia and from places across the globe. It is clear that, in the shock of the days after her death, Sandra’s Facebook site provided a space whereby widely dispersed individuals could not only pay homage to Sandra’s life and work, but also share their grief and offer support to each other. It seems natural that this site of regular, albeit happier communication, rapidly became a site of collective online mourning.
Scanning back through Sandra’s posts, I wonder what will happen to her site now.

Writers always leave a legacy – their publications and works in progress, journals, letters, drafts and notes – continuing to circulate when they die. Some authors have tried to control this cultural inheritance, culling, burning or otherwise seeking to edit some of these materials and the stories they tell, but such actions can never destroy items already outside their own collections or in the public domain. Today, however, when someone dies, he or she additionally leaves behind a plethora of online and other digital information and, in this instance, what is ‘public’ and ‘private’ is often blurred. Apart from material that is beyond individual control – our names and records in various official repositories, for instance – there are also our personal and work email accounts, biographies and online profiles as well as a wealth of textual, visual and multimedia information including photographs and possibly videos and sound files posted on various social media and other websites, or stored in the ‘cloud’. Some of these sites have policies relating to what happens to this material after the death of the named author/maker, while others do not. There is also a growing graveyard of dormant, but still visible, sites on the Internet with no one to contact, even if there was a past process in place.

In 2009, Facebook employee Max Kelly explained how the death of a close colleague prompted the company to instigate the ‘memorial profile’. Clarifying the rationale, he wrote:

> When someone leaves us, they don’t leave our memories or our social network. To reflect that reality, we created the idea of “memorialized” profiles as a place where people can save and share their memories of those who’ve passed. … We try to protect the deceased’s privacy by removing sensitive information such as contact information and status updates. Memorializing an account also prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, while still enabling friends and family to leave posts on the profile Wall in remembrance.

Kelly’s use of euphemisms for death and the dead – ‘when someone leaves us’, ‘those who’ve passed’ and ‘the deceased’ – is common in this context, reflecting, I believe, both a sincere desire to protect the raw feelings of the grieving and the general discomfort many in the West have regarding death and dying – whether in particular instances, or in general. Kelly, indeed, continued:

> We understand how difficult it can be for people to be reminded of those who are no longer with them, which is why it’s important when someone passes away that their friends or family contact Facebook to request that a profile be memorialized (2009).

Memorialisation converts a Facebook member’s profile into a tribute page that, while lacking some personal information and detail, no longer disconcertingly appears in search results. While those who are already friends can still post messages on tribute pages, this has created some ill feeling among those who aren’t, but who still want to post in such a sad eventuality, such as parents who may not be Facebook friends with a child at the time of his or her death.

Facebook will, also, its policy states, remove a profile at the request of the next of kin and this is obviously an action preferred by some. Writing in *The New York Times,*
Jenna Wortham noted the problem of Facebook ‘shuffling a dead friend through its social algorithms’, a process by which no longer living members circulate endlessly as ‘ghosts in its machine’ (2010). This can, she warns, increase pain for the grieving when they are continually reminded of someone they have lost and can be especially shocking when a name pops up out of context. Widow Donna Rawling was quoted in an article in The Guardian as stating that although she had managed to wind up most of her late husband’s affairs, she found his continuing presence on the web ‘eerie’ and disturbing and wished she could have some of the information removed. She explained:

Normally you get in touch with friends and acquaintances and colleagues and let them know what’s happened … That gives you closure and stops you being contacted in future and asked how you both are. But to my knowledge, there’s no way of doing that with the web. The perception is that he is still alive and well and having fun on his motorbike (qtd. in Jefferies 2009).

Twitter states that it will deactivate accounts upon being provided with proof of death and a statement of the relationship of the requester to ‘the deceased user or their estate’ (2014). Counter intuitively, this can only be submitted to Twitter, Inc. by hard copy mail or fax although, thereafter, all communications will be conducted ‘via email’ (Twitter 2014). On the 19th of August this year, Twitter also added a policy statement regarding the removal of images or videos of ‘deceased individuals, from when critical injury occurs to the moments before or after death’ (Twitter 2014). This was seemingly in response to Robin Williams’ daughter cancelling her account after grisly photoshopped images of her late father were sent to her via Twitter (Musil 2014). Information from Twitter on this removal notes, however, that when reviewing such requests, it ‘considers public interest factors such as the newsworthiness of the content’ and warns that the company ‘may not be able to honor every request’ (Twitter 2014).

Wikipedia has a memorial listing of ‘deceased Wikipedians’ who have made a significant contribution to Wikipedia. It also has a page of guidelines outlining its ‘organized procedure for dealing with the accounts, userpages, and user rights of deceased Wikipedians as established by community consensus’ (Wikipedia 2014), including that, after stringent verification, user pages are ‘ordinarily fully edit-protected after the user has died’ to prevent ‘vandalism’, any automatic subscriptions are deleted and, ‘by default, constructively contributing Wikipedians should be honored with a listing at ‘WP:RIP'. Wikipedia adds that a colleague of an editor ‘may create a memorial page to honor the deceased, as long as the family has not objected and the user did not object to it prior to their death’ (Wikipedia 2014).

There are many online sites and services that do not, however, have any policy – or seemingly, any way of dealing with such situations. Even armed with information and authority, removing an online presence is not always easy. Google has, for example, information regarding ‘Obtaining a deceased person’s YouTube videos’ online in their ‘Help’ section but notes that this is lengthy, difficult and unlikely to be successful: ‘in rare cases we may be able to provide that information to an authorized representative of the deceased person … Any decision to provide the contents of a
Brien  Death and digital afterlives

deceased person’s account will be made only after a careful review’ (Google 2014). They also warn that the process of ‘application to obtain video content is a lengthy process with multiple waiting periods. Further, Google will not produce video content that is already publicly available (Google 2014).

Some online contacts may, conversely, feel pain when profiles and/or other content disappear (Cheng 2010) – I know I would feel sadder if Sandra’s profile and posts weren’t online. Valuable intellectual property can also be lost if an account is automatically deleted after a certain period of inactivity as in, for example, Dropbox’s free accounts which are deleted after a year of inactivity (Dropbox 2104).

We all selectively cultivate our public identities and, as writers, attempt this, at least in part, through our writing. Yet, no matter how carefully we might plan, no one can control the meaning others take from our work, and the persona that, therefore, lives on in public memory. Thinking about Sandra, my memories are of a blend of our actual and our online interactions, but also vividly of her writings. I have a folder named ‘Sandra Burr’ in the ‘My documents’ folder of my laptop as well as an email folder with the descriptor ‘S Burr’ on that computer. Apart from the many word and pdf documents created by Sandra in these and other folders on my hard drive and stored on Dropbox, these are also echoed in my various external backup systems.

There are many drafts and versions of articles, conference presentations and papers, and reports that Sandra, Jen and I wrote together – these are variously named BurrBrienWebb, BurrWebbBrien, WebbBurrBrien and so on, together with the date that version was made and/or circulated. Many have a letter after the date, showing that on that day (or night), there were many versions flipping back and forth between us. The day and time determined whether we were in our various offices or homes, and sometimes we were all away from home and even overseas, but still the drafts circulated until they were ready to submit for publication or deliver to an audience. Sandra was not only a careful editor and an expert spotter of the obscure or redundant phrase. Many of our drafts were constructed with blank areas where one author was lost for words, and one of Sandra’s great skills was to be able to fill these with the perfect idea, phrase or reference. As we almost always used track changes in our drafting and edits, there are thousands and thousands of comments and changes that are tagged with Sandra’s name in my files. These show what truly collaborative endeavours our co-written pieces were. I will keep these drafts, but don’t have the heart to open them right now to further investigate.

Sandra’s textual legacy will live on in many other ways in the public realm. Like most contemporary academics, Sandra engaged in a range of research projects aligned with both institutional imperatives and her professional interests, but the research that was most personally important to her related to animals. Her PhD thesis (she graduated in 2008) is a model of a self-reflective researched creative nonfiction memoir plus theoretically informed exegesis. This research was inspired by her equestrian skill and experience and deep love, and empathy, for horses, and comprised a creative work, ‘Writing riding: reflections of an Australian horsewoman’ and an exegesis, ‘Women and horses: a study of Australia’s recreational horsewomen’. This can be accessed via TROVE, the National Library of Australia’s digital information portal, and downloaded from the University of Canberra. She was a member of the Australian
Animal Studies Group and Human-Horse Relations Research Group, and this led to her to work with the Australian Capital Territory’s (ACT) Rural Fire Service, helping property owners with an agisted horses plan for bushfires. A skilled and personable, although always modest, public speaker, Sandra was a longstanding and much valued member of the Writing Research Cluster of the University of Canberra, the ACT Writers Centre and the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). Her special skill was her ability to make conference and seminar audiences laugh as well as think about the material she was presenting – whether this was academic research or her creative writing. Her rare combination of dry wit and steel-trap intelligence melded to gentle sensitivity also made her a popular and influential teacher of both creative writing and creative/cultural research practice.

Much of Sandra’s scholarly service was through online media and her contribution can be traced through these sites. She was a foundation member of the editorial board for *Axon: Creative Explorations*, for instance, a fully online journal, and a frequent and valued peer referee for a large number of online publications including *Axon, TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, M/C Journal and Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, as well as themed issues of journals or conference proceedings such as Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research’s ‘Write4Children’ special issue and the AAWP’s annual published conference proceedings. In my editorial roles, I could always depend on Sandra for a thoughtful review, always delivered on time and, sometimes, unreasonably rapidly if this was necessary. She was always consummately confidential and this means that many academics and writers have unknowingly benefited from her knowledge and insight. Sandra’s reviews were models of gracious generosity and her curiosity in this area led to a co-written journal article on the role and important contribution that peer refereeing makes to the scholarly endeavour, together with some of the limitations of this form of review (Brien, Burr and Webb 2010).

The most extended project we worked on together was a nationally grant funded project – *Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards* (Webb, Brien and Burr 2012) that Sandra managed for Jen Webb and I from 2010 to 2012. In this, Sandra proved herself to be an extremely accomplished project manager – ‘competent’ sounds so weak a descriptor in this context – and this led to her also being called upon to act as a conference and seminar organizer, roles she always fulfilled with quiet calm and an eye for detail. We conducted much of our strategic and organisational communication about the project through email, and Sandra also organised the archiving of these emails in various repositories, as well as the design and creation of websites for the dissemination of project news and information. So vital and embedded was the work Sandra completed with us on this project, that we soon began putting our three names on all project material, including the many publications and presentations developed from this work and, including—in an important recognition of Sandra’s significant contribution—the final reports submitted to the government.

Email and websites are also largely the way notices about conferences, symposia and roundtable discussions are now disseminated – whether they be international, national
or local in scope – and a number of such events have Sandra to thank, at least in part, for a successful communications strategy. This included her work on two major AAWP conferences in Canberra (2007 and 2013), the Bienniel Conference of the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research, If We’re Being Honest: The Facts and Fictions of Children’s Literature, at the National Library of Australia (2002), and the Creative and Practice-Led Research Symposium (2009) that was a component of our OLT grant and the Development and Aid Effectiveness: Interrogating Pedagogies in International Development Studies (2010) conferences, both at the University of Canberra.

Most importantly for future readers and researchers, digital platforms for publication dissemination mean that many of Sandra’s beautifully written pieces are available online. A number of her papers were published in TEXT (2007a, 2010a, 2010c) for which she co-edited a special issue (2010c). Some of her work, however, readers will need to locate in print. This includes short stories and poetry (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2007b, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), as well as two of my favourites: a perceptive chapter on how to write about animals in Elaine Walker’s Teaching Creative Writing (2012) and the important study ‘Women and horses’, which was published in Hoofbeats (2007c).

A piece I re-read again only a few weeks ago to cite in my own work is an article in which Sandra profiled the development of a field of an extremely specialist writing – cookbooks and, therefore, food writing for pets. Her abstract explains:

Across many cultures companion animals have attained the status of significant others in human households. Pets are now family members living in the intimacy of our homes occupying our bedrooms, our hearts and our deepest affections. In many ways, the lives of our pets mimic our own with designer outfits and personalised accessories, exercise classes, heated beds and specialised diets. … Today pet food is a significant global industry producing a complex range of scientifically formulated nutritionally complete canned and dried food for busy pet owners. In response to this phenomenon is a rise in the number of pet cookbooks whose authors refute the claims of commercial manufacturers, emphasising instead the importance of home-cooked food for the health and wellbeing of our animal companions. While America continues to dominate the pet cookbook market, Australia has produced a number of pet cookbooks that reveal a great deal about past and contemporary cultural attitudes towards companion animals in this country (Burr 2013).

This article reflects on the evolution of human-animal relations in Australia through the lens of this small but significant body of Australian publications. This type of inquiry linked her research interests in exploring our evolving relationships with the non-human animals all around us with that of writing. Colleagues in both these fields, as well as all the other areas Sandra made a contribution to, will miss her and her wise contributions.

Note

1. Almost a month after her death, Sandra’s Facebook site is still online and operational. It now contains a series of messages about a well-attended ceremony held to commemorate her life, complete with her horses, Myst and Indie, and continued commiserations from near and far.
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Research statement

Research background

The personal essay has been an area of writerly inquiry since Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580), although more recent research has focused on ethical issues of concern for writers of creative nonfiction (and especially memoir) such as the borderlines of fact and fiction and the ethics of disclosure, rather than forms and potential of the personal essay. This work is part of a larger project investigating the forms and sub-genres of creative nonfiction writing, in this case, the personal essay and, in particular, the personal obituary essay.

Research contribution

The obituary has been investigated in terms of journalistic production (for example, Barnes 2013), what it reflects about societal attitudes to death (Barth et al. 2013/14) and linguistic practices (Todua 2014), but rarely in relation to contemporary creative writing or creative writers, or the effect of the digital online world on the work writers leave when they die. Building on Stark (2006), this work addresses these issues, in response to the death of a close friend/colleague.

Research significance

In exploring the potentialities of the obituary as personal essay, this work suggests approaches to these forms as a vehicle to discuss both the realities of personal loss and contemporary death. This essay has been accepted for publication in a peer refereed journal.

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Jen Webb

Counting up my dead (for Sandra Burr)

Biographical note:

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice, and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the relationship between art and society; she is currently working, with Kevin Brophy, Michael Biggs and Paul Magee, on an ARC-funded project that investigates creativity through a case study of contemporary poetry. Jen publishes work on cultural theory and creative research; she also writes poetry, and exhibits produces artist books for exhibition.

Keywords:
Creative writing – death – grieving – ontology – stories
Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are.

(Daniel Dennett 1991: 418)

We tell stories about ourselves, writes Daniel Dennett. The stories are designed to set up a protective barrier, to help us blend into the environment, to give us a sense of control over the environment and over ourselves. Storytelling is a *fundamental tactic of self-protection*. But each story that is told contains, in shadowy form, a counter-narrative, a resistive alterity that works against the possibility of control that the original telling promised. I tell my story: in that story I shape the conditions for being and relating as they seem right to me – as they suit me. It becomes my truth. And then I hear someone else’s story, and it knocks me out of the ring. I am disrupted, disturbed, outraged, or astonished. Or worse than that: I hear someone else’s story, and it seems to be story no longer, but rather truth, something that cannot be reconciled because it is not narrative but ugly, concrete fact, ‘too cruel anywhere’.¹

Someone has died. This is not a story. This is ugly; it is concrete fact. It cannot be edited or revised. But I cannot accept that this is all the meaning it can have. There must be some other tactic of self-preservation.

I am counting up my dead. Fifty-five years of living, and what I have here is a stack of names, dates, details, of those I loved: of what I called them; when they died and where; why they died. Year by year, the losses mount up. As they do for all of us; and yet we continue to connect with others; to find love; to pretend there will not be loss, or that if there is loss, we can recover our position.

It was 2003. I was teaching creative writing to a class of graduates, and Sandra Burr was among that cohort. Over the course of that first semester, as I listened to her speaking in tutorial sessions, as I read drafts of her work and graded assessments, I came to recognise in her something very unusual. She had an internal mechanism that most of us lack. Later I understood what the mechanism was: it was the ability to listen, as few of us do. To listen, and attend more generally to what was being said. Her sharp intellect meant that little got by her, but she only rose to the bait if a particularly putrid morsel was dangled in front of her. And even then, she was more inclined to bat foolishnesses out of the way than to attack the baiter.

This is the approach she had learned in her dealings with non-human animals, and particularly with horses, those edgy, inquisitive, easily panicked prey animals with whom she had spent her life. With whom, she told me, she had learned how to be a person. Sandra was a horse whisperer; and, it transpired, she was a people-whisperer too. When I was in her company my anxieties and rages faded to grey. The world seemed a kinder, happier, calmer place.

Sandra continued with her studies, completing a doctorate and building a reputation as someone with deep scholarly and phenomenological knowledge about the ethics of relationships between human and non-human animals. People sought her out – scientists as well as cultural theorists and artists – because she had remarkable
insights, remarkable instincts. She remained on intimate terms with her horses, and when she died – too soon, too soon – they attended her wake, grieving like the rest of us, confused and full of yearning.

There is no consolation attendant on the death of those we love. There is only a great absence that fills the world. There is only a long cold path that leads to an unwelcome future. We begin walking down that path; we wait for that great gap in being to knit itself up again. Death has come into our small local worlds, turned them upside, goes away again. It will return another day. Death always moves among us, armed with a thuggish intensity. It has taken those we love. It will take us too, no matter how fat our bank accounts, how strong our bones, how fine our minds: ‘Being brave / Lets no one off the grave / Death is no different whined at than withstood’ (Larkin 1977: 92–3).

I am not brave; I do more whining than withstanding. I grieve for Sandra, and for the others, for all my dead dears, those who have gone with no forwarding address, with no promises to return. I don’t complain though, because to whom would I address that angry letter? The matter of human being is death as well as life; being is always equivocal, always ambivalent. We tell stories, says South African poet Antjie Krog, in order ‘not to die of life’ (1999: 72). And some of those stories – perhaps the thorniest ones of all – are the stories about death. They are so difficult because death is so utterly, materially real, and yet so utterly ineffable. What does it mean – where do we draw the line between the living and the dead? Is a tree alive, is an ocean? Both are, in their particular ways. Are Martin Heidegger or Pierre Bourdieu alive, since both continue to emerge in print years after their formal death? How about that baby Paul Virilio writes about, the one from the Lumière brothers’ film who ‘has gone on guzzling his food just as hungrily since the beginning of the twentieth century, even though he long ago died of old age’ (Virilio 2000: 34-35)? Baudrillard seems to think so; he writes:

Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear by proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary mode of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal (1993: 4).

Language, discourse, technology: they make a permanent-present available to us. It’s not enough. Faced with the actual tangible for-ever-ness of the death of those we love, it’s not enough.

Death is the big silence that continually shouts, the gap that can’t be sutured, the knowledge that can be neither known nor forgotten. It is what seems to undo or overcome language, what undoes the possibility of being, what disturbs the living and problematises the value of truth, or time, or space. It can’t happen. It will happen. It can’t be escaped, whether whined at or withstood. It can’t be true. But it is.

Despite what we know about the space between life and death, the headstones at any cemetery are reminders that we humans deny death: He is not dead, but sleeping. Absent from the body, but face to face with the Lord. Rest in peace. Death may be the absolute and definite obverse of life, but it is also an impossibility, and most of us are
able to have these irreconcilable beliefs co-exist comfortably in our heads. I may die, I
tell myself, but I’ll come back: resurrection, transmigration of souls, reincarnation,
glorious eternity.

And besides, how can we tell when death is, where it is? Doctors and ethicists spend
considerable energy trying to determine the moment of transition, not always with
certainty. Was the American woman Terri Schiavo dead or alive? Both. Neither. She
was in a nowhere place, somewhere in-between. In this sense, death is rather like
statistics: where, for instance, does two end and three begin: is it at 2.5? Is it at 2.95?
2.99? 2.995? There is no universally satisfying answer. There is only the knowledge
that at some point, probably when you momentarily glanced away, two became
manifestly and undeniably three; that at some point, probably as the nurse looked
away, life became death. The heart falls silent, the EKG flatlines, living flesh begins
to decay, and the person who looked out at us through the eyes in the skull has gone.

Death, says Michel de Certeau, is ‘the problem of the subject’, ‘a wound on reason’
(1984: 192). It is, in everything, a paradox, at once the great inevitability and the great
uncertainty. ‘No one is sure of dying’, writes Maurice Blanchot. ‘No one doubts
death, but no one can think of certain death except doubtfully’ (1982: 95): it won’t – it
can’t – happen to me. But even while I cling to this thought, I know that unresting
death (Larkin 1977) will indeed come for me because it has come for everyone else
throughout history; because it is metonymically part of life, and simultaneously life’s
Other. As Other, death constitutes the limit and the boundary of both life and
meaning: the limit because it marks the end of self-awareness; the boundary because
it removes the human subject from the symbolic order, and returns it to the Real. We
are born into the Real: inarticulate, not quite human, and certainly not social. With the
acquisition and appreciation of language and its rules, and of discourse and its rules,
we become truly human. And yet this human status is contingent and temporary,
dependent on death’s delay; that inarticulate infant is still lurking somewhere in our
being or our subconscious as a continual reminder that we once were, and will
inevitably again be, neither human nor social. Death dissolves meaning because it is
itself beyond language, beyond signification, and beyond the symbolic order.

But if language is predicated on difference, and not identity, and if meaning is reliant
on meaninglessness, then the assertion of an unbridgeable divide between life and
death, of absolute life, or certain death, can’t be sustained either. The dead, by being
life’s Other, provide for the living that difference which names and confirms my
being. But the slipperiness of signification means that in the process of providing the
guarantee of my life – my aliveness – the dead simultaneously call me to, and recall to
me, my own death; and the various signifiers I hold up as talismans to keep death in
exile simply call it back into social life by naming it and focusing on it. Death as
signifier slides across life, infecting and problematising it. Similarly, the attempt to
brace death off as the Other simply reminds me that self and Other, death and life,
are always imbricated within one another, and depend on each other.

An effect of the paradoxical uncertainty/certainty of death is that for most of us death
is both there and not-there, a small unfocused blur. This blur must be blotted out
because it is a stain on consciousness, a remainder of the Real, and a reminder of our
own disintegration and expulsion from the world of meaning that spoils the present
and makes it difficult to concentrate on being-in-the-world. And despite our denials, we know we will die; as Heidegger tells us in *Being and Time*, being human is ‘being-toward-death’, and this we can’t escape. In the interests of asserting our own being – not a ‘being-toward-death’ but a visceral vitality – we avow life and disavow death, but we know in a certainly-uncertain way that at the end we will fall back to the pre-linguistic, asocial state, and further back, into the state that is no state, where we are unable to say or even think: ‘I am, and I am dead’.

‘I think you’re making this all too complicated’: that’s Sandra’s voice, Sandra’s words. She continually called me to account, reminding me that beyond all the clatter of words, all the ‘shimmering’ of discourse (Foucault 1972: 228), there is living, and being, and the making of art, poems, coffee, love. There is the quiet recognition that we are, finally, bodies and not mere discourse; that we are closer to our non-human relatives in our state of material embodiment than we are to the abstractions of subjectivity we dream up, in our brief lives.

But although Sandra often teased me, gently, about the way I turn myself inside out over concepts, she too was driven by the need to make creative works; works that rely on observation and humour and aesthetic judgment. In this she was entirely aligned with Ronald Schleifer, who identified in the materialities of creative practice ‘a revelation of the other in the same’ that is ‘the secret melody of death and materialisms’ (1990: 49–50). Art, for Schleifer, and for me, and perhaps for Sandra (although I won’t presume to speak for her), offers ways of addressing death, of acknowledging the other in the same and, in the process, making it possible to go on. Sandra went on; the week of her death we were plotting and planning work we would each submit to next year’s staff exhibition—her photographs of animal representations in Canberra, of all that quirky and often ludicrous graffiti and public art and commercial signage that bring into discourse the animal selves of the human, our own materiality. It is what artists do: make work right up to the moment when the hand can no longer hold a pen, the moment when the light fails. Perhaps it is because art allows us to deflect our knowledge of the certainty of our own death; but perhaps it is because in the making of art we acknowledge our own materiality, and hence that certainty, and find in those acts a small but fundamental ‘tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition’.

Maurice Blanchot insists that ‘you cannot write unless you remain your own master before death; you must have established with death a relation of sovereign equals’ (1982: 91). That relation must, surely, be predicated on a familiarity, on an enduring conversation. On this exchange of thought and meaning we can build a (creative) life: we can write, or dance, or draw because we know that this expression is going to cease, finally and irrevocably; and with this assurance of death, comes the assurance that we really do have that material being of which symbolic being is a correlative. It is death, and its promise, that makes us human.

(I don’t really believe this: I know only that the wound on reason that Sandra’s death has inflicted is best treated by the application of theory; and then, the healing starts, with the return to creative expression. I write, therefore I am. She has written, therefore she is.)
Endnotes

1. This is Banquo, responding to Lady Macbeth’s attempt to present a face of innocence on the discovery of the murdered King Duncan, in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Act II, Scene III.

2. This phrase comes from Captain Cat in Dylan Thomas’ Under Milk Wood.

3. I can’t help observing that I write of Baudrillard in the present tense, although he died in 2007.
Research statement

Research background

At the heart of philosophical investigation is the question of what it means to be a human being (to name just a few, see Althusser; Aristotle; Nietzsche; Schleifer; Voltaire). This is not simply a matter of ontology, but a matter of definitions, language, ethics, relationships and responsibilities. What it means to be, how to live according to sound epistemological and axiological frameworks, and how to articulate this, are questions that perhaps will never be answered in a satisfactory manner. However, the shock attendant on the death of loved one, and the consequent reflection on one’s own mortality, continue to drive the attempt to understand this most fundamental aspect of being.

Research contribution

While there is a substantial literature on death and dying, much of it relies on metaphysical foundations, or deploys purely discursive formulations. This short essay draws directly on phenomenological questions, exploring the material nature of being, and locates the discussion in a particular instance of death, one that is not at all abstract but real, present and painful. This provides me the opportunity to use language both to pay tribute to my friend, and to think ‘out loud’ about that great ‘problem of the subject’ (Certeau 1984): what it is to live, and to die.

Research significance

I cannot offer any argument about research significance; to do so would be, I feel, to exploit Sandra’s life and death, and indeed my own grief, for a scholarly outcome. What I can say is that the direct gaze into that terrible ‘wound on reason’ has this significance: that it drives me, and others (e.g., Blanchot, Derrida, Didion) back to creative practice, which for those of us who are artists is perhaps the only final way to articulate things of final and devastating significance.

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Dallas J Baker

Willowhaven

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death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up (Jacques Derrida 2001: 107).

Darling Downs, Queensland, 1982

For about a year when I was fourteen my family lived in a rented farmhouse about thirty minutes outside Toowoomba on the Darling Downs. My father was out of work and our family home had been sold to pay off debts. We moved onto the farm in early spring, but the cold westerly winds of winter were still blowing. The farmhouse creaked and groaned as the wind forced its way inside, blowing in under the doors and up through gaps in the floorboards, like the probing fingers of some invisible creature.

The house was as rustic as the rent was cheap, a small, century old weatherboard cottage with closed-in verandas on three sides. With only one proper bedroom it was a tight squeeze for my two sisters, parents and me. Surrounded by cornfields, the cottage sat on a small slope in the middle of an acre-large yard of dry grass. A huge Weeping Willow provided the only shade. A faded sign hanging loose on the gate read ‘Willowhaven’, a romantic name that didn’t reflect the reality of the place. The verandas, enclosed sometime in the seventies to make a bathroom and two cupboard-sized bedrooms, were not watertight. The ceilings leaked and the windows let in the cold. The house’s exterior walls, clad in plasterboard in the seventies as well, were buckled and warped from the weather, which alternated between hot and cold, drought and deluge.

Apart from the general state of disrepair, one thing stood out about Willowhaven. Its cracked gutters and window frames were all painted a vibrant sky blue. The front and back doors were painted the same colour. That blue paint was the only good thing about the place, apart from its setting on the Darling Downs, with its miles and miles of gently undulating hills beneath broad skies.

Before I lived at Willowhaven, I’d never seen a house with blue trim. In Toowoomba, where I grew up, houses were almost universally timber and painted white. The most daring trim colour on those houses was red – but mostly they were decorated in muted greens. The blue gutters and window ledges of Willowhaven intrigued me enough that the next time I saw Modeste Temple, I told her all about it.

Modeste was the mother of my classmate Danny, who was the only kid in my year who wasn’t white. The Temples were immigrants from Jamaica. Although a grown-up, Modeste insisted that I always call her by her first name. She was as unlike all the
other mothers as she could be. She spoke with a thick accent in a smoky voice and
told fortunes with Tarot cards. When she wasn’t rubbing coconut-scented lotion into
her dark skin, she was reading books about fortune-telling and ghosts. I found her
deeply fascinating.

My first chance to tell Modeste about the blue trim came on the day of my Catholic
school’s spring fete. Modeste was in charge of the sandwich stall and had insisted that
Danny and I help. On a table before us, dozens of cling-wrapped sandwiches glinted
in the morning sun. Modeste’s dark skin seemed to glisten as well as she arranged the
sandwiches into orderly rows. I watched her at work, thinking, She’s so, so beautiful.
Young to have a son of fourteen, Modeste’s eyes were dark yet luminous, her skin
flawless. Her jet-black hair hung to the middle of her back in lustrous braids. To a
bookish and girly boy who’d never been outside of Queensland, Modeste Temple’s
existence was proof that there was another, much more interesting world beyond the
Darling Downs.

‘There, I think that’s as pretty as I’m going to get these sandwiches to look,’ she said,
pushing the last sandwich into its place. ‘What do you think, boys?’

Danny shrugged, but I nodded, even though the sandwiches looked a bit limp and
sweaty.

‘Well, maybe if I arrange them into patterns, like this …’

She shuffled the corned-beef sandwiches into a star formation, stood back and
squinted at them to see what she thought. After a moment she clicked her tongue
against her teeth and shuffled them back into rows again.

‘That will just have to do,’ she said with a small sigh. ‘It’ll be a miracle if we sell
more than half of them.’

Her patois accented voice was drawing the attention of passers-by, though none came
to buy sandwiches. They simply stopped and stared, their mouths making small ovals
of surprise at seeing someone so striking at our school fete. Once Modeste was done
arranging the sandwiches, I described the blue edging on our new home.

‘In the Caribbean,’ she explained, ignoring the lingering gaze of a particularly
dumbstruck man, ‘we believe that blue paint on windows and doors stops restless
spirits, ghosts, from entering the house.’

‘How’s that supposed to work?’ I asked, fascinated.

‘Well, honey, spirits will not cross water,’ she answered, her almost-black eyes
reflecting the sun shining above her head. ‘The blue paint looks like water and
confuses the spirits so that they don’t dare go inside.’

‘Oh Mum,’ Danny interrupted, rolling his eyes and looking at her with a smirk, ‘you
don’t really believe that, do you?’
‘Yes, I do, Danny,’ she said flatly, turning her back to him, pointedly straightening a row of glinting egg and lettuce sandwiches.

Modeste’s turned back silenced Danny like a no-talking sign in a library. I threw him a hateful glance without him seeing, thinking, I could kick you. I wanted to hear more about the blue paint and the restless spirits. I was much more interested in listening to Modeste talking about ghosts than in listening to her son, no matter what the topic. Danny was obsessed with cricket and spoke of little else. I couldn’t have cared less about cricket. I barely knew what a wicket was, let alone an over.

Unlike his mother, Danny was awkward looking, with wiry hair and too-large front teeth. His voice, strained through those tightly packed teeth, always sounded wet. His complexion was not as dark or as glossy as his mother’s, but closer to that of his white father. He took after his father in personality as well. Mr. Temple was an accountant and so dull that he even bored himself, preferring anyone else’s company to his own. Danny was even duller than that. I was only friends with him because of Modeste, whose attention made me feel almost as interesting as she was. I put up with Danny’s endless monologues about cricket and his wet voice only so that I could spend time with her. I felt bad that I didn’t like Danny as much as he liked me, especially as he always seemed so desperately needy, like his father. Ironically, he was probably my best school friend, my only school friend if I were to be honest.

Once Danny had upset his mother, she could stay annoyed for hours. He often irritated her so much that she refused to speak to him for whole days at a time.

‘Caribbean mothers know how to hold a grudge,’ Danny said on one of those occasions, a sad smile on his face. ‘It’s like their religion.’

There was no point hanging around the sandwich stall now that Modeste wasn’t talking. So I said goodbye to Danny and got up to leave. He nodded in response, waving half-heartedly, his eyes still resting resentfully on his mother’s back.

As I stepped out from behind the sandwich-laden table, Modeste leaned towards me and whispered, ‘It also stops blood-drinkers.’

‘Sorry?’ I asked.

‘The blue paint, honey. It stops blood-sucking bugs from getting into the house. It’s even supposed to work on roaches.’

She smiled, letting me know that her irritation was not directed at me.

‘Now you go have fun, honey.’

I smiled back at her and went to explore the fete, my mind already turning to the prospect of buying a toffee apple.

As far as bugs were concerned, the blue paint was a failure. Willowhaven was home to a veritable bestiary of six and eight legged things. Wasps nested in the eaves. Spiders spun webs in the corners of the high ceilings. Ant colonies occupied the spaces between the walls. Frogs croaked from beneath the floorboards where the leaky pipes created a perfect spawning ground. At night, as soon as the lights were
switched on, moths and beetles came from every nook and cranny to swarm around the bare bulbs. It didn’t matter how tightly secured the windows were, somehow the bugs found a way inside.

On the other hand, I never saw or heard a hint of a ghost. No spectral shadows or lights, no ghostly moans or sighs. There was a time, just weeks after the school fete, when I really hoped there would be, for the sake of Modeste.

Danny Temple died suddenly in late September. Viral pneumonia nested in his lungs one Sunday night and took him to the grave the following one.

By mid-October, the weather had warmed up and the sky above the Downs gone a paler blue with the increased light. On a Saturday morning under that paler sky I settled into a creaky wicker chair in the shade of the willow in our yard, with a cup of tea in hand. We only had two of those wicker chairs. There was always a fight between my sisters and I over who got to sit in them, especially as one was always reserved for my mother. I was home alone, my parents and sisters were in town for the day, so I could sit in whichever chair I wanted. I was making the most of the solitude by spending as much time outside as possible. The farmhouse was dark and cold, but the outside offered views of those low, rolling hills and fields of honey-coloured grass that spread from the edge of our cornfield to the horizon.

In the distance, a Black-breasted Buzzard circled above an empty paddock, its shadow ghosting over the ground below. Where’d he come from? I thought, knowing that buzzards weren’t a common site on the Downs. Normally living far to the west, they only came this close to the coast when their natural range was hit hard by drought. The sight of a buzzard over the Downs was a sign of a bad dry spell coming, a trigger for farmers to stockpile feed and conserve water.

I was still watching the buzzard when a car turned into our long drive, throwing behind it a small cloud of dust. The drive was rough and the ground dry, even though it had only rained a month or so ago. The dust cloud trailing the car stretched from the dirt road leading to our house all the way to the highway. Whoever it was had come from town. Who is that?, I wondered. The morning sun hung directly behind the car, making it hard to see. I could just make out that the car was red, but that was about all. It wasn’t our car, ours was white. I shielded my eyes with a hand, trying to see who was behind the wheel, but it was no use.

I stood up to head inside, planning to bolt the door and pretend not to be home. The idea of being home alone with a stranger made me nervous. But then the car came close enough for me to see that it was a Citroen. Only one person I knew owned a red Citroen, and that was Modeste Temple.

My heart lurched and then sank into my stomach. What was she doing here?

I hadn’t seen Modeste since Danny died. I didn’t go to the funeral, didn’t even send a card. I looked over to our blue front door, wondering if I could dash inside and hide before she saw me. I didn’t know how to act with her now that her son was dead. But it was too late. She’d already turned into the yard and was steering towards the tree where I stood. The Citroen came to a stop just a few feet away from the willow. The
engine stuttered into silence; a silence that hung in the air as heavily as Danny’s death.

Modeste stepped out of the car and into that silence. Her long braids were still glossy, but she’d tied them back into a ponytail rather than letting them hang freely as she’d always done in the past. Her black dress almost disappeared against her skin. Her eyes were shaded by dark sunglasses. She was much thinner than she’d been just weeks before. She walked straight towards me, repeatedly flattening her dress with the palms of her hands in an agitated way and straightening her hair.

‘Is he here?’ she asked suddenly in a desperate voice. I’d never heard her sound like that, it made my stomach tense with fear. ‘Tell me, is he here? My boy, is he here?’

‘Danny?’ I stuttered, ‘but, Danny’s –’

‘I’ve been waiting for him to come back to me,’ she interrupted. ‘His spirit should have risen by now, but he hasn’t come to me. I thought, because you were so close, he might be here.’

She looked around, as if expecting to see the ghostly form of Danny lurking somewhere in our unkempt yard.

My mind reeled. Does she really think Danny’s ghost is here? Confused and anxious, I said the first thing that came to me.

‘But, the paint, the blue paint around the windows and doors. He can’t be here, can he? You said that ghosts can’t enter a house with blue trim.’

She thought about that for a minute.

‘I forgot about the paint,’ she moaned, her head sagging. ‘I’ve been waiting for him to come,’ she muttered again, her face turned towards the ground. ‘Why hasn’t he come?’

Her voice was pleading, frantic, as though begging the earth for an answer.

She seemed so desperate to be consoled that I couldn’t leave that question unanswered.

‘I … I thought you said that only restless spirits return? Maybe he hasn’t come back because he’s … happy where he is.’

The look on her face made wish I hadn’t said anything. Her jaw clenched and her lips tightened into a near grimace. Her hands balled into fists and thumped at her sides. She shook her head slowly from side to side, refusing to accept what I’d said.

Then she turned her face to the sky and stamped one foot on the ground and snarled, ‘No, no.’

She stood there, her face turned upwards, shaking her head, for what seemed like minutes.

Then, after a long while, she went still, looked up and said, ‘He’s really not here? My boy?’

‘No, he’s not here,’ I answered, shaken.
She nodded, very gently and just the once, finally accepting it. All the tension drained from her body then, triggered by that inner change. Her shoulders dropped, her hands unclenched, her jaw relaxed. I could almost feel her coming back to her senses. She looked over at me, an embarrassed smile coming to her lips. She took a breath and stepped closer. I almost flinched, but she didn’t notice.

‘What must you think of me,’ she said quietly, sounding almost like herself again.

She reached out and touched me softly on the shoulder.

‘I’ve missed you, honey,’ she added, before sitting in my mother’s wicker chair and looking out over the fields.

She kept her eyes covered, but I could tell that she’d seen the buzzard circling above the paddock in the distance, and was now watching its slow movement.

‘It’s a Black-breasted Buzzard,’ I said, trying my best to seem like I wasn’t surprised by what had just happened and that she was in our yard, sitting in one of our wicker chairs. ‘They’re really rare, especially around here.’

She didn’t respond. A long moment passed as I stood there awkwardly and she, for all I could tell, just stared off into the distance.

‘It was wrong of you not to come to the funeral,’ she said finally, her hand gesturing for me to sit.

I took the chair beside her, unable to think of anything to say that would excuse my absence from Danny’s burial.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said quietly, frightened that she might lose control again. ‘I just couldn’t.’

‘I almost couldn’t go myself,’ she said, making a small understanding nod. ‘The pain was almost too much for me to bear. I know it must have been the same for you.’

She turned her shaded eyes toward me and smiled sadly.

I nodded back at her, then looked out to where the buzzard still circled silently. But what she’d said wasn’t true. I’d barely noticed Danny’s death. It’d happened during the spring holidays. Nearly a week had gone by before I realised I hadn’t seen him for a while. Then, on the first day back at school, the principal made an announcement that Danny had passed away. That’s why I didn’t go to the funeral, not because I was too grief stricken, but because I hadn’t missed him.

‘Modeste, I –’

‘There’s no need to explain, honey. I understand. You’re a sensitive boy, too sensitive for funerals.’

She patted me on the hand and then squeezed it before letting it go.

My stomach squirmed, urging me to tell her the truth, but I just couldn’t admit to her that not only was I not grieving for her son, I hadn’t even liked him.

‘Would you like a cup of tea, Modeste?’ I asked, needing to get out of her presence for a while.
‘Oh yes, honey’ she answered, ‘yes I would.’

I went into the house to make the tea. Once inside, I leant against the kitchen wall, my knees shaking, thinking. It’s okay, calm down, she doesn’t know. She doesn’t know. When I took the tea back out, she had removed her sunglasses and was looking up into the canopy of the willow. Shafts of sunlight fell down through the leaves onto her face, so that freckles of golden light danced on her cheeks, on her dark lips.

‘Such a beautiful tree,’ she said as I passed her the cup. ‘Back home, willows are rare. But there is one just like this, in the garden of an old plantation near Kingston. I know about it because it’s haunted.’

‘Haunted? A tree?’

‘A Weeping Willow, yes. It’s haunted by the ghost of a little boy. They say that if you listen to the sound of the wind blowing in the leaves of that tree, you can hear the boy crying for his mother.’

She looked up into the branches again, perhaps thinking that this willow was also haunted, by her dead son. But the willow’s leaves were motionless and silent, the air totally still.

I looked into her eyes and knew that we were both hoping for the same thing – for Danny’s spirit to return. I knew though that Modeste’s hope and mine were of a different kind. Modeste hoped for Danny’s return purely to be comforted. I hoped for it so that his ghost might somehow alleviate my guilt.

‘That little boy was murdered,’ she continued, ‘right at the foot of that tree. He was the son of a maid who lived on the plantation. Even though he was only 6 years old, his mother used to send him into town to sell plantains from her garden. After one of those trips, a man followed him home and did mischief on him. They found the boy’s body beneath that big old willow. Of course, everyone blamed the mother. They said it was neglect and whispered about what kind of mother sends such a little boy into town all alone.’

She looked at me as if expecting an answer to the question. I shrugged.

‘A poor mother,’ she whispered, ‘a mother with no other choice, that’s what kind.’

Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them away with a slow finger.

‘But I don’t have that excuse. I’m not poor.’

What was she saying?, I wondered, then looked into her pained eyes and understood.

‘But, Modeste, it’s not your fault that Danny died.’

She smiled weakly, looking out over the cornfield and the yellow hills beyond. The buzzard was circling higher now, so high that its shadow had vanished. She wiped at her eyes again and took a slow breath.

‘Oh, I know that,’ she said, her voice cracking a little. ‘But I neglected him. I should have been more patient with him. I shouldn’t have got so annoyed with him all the time.’

‘Danny loved you,’ I said.
Although he had never actually said that to me, I was sure that it was true. Boys don’t say such things, but they do feel them, and I was certain that Danny had.

‘That makes it all the worse,’ she said in a tremulous voice. ‘I wasn’t a good mother to Danny. That is killing me.’

She stifled a sob. Her hands were shaking fully now. She rested the tea cup in her lap to avoid it spilling. She looked up into the high branches of the willow again and took another deep breath.

‘I loved Danny,’ she continued after a moment, ‘and it’s true that he loved me back. Maybe I did my best. But now that he’s gone, I don’t know what to do with myself. You see, although I loved my boy, I don’t love his father.’

She sighed then, and finally took a sip of her tea.

‘I only married him because I was pregnant. I would never have considered him for a husband otherwise. As Danny grew in my belly, I grew into a wife and mother. Now that Danny is gone,’ she subconsciously placed a trembling hand on her belly, ‘I don’t know who I am.’

She cast me an imploring glance. I didn’t know what to say, so I resorted to telling her that she’d be alright.

‘You think so, honey?’ she asked. ‘You think I’ll be alright? I’m not so sure. I’ve been here ten years. It was my husband who wanted us to come to Australia. I didn’t want to leave Jamaica. But he didn’t listen, so we came here when Danny was four years old. Danny was more an Australian boy than a Jamaican one by the end. This country doesn’t mean anything to me without him. He gave this place meaning for me.’

She gestured out to the hills and the broad sky.

‘Now that he’s gone, I just don’t know how to be here, in this strange place, so far from my home. I don’t even know how to be with my husband anymore.’

She sipped at her tea, tears still glistening in her eyes.

‘When my boy died,’ she continued, ‘it was like that part of me that was a mother, and a wife, died as well, and this place has become nothing more than a graveyard.’

I couldn’t say anything. What could I say to that? My understanding of the feelings she’d expressed was slight. I understood one thing, though. She and I both felt guilt over Danny’s death. Knowing that eased mine. I wondered if telling her that I’d never really liked Danny, that I had always preferred her, would ease hers. Given Modeste’s state of mind, it was a risky idea. Before I could make a decision, she made it for me.

‘It comforts me that you and Danny were such good friends,’ she said, putting her tea down and taking my hand. ‘I’m thankful that you knew each other. Danny was lucky to have a friend like you. And so am I.’

She paused, then continued.

‘You might think it strange, but you are the only person I can talk to. I can’t tell my husband these things, and I don’t have any other friends. I suppose I should be
ashamed to call a fourteen-year-old boy a friend. But you know what, I’m not ashamed at all. Do you think I should be?’

‘No,’ I answered. ‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I am your friend, even though I’m only fourteen.’

‘Good,’ she said, smiling properly now, ‘we can be shameless together.’

She squeezed my hand again. I felt that she was squeezing my heart at the same time. I smiled and turned toward the dry paddock to watch the buzzard, circling so high now that I could barely see him.

Modeste may not have been ashamed, but I was. Not of our friendship, I could never be ashamed of that, but of the fact that I kept my true feelings about Danny secret. Keeping that secret inevitably poisoned our relationship. Being around her made me uncomfortable, especially when the topic of her dead son came up, which was all the time. I didn’t know what to say to her anymore. I felt that the part of me that knew how to be her friend died with Danny.

Before long, I was avoiding her. I could tell that this confused Modeste, but she never said anything. She was too hurt, or proud, or both, to ask a fourteen-year-old why he didn’t want to spend time with her.

Less than a year later I heard that she’d left her husband and gone back to Jamaica. My mother told me about it while we were packing to move house again. As soon as she said the words, my heart stopped for a moment. When it started to beat again, I ran out into the yard, to the huge willow, fighting an overwhelming urge to cry.

I dropped into my mother’s wicker chair and looked up through the leaves to the sun above, just as Modeste had done on that day she’d come looking for Danny’s ghost. I closed my eyes, wanting to feel the warm sunlight dance on my eyelids. I needed to feel something beautiful, something other than guilt and loneliness.

As I sat there, my eyes shut tight against coming tears, a breeze picked up, making the long branches of the willow move and sigh. I opened my eyes to see a bank of clouds moving in fast from the South, growing larger and darkening as it came overhead. The weather is finally going to break, I thought. No, I am finally going to break. The breeze strengthened into a fierce wind, causing the willow to bend and moan, as if alive. Then another sound, barely audible, joined in with the sighing of the wind. I couldn’t tell if it was coming from the wind or the tree or from somewhere within me. My hair stood on end as I realised it was the sound of a boy, the sound of a crying boy.

About a year later we moved away, and soon after that Willowhaven burnt to the ground. The fire started with a lightning strike. If it weren’t for the rickety fence there would be no evidence that anyone ever lived there, that in that acre-large yard a lonely boy and a grieving mother had once sat in wicker chairs hoping to see a ghost. The yard is now empty but for dry grass and the willow, tall and solitary on the slope; the only sign of life for miles around a Black-breasted Buzzard circling high overhead.
Research statement

Research background
This work of semi-autobiographical Gothic fiction explores ideas about mourning espoused by Jacques Derrida (1996, 2001) who argued that mourning is an affective state that is non-responsive to rational or theoretical ideas. This reflects Michel Foucault’s approach to the state of repression, which he argued cannot be addressed by a theoretical discourse alone (1978: 5). Therefore this work takes a creative rather than theoretical approach. The work explores Derrida’s (2001) notion that mourning is triggered not only by the death of a loved one, but also by the death of that aspect of ourselves that existed only in relationship to the deceased.

Research contribution
This work makes an original contribution by describing and illustrating ideas around the affective state of mourning in a creative rather than theoretical way. The work aims to produce new knowledge by deploying creative writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000) into mourning. The work disseminates that knowledge around notions of mourning in the form of a creative rather than theoretical narrative.

Research significance
The work is innovative in exploring Derrida’s (1996, 2001) theoretical ideas about mourning in the context of creative writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson 2000). It is also a wholly original creative and critical work in the Gothic genre.

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Central Queensland University

Denise Beckton

Bridging the gap

Biographical note:
With a background in public health and education, Denise Beckton is a tutor in Creative Industries and higher degree research student at Central Queensland University in Noosa, Queensland. Denise is currently writing a young adult/crossover novel and a related dissertation that explores the use of invented languages and their use as a narrative component of fiction.

Keywords:
Creative writing – prose
The day began like every other, with a trip to the letterbox, and then a short walk over the road to check for the telltale signs.

Sid could sense, almost immediately now, when someone had jumped in the night. He couldn’t put his finger on how he knew. It was nothing he could see or hear – the osprey welcomed him with its usual falsetto and the waves crashed against the cliff to the same timeworn beat – it was more a feeling. The same sense of foreboding he felt when he dropped something, before it hit the ground; as though the world had paused, waiting for something to smash.

He wrestled the jam of bills and leaflets from the mail slot and shuffled them like poker cards in his hands. The real-estate brochures, which seemed to breed inside the small box, arrived most days now. Some from agencies as far away as the CBD. Sid clicked his tongue at the ‘No Junk Mail’ sign.

That was a waste of time.

Still, he preferred the brochures to the agents’ cocky rat-a-tats at the front door. Sid could distinguish them from the Mormons by their stiff shirts and matching smiles. One had braved his doorstep just last week with slow-talking promises of money, and a comfortable life.

“What on earth would we do with more money?” Edith had asked. ‘We’ll be long gone before we have a chance to spend it.’

She didn’t hang around to hear about cruise liners – how nowadays they cater for people in our condition – and only returned when she was sure the agent had left.

“I don’t know why you give them the time of day, we’re never going to sell, so why do you bother?’

“I like to see how long it takes before they talk themselves into knots. They think we are their ticket to a quick commission – they’re worse than ambulance chasers if you ask me.’

“So, you’re toying with them?’

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.’

He turned away from the frown that she favoured when he got this way.

“I think I know what the kids would say to that if they were still here.’

‘Yeah, I know, they’d tell me to get a life.’

He looked back at the house they’d shared for nearly fifty years. They were one of the first to build at The Gap, back when green fibro facades and picture windows were all the rage, when rows of eucalypts surrounded their house, like giant picket fences. The world had changed around them and most of their original neighbours had moved on. New growth had sprung up in their place; trees with white walls for trunks and glass sheets for leaves. Edith called them concrete bunkers. There was one either side of their house. Their walls eclipsed the sun and shortened their days, and cast sword-like shadows across the weed-ridden cricket pitch on the front lawn.
It made their little shack look vulnerable, like a toddler between over-protective parents.

He and Edith made a good team, he thought, and pretty much had their morning routine down pat. He had mastered a few well-placed questions: *What brings you here to The Gap?* and *It’s a long way down from up here, eh?* These were usually enough to get most people talking and willing to follow him over the road to Edith for a cup of tea or a beer.

They’d married before the war and even though he had returned (like most who had seen action) a different man, Edith had stuck by him. He couldn’t tell her that the faces of the men he’d killed had followed him home, haunted him. They had, at first, infected every happy thing in their lives like a contagious flu, so that the giddy suffering of childbirth melded with the image of a soldier’s contorted pain, and every opened present become someone’s final look of surprise. The memories tailed him like a spy, and he came to understand why some people chose to outrun them, to leave them on the cliff as they leapt from the edge of the world.

Sid dumped the brochures in the recycling bin and crossed the road. He liked to get to the cliff early, before the buses and the sightseers with their cameras arrived, before people started to mess with things. He looked to see if Sharif was there. It had become a game, of sorts, to see who would be first to arrive at the park bench. The boy’s slight frame was almost always there, silhouetted against the waking sky, waiting for Sid to round the dunes.

He had, at first, thought Sharif was a jumper – the boy showed signs; the skinny frame of a life wasted on drugs, and an ink-penned story on his skin that seemed to have too many chapters for someone so young. But when he asked about the tattoos, Sharif laughed at Sid’s concern.

‘It’s art man. Everyone’s got ink, and this,’ he said, pointing to the decorative script that encircled his bony arm, ‘is Persian ink.’

The weather and talk turned to football, politics and everything in-between.

‘Soccer is the real football,’ said Sharif, ‘AFL is for Neanderthals – it’s a free-for-all.’

‘Yeah, it does look like that at first, but trust me, there are plenty of rules, unless you’re playing Footscray of course.’

He taught Sharif the difference between holding a mark and holding the ball, and gave him the dog-eared stash of comics that were left by his son under the single bed.

‘Marvel copied DC you know, you can’t beat the original stories,’ Sharif said.

Sid worried when the boy talked about being a square peg in a round hole, and of his parents who were grateful to the country that gave them sanctuary, but ill at ease with the freedoms it allowed their children. At these times, Sid slipped into the paternal role as easily as a well-worn cardigan, only realising how much of a gap there had been in his life once it had been filled.
‘It’s hard man, nothing I do is ever good enough.’

‘I’m sure they just want what’s best for you.’

‘Nah, they don’t understand me, or don’t want to.’

‘There are plenty who will try, like youth workers and the church?’

‘Those dudes are mostly whites who’ve never missed a Sunday roast, and religion, Sid, is opium for the masses.’

‘Take it from me, it’s the real opium that lures the masses. I know because most of them end up here. When you’ve had as much tragedy in your life as some people have, you will come to realise that churches are the only stable things that some people have to cling to.’

They differed on most topics but agreed that war was pointless. Sharif spoke of the tennis-like conflict that still played in his homeland, and of the generations who were born into it and knew nothing of peace.

Sid talked, for the first time, about his own experiences and the people at The Gap; those he was able to help. Like the husband who preferred to end his own life rather than see his wife waste away before him, and the wife whose cosmetic surgeries could never outweigh the value her husband placed on younger women. They wondered about the ones that couldn’t be saved and the demons they left behind. Sid told Sharif that black, white or brindle, people just wanted to be heard, and taught him how to recognise those who needed help; the depressed, the lonely and the lingerers. Now the boy was asking his own questions and listening.

He hadn’t told Sharif about the letter he’d found many years before. He pulled it from his pocket; the soft paper was splitting at the folds and the words, which he knew by heart, were faded and hard to read.

I came here fully expecting to return home feeling happy with my lot. I told myself that if just one person asked how I was or showed they cared then there was still hope in this world. As you can probably guess (as usual), things didn’t go to plan.

Sid patted the empty bench on his way to the viewing platform (he’d made it there first, for once) and scanned the ground for signs, which he sometimes found, illuminated in slanted columns of daybreak, like prizes on a television game show. It struck him that people left the most ordinary things, like wallets (sometimes full), cigarette packets (usually empty) and shoes. He knew though, that however insignificant the gesture of emptying pockets and removing shoes might be, to friends and family they were farewell gifts, so he tried to collect them as best he could.

There were precious things too; heirlooms that held a catalogue of lifetimes were willed to sons and daughters on whatever scrap of paper could be found. Sometimes, there would be nothing at all but the disturbance of gravel at the edge and a headline in the Morning Herald announcing that a John Doe had been ‘cradled by the waves’, carried to a southern beach, as if the sea were trying to hide its shame.
Sid wondered what was keeping the boy and decided it was, most likely, the weather. The easterly squall was seeping through his swollen bones and, though it would probably die-off by lunchtime, the wind was brisk enough to keep all but the most vigilant joggers in their beds. The cold was never an issue for him. He’d spent too many years facing it from the decks of naval ships (where the only respite was standard issue coffee and the soothing draw of cigarettes) and was thankful just to be on dry land. He sat down and filled his lungs with salty air. The past had a habit of haunting a person. If he’d known then what he knew now, perhaps he would have laid off the tobacco.

A steady flow of thank you cards and photographs, from people he’d pulled back from the edge, told him that maybe he’d appeased some of the ghosts of his past. The faces that smiled back at him were often so transformed that he struggled to remember their names. He looked at the pictures when the tortured faces of those he’d encountered in the war played on his mind.

His watch told him that a screech of hydraulic brakes would soon announce the first convoy of tourists. They would form an unbroken line along the barrier fence, like a cheap necklace of brightly coloured beads, and block his view. Sid sheltered his eyes with the arc of his palm and watched a cloud pass over the strengthening sun. The Gap fell silent as the cloud sat suspended above him, creating an oil-spill shadow that swallowed the colours of the sea. It reminded him of a closing eye and made him anxious. He took the hollow feeling as a sign of hunger and, rubbing his stomach, scanned the dunes for Sharif, one last time, before turning back home. He was sure that Edith would have the cake iced by now.

Endnote

1. This short story was inspired by the deeds of the late Donald Ritchie whose actions saved the lives of many people at The Gap. I never met Mr. Ritchie or any of the people he assisted. This piece of writing and the characters portrayed within it are entirely fictional.
Research statement

Research background
This short story was inspired by the actions of Donald (Don) Ritchie who prevented more than 160 people from suiciding from The Gap in Sydney (SMH 2012). Building on Nabokov’s story ‘Signs and symbols’ (1948), this work juxtaposes two narratives within a larger structure and relies on symbolism in order to gradually unveil plot elements and build suspense (de la Durantaye 2006, Rosenzweig 1980). The measured revelation of information highlights nuances within the narrative, and conveys information about how characters’ relationships change over time, according to shared experience.

Research contribution
This work highlights issues that contribute to mental illness in Australia (ABS 2014) and contemporary attitudes about multiculturalism, immigration and Australia’s involvement in international conflicts (SMH 2014). The narrative is constructed to create awareness, and foster contemplation, about current contentious issues and the belief systems around them. It also implies that, through simple acts of interpersonal kindness, people can facilitate societal change and that ‘a simple conversation could change a person’s life’ (RUOK? 2014).

Research significance
By replicating Nabokov’s use of textual devices to build suspense and drive plotting, this work shows how fictional narratives can profile contemporary societal issues. This story has been accepted for publication in a leading peer-refereed journal.

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Shady Cosgrove

Getting my hands dirty: research and writing

Biographical note:
Shady Cosgrove is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wollongong. Her novel *What the Ground Can’t Hold* (Picador 2013) tells the story of a group of people stranded in the Andes, all of whom have links to Argentina’s Dirty War. Her memoir *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009) was shortlisted for the Australian Vogel Literary Prize, and her short stories and articles have appeared in *Best Australian Stories, Antipodes, Southerly, Overland, the Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*. She has also written about the ethics of representation and teaching of creative writing. For further information and free downloads of her work, see <http://www.shadycosgrove.blogspot.com.au>

Keywords:
Creative writing – non-fiction – life writing – non-ficto-critical
9.15pm on a Sunday: I’m parked on the street, in front of Aldi Wollongong. The lot is empty, the sky threatening rain. I’ve been waiting for fifteen minutes, scanning my phone, peering up the street. Inside the supermarket, the fluorescent lights are dimmed and I imagine ghosts patrolling the aisles, trolleys moving with slow deliberation. A siren sounds nearby, and I jump in my seat, scanning the rear view mirror. Just a fire engine.

Finally, a car pulls in. Then another. My heart is thumping, my hands clammy. I turn the ignition and follow them. We circle round to the dumpsters on the far side of the lot and I park next to the Toyota, one space between us. I unroll my window.

‘Anne?’ I ask.

A woman with brown hair says, ‘Nah, but she told us you were coming. Hope it’s good – haven’t had much luck lately.’

Her friend in the passenger seat nods.

I get out and introduce myself. They’re friendly, early twenties. I make small talk about my kid and realise I’m signposting my age. I try to think of something else – anything else – but everything keeps coming back to my four-year-old and how excited he is that I’m dumpster diving. He’s hoping Aldi have had a toy cull.

After a moment Anne pulls in. She’s younger than I expected from her text messages: probably early twenties too. She’s a friend of a friend of a friend – I put a call out on Facebook and her details were passed on to me. The women from the other car join us, and more introductions go down. There are about six of us now. Some are wearing scruffy flannel shirts, a couple are dressed in black. One of them has a headlamp.

‘Is it always women?’ I ask.

‘Heaps easier with security guards. Better for getting into dumpsters, too.’

I’m surprised. This flies in the face of all the ethnographic research from Europe and the States that says dumpster diving is male-dominated, and I’m struck with love for the tough Aussie woman who’s not afraid to climb into a garbage bin.

‘How long you been doing it?’

Some, like Anne, have been going for a few years, others a few months. While we’re talking, the woman with the headlamp stakes out the dumpsters with her friend. She comes back, shrugging.

‘Nothing but rancid meat,’ she says.

Anne asks if it’s fit for her dog but the women don’t think so. And then we’re talking about where to hit next, and I’m reminded of Saturday nights in the small town where I grew up – teenagers meeting in the bank parking lot, cruising for parties. There’s that same fear, too: of cops, store managers, security guards.

But to be clear: we’re going through stuff that’s been thrown away, stuff deemed to be in the public domain. The women tell me you never tamper with locks and only access places on the periphery of parking lots because you don’t want to inadvertently...
trespass. And there are rules to dumpstering – never make a mess, never take more than you need, and never stay if you’re asked to leave.

We decide to hit Fairy Meadow Aldi, and drive en convoy along Corrimal Street. This time the bins are in a metal container so two of us have to shimmy underneath a grate on our bellies and stand up inside the dumpster hull. Inside, we take turns holding the bin open while the other looks through the garbage with a torch. I’m holding my breath but the stench isn’t too bad. Even so, there’s not much glory. Just big plastic bags full of store garbage and a bunch of flowers, which I pass out through an opening in the top.

The women are bummed.

‘You wouldn’t believe the stuff I’ve found.’

Anne has her phone out, scrolling through photos. She tilts the screen and shows me elaborate food portraits: fresh, stacked produce; biscuits and bread; cartons of beer.

‘Beer?’ I ask.

‘Amazing what gets thrown away.’

The woman from the Toyota nods, ‘Once we even found a coffee machine, you know one of those capsule ones. The box had been damaged so it was thrown away.’

Another woman who, it turns out, lives in a share house on my street, adds, ‘Usually you get a heap of one thing. Like forty punnets of blueberries. And they have to be eaten straight away so you take them home, wash them, and pack them in the freezer or make jam that night. Sometimes you’re up until three or four in the morning.’

They talk too about the politics of consumption, about how modern living is just not sustainable and if they can take just a little bit out of landfill then that’s gotta be a good thing. And I’m struck with how down-to-earth and unpretentious these women are.

After the disappointment of Aldi, half of the crew head home and just three of us carry on to Woolies. There, the bins get locked away at night so you need to arrive before closing, they tell me.

We move through the parking lot, all stealth and focus, down a ramp to the loading bay. At the bins, I think we’ve hit a gold mine: five or six big bags say ‘bread mix’ but they’re empty, stuffed with cardboard and paper. We keep rifling through the store garbage and I find a plastic bag with five beautifully ripe tomatoes. My new friend with the headlamp unearths a bag of broccolini – at least a kilo, maybe more. The produce couldn’t be in better condition. It’s perfectly ripe, and this worries me.

‘Why’s it being thrown out?’ I whisper.

‘Sometimes they just don’t have room on the shelves. It’s crazy,’ my neighbour says.

Since it’s my first dive, they tell me to keep the loot and I’m impressed with the generosity. It’s not a huge haul but it is disturbing that such stunning food has been thrown away.
I give my neighbour a ride home. I’m so giddy I keep misplacing things – my keys, my gloves – and she laughs.

‘It’s easy to get hooked.’

She’s right. I’m back at it on Wednesday and find grapes, capsicum and bok choi. And it’s not the politics or the fact this stuff is free. It’s this vigorous feeling I haven’t known since my early twenties, like anything is possible and the world isn’t fixed. Just because someone has called this beautiful tomato ‘garbage’ doesn’t mean I have to agree. I get to make that choice.

I wasn’t dumpster diving because I’m strapped for cash. I was reaching into bins because I’m writing a novel where a number of the characters are dumpster divers and if you want to write about something convincingly – even if it’s fiction, especially if it’s fiction – you need concrete details. My novel (in progress) is called ‘Freefall’. It is set in a freegan community in New York City. Freegans are ‘people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources’ (Freegan Info). They take recycling to the political limit – trying to re-use anything they can to avoid adding to the bins. While my newfound friends in Wollongong seemed politically aware I don’t know that any of them self-identified as freegan. I was impressed with how inclusive they were – while I’d been known to look through my neighbours’ cast-aways during council clean-up, I’d never been dumpster diving before the night described above, and no one seemed to hold that against me.

My question here isn’t so much about the politics of this particular project. Rather, I’m interested in how writers research and how that research affects writers. To be clear, I’m not talking about capital ‘R’ research – with HERDC points and ERA statements – I’m talking about the research novelists do to make sure their stories ring true. Because I think this research can transform us, both as people and as writers.

Certainly reading and writing can affect us. A great deal of work has been done on narrative empathy and reading (Gabriel and Young 2011; Mar, Oatley and Peterson 2009; Keen 2006). And it follows that fiction writing, too, can affect our ability to imagine other lives, but how novelists research – and how it impacts us – is something that hasn’t received much critical attention. Though in author interviews, writers discuss their varying processes. In an interview with Arts ATL (2013) about his novel Canada, Richard Ford says he was thinking about research ‘in both large and small terms’. For instance, ‘Where in Great Falls does this take place? Where is the jail in Great Falls? How do you get from that place to the jail? All that kind of stuff, as well as more intellectual issues like borders and boundaries.’

For me, research – especially experiential research – offers a way to find the concrete details to hang my scenes on and it’s the detail that makes these scenes seem authentic. Of course authenticity is a matter of subjective opinion and too much detail (or the wrong sort) can stifle a story’s momentum, but generally if the grounding detail is convincing, I can take bigger risks with plot or character. The kinds of questions I was trying to answer in the supermarket parking lots were both logistical – How big are
the bins? Do they open from the top? Are they locked? – and thematic – What does it mean to dumpster dive? Is it viable? Why is a perfectly functioning object deemed ‘garbage’ by its position in a bin? Sometimes, however, the writer doesn’t know what questions to ask. For instance, I didn’t foresee that all of the dumpster divers I’d meet would be women or that I would need to crawl on my belly to access a bin. And to be clear, all of my research before this dive had been second hand via newspapers, word-of-mouth and scholarly articles spanning law, cultural studies, ethnography and feminism. But I’ll be spending four months in the United States this year, talking and dumpster diving with squatters and freegan activists, and I wanted to build up some experience.

As the novel I am writing is set in New York City, it is important to me to spend time there. Understanding place (as much as one can) is critical in rendering setting and the detail here is key. Ford travelled extensively in writing Canada:

Certainly the road, Highway 32, along which Dell travels from Partreau to Fort Royal and then from Partreau to the west, is a road that I had to go on many, many times. I never went to Creekmore, North Dakota, because there is no Creekmore, North Dakota. But I have been across the border from Weebo, Montana, into that part of North Dakota, so I know what that looks like. There is a good bit of taking my tape recorder and getting in a rental car and driving all around the places where my book takes place (2013).

It’s this kind of research that takes the author outside of their study, away from their computer, that I’m interested in here – because sometimes it pushes us into the uncomfortable. For instance, when researching her novel State of Wonder, Ann Patchett passed out in a hospital after witnessing a caesarean section. She also went to the Amazon, which she enjoyed for a few days, but:

Unfortunately, I stayed there for ten days. There are a lot of insects in the Amazon, a lot of mud, surprisingly few vegetables, too many snakes. You can’t go anywhere by yourself, which makes sense if you don’t know the terrain, but I enjoy going places by myself. I can see how great it would be for a very short visit, and how great it would be if you lived there and had figured out what was and wasn’t going to kill you, but the interim length of time isn’t great (Amazon).

So research can be something writers endure for the sake of their craft. And yet, research can also be a source of inspiration and excitement. Patchett’s research into opera (for her earlier novel, Bel Canto 2001) radically transformed her music tastes: ‘I had very little experience with opera when I wrote Bel Canto, and since then it’s become a huge part of my life’. Certainly, spending time reading about freeganism and dumpster diving has affected the way I view the world. I am more aware of waste and less enamoured by the aesthetic call of beautiful objects in shops. I’m also aware of the dumpster as a site of opportunity.

Research has also forced me to confront my fears in approaching strangers. I feel uncomfortable cold-calling someone like Anne (who’s name has been changed here and above) and saying ‘Hey, I’m writing a book and someone told me you know a lot about dumpster diving. Can I come with you?’ It seems a big ask to expect someone to trust me, and there’s always the issue of worthiness – who am I to claim the title
writer’ and be allowed access to the intimate space of story? With my last book, What the Ground Can’t Hold (WTGCH), my first response to these feelings was to avoid research that took me outside my comfort zone. I thought I was being strategic in using the Andes as a setting because my sister lived there with her husband, who happened to be an avalanche expert. But as I researched the book, travelling to Argentina, there were characters and events that needed fleshing out – and I was forced to approach refugio operators, tourists, bus drivers, journalists, tango dancers and members of the group The Mothers of the Disappeared. Each conversation broadened my understanding of the story I was telling – but that wasn’t the only gift: these shared stories affected me. I was overcome with tears at the Plaza del Mayo, talking with Rosa Nair Amuedo, who’d marched around the Plaza for decades because her daughter had been kidnapped and murdered by the government during the Dirty War. Rosa’s experience was unfathomable to me – but the novelist’s job is to access the unfathomable for the reader, and this means grappling with the beauty and horror of the human condition. I write because it helps me imagine more of the world, which helps me be more compassionate, which makes me a better person. And research is the linchpin: without it, we can’t get the detail that makes the image ring true.

As well, sometimes the research can lead the writing. With WTGCH, I had a rough overview of the novel but research provided pivotal plot points and character arcs, even if it was accidental. For instance, there’s a scene in the novel where a young boy on a bicycle hits a pothole and dies. This was written after I witnessed a teenage girl in a similar bicycle accident in Bariloche, Argentina. All of the detail in the book is taken verbatim from that experience – and much of the book’s conflict results from the little boy’s death. And yet, this critical plot point wasn’t planned – it emerged from the ‘research’ of walking down the street. With ‘Freefall’ it’s impossible to know what will emerge from my setting research in the States. I am experimenting with a detailed outline to see if that shortens the drafting process (WTGCH took seven years to write) but there must be room for the research to influence the text – otherwise the research is pointless. Patchett drafts her scenes and then uses research to correct any mistakes (2011) – but I need more on-the-ground experience with this project before I start drafting scenes.

Of course, writers don’t have to experience everything they write. I am assuming most mystery writers draft murder scenes without killing anyone. And sometimes it’s not possible to visit your setting: especially if the location is in political upheaval or there’s an historical angle to the story. Secondary research can be important in determining facts but this data doesn’t always translate into the detail of lived experience. Before dumpster diving, I’d trawled through scholarly articles and newspapers but it hadn’t occurred to me that a headlamp would prove so important when sifting through a dumpster. It’s this kind of detail that matters to the story.

Some writers don’t believe in research. Their stories are directly inspired by their lives, events they’ve already experienced, and they don’t need to formalise the process by calling it ‘research’. The problem with this strategy for me is you’re then stuck writing about yourself and nothing is more boring than writing something you already think you know. I prefer Don Delillo’s take on research, as detailed in an
interview with The Paris Review: ‘Anyone who enters this maze knows you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective.’ I like that: the writer is an existential investigator, trying to illuminate the human condition. And research – whether walking down the street or scampering in a bin – is about finding detail that will impact the reader. In this search, both the text and the author are under construction.

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Research statement

Research background
While many author interviews address fiction writers and their experiences with research in passing, there are few substantial meditations on the subject. This non-fiction creative research piece ‘Getting my hands dirty: research and writing’ dissects the author’s experience of research through a non-fiction narrative and discussion piece that examines how experiential research can impact both the text and author of contemporary fiction.

Research contribution
Cosgrove’s piece investigates how research informs the creative text as well as the author. The topic is in need of exploration and Cosgrove has chosen a unique structure to do so – a non-fictional narrative, followed by a personal-critical engagement with how the described experience constitutes novelistic research and affects her as a writer. Usually research is the hidden ‘ghost’ to the novel but Cosgrove has inverted that: the ‘ghost’ here is the fictional text, which the reader doesn’t get to see.

Research significance
This piece unpacks how the writer accesses detail that is critical to ‘showing’ in a creative work. By showing how ‘showing’ works, the author demonstrates the collective layering essential to fiction, offering a map to other writers. While the first section functions as an independent creative non-fiction work, the second section reflects on how research lays the foundation for creative practice, addressing the questions: how does research happen, why is it important and how does it inform writers? These are critical questions for anyone writing contemporary fiction.
University of the Sunshine Coast

Gary Crew

Voicing the dead

Biographical note:
Gary Crew is Associate Professor (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, Queensland. First published internationally in 1986 (The Inner Circle), Gary has continued to write over a broad range of genre from illustrated books to creative non-fiction, addressing audiences from children to adults. Four times winner of the Australian Children’s Book of the Year, his multi-award winning work is published throughout the world.

Keywords:
Creative writing – fictocriticism – post-colonialism – young adult literature
You ask, ‘Can the dead speak?’
I answer, ‘Is this blood that runs in my veins, or ink?’

You ask, ‘Are you a creature of flesh, or a character in fiction?’
I answer, ‘I am real enough. I call myself Jack Ireland. I am sixteen years old. A century ago I sailed the South Seas. I lived then, I live now.’

You ask, ‘So is this History?’
I answer, ‘If it bores you, shut the book – but you will not silence my voice. After all that I have suffered, it is impossible to destroy me. So I ask that you read me. I ask that you hear me. See me. Touch me. Others have, and tasted my blood…’

You ask, ‘Yet you still live?’
I answer, ‘Ask no more. Read…’

Over the years, many words have been written about me; of the life I have lived, the horrors of my suffering. I have also penned an autobiography, and seen it published – but my tale is not truly told. My editor, a certain Mr Thomas Teller (I tell no lie), refused to use my preferred name on the title page. Mr Teller called my book:


S Babcock, Publisher, Chapel Street. New Haven. 1845.

What a mouthful that is, and so much of it *nice* and *proper* as Mr Teller thought that the life of an orphan should be in those times. Because Mr Teller did not simply edit my story (my life!), he took over; he left out the head hunters; the head hunters who captured us. Nor did he let me have my say. He would not let me use my own words – my own voice – as he admits in the preface:

The Narrative was written by one of the Orphans, John Ireland [John, not Jack!], and I give it to you in nearly his own words—[Nearly, note! Nearly!]—having made few alterations—[Few? Few? Try hundreds. Try Thousands!]—in the style in which he tells the story of his sufferings.

(Ireland 1845: 3)

Many lies have been told about me, and not just by Mr Teller. So much of what is written – entries in ships’ logs, stories in newspapers, novels and even history books –
is so far from the truth that I need to correct it; I need to recreate my life in ink so that you might read me. Only then will you hear my voice.

And not my voice only; as Mr Teller has (truly) writ, because I did not suffer alone. You will also read of little William D’Oyley – a toddler, captured with me – who was orphaned before our eyes. He being younger, poor wretch, is more to be pitied.

So, in answer to your question, ‘Can the dead speak?’ – and I thank you for your patience – I am obliged to ask: How can I be dead if you are hearing my voice? Try to understand: I do not live by blood – I have seen enough of that – I live through story. Wherever and whenever humankind has dipped a pen (or a feather, or a finger) in ink, or paint, or tar, or lifted a voice to narrate a tale in song or saga, I am enlivened. I ask, then, that you hear my tale: the truth of it, the horror; the pity. But for my voice to be truly heard, all that has been told of the events of my life must be reconsidered; recreated and recounted. Only when I tell my own tale, only when I am truly voiced, do I live.

For all of The Shipwrecked Orphans failings as an autobiography, Mr Thomas Teller saw fit to include it in a series entitled Teller’s Tales. Since readers of the Victorian era loved to Romanticise on the woes of orphans, Teller’s Tales was riddled with them. While the works of Mr Teller are not my favourite read, I am fortunate that I have access to many books – almost every book ever published, in fact – by means of an extraordinary ability (a ‘literary gift’, shall we call it?) which I will attempt to explain later in my story. By means of this gift, I have read widely on the fate of my own kind – the Victorian orphan:

Orphanhood was not uncommon in the nineteenth century because of the shorter life expectancy, and especially because of the frequent deaths in childbirth… But while orphans might wander the streets unheeded, or labour long hours in mines or factories without attention, in Victorian Literature they were used to evoke sympathetic audience responses (Reed 1975: 252).

Both in real life and fiction (sometimes there is little difference), Victorian orphans were often considered sub-human, invisible to proper society. Charles Dickens’ orphaned central character in David Copperfield (1850) is sent to school wearing a sign that declares, ‘Take care of him. He bites…’, which causes young Copperfield to believe he is a dog. Charlotte Bronte’s orphan Jane Eyre (1847) is inhumanely termed ‘A liar’ rather than being praised for her scholarship, and in Wuthering Heights (1847) Emily Bronte’s gypsy foundling Heathcliff is referred to as ‘it’, as if he were an object, not a human being.

I mention these things for two reasons:

(1) I am an orphan myself and

(2) since my voice is enlivened by story rather than blood (You asked, ‘Are you a creature of flesh or a character in fiction?’ and now I am answering), you need to know that I move easily through time, and place, and narrative; but, to tell the
truth, I have no memory (should I call that ‘back-story’?) of any persons
(should I call them ‘characters’?) or any place (should I call that ‘setting’?)
previous to my boarding the ill-fated Charles Eaton on 28 September, 1833.

And so, all things considered, let me begin there, on the London docks, at that very
date, because that is both where and when my life, my story, truly begins.

You ask, ‘Are you making this up? Is this some monstrous work of fiction, like Mary
Shelley’s Frankenstein, or yet another blood-lust saga by Stephanie Myer?’

Since I am familiar with the works of both authors, I truthfully answer, ‘Indeed, it is
not.’

This narrative faithfully recounts the dreadful circumstances occurring to human
beings not that different from yourself. If you don’t believe me, read Jordan
Goodman’s account of the voyage of The Rattlesnake (Faber; 2005), the British vessel
which rescued me from the head hunters. Goodman cites the exact words of Lewis,
The Rattlesnake’s captain:

I found the skulls of the unfortunate people on the middle of the island…
These heads of different people were placed round like the figure of a
man, and painted with ochre. I observed long sandy hair on one of the
skulls, also great marks of violence on them. Having satisfied myself of
the truth of this detail, I at the same time conveyed the skulls on board...
(Lewis in Goodman 2005: 7)

Now since I was there, and saw all of this – in fact, little William D’Oyley and I lived
with the islanders for three years, from 1833 until 1836 – you might also check the
accuracy of my story as quoted in The Times of London for December 1836 and
August 1837 – copies are available through any decent library. There you will read
my very words; you will hear my voice. I was interviewed; I appeared in court; I was
quite the celebrity – while still no more than a teenager: a teenager who had been
around, mind you; who had shaped history; who had stories to tell …

Ah! I see you shake your head. I hear you groan, ‘I knew this was History,’ but it’s
the only fit subject for a novelist …’ Which leads me to wonder: Is that what I am? Or
am I the novel itself? (I have enough bloody story in me – that’s for certain!)

I mention this conflict between story and history because, as opposed to story, in the
nineteenth century (the time of my beginnings) the ‘common sense’ view of history
was that the discipline consisted of:

a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents,
inscriptions, and so on, like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them,
takes them home, and cooks and serves them up in whatsoever style appeals to him.
(Carr 1961: 6)

Indeed, in The Cambridge Modern History: Its Origin, Authorship and Production,
one authority declares that through understanding history, we can: ‘show the point we
have reached on the road from one to another, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution’ (Acton in Carr 1961: 3).

But my life is not made up of ‘facts’. It is a combination of emotions, senses, longings and fears (oh, plenty of them…), among other sensations and experiences, none of which can be pinned down on a slab and called ‘a fact’. Nor is history a ‘road’ (that is poetic license), and what’s more, many people (head hunters included) never recorded ‘information’ (as Acton suggests ‘all information is within reach …’) or, for that matter, did they make any attempt to bring ‘all information … within reach’ of the world in general; nor, for most of history, did women and children have that chance; nor orphans, nor anybody else who was ignored or silenced by the powers of their time. So how can the voices of those who have been ‘silenced’ be heard? How can their stories be told?

I am on the side of Professor Greg Dening, who suggests:

If the texts of the past are mountainously high, the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of pain, and of happiness for that matter, silences of fear; silences of exclusion… Imagination is hearing the silence because we have heard some of the sound around it. Imagination is seeing the absent things because we have seen so much around it… Imagination humbles the author in any of us to accept what we cannot know or cannot say (Dening 1998: 210-11).

Oh dear! What a far cry that statement is from Acton’s claim that through a knowledge of history, ‘every problem has become capable of solution’. Which leads me to admit: they were head hunters who captured us, never doubt it. They were bloody murderers, clubbing young D’Oyley’s mother, father and nurse as well as Captain Moore and my friend, Mr Clare. Oh yes. They killed them all right – beheaded them too – but who will speak up for head hunters? They have no paper, no pens, no ink, no weighty books to record their tale. Indeed, like so many others ostracised by society, their voices are lost in the silence of time – so they remain damned in their savagery: the doomed of History. Dreadful as the murderous scene was – William and I were there – we saw the killers’ terror, their horror at the sight of our white skin, our blue eyes, our yellow hair, our wrinkled cotton hose (Is that skin?) they wondered, our leather shoes (Are they feet, all black and shining?) they wondered) and, like us, they were afraid. Who (or what?) were these alien creatures? These pale gods? These ghosts, returned from the dead?

Remember, as Mr Teller rightly says, we British were the visitors in those South Seas. These islanders did not come hawking their clubs and machetes through Sydney Heads, nor paddle their war canoes up the cold, grey Thames. No, indeed, we were the intruders in their world. We were the threat they responded to. But then, is murder ever justified? Is massacre ever right? Threat we may have been, but dangerous? We meant no harm. Not then, anyway…

And so, having both seen and suffered, it is my belief that if I am to tell my tale in truth, I must give voice to all the dead. And if you will hear me, I shall…
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Research statement

Research background

The barque *Charles Eaton* was wrecked in the Coral Sea in 1833. Ion Idriess fictionalised the aftermath of this wreck in *Headhunters of the Coral Sea* (1940). Although he cites three historical sources for this novel, Idriess makes no reference to the account of the wreck provided by the surviving ship’s boy, Jack Ireland (1845). Presumably, this is because Ireland’s more obscure illustrated children’s novella has only recently become available (online). In responding to Ireland’s account, the accompanying extract from the original young adult novel, *Voicing the dead*, is intended to bring an appreciation of post-colonial themes to the attention of youth through the medium of fictocriticism.

Research contribution

*Voicing the dead* creatively investigates the fate of the *Charles Eaton* through a fictocritical interrogation of Jack Ireland’s personal narrative and numerous nonfiction sources pertinent to Post-colonialism. The intention is to expose a youth readership to a new form of novel while alerting them to the insidious, all-pervading power of a patriarchal Empire.

Research significance

The 70,000 word novel *Voicing the dead* is a unique contribution to literature, in that the fictocritical novel has made no previous inroads into the Young Adult market. *Voicing the Dead* is contracted to Ford St Publishers (Melbourne).

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University of Canberra

Anthony Eaton

Birthday wish

Biographical note:
Dr Anthony Eaton has been writing professionally for children, young adults, and adults since the late 1990s. He is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Canberra where he is researching the changing nature of young adult fiction in Australia, and the lived experience of creative practitioners at the nexus of creative and academic work. He is currently president of the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research, and co-editor of the journal, Write4Children.

Keywords:
'The problem, Mr. Andrews, is not your ability to meet the required funding for your son. Under normal circumstances a direct temporal debit from your estate would offset that financial burden until such time as your offspring can either repay the resource allocation, or until the averaged expectancy for both of you reaches zero. The problem lies in your son’s diminished future potential.’

Fabian Andrews stared at the man sitting on the other side of the desk, his face a mask of trepidation.

‘So you’re telling me that even though lifespan averaging is legal …’

‘Only in cases where both parties have the requisite level of future potential,’ the man interrupted. ‘And unfortunately, in this case, the department cannot justify the reduction in your own temporal allocation – given your efficiency and contribution output – in favour of your son, who, let us be honest, would appear to have done little for overall national progress.’

‘But you don’t understand – Alex is, has always been … different. His, I mean, what he does is incredible … beautiful …’

Andrews trailed off, struggling to find the words.

‘Mr. Andrews, as you are well aware, the department of national administration has a responsibility to ensure the ongoing maintenance of the GDP, as well as the continuing reduction of our national debit. Under the provisions put into place by the U.S. Department of State in the Amendments to the Constitution of Australia Act of 2075, our only obligation is the management of the Australian economy to that end. It is a long established principle of law that this task must include management of the entire social context which supports that economy, and both you and your son are elements of that economy.’

‘So, you’re telling me there’s absolutely no way that we can …’

‘That’s exactly it. Lifespan averaging does not apply in this case. The only way you could extend your son’s temporal allocation would be through the purchase, in advance, of a further period. As we have already established, however, your son’s productivity is nil and, given his age, his consumption levels are only going to increase in the next few years so the purchase of an extended temporal allocation will be prohibitively expensive, especially for someone like you, already on subsistence income.’

‘But …’

‘I really don’t have the time to explain this any further, Mr. Andrews. The nation has supported him for the requisite twelve years and cannot afford to do so any longer. Your son’s temporal allowance expires in one week and your request for lifespan averaging is denied.’

The auditor punched a couple of keys on his machine.

‘Good day, Sir.’

Fabian Andrews stepped numbly out through the front doors of the Department of National Administration. This appeal had been their last hope; even a couple of years
would have given them enough time to try and increase Alex’s future potential, to find him a skilled position in a factory, or try for some sponsorship – perhaps from one of the few remaining cultural philanthropists, for another temporal allocation for the boy.

Now, though, there was no hope at all, and the fact reflected in the dull greyness of Fabian Andrew’s eyes and in the drop of his shoulders as he shrugged his coat tightly around himself.

An icy wind blew up Collins Street as he picked his way along the pavement, jostled and shoved in the perennial throng that swarmed the streets of the capital, and Andrews allowed himself to sink further into his misery. Only once did he stop and look back at the stone edifice of the Department. Against the dark Melbourne sky, the building loomed, ancient and cold. Impervious.

‘Hey, Buddy! Move it!’

A sharp shoulder jostled him aside and he almost fell into the path of the traffic.

‘Sorry … I …’

But his assailant had gone. Hurrying off to be productive.

Andrews lowered his head and allowed the bustle of the crowd to sweep him along towards his stop. As usual, the tram was crowded – the stench of packed humanity tickled at his nostrils as it rattled him away from the city. Clattering over the bridge, Andrews ducked his head slightly, catching a quick glimpse of the Reclamation Centre through the grimy windows. It stood out from all the other buildings; clean, freshly painted, its front door brightly lit, welcoming and throwing long paths of light out across the forecourt and pavement. From his vantage point Andrews couldn’t make out the enormous neon-lit spire, the visible symbol of productivity, but he knew it was up there, standing proudly atop the centre and shining its message to the city across the river – Produce! Recycle! Help your nation GROW!

The Reclamation Centre vanished into the gloom as quickly as it had appeared. He could remember when they used to perform operas there.

It was raining solidly when he climbed down from the tram, and Andrews trudged the last couple of kilometres home as slowly as he dared. In his mind, he turned over the problem of how he was going to tell Alex the news,

_I’m sorry, son, but we’ve still got time to find you a sponsor … no. False hope._

It’s probably all for the best … A lie.

_It won’t be like you imagine … and how could he know that?_

Finally, he arrived at his tiny, one-bedroom unit. Alex was already home; a sonata – Mozart, he thought – trickled from the house into the street, slightly out of tune, but that was the piano. With a sigh, Andrews trudged up the front steps and into the house.

‘Dad!’
At eleven, almost twelve years of age, Alex was just shaking off his childhood in favour of more gawky adolescence. As soon as the front door opened, he stopped playing and swivelled to face his father.

‘How did it go?’

‘It …’

Fabian Andrews said no more. He didn’t need to. His face spoke for him. For the briefest of seconds, a flicker of disappointment, of fear, flashed in his son’s eyes, but it was quickly masked again.

‘It’s okay, Dad.’

Now Alex stood from the old piano and crossed to his father, awkwardly reaching for him.

‘We knew there wasn’t much chance, anyway.’

Andrews looked at his son for a moment, before grabbing him, holding him. Trying to imprint the feeling into every last synapse of his memory.

‘Play,’ he said. ‘We’ve only got a week left. I want to hear you play.’

Alex offered his father a sad grin as he returned to the keyboard.

So Alex played. For the next six nights. He was playing when Fabian arrived home, and continued well into the evening. Concertos, operas, entire symphonies. Alex filled their tiny space with the long dead works of long dead composers. Until the final night, when he stopped, suddenly.

‘What was that?’ Fabian Andrews asked into the sudden silence.

‘Schubert.’

‘Are you going to finish it?’

‘No.’ Alex shook his head. ‘No. I’m finished, now.’

He stood, closed the lid, and walked across to the little kitchenette, where his father was sitting.

‘Will you come with me in the morning?’

For a long time, Fabian Andrews held his son’s gaze.

‘I can’t. I asked my supervisor, but it took all of my annual leave to go into the department last Wednesday.’

‘Oh.’

‘I could come anyway, bugger the consequ …’

‘No.’ Alex Andrews shook his head. ‘No, Dad. You can’t afford a productivity drop. They’ll take it out of your temporal allowance.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘I do.’
They sat a couple of moments longer, and the single light bulb that lit their house flickered a couple of times.

‘It’s almost shutdown.’

‘I know,’ Fabian replied. ‘Are you going to sleep?’

‘No. Not tonight. I think I might go for a walk. You go to bed, though, and I’ll be in later …’

Standing slowly, Andrews hugged his son, just once, quickly, and then made his way through the thin curtain that separated the bedroom from the living area. A couple of moments later, the front door opened and closed.

The sun was just kissing the horizon when Alex Andrews arrived at the doors of the Reclamation Centre. All night he’d wandered, aimlessly, but inevitably, it seemed, towards this place. In the grainy dawn, he stood outside, in the forecourt, gazing up at the spire as it broke the heavens – a finger of light reaching up into the beyond.

Alex closed his eyes. He was too young to remember this place as anything other than a reclamation centre, but his father had told him stories and, just for a second, he almost thought he could hear music, floating ethereally out from the brightly lit double doors. Then the music faded and, for a few moments, he thought about running – turning away from the light and fleeing, anonymous, into the back lanes and alleys of the city.

But, of course, he couldn’t. They’d find him, easily. There wasn’t anywhere to hide.

So instead he walked a little way around the building, following the curve of the wall towards the river until he reached a spot where a patch of shadow fell across the smooth concrete. There was a camera cluster just a few metres away, its panopticon cluster of low-light lenses already locked upon him. For a moment, Alex stared directly into it and then, reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a black, almost-exhausted marker pen. It only took him a few seconds: A filled circle, a line, two gently cursive tails. He turned away, leaving a single semiquaver sketched on the otherwise unblemished Reclamation Centre wall.

Then Alex Andrews threw the marker away, quickly retraced his steps, and walked through the front doors into the bright-lit marble foyer.

‘Yes, can I help you?’ A woman in a starched, white uniform looked up from behind the reception counter.

‘Alex Andrews.’

She punched his name into her terminal.

‘You’re early. Most of your lot don’t come in until just before midnight. Like to leave it as long as possible.’

Alex just shrugged.

‘May I please have your identification card and your public passes?’


The woman held out a large hand, and Alex handed over the cards, which went directly into a shredder by the desk.

‘Right. All done.’

The woman punched a couple of final commands, and then read her screen for a second.

‘You’re in room One – just through that door, along the corridor, then the third door on your left. Once you’re settled, press the red button. The rest is automatic.’

‘Thank you.’

Alex stepped towards the door she had indicated, then stopped.

‘Can I ask a question?’

The woman had returned to studying her terminal, and didn’t even look up at him.

‘You want to know what happens.’

‘Yes.’

‘Fertilizer, mainly. Phosphates and so-on. For the farming effort.’

‘Thanks.’

He walked along a corridor until he found the door marked ‘One’. Beyond was a small room, not much larger than a cupboard, and a steel chair. He closed the door firmly behind him, settled into the chair and, humming an aria from Puccini, pressed the red button.

Then Alex closed his eyes and settled back in his chair, to enjoy the rest of the concert. Across town, Fabian Andrews woke, alone in his bed for the first time in twelve years.

‘Happy birthday, son,’ he whispered to the struggling dawn, as he pulled on his tattered old work overalls.
Research statement

Research background

Dudek locates the role of the child protagonist in critical dystopia as central to the masked utopian reading that the text invites: ‘an impulse whose imperative it is to see difference and to resist uniformity, into a dystopian space’ (2005: 65). Ming Tan argues that the role of the child resistor protagonist in dystopic spaces is a vehicle for contemporary adult concerns: ‘this phantom – the child who never existed … is often indicative of fears for the future. Child sacrifice is a common trope in our society … beneath it lurks questions of desire, identity, and humanity’ (2013: 55).

Research contribution

This dystopic short story explores the degree to which the embodied role of the child protagonist in contemporary young adult dystopia might function simultaneously as vehicle for both hope through resistance and existential and political despair. The story is informed by research into the cultural significance of the popularity and impact of dystopic narratives in the children’s and young adult marketplaces.

Research significance

Birthday wish contributes to current discourses around the construction and role of the embodied young adult protagonist, and to examinations of the function of dystopias and critical dystopias by scholars such as Dudek, Bradford, Mallan, Stephens and McCallum. It also acts as an extension of the author’s previous creative exploration of the function of dystopia as social commentary within a contemporary Australian political context.

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Bronwyn Fredericks

‘… Souvlaki and a bit of lemon’: an Aboriginal Australian Greek story

Biographical note:
Bronwyn Fredericks (Cert IV Community Culture, Cert IV Training and Assessment, DipT, BEd, MEd, MEd Studies, PhD,) is Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University, Australia. She is published in academic and community journals, including in M/C Journal, TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge, Cultural Studies Review, AlterNATIVE, the Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues and others. Bronwyn is a founding member of the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM) which is a collective of Indigenous Australian artists, photographers, sculptors, mixed media artists and writers based in Central Queensland, Australia. She undertakes interdisciplinary research and is a member of the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

Keywords:
Creative writing – research – cross cultural – Indigenous – Greek - food

I may not be a Koori, but as an Aboriginal Australian woman – a Murri from south-east Queensland – I appreciated the sense of cultural connection and understanding that came with the waiter’s question. It reflects the intermingling that I appreciate between Australian Aboriginal culture and Australian Greek culture. And the food of the moment for me that I could taste in my mouth, despite just ordering, was seafood souvlaki, with a bit of lemon.

In Victoria, Aboriginal peoples are collectively known as Koories (Koori History Website 2014). It’s a name that most people are comfortable with, even though each Koori will also hold their own specific tribal affiliations (Horton 1999). For example, the people of the Kulin nation are the Traditional Owners of the land that is now known by the English name of Melbourne. I am an Aboriginal Australian woman who originates from south-east Queensland (Brisbane/Ipswich). In south-east Queensland, some groups are collectively referred to as Murries.

I often spend time in Melbourne, working with Koories in the inner-city suburbs of Fitzroy and Collingwood. These suburbs are known for their Aboriginal, migrant and refugee populations and working class heritage. They’re great cultural melting pots, and the Greek influence is strong.

Melbourne has the largest Greek-speaking population outside Europe, after Athens and Thessaloniki (Victorian Government 2013a). Although people began to migrate to Australia from Greece in 1827, most migrants arrived between 1945 and 1982. Melbourne has a strong Greek presence, with a Greek precinct in the city, Greek focal points in the suburbs, and a strong sense of Greek cultural pride. It’s easy to find Greek restaurants, cafes and cake shops, travel agents, music shops, bridal boutiques and religious shops.

My Koorie friends and I have our favourite Greek restaurants that we visit regularly – to talk and eat, and talk and eat some more. We know which restaurants satisfy our taste buds. We visit some restaurants so often that the staff know our names and know us as Aboriginal people.

Last week a group of us from Rockhampton, Brisbane and Darwin visited Melbourne for a meeting with the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAN 2014). At the end of one of our working days a few of us walked from Lonsdale Street where we were staying, up Punch Lane into Little Bourke Street. Right in front of us was Kri Kri Mezethopoleion Greek Restaurant which none of us had tried before (Kri Kri 2014). We were unknown to this restaurant, and it was unknown to us.

Mezethes style is where everyone at the table shares mezethes or ‘small plates’ of individually prepared foods. There is no set entrée or main meal just a series of individual dishes served as they are cooked and in an order that would complement one another.
We ordered the dinner banquet that contained a large variety of mesethes, which could be shared between us not just in this Greek manner, but also in the Aboriginal way of sharing food (Foley 2005). Aboriginal people generally expect to share food with others and often experience the sharing of food as an affirmation of connections and relationships (Foley 2005, Fredericks & Anderson 2013). As we ate, we storied (Dulwich 1995) and yarnd (Bessard & Ng’ando 2010) throughout the night about our research and as the plates of Calamari Lemonato (Fig. 1), Prawns with a tangy capsicum mayonnaise and rocket (Fig. 2), Keflethes, Kotopoulo Scaras, Armissia Paithakia (Fig. 3) and other dishes arrived, we savoured each one.

The food was delicious and it will now become known to us and connected to our memory of our time together in Melbourne.
The connections between the Greek community and the Australian Aboriginal community, extends back into the history of Greek migration. Over the years, there have been inter-marriages, common businesses, and support for each other’s issues. One well-known Aboriginal-Greek couple, Merle Morgan and Alick Jackamos, did a lot to unite the two cultures. Merle Morgan is a Yorta Yorta woman who was born on the Cummeragunja Mission on the New South Wales side of the Murray River. Alick Jackamos was the son of Greek migrants who grew up in Collingwood. They married in 1951 and spent many years working in the local Aboriginal community – attending Pastor Nicholl’s Gore Street church in Fitzroy and helping to develop and run the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL). Alick remains the only non-Aboriginal man to be awarded life-membership of AAL (Victorian Government 2013b). One of Alick’s most lasting legacies is his photographic collection of Victoria’s Aboriginal communities. As he travelled around the state with his work for the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs, or the AAL, he took many, many photographs (Broome and Manning 2006).

The children of these cross-cultural unions are making their way in contemporary times. For example, Kalliopi-Aspasia Koumalatsos expresses her Greek and Aboriginal heritage through her sculpture, painting and photography. Her work is vibrant and passionate in a way that is simultaneously Aboriginal and Greek. She was selected to participate in the first exhibition of Indigenous Australian art in Greece, at the Benaki Museum in Athens for the 2004 Olympic Games (Kanarakis 2011).

There’s also a wonderful melding of Greek and Aboriginal cultures displayed by ‘The Chooky Dancers’ – ten young men from the Top End of Australia who blended Aboriginal dancing with Greek music. My guess is that, when ‘The Chooky Dancers’ got up to dance at the Ramingining Festival in September 2007, few expected that the group would go on to tour nationally and internationally. Their dance was filmed by Frank Djirrimbilpilwuy (2007) from Milingimbi, who is the father of one of the performers and has been involved in the Indigenous Media Industry for many years. He uploaded the
performance to You Tube, and with over two million viewers to date, the rest, as they say, is history. Six of the young men are now touring Australia under the group name of Djuki Mala offering performances in contemporary and traditional dance, along with and promoting healthy lifestyles (Hannaford 2014, Lallo 2014).

When the seafood souvlaki arrives, I squeeze on a bit of lemon and find myself reflecting on my own links with Greek culture. I’ve had wonderful times at Paniyiri (Paniyiri Greek Festival 2014) in Brisbane with my family and friends. Paniyiri is held every year in Musgrave Park, South Brisbane, on Jagara land and an original meeting place. The park is a remnant of a much larger former Kurilpa (South Brisbane) Aboriginal camping ground (Musgrave Park Cultural Centre Inc 2014). It is still a camping ground for some Aboriginal people. Paniyiri, now in its thirty-sixth year, is Queensland’s celebration of all things Greek. For me it is a Greek celebration that is part of the landscape of Aboriginal Brisbane and a celebration for Aboriginal families too. It is always conducted with respect for the Aboriginal Land on which it is held.

I think that there are visual, auditory and physical sensations that come from the mixing of Aboriginal and Greek cultures. It is intriguing and stimulating – kind of like the zing you get from a Lilli Pilli (fruit) after a thick piece of bush peppered kangaroo or, right now, seafood souvlaki with a bit of lemon.

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Research statement

Research background

This work is written as creative non-fiction which moves from autobiographical to biographical through food, relationships and creative expression and reflects the relationship between Indigenous Australians and Greek migrants and where their cultures have influenced each other.

Research contribution

Establishing my creative writing as scholarship allows me to explore and extend my research focused on Australian race relations and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2012). This form of scholarship allows me to draw on Indigenous interests, methodologies and knowledges (Chilisa 2012) and position them as original contributions within the research domain (Australian Government 2012). The Indigenous research field within this process is the application of Indigenous knowledges in their various forms.

Research significance

This work positions existing and Indigenous knowledge in a new and creative way so as to offer new understandings, concepts and methodologies (Australian Government 2012). It offers new understandings as to how Indigenous peoples experience humanity and culture and contribute to cross cultural relationships within broader Australian society. This creative scholarship builds on previous research in the field and contributes to the growing body of work by Indigenous researchers that will assist in the understanding and knowledge development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers of the future (Chilisa 2012).

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Nigel Krauth

Mediterranean songs

Biographical note:
Professor Nigel Krauth is head of the writing program at Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia. He has published four novels (two of them national award winners) and three teenage novels, along with stories, essays, articles and reviews. His research investigates creative writing processes and the teaching of creative writing. He is the co-founding editor of TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses www.textjournal.com.au

Keywords:
Creative writing – Mediterranean writers – first person plural
Where the Durrells and Miller went

The Shrine is our private bathing-pool.
– Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero’s Cell*

Here we baptized ourselves anew in the raw.
– Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

Where the Durrells and Miller went, we want to follow. We drive towards Kalami, thirty kilometres north of Corfu Town, and at Nissaki we trek down from the hillside road. There’s a dip in the rugged coastline here, Corfu folds on itself to protect a tiny knob, a white-washed little chapel, cypress-held above cleft rocks – the shrine to Saint Arsenius. Walking the cliff track in olive-shade we nearly miss it, but catching sight, scramble a descent for goats to a sun-trap ledge, and deep water.

Larry and Nancy Durrell came here, with *Prospero’s Cell* a gleam in Larry’s eye. They dropped cherries like blood-spots in turquoise, and Nancy dived naked for them. They brought their friend Henry Miller here too when he visited, to be baptized in Greece.

We’ve arrived with light packs and sunscreen oil to join their cavorting, to write and make love, to replay the privacy and potency. We expect to be alone, but have company straight away. Around the headland two open boats, one tows the other – three Corfiot fishermen. They lean out, tie up at the rock-shelf too near us. It’s their daily routine, it seems. Studiously we’re ignored on our ledge near the shrine. They keep looking away. We imagine these fishermen have a legend of people naked, taking photographs and writing, on this sun-struck, deep-water ledge.

We watch as two of them stroke the net-line in a wide arc out and back again, while the third waits, his back to us, in the rocking anchor boat. Then the motor splutters for the haul-in. The catch in the sea-oozing net is a glisten of jumping sardines – two and a half boxes, it turns out. We came here for a lesson in naked history; the fishing is the lesson now.

The sardines throb in the slippery light. They’re the cherries in Nancy’s mouth, surfacing; they’re the words in Larry’s book, and the specks in Henry’s eye. We see in the gleam of ancient fishing, all we came for.

We put on our clothes and prepare to leave. This place has un-moored us from normal attachment to land. When we climb back up to the car we find we are smiling and seeing differently.
We don’t often see snaps

J’aime le soleil, la nudité, la lumière...
– Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

We don’t often see snaps of famous authors naked. We look at this photo and want to get into it.

Marvellously, this shot of Miller and Durrell records their skinny-dipping in Corfu in 1939. Miller, by no means possessor of an Apollonian body, looks almost anorexic – bald and wasted, but happy with himself. Durrell, more introverted and twenty years younger than Henry, has a lithe attractive body, not ostentatiously muscled, young and fit but shyly uncomfortable before the camera. We like this photograph because it is the antidote to the tourist images of Corfu. Henry and Larry in their nakedness put a different frame around themselves: expansive rather than exclusive; sensuous not censorious. An invitation to honesty, not deception.

We sit down between them. There’s room on the rock with the waves tickling our bare arses. We shake hands, and we blurt what admirers we are. Henry looks us in the eye and shrugs. ‘What’s up at your place?’ he asks. Larry is more circumspect. ‘We were just leaving …’ he says.

We lean back a little, trying to emulate Henry. ‘We’re doing a tour,’ we say. ‘We’re looking for ourselves in the Mediterranean.’

Larry smirks, but disguises it with a cough. Henry puts his arm around us. ‘You’re in the right place,’ he says.
‘We think there’s a network of self-knowledge in the world,’ we say hesitantly. ‘Made of place and literature and experience. And for English-speakers it’s significantly focused on the Mediterranean...’ Then we add, ’... the cradle of the Western world,’ and immediately regret it.

Henry gives us a great slap on the back. ‘Damned right,’ he says. ‘Do all of it. Do it any way you can. The network extends everywhere. Rock that cradle!’ He rubs his knees enthusiastically. We wonder about the impropriety of developing erections.

But Larry comes to our rescue. ‘The world is complex and nasty,’ he says. ‘And very gorgeous. You need strategies.’

**Like Neruda**

This hidden Capri that you enter only after a long pilgrimage, after the tourist label has peeled off from your clothes…

– Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*

Like Neruda we walk around Capri and walk around our bodies. The sheer drops are our declivities, the belvederes our bright thought. Pathways bend and open like the progress of our talk, and the air tells stories of near and far, like our breath.

Cuddled together, head to head, the zig and zag of stairways, the funicular of pleasure, we circle our nipples. A palace rises, remembering atrocities. A grotto unfolds, with celebrations. We see the spectacular view. In the square the clock tower times waiters with trays.

We are bursting in the street, leaf and wall, and vine. Winter blew us to this island, our love. And here we found hugging fire. We curved into each other’s breasts. A sea of love and troubles surrounds us.

There’s nothing to learn of a place but through another. We know the colour of winter, an unripened avocado, green not yet black. But the flesh and seed on the inside of us is what counts.

When we learn this island we will learn ourselves. We will bring it out of its hiding inside us. The bougainvillea will blossom later. Right now, the stones explode with rain on the dark leaves.
In bed with DH Lawrence

We are on top of the island, and look down on green pine-tops, down to the blue sea … But I don’t really like islands.
– DH Lawrence, Letter to Else Jaffe, 1928

In bed with DH Lawrence, there’s plenty of room under the covers. He’s so skinny now, practically weightless, he takes up almost nothing of the world’s space. He smells like cheese, and moves his bones uncomfortably. He’s been lying down too long, hasn’t been for a walk in weeks. We hear the fruity churning in his pinched chest, with an echo that belies his narrowness. He coughs up a patch of blood. He spits it into the envelope from one of the letters that arrived today, re-seals it, and adds it to the pile of reddened envelopes secreted under the bed. Then he picks up the edition of *John Bull* magazine that came with the letters. He riffles through it. His wide eyes tell us he wants to fight, wants to blast the world and make love to it at the same time, but the spleen is gone from him. There’s not enough of him left.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘They hate my *Lady C* …’

He wants to toss the magazine under the bed, but we put our hands out for it. He gives it up with a sigh. His eyes are red-rimmed, barely seeing us.

‘“Famous Novelist’s Shameful Book”,’ we read out aloud, ‘“…the most evil outpouring that has ever besmirched the literature of our country … the fetid masterpiece of this sex-sodden genius … we have no doubt that he will be ostracized by all except the most degenerate coteries in the literary world…”’

We stop reading. It is too much.

He breathes out, giving up more of himself to the world. We worm beside him, turn on our sides and put our arms across his thin frame. We feel the pulse in his belly. His stick fingers open another letter, this from the publishers of the catalogue of paintings for his London exhibition.

He shakes his head.

‘And my *Dandelions*,’ he says. ‘They want to leave it out …’

He waves the letter vaguely, then drops it onto the bed covers. He adjusts his bony buttocks on the mattress. We get a waft again of cheese under the blanket.

‘It’s a painting of a man pissing, for Christ’s sake,’ he blurts. ‘A man pissing! What’s wrong with that? It celebrates the simplest, most beautiful thing. He’s naked, pissing onto dandelions beside a wall. His arse is firm. He has beautiful shoulders. His head is bowed. But … the most important thing I painted in that picture was the wall.’

He turns his gaunt face to us, his fingers clawing at our shoulders.

‘My darlings,’ he says. ‘We are so afraid … so pathetically afraid.’
Then he gives a croaking sort of laugh which alarms us because we think it might be the death rattle.

‘We are so afraid of ourselves,’ he says.

Frieda has heard the croak and sweeps into the room from the kitchen. She frowns at us cuddling up to Bertie, but says nothing. She’s a big woman, and we can imagine how these two lie in bed together, him moving over for her.

She hard-tucks the blanket on either side of us, like a good hausfrau.

‘Are you wanting anything?’ she says.

‘Only you, my love,’ he replies.

Remarkably, Lawrence is revitalized by her attention. He sits up further, rigid. He smiles at her as she leaves the room.

‘Oh, Lord. The fights we had,’ he says. ‘I remember trying to kill her on several occasions. Lying in wait and attacking her. Of course, she did the same to me.’

He croaks again, and coughs another mouthful, this time onto the letter about his Dandelions. He folds it over.

‘I have always hated what I loved at some time or other,’ he confides. ‘Even simultaneously.’

He pats our shoulders.

‘But not clichés. I never loved them.’

We think we’re really getting somewhere. We feel so close to him. We move our arms around his waist to hug him tighter.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘I might as well…’

Then he erupts into a spasm of coughing and there’s blood all over us, all over the bed. It’s a huge hemorrhage. The women come running from the sitting room and we fly up to the ceiling. Hovering there, all we think is how much we love him, for what he has done for us.
In the town of Vathy, on Ithaca

I have some idea of purchasing the Island of Ithaka.
I suppose you will add me to the Levant lunatics.
– Lord Byron, Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 1810

In the town of Vathy, on Ithaca, there’s a memorial stone near the modest little cinema whose foyer has room for just a table and chair. In Greek and English the inscription reads:

For the
Commemoration of
BYRON’S
Stay at Ithaca August
1823

‘If this island belonged
to me I would bury
all my books here
and never go away’

Byron

The stone, which looks like a gravestone, is set at the address where he stayed en route to his Greek war. It is one street back from the waterfront. We wonder why he did indeed go on, why he didn’t sell up all and buy the island, and never go away. He was obsessive about Greek independence from the Turks, and his continued writing about the atrocities done to Greece attracted world attention. He was astutely opposed to Lord Elgin’s robbery of the Parthenon marbles and, as a member of the House of Lords, was experienced in diplomacy with both the Turkish and Greek camps. So why as a writer did he take up the sword and join the war of independence rather than continue to do what he did best – be Greece’s outstanding publicist and celebrity?

We assume Byron’s mention of burying his books refers to Prospero’s finale in The Tempest, and that he saw Ithaca as Shakespeare saw his island – a metaphor for the magic of his entire writing output. But possibly, the books Byron referred to were those he carried on his final travels towards his inglorious death on Greek soil: there was a considerable load of them, overweight luggage rates not being what they are today. Maybe the mention means that as a writer he did not need a library any more – that the island of Ithaca replaces all need for a library when contemplating one’s final sum of knowledge – that Ithaca is better than a library, has more to teach, can teach it better. That Ithaca is poetry, drama, philosophy, history, natural science – that it is indeed, encyclopedic experience. But we wonder further: maybe the books he intended to bury were his own. Might a single perfect island answer all the questions one seeks to answer in a lifetime of writing?
Byron took the track to the Arethusa Spring at the southern end of Ithaca. This is the same track Odysseus walked when he returned in Homer’s classic. Byron probably rode on a mule or donkey with a guide, but today we trek through waist-high scrub, unsignposted, wishing we’d worn long pants: the bush is gnarled and spiky. But marvellously, it feels like walking the ancient landscape of the Odyssey itself. Byron went to the Arethusa Spring in homage because this was where, in song, Odysseus re-met his honest swineherd, the only friend he could trust, Eumaios. Odysseus came home via the back gate, so to speak, by a remote beach landing, because home had become a dangerous place. He crept up on his wife, to discover what she was doing. But also, as a consequence of arriving this way, he didn’t recognize his own island. Home wasn’t home as he thought it would be. ‘I do not think this is my beloved Ithaca,’ he complains to the goddess Athena, ‘but some other country, where I find myself.’

After more than an hour of lonely walking, we arrive at the famed Arethusa Spring. It’s a nondescript hole between rocks, less than a metre wide, with a grubby makeshift bucket abandoned on a length of frayed rope nearby. We look upwards at a cliff-bolstered mountain and down on a deserted beach. There’s nothing human in sight. No building, no road, no sign of our civilization. A raven caws above us, razors the cliff-ridge of the mountain, and we feel greatly drawn to the place. It is truly wild.

We pick our way down to the tiny beach and take our clothes off. We sit on a rock naked for an hour with our feet in the sand. It’s cold, but not too cold. No one passes on land or sea, only nature moves. Like Byron, we decide to take a swim in this unpolluted water where Odysseus re-found his story home.

Swimming in the Mediterranean sea

‘What country is it, and what men live here?’
– Homer, The Odyssey

Swimming in the Mediterranean sea, we feel we are rebirthing ourselves. We have a space to think about who we are, where we’ve come from, what the hell’s happening to us. We realize we’ve not spent time thinking about what we’ve done; we’ve been too busy doing it. Living life has gotten in the way of understanding it. What do we value most in life? We couldn’t say.

We realize how mundane these epiphany thoughts are. We’re supposedly intelligent, and educated, but we’ve made a complete stuff-up of living. Knowing Homer or Byron or all of modern literature did nothing for knowing ourselves. A university degree is like a marriage certificate – it means zilch in real life.

Except perhaps right now, at this moment when we’re dripping wet on Homer’s beach sharing with Odysseus his headache about home. He staggers out of the sea, flinging water from head, chest and thigh. He’s not the big dude we imagined, has good pecs.
though, and excellent legs. We smile at him. He reminds us a little of ourselves in times earlier, when long-haired and tanned. He looks confused and worried. Looks as though he feels he looks older than he should. But that’s the way it happens, re-contemplating home.

He comes up the beach and stops, looking at us.

‘Fuck you, guys,’ he says. ‘Are you the ones I have to deal with?’

He approaches more cautiously, leans across the rock beside us, and we notice behind the rock he has secreted his clothes and a longbow and arrows. It’s a huge bow, a bazooka of a bow. He picks it up and puts an arrow to it. Then suddenly lifts it and points it at our foreheads.

‘Jesus, mate,’ we say. ‘We’re on your side.’

After a moment he shrugs and chuckles. He lets the bow and arrow fall to the sand. He sits on the rock beside us. His hairy brown shoulders are wet and rub against ours. He smells like the wine-dark salty sea and pig-meat. But we get a great charge from his intimate, thoughtful aggression.

‘Fuck. I’ve been going for so fucking long,’ he says, digging his feet in the sand. ‘I’ve been fucking sheilas all over the fucking world. High-class, middle-class, lowest class. Goddamn prostitutes and goddamn kings’ daughters. Nubile, married and divorced. No difference. It’s a wonderful world, this Mediterranean.’

He explodes into laughter, shaking his head. A torrent of seawater comes off his shaggy curls.

‘But what about home?’ we say, knowing he might stand and put an arrow through our heart for mentioning it.

‘Fuck, guys,’ he says. ‘I haven’t got the faintest idea. We deal with it until we can’t deal with it. We get away with what we can until we can’t get away with it. Eventually, as with the bow and the arrow, we decide where our true aim lies.’

While we’re absorbing these words he gets up from our rock and transforms into an older man, shawl over his shoulders, staff in his hand. We recognize ourselves again in him.

‘Good luck, guys,’ he says. ‘Goddamn, I love you. You’ve given me so much strength to go ahead.’

We grasp his hand. We feel tears in our eyes.

‘Our aim is true too,’ we say.

Our hands unclench and he heads off into literature and pulp fiction.
Endnotes


3. Homer 1999/800 BC *The Odyssey* trans. WHD Rouse, Signet, New York, 154
Research statement

Research background
Richardson’s 2006 list of fiction written entirely or largely in the ‘we’ form includes works by Kafka, Faulkner, Robbe-Grillet, Barthelme and Cortázar who researched the inclusive and exclusive effects of ‘we’ narratives (2006: 141-2). First person plural experiments from 1924 to 1964 were mainly undertaken in short bursts in short stories. After 1970, novels such as John Barth’s Sabbatical (1982) and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides (1993) showed the robustness of the ‘we’ voice for longer narrative. Similar to the ‘you’ of second person narration, the narrating ‘we’ is an unstable viewpoint that can disorient readers and lure them into perspectives not previously experienced.

Research contribution
Conventionally, the ‘we’ narrative represents ‘an in-group pushing against an out-group’ (Nesbit 2014) corresponding with the linguistic perspective where “‘we” does not designate multiple “I”s, but rather an individual “we”-sayer’ (Margolin 1996). I am interested in the case where the ‘we’ might indeed be multiple ‘I’’s, might represent a dual experience, a love-dyad viewpoint such as that postulated in e.e. cummings’ ‘little you-i’ (cummings 1960: 68), and its effects in the context of memoir.

Research significance
This piece is part of a portfolio of work concerned with the boundaries (or lack thereof) between autobiography and fiction (see Krauth 2010, 2012). In line with Brien’s examination of speculative biography (2014), this piece tests the concept of a memoirist ‘we’ and the territories it shares with conventional biography, autobiography and fiction.

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Jarryd Luke

Sim-therapy

Biographical note:
Jarryd Luke has a PhD in creative writing from the Queensland University of Technology. In 2011, he was shortlisted in the State Library of Queensland Young Writers Award and the QUT Postgraduate Writing Prize. His manuscript ‘Corkscrew section’ was shortlisted in the Emerging Author category of the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards. His work been published in *The Lifted Brow, M/C Journal, LiNQ* and *Rex*. Jarryd is the Director of the Townsville Writers and Publishers Centre.

Keywords:
Creative writing – short fiction – graphic devices – digital technology
It will be all right ...
  - Maurice, *For the Term of his Natural Life*, 138

It will be all right ...
  - Marilla, *Anne of Green Gables*, 122

It will be all right ...
  - Richard, *Bleak House*, 228

It will be all right ...
  - Mrs Assingham, *The Golden Bowl*, 99

God will send the dawn and we shall be all right.
  - the Squire of the Grove, *Don Quixote*, 497

Anne: He pulled me out of his car and took me around the side of his house to the backyard and there was this huge shed attached to the back of the garage, and he dragged me inside and showed me how he’d made this trapdoor under a tool bench. Like they said on the news, the door was this slab of concrete reinforced with steel. He typed a code into a little box on the wall and the door slid open, and he told me he’d rigged the door so if I messed with it it’d explode.

Dr Muir: What did it look like inside?
Anne: The room was only a couple metres long and a bit under two high. I used to have nightmares where I got taller and had to crouch the whole time, but of course I hardly grew while I was down there. Like ten centimetres maybe.

Dr Muir: What happened on the first day?
Anne: He’d left this pile of books and toys on the mattress and at first I couldn’t even look at them. But every few weeks he brought me more books because he could tell I loved reading, and I kept them in stacks in the corner opposite my bed, and I had four stacks by the end, all the way up to the ceiling.

Dr Muir: What were your favourite books?
Anne: I loved Charles Dickens and Henry James. And then I had lots of trashy stuff like Mary Stewart and Georgette Heyer. I read each book at least ten times. I started underlining phrases, ones that echoed the things I was saying to myself, like ‘I want to go home’ or ‘It will be all right.’

I stay back at the office, listening to the interview with Anne (pseudonym) for the umpteenth time. Anderson asked me to put the finishing touches on Dr Muir’s dungeon simulation, which is based on a tunnel we created a few months ago for the trapped miners in Bolivia. As always, Anderson’s obsessed with the tiniest details: the titles, authors and publication dates of the books; the number of rungs on the ladder.

Claire, my ex, is the beta tester. She walks back and forth through our sims for a living: wall hugging, searching for inconsistencies, errors, glitches.
We were together for six years. A few months ago, she kind of burned out and decided she needed some time on her own. When we moved out of our apartment I realised I wasn’t as independent as I’d thought. Claire always had more friends than me, and my family’s interstate, so I didn’t have anyone I could stay with while I sorted things out.

Now the sim’s finished, I’ll send it to Claire for testing. It’s weird having her check my sims, but we’ve always worked in the same industry and helped with each other’s projects. At least she’s in a different building.

Claire’ll spend the next week immersed in the sim, repeating the situations in Anne’s Anxiety Hierarchy:

Climbing down the ladder into the dungeon.

Waiting with the lights off for a week, as punishment for dirtying the room, using too much water, or refusing to play cards with her kidnapper.

Sitting in the corner sharing a Curly Wurly with him as he describes his own traumatic childhood.

Teasing him about a John Coltrane record, which he plays on a gramophone he bought for her at a garage sale at the neighbours’ house. (Cowering on the mattress while he shouts at her and tries to burn her wrist with a cigarette lighter, but his hands shake and he can’t get it to light and he apologises and promises to bring her something other than jazz.)

Standing in the backyard for the first time after he decides to let her help him weed on Sundays, surrounded on all sides by a high fence, which he tells her is electric.

Fleeing through the house two months later after a rock flung by the lawnmower hits his foot.

My job’s not easy. Lately I’ve been getting dizzy spells that brown out my hearing and vision, leaving me with nothing to focus on for a few seconds but a bland disgust for the way I operate. But still, I’m glad I’m not a beta tester.

At home I’m trying to finish a puzzle game, one of the projects Claire and I used to work on together. It’s about a spherical amoeba who overcomes obstacles by cloning himself. His goal is to reach his sweetheart (also an amoeba), who’s been kidnapped by a malignant bacteria. It was Claire’s idea. I pointed out that amoebas are asexual,
but she said that was part of the charm. I know I’ll probably never finish the game, but it makes a nice change from all the horror stories I recreate at work.

Today I come up with a level where the amoeba creates piles of clones and climbs up them to reach his girlfriend.

At ten o’clock, Anderson introduces me to the new programmer, Stephanie, and asks me to show her the ropes. She’s in the cubicle next to mine. The old programmer, Frank, left a few days ago after setting up a ‘nerd culture’ novelty store with his brother-in-law. I show Stephanie his goodbye present – an ant farm that’s painted like a Lemmings level, with ants running back and forth instead of the lemmings.

She says it seems like a radical career change and I tell her how Frank used to get anxiety attacks from constructing disasters all day long. Over the last year my own nerves have deteriorated into a sort of Fox News of alternating hysteria and dread.

It makes it easier if you pretend you’re coding games. Some of our sims are actually based on big titles. We made an office shooting sim last year that borrowed graphics and code from a first-person shooter called Street Soldier.

To show Steph how things work, I load a plane crash sim I need to redo for one of Frank’s old clients. I warn Steph to be wary around Anderson while we’re working on it. His wife died on a flight to Montreal a few years ago; that’s the reason he got into the business.

‘We specialise in non-military scenarios,’ I tell Steph. ‘Car crashes, volcanos, floods. It’s a competitive field. Therapeutic sims were first developed for Vietnam War veterans, and the US army is working on similar software for Iraq. Anderson loves details. That’s what makes Sim-Therapy unique. We create personalised, ultra-realistic simulations.’

Details are important. Our clients have PTSD, and our sims are a form of exposure therapy; e.g. you take someone with, say, arachnophobia, and show them a spider. You gradually increase the time they’re exposed to the spider, and then maybe get them to approach it, or hold it in their hand. By exposing them to the source of their fear while they’re in a safe environment, you can help them control their anxiety.

I give Steph the helmet and gloves so she can look around the plane.

‘Last year we made a sim for a very similar crash: same type of plane, different airline.’

Steph flicks through the in-flight magazine with her gloved hands.

‘So Anderson wants us to make a list of everything the art department – Ted and Joan over there – has to make so the plane looks like it belongs to a different airline. It’s all about recreating the scene where the traumatic event took place. The user has to believe they’re back there.’

We make a list: the background music during take-off; the name of the airline in the safety demonstrations and captain’s announcements; the patterns on the seats; the dates on the complimentary newspapers; the airline logos on those little plastic bags.
they give you the head phones in; the food (lunch and dinner); the in-flight entertainment.

Steph points out all these things I overlook, like the airline logo on the gate, which is just visible through the windows. She’s good.

I’m giving the sim a final look-over when I hear Anderson walking towards me.

I reach for the helmet but he says, ‘Leave it on.’

So I sit there with the helmet on and listen to Anderson type something into my computer. Steph went to the bathroom a couple of minutes ago and even though I can’t see, I’m pretty sure she’s not back yet.

The sim shifts and I find myself in a shopping mall.

‘Look familiar?’ says Anderson.

I nod.

‘Remind me what this sim was for.’

‘We made it after a kid got his sandal caught in an escalator,’ I say. ‘The escalator jerked to a halt, and this old man who was halfway up the escalator with his wife fell over and bumped his head. He went into a coma or something.’

I walk towards the escalator. I know something’s wrong here, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s in the details. Something’s wrong with the details. I pray that Steph won’t come back yet.

Anderson plays the incident. The man’s head smacks into one of the steps and his groceries tumble down towards me.

‘Do you remember how the boy managed to get his sandal jammed between the steps?’

‘There was a similar accident the previous year. Little girl got her shoelace caught in the same escalator. So they painted yellow lines on every step, so people wouldn’t put their feet near the edges.’

‘But?’

I hear his feet shift on the carpet.

‘But, um, a couple of days before the sandal incident, the up escalator stopped working. So, in the meantime, the management decided to, uh, reverse the direction of the other escalator, so it was going up instead of down. It was easier that way, for the customers.’

‘And …’

I realise where he’s going with this.

‘In front of every yellow line they’d also painted a message saying Do not step on the yellow line.’

‘Uh huh.’
‘But because the escalator was now going up, instead of down, the message was facing away from the customers, instead of towards them.’

I look at the warnings on the escalator steps in front of me. The words are the right way up.

‘So when you made this sim,’ Anderson says, ‘you were extra careful to print the words upside-down, just like in real life, weren’t you? Because you knew how important it was to the victims. Because you knew the old man’s wife sued the shopping mall because the little boy couldn’t read the safety message.’

I’m disoriented. I can’t work out where Anderson is. A little part of my brain keeps telling me he’s going to hit me. He’s not normally this bad. It’s the plane crash. He can’t handle it.

‘Do you have any idea what our clients would say if they saw this? What if the boy’s therapist calls me up and tells me my sim has caused her client all manner of mental anguish by implying he was responsible for the whole fucking mess?’

It takes me a minute to realise he’s stormed off. I take the helmet off and look around. Steph is walking over, smiling.

‘How’s it coming along?’ she asks.

I try to breathe normally.

‘Good.’

At home I sit on the balcony and design another level for the puzzle game, where the amoebas are on opposite ends of a seesaw. In the middle of the seesaw is a laser powerful enough to kill the male amoeba but not the female amoeba, who is more highly evolved (Claire’s suggestion). The male amoeba solves the problem by cloning himself so the seesaw tips and the female amoeba rolls towards him.

The next day Steph and I start working on the next stage of the kidnapping sim for Dr Muir. Now that I’ve finished the dungeon we have to design the kidnapper’s house so Anne can relive her sprint through the rooms and out the front door. I focus on the living room while Steph plans out the hallway and kitchen.

After lunch Anderson comes round to check on our progress. I’ve been dreading this, but thankfully he doesn’t mention the escalator thing. Although for some reason he gets worked up about a grandfather clock in the living room, which I didn’t plan to
animate, but apparently needs to be functioning if we’re going to have any chance at verisimilitude.

So I spend the afternoon programming the stupid pendulum.

Steph and I chat in my cubicle for a while and somehow we get onto the topic of what animals would look like if they evolved to survive in a manmade world; e.g. big cats camouflaged to resemble concrete or stainless steel; trees twisted into the shape of traffic lights; meerkats with Geiger counters; insects that subsist solely on artificial colours and flavours.

At five, Anderson tells me off about the grandfather clock again; now he wants the hands on the face to move around in time with the pendulum. This is getting ridiculous.

I have this dream where the female amoeba moves a bunch of angled mirrors in order to trap the male amoeba within a series of intersecting lasers. It sounds lame but it freaks me out.

I feel like Steph and I had a moment this morning. I went to get a Gatorade from the drinks machine and Steph was banging it because she’d bought a Dr Pepper but it got caught on the hook and was teetering on the edge of the shelf. I pretended I wanted a Diet Coke because it was three rows above the Dr Pepper. When I pressed the button the Diet Coke hit the Dr Pepper on its way down, knocking it loose, and both drinks banged into the tray at the bottom. We laughed and bumped fists, like we’d pulled off some elaborate billiards trick.

I happily play back this moment in my head for twenty minutes until Anderson comes round again and gives me an earful because I haven’t taken into account the fact that the ‘incident’ occurred at the height of summer, which means the grandfather clock’s pendulum, which was made of brass, would have expanded, thus becoming longer, thus increasing the diameter of its swing, thus slowing down the time displayed on the clock face.

I could point out that Anderson’s demands are becoming flagrantly absurd and his judgement is clearly being clouded by his own traumatic past, but I keep my mouth shut and do the calculations because I don’t really have a leg to stand on after the escalator incident.
Anderson stays in his office all day and the receptionist (his daughter, Rose) doesn’t even come around at morning teatime to offer us coffee.

Came up with another level. The male amoeba needs to reach the female amoeba as quickly as possible. He doesn’t have time to explore every branch of the maze, so he clones himself at every intersection. That way, he can cover all his bases and make sure at least one of him gets to the female amoeba in time.

When I finish the level, all those clones caught in dead-ends remind me of how clients often say they feel disembodied during traumatic situations – they become separated from themselves and what’s happening to them. Sometimes they can’t remember anything, and it only starts coming back to them later, in dreams and flashbacks, repeating itself. Part of them always stays back there.

You have to move outside yourself to survive. But you leave pieces behind.

I stay back late again, putting the finishing touches on the living room. Steph ducks out to get us coffee.

I don my helmet and stand in front of the clock, watching the pendulum swing back and forth inside the glass. I imagine Claire standing in the same place, walking past the clock over and over, from every possible angle, and something occurs to me.

I pull up an old picture of us in a bed and breakfast in Amsterdam, sitting on the couch with our faces flushed from a storm outside.

This isn’t a cry for help. I’m not trying to get back with her. It’s just that for a long time I haven’t been as calm as I was then and I want to acknowledge that.

So I insert the image into the sim, into the glass in front of the pendulum. I make the picture look like a reflection in the glass, as if the grandfather clock is actually in the corner of the darkened room in Europe. I program the reflection so the user can only see it if they stare at the clock from a certain angle. The reflection is so faint you can still see the pendulum, swinging back and forth between us.

Then I send the sim off for beta testing.

I stare at my hands in front of the keyboard for a while and get up to stretch. When I’m on my feet a dizzy spell hits me and I nearly fall over. My ears start ringing and I lose my balance.
The truth is I have a diffuse unsafe feeling almost all the time now and I don’t know where it comes from.

I hold a hand out but I can’t find the wall of my cubicle. My eyes are still sorting their way through a lot of fake light when I feel Steph put a hand on my shoulder.
Research Statement

Research background
Desktop publishing has encouraged many contemporary writers to experiment with the visual presentation of their work, using photographs, sketches, typography, white space and found documents to reinforce and invigorate their fiction (Gutjahr & Benton 2001: 14). Researchers have shown that these graphic devices, which are traditionally absent from literature, are not just superficial; they play a complex and integral role in the creation of meaning, such as morphing to reflect the action, suggesting connections between disparate elements, or highlighting aspects of the characters’ inner lives (Sadokierski 2010; White 2005; Schiff 1998).

Research contribution
In ‘Sim-therapy’ I used digital tools to create diagrams spread throughout the story, as well as an unusual epigraph, which repeats the same quote from five different authors. These quotes would have been all but impossible to find without running searches through digital texts. This method of collating the epigraphs ties in with the story’s exploration of how digital technology influences the way we receive and interpret information. The layout of the story is also governed by this theme: the extremely short paragraphs and the insertion of material such as screen shots and recorded interviews indicate technology’s effect on the main character’s thought patterns and way of life.

Research significance
‘Sim-therapy’ maintains a careful balance between visual experimentation and traditional storytelling. It creates complex narrative and thematic connections between words and images, producing new associations for the reader to explore, but without disrupting the reading experience or disorienting the reader by presenting them with jarring or overly complex visuals.

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University of Newcastle

David Musgrave

Anatomy of voice: the second partition

Biographical note:
David Musgrave lectures in creative writing at the University of Newcastle. His most recent book of poetry is Concrete Tuesday (Island, 2011) and his novel Glissando: A Melodrama (Sleepers, 2010) was shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Award for Fiction. He founded the independent publishing house Puncher & Wattmann in 2005, where he is currently the publisher.

Keywords:
Creative writing – poetry
They come in the dark to those that listen, the dead and distant, enemies and friends crowding the silence with their voices conjured from nothing but parts of the flesh and bone memory. Prodigal swarms lost in the labyrinth of the ear join us to their shuttering selves, transporting us across space and time while we remain as we are, alone.

1.

They come in the dark, to those that listen, and then some, to my threads. Think silk, Cathay, slit-nets, others’ thought, eco-myths. Thin cards of yachts listing in the shooting sea. The crocodile is slime, the ten to one, the toad in the shark has toes that glisten.
2.

The dead and distant, enemies and friends saddened and frightened, menaced, thin and instead of their demons, teddies. Indeed. Maenads, dandies, their unedited fiends danced and tended faded anathemas. The deadened ides of dire mendacity.

3.

Crowding the silence with their voices, the sirens were thieving their kill words, drowning in weather. Thick slices of cloud licensing wives on roids. The swirling senses thrive. Either the crow or crowns wreathe these slithering voids.
4.

Conjured from nothing but parts of the flesh.
In your pungent rhumbas, the shuffle of injured tongues. From the book-trap of shelf the jury thronged the prefab muff confits.
Bud Junior, of shopping tube country, films the pledge of neuro-buffing comfort shunts.

5.

And bone memory, prodigal, swarms among mad weasel domains. I probed your problems: my words are in damage mode, and yours are empowering emblems.
Magi bear emeralds, pomes and myrrh, dance madrigals. No embers whimper.
6.

Lost in the labyrinth of the ear,
I inlay the stolen breath of the earth,
ethereal follies. The birth-torn
listen to either the blarney of
intel beneath the frail theories or
the last throb, thinly: ‘Our father in…’

7.

Join us to their shuttering selves,
just as their loins gutter in shelves.
Sh! Enjoy the Vestals rutting! Two
thuggish elves stutter in joyous
joshing. Veterans, listen to
Grillus’ voice. Urgent tushing.
8.

Transporting us across space and time, our ants are tame. Crossing a streetscape is no constraint. My august spite came at a cost: no dancing, sport. My truss is part costume. No spirit says grace, nor poets escape our timing sands.

9.

While we remain as we are, alone on email. We whine, wheeze our alien lays. Women wow a new aerial arena where wine is lower, amyl will allow a nearer, new malaise. Whales wallow near a main isle.
Endnote

1. **Emblem Sources: The Second Partition**

   ‘Hand in Clouds’
   Das Kurze leben
   Das Lebens Ausgang ist auch dessen Untergang
   Die Wiege selbst ein Grab
   viel sterben
   eh sie leben
   Viel müssen vor der Zeit der Erden Ubschied geben
   Das längste Leben ist nicht einer Spanne lang.

   The Short Life
   Life’s rising is also its setting
   The cradle itself a grave
   many die
   Before they live
   Many must farewell the earth before time
   The longest life is not a span long.
   Joannnes [Juan] de Boria, Moralische Sinn Bilder, Brandenburg, 1698 Nr. 19

1. ‘Crocodile’
   sibi nequam cui bonus
   Jacob Cats, Proteus ofte Minne-beelden Verandert IN Sinne-beelden Tot Rotterdam Bij Pieter van Waesberge boeckercooperAn.° 1627 Nr. 34, at <http://emblems.let.uu.nl/c162734.html>

2. Tanz
   Furentem quid delubra iuvant
   Jacob Cats, *Proteus*. Nr. 42.
Lehr und Kunst

Ist gegen die Natur umsunst.
Ein Meister hatt’ ehmahls Affen lernen springen
So wie sie hörten ihn auffpfeiffen oder singen:
Doch ließen sie vom Tantz als einer Nüss’ auswarff
War gleich mit seiner Zucht der Meister noch so scharff.
Ein Buhler war auch eins zum Tempel hingegangen
Vermeysend dass er loss von der / so ihm gefangen:
Des wolt’ er dancken GOtt; doch wie die Liebst’ auch da
Verliebt er wider sich so bald er sie nur sah.

3.

Les Grands Ne Doibuent Craindre La Mort
Gilles Corozet, Hecatomgraphie, Paris, 1540 Nr. D vii b

Cette couronne enlassée de vers,
Monstre à chascun et mesmement au prince,
Que mort prend tout, qu’elle meurdrist et pince,
Et facit gesir les plus grans à l’envers.

4.

Tamen Discam
Gabriel Rollenhagen, Nucleus, Arnheim, 1611. I Nr. 75

Et licet in tumbam pes decidat alter, et alter
Vivat adhuc, studiis invigilabo tamen

5.

audito multa, loquitor paуча
Junius Hadrianus, Emblemata Antwerp, 1545
Nr.18

Aure concipit, parit
Mustela foetum postea in lucem ore.
Aure dicta concipe,
Diu at recocita parcius prome ore.

The weasel is impregnated through the ear and later brings its young into the world through its mouth. Take in words with your ear; but only after you have weighed them up let them emerge sparingly from your lips.

6.

Labyrinth
Guillaume de La Perrière, La Theatre des bons Engins, 1539
Nr. 35

En volupté facilement on entre:
Mais on en sort à grand difficulté.
Par trop vouloir obeir à son ventre,
L’on en est pire en toute faculté.
Ce beau propos avons pour resultant,
Du Labyrinthe auquel facilement
L’on peut entrer: mais si parfondement
On est desdans, l’yssue est difficile.
En vain plaisir aussi semblablement
L'on entre tost: mais sortir n'est facile.

7.
Gryllus
Petrus Costalius, Pegma 1555 Nr. 176
In Grillum
Voluptatem Immanissimus quisque sequitur lubens

8.
Guillaume de La Perriere, Le Theatre des Bons Engins, Paris 1539. Nr.100
En ce pourtraict on peut voir diligence,
Tenant en main le cornet de copie.
Elle triomphe en grand magnificence:
Car de paresse onc ne fut assoupie:
Dessoubz ses piedz tient famine accroupie,
Et attaché en grand captivité:
Puis les formis par leur hastiveté,
Diligemment tirent le tout ensemble:
Pour demontrer qu'avec oysiveté,
Impossible est que grandz biens l'on assemble.

9.
Guillaume de La Perriere, La Morosophie, Lyon, 1553. Nr. 19
Comem le vin bon goust ne peut avoir,
Si puenteur d'aucun costé la touche:
Semblablement bon propos n'a puoir,
S'il est sorty d'une meschante bouche.

Guillaume de La Perriere, La Morosophie, Lyon, 1553. Nr. 23
Coupant le pont, on mon corps se soustient,
le prens grand peine à faire mon dommage:
Mais seul ne suys, car tel erreur detient
La plus grand part de tout l'humaine lignage.

If I saw through the bridge on which I myself stand, I am taking a lot of trouble to harm myself. But I do not stand alone, for most people are stuck in such error.
Research statement

Research background
Current international developments in poetry have foregrounded the poem as a linguistic artefact which is relatively autonomous from its referents. As such, there has been increased emphasis on creating poems according to models which are in sympathy with this stance, such as homophonic translation or John Tranter’s ‘The Anaglyph’ (2009: 105ff). This research uses phonemic rearrangements and an aleatory process to generate the poems of ‘The Second Partition’.

Research contribution
‘Anatomy of Voice’ is a creative exploration of the metaphysical and phenomenological aspects of the human voice in the western tradition. It references the form of Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* which, as a Menippean satire (Holland 1975), shares a common generic tradition with TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (see Musgrave 2008, Nänny 1985), which is parodied in ‘The Third Partition’ (Musgrave 2014). ‘The Second Partition’ explores the relation between voice as a non-signifying, but necessary, component of the signifying aspect of speech. Here it follows Dolar’s study in positing voice as that which binds subject to other, and is also the intersection of *phone* and *logos*, *zoe* and *bios* (2006: 103, 121) and Agamben’s analysis of the connection made between the voice and the pneuma (spirit) of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as being crucial to late medieval notions of love (see, Agamben 1993). Through reducing the lines of an original poem (the first stanza) to its constituent phonemes, I rearrange them in order to discover latent meanings in the original poem at the phonemic level and, by implication, in voice itself. I relate the phonemically rearranged poems (stanzas 2-9) to Emblems (Henkel and Schöne 1996), as a result of words which, through phonemic rearrangement, suggest in an aleatory way the emblems themselves.

Research significance
The significance of this research is that it suggests a new axis for poetic exploration, the phonemic level, and introduces a ludic and aleatory process to explore iconographic elements of the poetry. Its value is attested to by the following indicators: publication of parts of ‘The First Partition’ in *Snorkel* (Musgrave 2013), ‘The Third Partition’ in *A Slow Combusting Hymn* (Musgrave 2014) and this work in TEXT.
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Gail Pittaway

Fingal’s Cave

Biographical note:
Gail Pittaway is Senior Lecturer in the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand. A member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network and the New Zealand Society of Authors, Gail has also been the curator for the Readers and Writers section of the Hamilton Gardens Festival of the Arts since 2010. She is currently an advisory editor for TEXT journal and a founding co-editor of Meniscus literary magazine, having also been a member of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs executive committee since 2004. Gail’s research interests include writing poetry, reading and reviewing contemporary fiction, and writing for radio. She has edited several anthologies of student writing, and a historical collection of writings associated with gardens, Writers in the gardens as well as regularly writing papers and articles for TEXT and Great writing journals on the history and teaching of writing.

Keywords:
Creative writing – short story
Few sounds give such an air of respectability to a neighbourhood as bagpipes. The lone warbling of even the most excruciating beginner cast an air of dependability over the most derelict of streets. The presence of the Merton Piper’s Hall, up a dowdy cul-de-sac at one edge of the trotting track, and behind a main thoroughfare of car yards and funeral parlours, lent comfort to the many pensioners and single-income families that seemed to congregate there.

This Piper’s Hall, a grey, prefabricated building of modest, even bashful, proportions, burped up from a plain of asphalt, its steep concrete steps jutting suddenly up to lead to a glass and wooden door that gave a vicious kick-back action. The doorway was so narrow and well swung that pipe bands had ceased to march through it in training, preferring the safety of pounding the perimeter of the inner hall, or stepping and turning on the bare dusty car parking space, once all the cars had been removed to a safe distance.

The hall was rarely unoccupied. There were the pipers, naturally, who trained on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, for beginners and advanced pipers, respectively. Before special occasions, such as Caledonian Society Ceilidh’s, Christmas parades or competition times, they practised on Saturday mornings, even parading down one or other of the secretive suburban roads, and collecting an audience of amused onlookers. Most weekdays, the hall was taken up with community activities – jumble sales, old-folks’ morning teas and concerts, local playgroup mornings, League of Mothers’ bring-and-buy stalls, Brownie and Scout packs. In fact, the hall was the centre of life in this treeless yet shady end of town.

Once a month, on a Wednesday, the first Wednesday in each month, the respectability of the Pipers’ Hall was graced with the charm of art. The august British Music Society, or rather the local branch, in the persons of the Misses Sinclair, teachers of violin and piano respectively, and Mr Allen D’Arcy, Head of Music at the High School and Director of the Male Voice Choir, would arrange an evening of musical performance for their small, but devoted, membership.

The iron-framed piano would be wrenched out from the wings of the wooden stage, and the backdrop with its crossed swords, tartans and thistles, would be artfully hidden behind thick black curtains. The stage would be enshrined with dangerous-looking vases of tall gladioli, lilies and agapanthus. A final touch of decadence was the addition of a standard lamp from the home of the Misses Sinclair, which was reverently placed near the piano or planted between the music stands of other performers. A rigid, simple wooden pole with a conical linen shade, this standard lamp was the most complicated part of the evenings’ arrangements, requiring Mr D’Arcy to take two trips to the Piper’s Hall; one with the Misses Sinclair who had never learned to drive, and another with the standard lamp which was so inflexible as to take up most of his car, on the diagonal.

Mr D’Arcy drove a 1951 Wolsey, even in 1974. His suit was tweed, his shoes had leather uppers, downers and inners. His accent was brisk, his manner clipped. He had been born in Kaitangata but his parents, upbringing and education had collaborated to make him forget this fact. He smoked a pipe. To be truthful, he was so busy that he rarely lit the pipe, but was so often seen packing, stuffing, stroking and sucking at it
that it seemed a natural appendage to his face and hands. When he placed the unlit pipe in his mouth there was a satisfying completion about the way the tobacco curling out of the pipe strained upwards towards the hairs curling out of his nose, then upwards and outwards towards those curling from his brow.

The Misses Sinclair respectively loved and feared Mr D’Arcy. Adelaide, the younger, taught violin. She still practiced fervently, although her only performances these days were to correct the positions and fingerings of her students or at the Society’s Christmas concert. There, the sisters would perform from their shrinking repertoire; perhaps arrangements of the Liszt ‘Hungarian Rhapsody’ or the lighter ‘In A Monastery Garden’. After one spirited rendition of the Liszt, Mr D’Arcy had once remarked to Adelaide that her playing betrayed the fire of gypsy blood. That was why she loved him.

Alexandra, the elder Sinclair, who, unlike her sibling, had not been born en route for New Zealand, but rather, sedately, in Sussex, was more timid than her wild colonial sister. She was content to accompany Adelaide and any other performers who needed her services. The combination of hesitancy in manner and refinement in technique made her a most sensitive, unobtrusive accompanist, and she was very highly regarded.

If she was a modest performer, Miss Alexandra Sinclair was a formidable teacher. She expected absolute commitment of her pupils, drilling them assiduously in scales, arpeggios and aural training. Each new piece was introduced with an historical account, the pupil taking notes. To her select pupils, Miss Sinclair seemed to know everything about music. But then, she only selected for them music that she knew.

Miss Sinclair was a snob. That was why she feared Mr D’Arcy. His brusque Britishness was suspect, his energy phenomenal, his virility unquestionable. In his shaggy, tobacco-stained way, he did not seem to her to embody the qualities she associated with the idea of being ‘musical’. Furthermore, there was an alarming tendency in his programming of concerts towards modernism. A tide of Bolsheviks seemed to be encroaching upon the small millpond in which she flourished. Liadev, Prokofiev, Scriabin, Stravinsky; she loathed their atonality and feared the percussive vigour in their rhythms. There was no charm, no ‘music’ in their scores, she would tell her pupils, dissuading them from any interest.

One of Miss Sinclair’s senior piano pupils was a Piper’s Hall local girl. Karen McKenzie had been virtually reared there, having attended playgroup, Brownies, and First Aid classes. Her father, Jim, played side drum for the Centennial Pipe Band in his spare time and worked as foreman in a mechanics yard on the main road. Her mother, Annie, attended League of Mothers, League of Mercy and assisted with various charitable mornings for the Old Folks’ Society and the Crippled, Maimed Association.

The McKenzies lived just along from the hall, a convenience for Karen’s attendance at British Music Society evenings, or soirees, as they preferred to call them. As a beginner she had performed the bass part of a duet of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Marche Slav’, (‘The only MUSICAL Russian!, Miss Sinclair senior had sighed). Karen progressed to solos – ‘Fur Elise’, ‘Ala Turca’, even a little Bach – preludes but not fugues.
While most of Miss Sinclair’s clientele were the offspring of professional fathers and society mothers, Karen had maintained a niche in their circle for her diligence and sensitivity as a student performer. She cycled every Wednesday from school across town to the hilly, tree-lined suburb and large old wooden house where old Mr Sinclair had finally reposed with his books, collection of early keyboards, flutes, violins and, of course, his daughters. A retired musicologist and a widower, Mr Sinclair had needed his girls to administer his correspondence and domestic needs. They, devotees and daughters to the muses, had complied long after his death and well into middle-age.

Karen, now a plump, bland sixteen, loved the dark quietness of the Sinclair museum with its oak paneling and hallway filled with long glass-topped cases of musical ephemera. To visit was a privilege, to breathe was to absorb not only atmosphere, but history. Best of all, she loved to wait in the front study while Miss Sinclair’s previous lesson was finishing. She would move between the crammed-in keyboards – a faded red harpsichord, the low, square piano, a family of uprights, shelves of boxed clavichords and spinets, closed up like coffins of tiny children. There was even a Pianola, which Miss Sinclair had once demonstrated during a keyboard history lesson. A few bars of the ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ had sounded, jeering loudly against the sedate and highly-strung instruments, before Miss Sinclair stopped the scroll as if in shock that her father might have collected such a sound.

The green darkness of the house with its acreage of soft rugs and carpets was alien to Karen’s experience. Her own barren suburban upbringing had not equipped her for the barrage to sensibilities that the Sinclair place created and, over the years, awe changing to affection, she had come to recognise this as the centre of a world of ideals. She saw the meanness of her home surroundings, the lack of poetry in her father’s occupation, the lowliness of her mother’s charitable acts. She came to loathe pipe bands and popular music, and lost interest in discussing music with them. A clever girl and hardworking; as long as she was doing well they were prepared not to worry. It was probably just a phase in a ‘time of change’, which was Annie McKenzie’s useful term for puberty, the menopause and all passages in-between.

Karen was changing. But this cycle of change had not ended. So well drilled was she by her teacher’s regime, she had begun to outgrow her tutelage. Practising reading at sight had led her to reach beyond the scores of long dead composers into the twentieth century for new challenges. Admittedly a few latter day composers had slipped over Miss Sinclair’s undefined but rigid musical picket fence; Debussy had ‘atmosphere’, Hubert Parry had ‘tradition’. Karen could only surmise that her teacher did not mind a little discord, so long as it was resolved. Quickly. Back to the dominant key.

The problem was that Karen had begun to enjoy the ingenuity and complexity of the moderns. This new enjoyment had been nourished by Mr D’Arcy’s music classes at the high school which had introduced Karen and her classmates to the ‘Rite of Spring’ and the thrum of new rhythms and impulses. Furthermore, she was achieving new popularity as a pianist, playing requests for her school friends in the lunch hours – they had only to hum to her or give her the music and she could play it for them immediately. Musicality was taking on new meanings.
What with Miss Sinclair’s inflexibility and Karen’s ‘time of change’, it was inevitable they should come to a passage of discord where Karen would not wish to revert to the dominant key.

They clashed over ‘Fingal’s Cave’.

It was Karen’s final year at school. Soon she would be leaving home, the town of Merton and Miss Sinclair, for Teacher’s College. It had been a busy year preparing for school exams and passing her piano examinations with distinction. As a relaxing treat, Miss Sinclair had selected Mendelssohn’s ‘Fingal’s Cave’ as a final study piece.

‘This is a piano arrangement of the famous tone poem by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. The piano stands in for a vast symphonic orchestra, recreating all the passion of the sea upon a wild and desolate coast in the Hebrides’, quoted Miss Sinclair, from her memory bank of musical anecdotes.

Karen had no quarrel with the piece itself; it was an adequate arrangement and in later years she was to enjoy a recording of the full orchestral score. But ‘Fingal’s Cave’ came to epitomise for her the very limitations of her teacher’s outlook. It was comfortably ‘musical’. It was sonorous. It was soft, then it was loud, then it was soft again. It could be imagined all too easily. It was unquestionably a British Music Society piece – one which, as a final gesture of gratitude to Miss Sinclair and the Society, Karen was expected to perform for the November concert. She had tried to suggest an alternative – a dizzy ‘Perpetual Motion’ by Poulenc, but it was dismissed as a ‘nasty modern clashing piece’ and ‘Fingal’s Cave’ prevailed.

Karen worked dutifully to achieve the many atmospheric effects required. One week before the concert she was playing superbly and Miss Sinclair triumphantly telephoned Mr D’Arcy to confirm her place in the programme.

Karen was quiet all the next week. On the day of the concert she was not happy with herself. She had never been a rebel, but she didn’t want to be slotted in between precocious kids performing arrangements of ‘Autumn Leaves’ and the ‘Moonlight Sonata’. She couldn’t bear to hear another adolescent voice grappling with German songs about pain or French songs about birds. Suddenly the Piper’s Hall, which had been like a temple all her life, seemed little more than a shed. And the British Music Society no more poetic than the clubs and charities her parents supported.

‘Selfish snobs, that’s what they are …’, she muttered to herself as she cycled to her lesson, past the hall, up the busy main road with its funeral parlour and car cemeteries made even more drab by November rain.

Hopelessly, she rehearsed ways she could get out of her obligation without offending Miss Sinclair. She knew she was too cowardly to create an accident and she was not prepared to lie. She wasn’t even aware of devising a plan as she arrived at the Sinclair’s front lawn and rested her bike against the huge sycamore tree that blocked the sun from the house and cast its green shade through the hall along the creeping rugs. She pushed the bell and let herself in, thinking for the thousandth time how like entering a doctor’s or dentist’s surgery it was.
Karen was in the keyboard graveyard when an idea so simple brushed across her mind that she scarcely had time to frame it into words before Miss Sinclair appeared magically out of the carpet and swept her into the Music Room.

She moved woodenly to the Steinway and began to adjust the piano stool. This had to be done quickly; Miss Sinclair had settled into her listening chair. It was a ritual at each lesson; Karen would enter and play, without warm-ups or scales, as if in concert.

She opened the music, breathed in and began the opening bars.

‘Too loud dear’, called Miss Sinclair from behind and Karen gained confidence.

She committed an unforgivable sin. She stopped and started again. She heard an intake of breath. It goaded her to greater sacrilege. She muffled a running passage to the treble, repeating the bar, tapping her feet noisily. She pointed her elbows out, flailing her fingers wildly at a cluster of notes and got them right. She repeated the bar and the motion and this time got them wrong.

‘Child, what is the matter with you?’, wailed Miss Sinclair from behind her hands.

The storm built up. Karen played it with all the vulgarity and pretended feeling that she knew Miss Sinclair to despise. She waved her head about, ecstatically, playing with the time with such recklessness that the main theme stretched and twanged like a game of cat’s cradle.

‘Stop! I can’t stand any more!’

Karen stopped, frightened. In three years, Miss Sinclair had never interrupted her first performance of the day. She froze, afraid to speak in case she apologised.

‘You can’t possibly represent me in public tonight’.

Miss Sinclair was marching down the hall as she spoke.

To Karen’s amazement, she heard her teacher telephone Mr D’Arcy and withdraw her name from the programme, giving as a reason, ‘Tonight isn’t suitable. It’s an unfortunate clash.’

She did not hear the rest of the tight tirade as she quietly closed the musical score and reverently left it on top of the piano. Then, torn between elation and dismay, Karen cycled back to her home.

That evening, just as Mr D’Arcy was unloading the standard lamp from his Wolsley, Karen explained to her parents that she wouldn’t be needed for the British Music Society concert down the road at the Piper’s Hall, after all.

She told them she was going to practice, then told them what she was going to play, finally explaining a little of the background to ‘Fingal’s Cave’ and its geographical inspiration in the Western Hebrides, just off the coast of Scotland, and Jim’s ancestral lands of Argyll.

Then, she went into the front room and began to play, without the score.

Any latecomers to the Hall passing the McKenzie house would have stopped mid-stride, with appreciation. Karen played ‘Fingal’s Cave’ more brilliantly than ever before.
In the open plan living room, where Annie was ironing and Jim was polishing his side drums, they turned off the television to listen to their daughter play. In the middle of a Hebridean storm, Annie looked up from a leg of Jim’s overall and sighed, ‘It’s almost like being there!’

**Endnote**

1. Fingal’s Cave was given its name in 1772, by Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist who accompanied Captain James Cook in his voyages of discovery to the southern hemisphere in which this story is set. Banks named the cave after the eponymous hero of an epic poem by Macpherson, and attributed to a Celtic bard, ‘Ossian’. The cave also gives its name to a piece of orchestral music by Mendelssohn, from his *Hebrides Suite*, of 1830, Opus 26, inspired by a visit to the cave in 1829.
Research statement

Research background
As a teenager, I had every intention of becoming a concert pianist. How to write about a world of music in detail, yet making it entertaining for the reader, was one of the research challenges of this story. My examination of the writings of one of New Zealand’s most significant authors, Katherine Mansfield, provided me insight into ways of managing the blend of domestic interiors, growing social awareness, and the use of irony in the narrative voice. It experiments with ways of updating the theme and tone of several of Mansfield’s ‘Garden Party’ stories: in particular ‘At the Bay’, ‘A doll’s house’ and ‘Her first ball’. Set in the 1970s in small-town New Zealand, the story also references elements of New Zealand’s cultural life; its characters are based on musicians, collectors and musicologists who lived in Wellington and Christchurch in this era.

Research contribution
Felix Mendelssohn’s music emerges out of an adolescent sensibility, and is still often used by those working with troubled teenagers because it reflects something of the growing rebellion and social awareness of young people at this transition point. This story explores ways of combining musical and narrative expression in ways that exploit the comic, resisting how the more conventional serious tone used in ‘growth’ or maturation stories.

Research significance
This work’s significance lies in its aims to assert gentle socially comic writing as a valuable literary tool, and to unite caricature and social realism with detail and knowledge of the classical musical repertoire. It has been accepted for publication in a leading creative writing journal in an issue focused on creative writing as research.

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The growth

Biographical note:
Antonia Pont is Lecturer in Professional and Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Deakin University. She publishes short fiction, poetry and theoretical prose, and researches practice-in-itself, or practice *per se*, seeking to distill the criteria that mark all forms of practice, including those of artistic engagement, quotidian commitments, and other forms of intentional non-doing that court radical but stable change.

Keywords:
The itch, at first, was unremarkable.

She was in the queue at the supermarket. Her basket reflected the contents of her list – toilet paper, plastic screw-top food containers, and a three-pack of clear, flimsy shower caps. She was standing behind a man with a large, cumbersome shoulder-bag, and a woman – perhaps his sister or wife – who had thinning hair on the back of her scalp, disguised with careful brushing and spray.

She brought a hand to her eye – a dry-skinned, office-day, air-conditioned hand – and rubbed into the soft pink flesh of the inner corner, into the part which, when inflamed, can creep out over the white of the bulb. It felt hot. She suspected the beginnings of hay-fever, since the sky lately had been etched through with those tiny seed mechanisms that carry a tree’s genetics with the wind.

She rubbed, but nothing grit-like came away. Her knuckle, too, stayed dry. This was unusual, since when it’s hayfever, everything usually runs—runs saline.

When the checkout attendant called Next!, she carried her modest shop over to the counter, postponing for the moment any worrying at her socket.

There was a recall on the shower caps. Apparently their constituent substances had been deemed a sudden threat to the consumer. When the attendant went to place her other two items in a plastic bag, she indicated she'd rather carry them and, after paying, left the register.

The rolls and containers were ungainly to manage but she didn’t have far to walk. Out in the early night, the sky was magician's blue. She walked briskly, feeling all the while the stubborn itch in the inside corner of her left eye.

Her armpits prickled, then softened to moisture.

She’d had conjunctivitus as a teenager. There was a faded school photo somewhere of her holding a shy, concealing hand to her temple. Washes and then something orally, if she wasn’t confusing it with some other ailment. In any case, an icky phase. And she remembered how ugly she’d felt in those weeks – at school, when it mattered to be consistently well-groomed every day – with a halo of sweet body-spray and socks managed fashionably. She hoped it wasn’t conjunctivitus.

Her partner was waiting for her at home. He opened the door, only to be nudged out of the way by John Deer, their adolescent Great Dane. The human male, beaming welcome, took the items out of her arms; she fussed with shoes in the cramped space.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked. ‘Were they polite to you down there?’

‘Hmmm. Yes, fine…’

She noticed the floor needed a sweep.

‘Sinister shower caps. Balding lady. Otherwise, all in order.’

She smiled far up at him, since he was the homo sapien equivalent of John Deer.
When she’d scrambled up to standing, he cupped her face in his slightly calloused hands and moved in close to nose-nuzzle her. Suddenly he reared back.

‘Oi, milady. You have one seriously red eye going on there. Like you’ve been on the tipple, but only your left half.’

She touched towards the spot that was now itching ferociously, like a miniature set of jaws, gnawing into her face. Dismissing a sudden odd feeling, she shouldered past him, failing in the meantime to acknowledge JD, who sat back onto his haunches – in tragic protest sulk.

In the kitchen, something rocky was playing. She turned the dial down on the amplifier, not sure if the playlist was the source of her sudden unease.

‘Sorry,’ he said, following her into the lit room, ‘was motivating myself to do dishes.’

‘No problem,’ she said. ‘Shall we get the dinner on?’

‘You mean, call Taj Palace?’

‘Yup,’ she nodded, restraining herself from touching at her face, ‘… exactly.’

She walked into the bathroom, then. Looking for the cold tap.

When she pulled back the curtain beside their bed the next morning, the day was already a violent, perfect blue. She hated that kind of weather, but had never known why. She’d recently decided to stop telling people this, since it began very predictable conversations about her antisocial weather preferences, and frankly, it put everybody in an awkward mood.

Blue skies. She found them onerous. Threatening. Nigh horrifying.

He was still sleeping, and for once, John Deer wasn’t moshing the door down. Her hand went automatically to her face, and she didn’t have time to stop it. When her fingers encountered new membrane, she drew in a wee gasp.

It must have woken him, for he let out a faint, sweet complaint-moan.

Climbing from the bed too suddenly, she swayed into the mantelpiece, before righting her torso in front of the mirror. Her finger was palpating, very gingerly, a considerable thing that had grown in the night.

She pulled both eyes wide, or the left one as wide as it could manage. Was it a blister? It was paler than her normal skin. Like a burgeoning nub of mushroom, almost, and she thought of Plath’s little ‘fists’. It was perfectly stretched over itself, pulled orb-tight and evenly coloured. It would have been worthy of aesthetic contemplation if it hadn’t been wedged between the bridge of her nose and her eye, stuck like a clean, fat pearl right onto her face.

She turned to him, who was now sitting dead upright in bed.
‘I can see it,’ he said. ‘Good lord, glad you didn’t bring those shower caps home.’

‘So right-funny at all the wrong times…’ and she pressed in closer to the glass.

It was a facial pet. She couldn’t take her eyes off it. Her home-grown head-fungi.

‘Does it hurt?’ he asked.

She turned her head from side to side. Peered up inside her nostrils for a second.

‘Nup.’

He nodded like an actor.

She went on, ‘Or, not hurt, as such. But it feels a bit pressured. You know. Like blisters do.’

‘What do you want to do?’ he asked.

She turned around and drew open the curtains fully. Forced herself to look out properly at
the sky. Blue. Blue. Not even a blue that one could like very much. Not enough navy. Not
enough slate. It was dumb-blond blue.

‘I’d like to have breakfast,’ she said, and left the room.

The next morning, which was Saturday, it was bigger. She stood at the mirror again and
this time, they didn’t bother with a conversation about it. They’d had plans to go to his
parents’ house in the outer suburban ring. His mum would cook a silverside, and his dad
would cajole them all into a round of table tennis, terry-towelling wrist bands included.

A quick phone-call postponed the visit. The blister wasn’t painful – ‘just a bit
pressured…’ His mother, basically, wasn’t someone who coped well with signs of illness
or deformity.

So they stayed home, and to her relief, around four o’clock, the belligerent blue from the
day before gave way to a baritone cascade of grindings and crashes. A storm coming
through that put her in a thoroughly sexy mood.

She’d been lying on the couch, trying to read something complicated but also in moments
so conceptually enthralling that it made her squirm down into her hips. He was tackling a
taffy recipe, and using his new sugar thermometer that she’d found in a sale bin. The
kitchen oozed the warm smell of sweetness boiling. She went and stood behind him as he
poured the stuff onto the oiled slab to cool and, sliding her arms around his pelvis,
unbuttoned his jeans.

You’ll be the death of this taffy, he breathed, chin lifting.

And he let her hold him until he was hard and then they spent the next couple of hours
making love to the sounds of insistent rain on tin and the occasional whinny of sheet
light. With her new organ-in-residence, it felt like a threesome, but she kept that quip to
herself.
She worked in the city and had her own office. It was a windowless affair, and very expensive, but for her line of work it was an evil necessity, and so she filled the paltry atmosphere with cut flowers and photos of him and John Deer. She sometimes burned a salt lamp that a close friend had given her. It was one of those pink ones you put little tea lights inside. She was not at all new-ager, but she reckoned the salt lamp did something. Negative ions, it said on Google. *Whatever works*, she’d thought.

She took the train always, keeping her push-bike for weekends. Corporate-wear doesn’t fare so well in the honk-and-sweat of a morning commute.

‘You sure you wanna go?’

He was still in his pyjamas, getting ready for a day at the home-office.

‘Course! I got shit to do, ya’know?’

Her feigned brashness was a cover for the sheer flock of denial she was currently sporting. She knew he could read it.

‘Want a lift, at least?’ he tried, quietly.

‘That is *über* sweet of you,’ she tossed, ‘but I’m good. Need my fix of people-ogglng ... and all that.’

‘It will be you, I suspect,’ he offered, ‘... who’ll be the ogglee.’

She conceeded with a monosyllable, fingering the large eye-wear she’d chosen, and resisting the urge to pet the transluscent foetus coming to term on her face.

Once at work, she slipped past the secretary, who was – one could be certain of it – following all-and-sundry on some kind of social networking site, and avoiding cleaning up her computer desk-top, or doing other constructive tasks.

*Morning, Rachel!* and by then she had already closed her timber door, and ripped off the glasses. They were hurting her ears. She opened her already turned-on laptop, and pulled up that program that allows you to take photos from the in-built web-cam and which serves quite nicely as a mirror.

The thing seemed to have grown since she’d left the house. It was technically past the middle of her eye, and sat like a water-balloon heavy against her nose. Still clean-white. A milky, opaque white. She wondered what was inside. She thought of those people who have an almost erotic urge to squeeze pimples, and decided she qualified as porn. 1-beep-2-beep-3-flash. She had the mirror make a photo. Evidence was in her line of business, after all.

Around eleven, she conceded that the glasses were not going to work on the trip home.

Jabbing at the lit boxes of her phone, she wrote: *please come get me at 6.15. train is not going to be okay. xx*
He answered quickly: *am there*.

She worked for the rest of the day as best she could. It still didn’t hurt but was simply ungainly. It was now large and un-ignorable. It was not documented on any of the medical sites that she consulted during her self-assigned, forty-five minute lunch break. She ate her left-over creamy pasta and rocket leaves, meanwhile flicking through blog after blog about horrific things that happen to people’s bodies.

*Graphic.*

Her little face-foetus, however, didn’t get a mention. *Very reassuring*, she muttered, while simultaneously changing her screen-saver to the single, typed word: ‘HYSTERICAL’.

Right on schedule, she heard him arrive in the reception area, providing a predictable distraction for Rachel, who seemed uncharacteristically to want to do overtime that day.

‘Watcha surfing?’ she heard him inquire.

She could imagine Rachel chewing a glossy lip, doing bored-coquette.

*Just following certain pee-pull ...* and the last word with the odious whiff of amateur stalker about it. Actually, she couldn’t hear them, but she grabbed her chance.

Behind his large back, she slipped out via the glass doors and prayed that her colleagues were still in their rooms or had already left. She hadn’t bothered with the sunglasses. It was a liminal moment.

That night, even he was getting edgy.

‘Babe...’

‘Fuck. I know it’s dire when you call me *babe*.’

‘Sorry. Listen, I know you seem fine, but this is getting weird-town. I’m slightly worried, and no, I don’t think hospitals are safe places either. *Golden staph*, or whatever it’s called. But, you’ve got to admit, this is serious. I mean, you could make us a fortune in tabloid news or talk-shows ...’

She appreciated the humorous punchline, because she didn’t want this to turn into a veiled fight. Not that he was a fighter much. He was too responsible. Owned up to stuff. Didn’t speak for her, blah blah. If he wasn’t such a hotty, it could almost get boring. Or that’s what she’d have thought, once upon a time, and now knew better.

‘I mean, look at it.’ He wore a pained look, one he didn’t bring out often.

She turned to the window. It was black-black outside, and there were faint sirens in the distance. He was playing something Frenchy, but tasteful. She could see her face superimposed against the nightblur of the side path. Ephemeral features. The growth, she was ready to admit, was beyond considerable.
‘Yeah, sure. I know, but this doesn’t feel bad. I know it looks bad. But I feel good. Better even. You know how I was a bit under the weather for a few months there. Never getting really sick, but never feeling one hundred percent. Well, I feel clearer. Lighter. Except for my face…’ She tried a grin towards him, but he wasn’t softening.

‘… let’s just wait. If you can bear it. Bear me. I may end up very disfigured, but maybe I won’t. We can have sex in the dark, if that helps.’

‘Having sex always helps,’ he agreed, and came over to scoop her unsuccessfusully up into a bundle that toppled him back onto the couch.

‘Ouch,’ he moaned, feigning lumbago. But she was grateful.

‘So, we’ve got the posh ice-creams still. Which one do you want, and how many scoops of each?’

He was straining to maintain the levity. His partner of six years had something seriously kook growing out of her face. He worked in creative industries, but this was probably stretching even his capacity for ‘innovative reframing’. She was often right about things. Was it the moment to remind him of that?

They fell into silence as she moved about the kitchen. Familiar. Herself. She was still the same. Completely the same. She knew he was watching.

In the laundry, at the deep-freezer, he reached an arm down into the cold interior and a billow of chilled fog slipped up around him like a wraith.

So, he is not unafraid, she thought. But if he can just wait a little longer.

‘Hello, Rachel … Yes, oh … good to hear it. Listen, just wanting to let you know that I’m going to be working from home for a couple of days. Please call if it’s necessary, but otherwise mail me through anything relevant … or send a courier. Home address. Good. Yes, that’s fine. Talk then.’

She said prayers of gratitude that she was lucky enough to manage her own time. Many did not have the privilege.

They weren’t used to being in the house together on weekdays.Normally it was his space as soon as she zoomed out the door of a morning. He went all self-conscious.

‘Ah, tea? I’m making one…’

‘Listen, just do what you normally do. I’ll muddle through. If I look lost, I probably am, so ignore me.’

Her appendage, as they had begun to call it, had continued its push for world domination, and was now larger than her left eye. She’d lost a little depth of field, walked into the table edge twenty times on that first day at home.
At night in bed, with the sheets kicked back, he traced a finger around the sploge of bruise that was forming on her thigh.

‘Collateral damage,’ he ventured, lightly.

But then his eyes drifted to the book on the side table.

She stared up at the ceiling. Up that long way into the white they’d painted together six months earlier. She rubbed her feet like two seal flippers, like children do to get comfort, wondering all the while about dogs for the blind. About how blind people always get pitied, food down her front, and how that would really piss her off. She imagined that he hadn’t been looking her in the eye – literally – for the last couple of days.

‘Hey there …’ she tried.

He closed the book around his finger. Only pausing. She felt about as sexy as a burnt piece of toast that you need to scrape the black off.

‘Yeah …’ giving her his full attention.

‘Nothing.’

The following Friday, he took her for a drive. Any weekday attempt at working had – for both of them – become a farce.

Several years earlier, they’d had the windows of their car darkly tinted. She’d always had a thing about direct light and sitting in traffic and arms and hands: that searing, frightening feeling. As they slid into the front seats, she attempted a joke about ‘brilliant foresight’. (It fell flat.) Then her mind slid to foreskin, and she wondered if his had too.

Coverings. Cauls. The membranes around foetuses.

There’d been an article in Time about harnassing the energy of water across concentration gradients. Invisible membranes made of difference … The title had been something like: ‘The power of osmosis …’

They drove without conversation for at least an hour.

At the sea, she was all ready just to look out, through the salt-spattery windscreen, now littered with bug-guts. She was prepared to huddle there, without the smell, and without the exposure to air she knew she wanted.

He motioned her out with a flick of the head. Stern, no words.

Weeping rattily, she unpacked heavy, defeated limbs from under the glove-box.

They trundled to the viewing platform, and the sea was a wild, dark soup – treacherous and consoling. She imagined that the salt air stung the ever-stretching, unblemished surface of her thing, but she couldn’t guarantee that she had feeling in that ‘skin’, if it were skin at all.

No one else came. And she was thankful that the wind howled the way she couldn’t quite.
(Part 1 of two parts)
Research statement

Research background

This work can be situated within a fiction tradition coming primarily out of North America, represented by authors such as Lorrie Moore and Don DeLillo. Moore’s work often depicts eloquent, slightly jaded, and marooned university-educated protagonists, who wield wit intentionally (often as a defence against their circumstances) and employ parody as a quotidian mode of communication, thereby unsettling certain attachments to authenticity, while evoking tenderness and intimacy in unexpected ways. From within this stylistic lineage, ‘The growth’ – an Australian narrative – takes magical realist (veering towards surrealist) tropes, deploying them in a ‘world’ that otherwise resembles the smooth, self-reflective urban universe of the upper-middle, creative classes.

Research contribution

Given this context, the driving query of the work involves the politics of action and waiting. Recognising the imperative in late-capitalism to produce, do, keep busy and respond precipitously, the narrative attempts to stage the strangeness of choosing to wait – in the absence of reliable information indicating any constructive path. The plot involves the counter-intuitive mechanism of resisting happenings (at one level) but stages waiting’s own vectors that may lead to outcomes less violent than interference. This accompanies my scholarly, philosophical research that uses Badiouian ontology to conceptualise events that really constitute ‘something happening’ as opposed to the deceptive flurry concealing the status quo’s stasis.

Research significance

This work contributes to the project ‘Conversation strains’ that interrogates the role of conversation in contemporary fiction, and the ‘telling’ shown by dialogue in an historical moment so versed in cinematic consumption. Other works in this series have been published in Meanjin and AntiTHESIS journals.

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RMIT University

Francesca Rendle-Short

Took to the sky: drawing as memory as nonfiction

Biographical note:
Dr Francesca Rendle-Short is a writer, an associate professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, and Co-Director of nonfictionLab Research Group and WriCE (Writers Immersion Cultural Exchange) program. She is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir-cum-novel *Bite your tongue* (Spinifex Press), shortlisted for the 2012 Colin Roderick Literary Award, and has had essays, articles and poetry published in *The 2013 Best Australian Science Writing* (NewSouth), *Killing the Buddah, Rabbit, TEXT Journal, Axon, Overland, Bumf* and other journals. With David Carlin, she co-edited the *TEXT Special Issue: Nonfiction Now* (2013). Francesca was the recipient of the 2013 International Writers Fellowship to the University of Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program in the United States. Her website is www.francescarendleshort.com

Keywords:
Creative writing – Memoir – Nonfiction – Poetry – Father – Alzheimer’s disease – Memory
DRAWING IS AN ONGOING MIRROR, AT ONCE BOTH KINAESTHETIC AND PHYSICAL, INVOLVING BALANCE, RHYTHM, SPEED (OR SLOWNESS), SENSE OF DIRECTION – STRENGTH, SUBTLETY, GRACE – ALL THE PHYSICAL CUES WE GET FROM THE WORLD THAT ALLOW US TO JUDGE THE EFFICACY OF OUR ACTIONS.

(DUBOVSKY 2008: 72)

PROLOGUE


Alzheimer’s disease is characterised by neurofibrillary tangles and beta-amyloid plaques full of amino acid peptides present in the brain tissue. As doctors will tell you, if asked, the amyloid plaques are found between the neurons in the cerebral cortex, and the neurofibrillary tangles are found inside them. As the disease progresses, the brain changes, nerve cells are damaged and eventually die. As discussed elsewhere (Rendle-Short forthcoming) Alzheimer’s is a state of atrophy, negation. Not thinking right, degeneration – un-memory. The brain’s white and grey matter cells turn black and the cortex shrivels up and the brain shrinks in size. A person with Alzheimer’s slowly loses their memory, they forget and forget and forget.

It can turn happy-go-lucky characters into angry monsters that require sedation, or as in the case of my father, turn his hard-line authoritarianism and no-give nonsense into sweetness. His deterioration allowed me to come closer, in measures, one drawing at a time. In truth, Alzheimer’s gave my father heart.

My father was a father. He was a medical man, a sailor, not a cook’s cook but a cook of nearly-ripe mango chutney and sticky sweety-sour cumquat marmalade made in those large hot aluminium pots; a paediatrician, a physician, a good sort people say – your father was a good man, they always tell me – a Man of God with capital Ms and capital Gs. He was a man who loved his views – who would do anything to get a good one – who was tickled pink when he and my mother bought their plot of burial ground near Bli Bli, Nambour, Queensland, on a slope, facing east. Today, that’s where he lies on top of her, head to toe – my mother first, buried more deeply, and him coming four years later. You’d have to agree, he’s the one with the better outlook.

My father loved to listen to his Angel, my mother, playing hymns on the upright Bechstein piano we had in Brisbane (not the Broadwood grand she played in Sheffield) – Angel do keep playing, play our favourites. She loved them too, especially those from the Presbyterian Hymnal.

Pure, unbounded love Thou art
Visit us with Thy salvation

My father was a reader and a writer. He liked to annotate texts. When he slowly lost his memory from Alzheimer’s disease, my father would sometimes try to read what we had all written in his visitor’s books sitting on the bookcase in his room in the nursing home. My father wrote the last sentences to his life as a set of annotations to
those books in the same way he annotated his bibles when, as a Young Earth Creationist, he wrote his young-earth arguments into the margins of the Indian paper pages. These phrases and comments in the visitor’s book are the final words he uttered in any semi-coherent way, written in his nearly illegible writing, unless you count his final murmurs and mutterings and sighs before he died, utterances of an unearthly, yet sublime kind.

My father.

My as in *mi* m-i, possessive pronoun, related to *myo* from the Greek *mus*, of muscle and muscles: and father *pater*.

This is my father going to work. What was he thinking that day, head bowed, hand clutching his briefcase? About those small children he was going to inspect at the children’s hospital on his ward rounds, hoping they had improved, were on the mend? Was he thinking diagnoses and prognoses, what he was going to say to the parents, the mothers usually, who would have roomed in with their sick children overnight (my father was a pioneer of the concept of rooming-in with astounding results, everyone said, as was his notion of treating ‘the whole child’)?

Or was he thinking about that book he was working on, *Man, ape or image: the Christian’s dilemma* that would be published three years later by Creation Science Publishing in Queensland (Rendle-Short 1981)? Was he thinking through a particular argument he was trying to make in his head and get right, such as the problem of Eve, her being evil and giving in and how she must be mastered? Or how to deal with homosexuality once and for all (little did he know a few years later two lesbians would turn up amongst his daughters)? Or the problem of sickness and evil and where
disability fitted into God’s creation plan? (In a recent obituary (Pearn 2013), a
colleague wonders at the apparent paradox, him being a modern scientific clinician on
the one hand and a literal truth Creationist on the other.)

I didn’t like my father but it’s true I did like to chase him around the house to take
photographs of him with my Instamatic – ‘Father going to work’, ‘Father reading
*Time* at the kitchen table under the fan’, ‘Father typing his books up with his
typewriter on his knees in the lounge room’. That sort of thing: these images as
witness. I would have been 16 or 17 at the time, my father 41 years older.

My father thought the things his children did were frivolous, especially the more arty
ones he fathered (and grandfathered for that matter) – writers, painters, musicians.
Nothing compared to his important work. His work of God written into the margins of
his bible, a bible now in my possession: ‘John Rendle-Short Pine Mountain October
1986’.

If you have a look at the beginning, at the Book of Genesis for example, you’ll see
here his mind at work, his thinking in the tiny notes written up and down the margins
of the pages, starting with this declaration:

I MUST ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THE ENGLISH BIBLE
CAME TO US FROM A CRUCIBLE OF TERROR. DO NOT
MEDDLE WITH IT.

The Book of Genesis, all 50 chapters, is the most crowded of all the pages in his bible.
It is as if he could never get past it, to read further, to study the other 65 books of the
bible to see how they compare. It so clearly demonstrates his persistence of argument
that if only we understood Genesis we’d all be saved, so-called Christians among us
too – he was an ardent Creation Evangelist.

Have a close look: tiny writing and cross references against different verses – chapter
and verse, verse after verse after verse, underlinings of pointers and phrases,
transcribing of key words as a way of reiterating the point, notes to self and summary
notations – all in different coloured inks depending on the pen he was using and in
different scripts too, depending on the day he was writing and the sort of mood of
mind he was in. There was so much black and blue ink the white space has very
nearly disappeared – in strangely parallel progress to that of his Alzheimer’s brain.
You hear him thinking out loud, word by word:

− Firmament from *vulgate* (Latin) expanse, not solid, a thin layer
− Evil flourishes when the godly compromise
− morning, therefore must be 24hrs
− The Flood is the proof that God is a will to be ACTIVE in the world. He will not allow it forever to go on its evil way
− If flood only local, why did not God tell Noah to migrate.

He abbreviated words for shorthand. He asked himself questions such as who was Cain’s wife? Is ‘Fetus’ life or property? He capitalised words for emphasis such as the MERCY SEAT, START OF GOVERNMENT, and COVENANT. He crossed things out that he’d written in his own notes: Sodom started the war [crossed out] battle. And crossed out words printed in the bible to substitute with his own: ‘Cursed be [crossed out] is Canaan.’

The annotations are so personal, I feel my father breathing behind me, breathing close, over my shoulder. I can smell him there. Notes and glossaries in drawings all over my skin. I can almost hear his heart beating – skopein stethos – he’s that close.

− Its stars, dust, sand in number. I am one of those stars, grains of sand (not dust). More of dust. To dust return. One day shine like the stars.

I feel his hand and fingers running over the well thumbed, yellowing pages as I smooth them down, soft and pliable, straining to read his oh-so-very-small handwriting and illegible lettering.

− The Tree of Life now only to be approached in God’s way, God’s time. Not just to the sensual pleasures of the Garden.

Sometimes I don’t really know what he means, I can only guess.

− The angels will suspect creation = not chaotic but lovely.

My father was a father. He loved good cheese, soft cheese, blue cheese: the smellier the bluer the better. And strawberries: my father loved strawberries, sugar and strawberries, strawberries dipped in sugar and cake and cakes and grapes and grapes covered in sugar.

For this drawing exercise, ‘Took to the sky’, I am adapting Anthony Dubovsky’s essay ‘The euphoria of the everyday’ for my purposes (2008). I am doing this both spatially and methodologically: his daily practice of drawing like a journal, his looking and his seeing, his noting with marginal inscriptions. ‘Yes, we can tell stories with drawings: they have elements of grammar and syntax … A drawing invented in its own making’ (Dubovsky 2008: 72, 74). I am parsing my father through these annotations, drinking my own ink, eating my own lead pencil.

Draw what you see.

‘Just because you have looked at something,’ Jennifer Roberts says on the power of patience, ‘doesn’t mean that you have seen it’ (2013).
Don’t draw what you *think* you see, I tell myself; don’t draw what you think you *should* see. Don’t draw what you *think* you are *thinking* you see, also. And certainly don’t draw what you think a drawing should look like. This is not wish-drawing.

Draw nonfiction Francesca. Draw positive and negative space. Draw truth – whatever she looks like, whatever your perception of it is. Draw what is there – draw an *is-drawing*.

So I draw my father as memory; I draw poetry: ‘Hold on, hold on, it’s been good to know you’ (Berger 2011: 157).

*Draw: and you shall remember.*

As Sylvia Plath says of drawing: ‘It is as if, by concentrating on the “inscape”, as Hopkins says, of leaf and plant and animal, I can know the world a new and special way; and make up my own version of it’ (2013).

Dubovsky insists drawing must be a daily practice, like writing too. Persistence. Ritual. And return. Perhaps too a kind of testing of fate – can you do it again, *and again*? Not to exist until it is drawn. Drawing: *dragen*. Drawing as something given: drawing because, as the American abstract expressionist Philip Guston once said, you never know when the angel will visit. Engage with her, with the angel – the word originally meaning ‘to pawn or pledge something’ and later ‘enter into combat’ – and she will deliver, she will give.

*Your angel will angel* a gift.

Strangely, thinking etymologically, the noun or mass noun of *gift* (mass noun meaning that which cannot be counted) is *medicine* as it happens, the Old High German *gift* the same as ‘poison’ (Harper 2014).

I draw him writing:

*It’s very complicated*
*t his and that*
*tracings and rubbings out and erasures and additions*
*the skin of this paper this pdf making shapes making shapes of hearing hearings*
he was the guardian

that

and this

I see my father in his white shirtfront coat, with his stethoscope around his neck. I watch him lean down to the sick children in his hospital. I feel him touching their arms to reassure as if he is touching mine.

Dubovsky writes: ‘Our “being” in the world is also a source of knowing’ (2008: 75). All that we are and all that we make can only be a meeting place of moments. As Confucius observes, our understanding of the world – in this case ‘the world’ of my father and my memories of my father – can only be presented in fragments. Still: ‘They are spatial arrangements. They have a geometry’ (Berger 2011: 149). Geometry measured by breath going in, breath going out and the pop pop pop of his fingers pulsing the diaphragm and bell.
1. Going to work
2. Reading TIME magazine
Rendle-Short  Took to the sky
3. Typing on his knees
Took to the sky

Once read, things become
Wishing to make
My dear friend

Said it was
So simple

Wave

draws

1st word

nothing

The moment

stages

...
Endnotes

1. All images and drawings by the author

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Research statement

Research background

This creative work contributes to a body of writing and research in nonfiction studies on the ‘vexed subject’ of writing the father (Clark 2008). If we think of nonfiction as inhabiting the realm of doubt and uncertainty – a process of turning ourselves inside out (Carlin and Rendle-Short 2013) to amplify emotional intimacies – ‘Took to the sky’ recalibrates imaginative possibilities to percolate the notion of ‘father’ to make a nonfiction work that traverses drawing and writing. It posits the idea that when we draw what we see, we re-read what we remember; we compose memory-as-poetry, drawing in words and marks as nonfiction.

Research contribution

The conceit for this meditative work brings together the delicate subject matter of familial relationships and memory. It is speculative, ‘suggestive and beckoning in its specificity’ (Clark 2008: 7); it renders the subject of father as nonfiction in oblique, fresh, nuanced ways. It gestures to the reader to consider their own father-as-fragment; also how they might ‘draw’ their father on the page into some sort of existence.

Research significance

‘Took to the sky’ tests the porosity of writing and drawing disciplines, the relationship of memory to nonfiction, and ignites creative synergies between different practices. It builds on a series of thematic creative works contributing to the author’s research as a creative academic under ERA: ‘A field guide to writing a father’ (Overland 2009), ‘My father’s body’ (The Best Australian Science Writing 2013). This current work was critiqued and developed during a research project in Penang, Malaysia, funded by Copyright Agency: WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange).

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Collaborative scholarly creative writing: two poems

‘Thoughts flow from mind to hands’ and ‘Coconut damper: a working recipe’

Biographical notes:

Margaret Anderson is a Home Economics teacher in Cairns and a research higher degree student at Central Queensland University.

Denise Beckton is a writer and a tutor and a research higher degree student at Central Queensland University.

Chelsea Bond is a Senior Lecturer with the University of Queensland although is commencing soon at the Queensland University of Technology.

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, where she Chairs the Creative and Performing Arts research group.

Doseena Fergie is a Lecturer at the Australian Catholic University.

Gail Forrer is editor of *The Noosa News* and research higher degree student at Central Queensland University.

Bronwyn Fredericks is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement, Central Queensland University.

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Patrice Harald is a research higher degree student at the Queensland University of Technology.

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Machellee Kosick is a Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery at the Australian Catholic University.

Marlene Longbottom, is a Lecturer and research higher degree student at the University of Newcastle.

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Nayadin Persaud is a research higher degree student at Central Queensland University.
Robyn Sandri is an author, consultant and casual academic at Central Queensland University.
Lynne Stuart is a research higher degree student and Lecturer in Nursing at the University of the Sunshine Coast.
Ulrike Sturm is a visual artist, and an academic and a research higher degree student at Central Queensland University.
Raelene Ward is a Lecturer and research higher degree student at the University of Southern Queensland
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Keywords:
Creative writing – scholarly writing – collaboration – collaborative practice – poetry
Doseena Fergie, Bronwyn Fredericks, Leanne King, Chelsea Bond, Marlene Longbottom, Raelene Ward, Judy Gould, Robyn Sandri, Machellee Kosick, Patrice Harald

Thoughts flow from mind to hands

Hands – gnarled, yet robust
Does the pen write words of wisdom created from the past?
Do the pages illustrate images of sadness – life – or love?

Eager to get down all that I can in one sitting

Pen to paper
paper to pen
Ideas spill out from a jumble to order
line by line in succession.

Is it an article?
Is it a facticle?
No, it’s research.

The power of text, the power of words, the power.
The author is expert, the author invisible, the author.
The knowledge created, the knowledge affirmed, the knowledge.

The slave dismantles the master’s house with the master’s tools.
From former studied object, to the writer and teller of our own stories.
Power exists as we move through the academy
not claiming the space,
rather our rightful position.
Creating the (writing) space, the flow of ideas, a quiet and reflective space relaxing, meaningful, focussed; a life well lived, imprinted in good times and bad, for eternity.

Blank page, pen poised, Intuition, Spirit, Ancestors’ knowings dictate. Hands are tools shaping hieroglyphics.

Words? Sometimes not enough, How can you express what and why? Does it magically appear?

I contemplate not what to do, but thoughts grow of things to do. I imagine and on paper I do. And now write my thoughts from mind and can do.

Lynne Stuart, Nayadin Persaud, Anita K Milroy, Cathie Joanna Withyman, Donna Lee Brien, Gail Forrer, Denise Beckton, Ulrike Sturm, Nereda White, Margaret Anderson

Coconut damper: a working recipe

The power of the pen, etching, scratching, styling, communication laced with meaning to pass on to generations to come. Guided by the hand and the mind of the thought-obsessed vessel. Out of the mind, through the hand, down the pen and forming words for time indefinite.

Food for Freedom
Fool for Chains
Fool for Language

In my mind’s eye, thoughts move and shift in technicolour. These I try to channel, to capture and record with paper and pen. Metamorphed (black and white), clear, stripped bare, exposed.

I hold it in my mind
I hold it in my heart
It is the story to be told, with words I can share.

I think I see a palm tree
I think I see an elephant
Coming out of the paper to me.

It is August now, the uncertain season between warmth and cold, living and dying. But as the elephant kneels down, two legs at a time, then one huge grey body on the earth, the certainty of her death,
position,
past lives,
is pure and absolute.

The railway tracks that line my hands with age,
Defy the pathways that connect them to, my brain,
The proof is on the page.

Finally the house is quiet and everyone is asleep. Even the dog.
Finally I have the space to begin my own work.
The clock strikes midnight.

I am safe and cocooned in my quiet space.
My mind is still and my breath is soft in contemplation.
By the sea, I see me calm, rested and content.

**Coconut Damper**

To successfully cook Coconut Damper in banana leaves in a convection oven, you will need:

**Ingredients**
- 4 cups SR Flour (sifted)
- 1 cup desiccated coconut
- ½ cup coconut milk
- ½ cup milk
- 2 eggs beaten
- 6 tbsp butter (melted)

**Utensils**
- Large bowl
- Wooden spoon
- Measuring cups / spoons / jug
- Baking dish
- Sifter
- leaves

**Method**
- Turn oven onto 180°C.
- Place banana leaves in oven and cook for 10 mins on each side and put aside.
- Sift flour into bowl and add coconut.
- Mix dry ingredients together.
- In a measuring jug, mix both milks with eggs and melted butter.
- Add wet ingredients to dry and mix thoroughly.
- Knead dough for 10 mins.
- Place in banana leaves.
- Place in a baking tray and bake for 40–50 mins.
- Cool, slice and serve with syrup.
Research statement

Research background
In August 2013, an intensive research-writing workshop, embedding Indigenous perspectives and approaches (Loban 2011), responded to imperatives to develop creative works as research outputs. Inspired by a visual artwork, two poems were collaboratively developed and performed at the workshop by the participants.

Research contribution
This activity, and these outputs, explored how visual works can inspire creative text, and how the melding of individual voices offers a dynamism that may not be achieved as a solo writer. Sharing this research technique to facilitate both individual and collaborative research writing resists the competitive nature of research evaluation/ranking (Brien 2007).

Research significance
These works were created for publication and performance by ten Aboriginal, two Torres Strait Islander and eight non-Indigenous women. This type of collaboration stands in contrast to Indigenous auto/biographical writing (Grossman 2001), and engaged Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors in a collaborative research process which has resulted in publication. This presented both challenges and opportunities to develop processes in learning, teaching and research as a collective of creative scholars (Williamson & Dalal 2007).

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University of the Sunshine Coast

Ross Watkins

Bodies in boxes: a fictocritical search for the writing process

Biographical note:
Dr Ross Watkins is an author, illustrator, editor and academic. His first major publication is the illustrated book *The Boy Who Grew Into a Tree* (Penguin 2012). He was shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Emerging Author, and his short fiction and non-fiction works have been published in Australian and international anthologies. Ross is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

Keywords:
Creative writing – fictocriticism – melancholy objects – body
There is a man at my desk with an obsession for broken things—objects, memories, bodies. He searches for such things in what he reads so that he might write about them. He is a writer and a teacher and an editor and a father; although sometimes he thinks he is none of those things. Sometimes he thinks that he is a broken thing.

He reads the opening pages of L.P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*. He highlights and underlines anything he finds catalytic.

> The **past** is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

Someone, probably my **mother**

> one or two **ambiguous objects**, pieces of **things**, of which the use was not at once apparent: I could not even tell what they had **belonged** to.

> a **recolletion** of what each had meant to me came back,

Something came and went between us: the **intimate pleasure** of **recognition**

> it **challenged** my memory
loosening in my mind

disappointment and defeat.

everything
would be different.

contemplating the accumulation of the past and the duty it imposed on me to sort it out.

The past made present via objects; memory jogged. He knows his next story is located somewhere here—not in the white of the page but in the imaginative spaces the words create. He thinks of it as leverage. L.P. Hartley is giving him a leg-up.

So is David Malouf. When he reads back over Hartley he cannot help but hear a resonance in Malouf’s 12 Edmondstone Street, in which Malouf writes of two brass jardinières from his childhood house—each either side of the piano and exactly the same in form, but the left jardiniere utterly transfigured by the bits and pieces inside, a collection of ‘the half lost, the half-found’. Malouf’s writing is a remembrance of melancholy objects, things of the past which tell stories of loss, with the body itself becoming a memorialised thing in the act of recollection. His
These stories are of the past and each past arrives in a box. I am at my desk. There are three boxes on my desk. The boxes are large and each one exactly the same.

He begins wondering about the coroner—who he is, how he thinks; the conflict he must confront; the violence intrinsic to his occupation; past violence, future violence; the paperwork he must read to arrive at his findings and then write to communicate those findings as his duty to sort it out. It cannot be a relief to know the exact scientific end of life. Surely not. Surely the coroner must also sit at his desk, and imagine...

The writer searches online for coronial reports to further understand his character. For that is what the coroner has become—a character. He reads a report about the death of a police officer and although he isn’t interested in writing about the police officer the flat voice of the narrator has him fixed. There is no stopping the process now.

He writes

These stories are of the past and each past arrives in a box. I am at my desk. There are three boxes on my desk. The boxes are large and each one exactly the same.

former self is beyond reach. Malouf cannot be the Malouf of the past because that would entail breaking his own body;

a dismantling of the body’s experience that would be a kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (Malouf 1985: 64)

At his desk, the writer is now making rhizomatic connections.

He recently read a student work featuring a mock coronial autopsy report and he remarked at the way a body could be described only according to its measurements—lungs: 930 grams combined; liver: 1650 grams; spleen: 130 grams. This appeals to him and he knows it is something he could write about. If only he could find a story to attach it to.

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He writes

These stories are of the past and each past arrives in a box. I am at my desk. There are three boxes on my desk. The boxes are large and each one exactly the same.
I write because

He often asks first year students to complete this sentence and once upon a time he felt compelled to find an answer for himself but now he is beyond it. Not because the question is irrelevant to him but because there are simply too many viable responses—personal, logical, institutional. Publish or perish, they say. If it is the brain which perishes along with the career then, yes.

When he was seventeen he felt his creativity like a blood clot in the heart which would burst an artery unless written out. Writing as an anticoagulant agent—it made sense to him. Now he is almost thirty-four and when he becomes depressed or irritable in the least he knows it’s because he is doing too much teaching and all that talking writing, reading writing and marking writing proportion. They have been packaged by the same person. Although the boxes are large they are not large enough to hold, say, a human body. Unless the body is broken into fist-sized portions and packed into the box with calculation. Fortunately I have not had to deal with such a case as yet.

And yet all my bodies are broken. All my bodies have not survived conflict. All my bodies and their conflicts are contained within my boxes in the form of filed paper and printed words and it is my job to read these collections and make sense of what happened and out of this sense I am charged with Authority to make recommendations to the Law regarding the body and how it came to be broken. This is my function under the Act of 1980. But I do this because I am a story-teller and it is all I know to do.
means that he is not writing and because of that a part of him breaks.

I write because

It doesn’t matter how he completes this sentence—all that matters is that he does write.

He writes more. He invites the sea into his story because it can be described as a body of water and so it continues his theme. He writes that the sea can sometimes be a place of violence as well as smiles and in this way the deaths the coroner is currently investigating begin to take on plot. His story is taking shape.

He reads back over everything he has written today and stands and walks away because he has to get some space from it to see more clearly what has been constructed. He believes he is writing a story about a coroner who is meeting his own violent past and maybe his own violent future by sorting through the three boxes on his desk. Inside the boxes are files of paper which tell how his wife and child were killed at the hands of the sea. The boxes are not coffins but the suggestion is enough.

The brain dies following approximately six minutes of oxygen deprivation.

He writes

Each day I go home from work I see myself in the small rectangular glass pane of the front door. I see myself as a husband or wife might sometimes see their spouse, and I ask: ‘Is this job affecting you?’ When I ask myself this question I give it much thought: over the lip of a drinking glass, in the face of the microwave, at the foot of the bed. Yes yes, I know. I see the body in everything. ‘This is because of your work,’ I say. ‘The boxes are piled too high. You cannot see over them.’
There is doubt about the contents of the third box but the coroner is an ordered man who follows the protocol of opening one box at a time, left to right. Like reading.

The writer seriously considers using text boxes to segment parts of the story as an attempt to draw attention to the idea that a page can also be a box used to contain words and stories like a coffin; a paradoxical coffin for creativity which lives on on the page. But he decides against this. He’ll use it for another story, perhaps to signify the fragmented instability of the writing process.

Sometimes in the interlude between writing spells he becomes distracted; he doubts, he dreams. He dreams and writes the beginning of a new story. It’s about a pregnant woman who becomes obsessed with vivid dreaming and uses nicotine patches despite the risks to her pregnancy because she heard about their hallucinogenic effects on dreams. For several weeks she tried magic mushrooms but she became too intimidated by the Earth Mother dealer who carried both an earnest smile and an overly healthy child in a convenient for breast-feeding organic cotton wrap.

**Dream #1:** She is in a car with a man who is driving but the man has no face—he has an ear and a corner of jaw line and the beginning of a high cheek bone profile but beyond this skin dissolves into sweet white light. She is in the passenger seat but for a few seconds she sees the car from above as it drives the highway at a good speed. Very cinematic. Such bullshit, really. Like when the camera angle returns to the internal shot and she’s puffing and riding the seat in reverse while giving birth to a baby that’s not-so-bloody and not-so-swollen from the pressure of her pelvic floor and vaginal wall. This is a *near*-newborn—far too logistically problematic to get a newborn on screen. Makes sense, but it still annoys the hell out of her, especially now that Reason has entered her dream. And when she recollects this well after the fact it becomes clear why she prefers Dream #2.

He never writes Dream #2.

He returns to the coroner. And this is where the story really starts to gain some momentum; where the story develops an
I take out the first file and place it on the desk and I open the file and this is how I am introduced to the body in the box. The body in this box is:

Her…

She is not young but also not at all old and although the file details her date of birth I always thought of her as younger than she looked.

She.

‘I am falling,’ she said and it was into me that she implied.

Her dress was yellow. Summer. Cut across her chest to exhibit her clavicle. No necklace. No need for adornment. Just adoration. For her and the way she spoke Latin as though it was the customary tongue. She told me later how she had practised Latin just for me, as a way to impress because she knew I was a story-teller but she did not know at that time what kind of story-teller and the sad and violent stories that a coroner must tell.

She fell into me on green lawn and all I saw was yellow and a sea-blue sky and the see-through blue of her eyes and she asked me if I would one day tell her story and I told her that I hoped not.

emotional centre. It is the writer’s first considerable attempt at empathy within this story.

She is not the writer’s wife but she could be. He remembers the first time he read Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*—so prevailing was his sense of awe for her melancholy poetic and aesthetic that it still lingers. Winterson’s words infuse his. Particularly the narrator’s ‘love-poem’ to Louise, apparently
dying of cancer, in which Louise’s body is anatomically split in the narrator’s recollection of her. But although her body is broken, it is also made whole again via the narrator’s memory. He finds beauty in this and so he thinks that if someone believes his story is simply sad then perhaps they have not yet recognised that there is homage here. That in the death of the body object there is a tender splendour.

The writer finds this suitable for the coroner, whose job it is to open the box of his wife’s metaphysical body and tell her story. Even though he always hoped not to.

The boy follows. The last thing a father wants is to be the one who tells the story of his young son’s death. Empathy twofold. And even before the writer writes about the boy he is already affected by the impending past tragedy. The writer has always been obsessed with father narratives but ever since he became a father he portrays the father-son relationship with less angst, more joy and sorrow. He hopes to imbue his stories with the love and wonder his sons have brought into his life so to write of the boy’s death renders a physical impact on the writer’s body—his heart crumples as though betrayed by what the brain can entertain.
But a writer must write.

I lift the lid and the body in this box is:

Him.

He is too young to be in a box of this kind. The boxes he liked were also of cardboard but were boxes in which I had cut holes for his arms and a hole for his head to stick out of and laugh that silly laugh which must be rapture made flesh and audio. Laughter that originates in the chest and rumbles through the ribs like bubbling water and out into the space between him and me and her in his bedroom with his new bed because he is ‘A big boy now,’ he says and we agree and laugh more because he has grown so quickly and looks older than he is according to his date of birth, which is written here at the top of the file on my desk right now but I know it already anyway. A file which contains many many words but none which spell ‘laughter’ or even invoke it other than as a sad and violent nostalgia.

Bereft, the writer begins to question why he’s telling this story at all and fantasises about incorporating it into some kind of fictocritical search for the writing process instead. But he looks at the third box on his desk and he knows that whatever it contains will provide him with a reason to go on. He writes that the climax is the moment when each character meets their conflict and looks their conflict in the eye and finds… he writes defeat but in writing this the writer triumphs—he now knows how the story will end.
The writer sleeps and while he sleeps the coroner dreams and
the writer

writes

I dream that I am at my desk.
There is one box on my desk.
It is unopened. I try opening it
but the lid is stubborn. I stand
on the desk and pull back my
sleeves and I bend at the knees
and then I pull on the lid and
my arms strain and then I fall
from the desk and I am on the
floor and I have hit my head
but in my hands is the lid. I
get up. I go to the desk. I put
the lid on the desk and rub my
head and look into the box and
in the box I see myself, in
pieces, organised into parts
according to function, my
liver my left hand my heart
neatly labelled and my face on
top eyes wide staring back at
me and then I raise an
eyebrow in a cunning way and
I ask myself: ‘Do you
understand?’

When the writer wakes he realises that he has in fact written
himself into a box. A kind of story-based suicide. Yet he is
simultaneously outside of this box, looking in on himself; a third
person point of view. Do I understand? There is a loosening in
my mind, an intimate pleasure of recognition. I decide to sort it
out…

There is a man at my desk
with an obsession for broken
things—objects, memories,
bodies. He searches for such
things in what he reads so that
he might write about them. He
is a writer and a teacher and
an editor and a father;
although sometimes he thinks
he is none of those things.
Sometimes he thinks that he is
a broken thing.
Research Statement

Research background

Anna Gibbs establishes fictocriticism as ‘writing as research, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain process in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow after the event’ (2005: np). Gibbs further discusses the ‘subtle activities of the body’ and their affect on the writing process, a concept which neatly adjoins fictional explorations of the body, writing and memory in Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* and Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.

Research contribution

*Bodies in Boxes* plait fictional, critical and autobiographical discourses in a fictocritical search of the process involved in writing ‘Coronial Inquest’ (*Meniscus* 2013). The work accounts for the fictional texts researched in the creation of the short story and enmeshes this research with a third person narrative exploration of the writer’s intentions, apprehensions and other (tangential) embedded narratives. Cannibalising my own work, *Bodies in Boxes* enacts an ‘encounter between the writer’s emergent, embodied subjectivity and what is written about’ (Gibbs 2005).

Research significance

*Bodies in Boxes* exemplifies Gibbs’ ideas while responding to post-structural explorations of assumed, sought and mythologised connections between the implied author (bodily/textually), narrator and character. In doing so the work teases out extant harmonies and tensions between scholarship and authorship in a creative writing context, as well as mapping themes of loss, melancholy objects and metaphorical representations of the body.

Works cited


Malouf, David 1989 *12 Edmondstone Street* Penguin, Victoria

Winterson, Jeanette 1992 *Written on the Body* QPD, Kent
University of Wollongong

Alan Wearne

‘Waitin’ for the Viet Cong’ and ‘Mixed business’

Biographical note:
Having been part of the Australian Poetry scene for nearly five decades I have courted mainly the tragic, comic and narrative muses to produce a number of verse novels and other collections, concentrating on (though not exclusively) lives in Post War inner, middle and outer suburbia. I am also, more recently the publisher of Grand Parade Poets with nine volumes in the past four years.

Keywords:
Creative writing – poetry - Post war urban Australia
Waitin’ for the Viet Cong

The speaker is a recently retired femocrat

…in this way my mother, my late mother told it:
how their elder daughter, scholarship holder/doctoral candidate,
had disappeared and how that winter in Paris,
as chill turned flu turned pleurisy turned pneumonia
no-one, not even her parents let alone those friends
The Collective, knew her whereabouts:
that had all stopped where and when a sad girl left
without forwarding address.

But as if my father decreed

_She’s our rebel and nobody else’s_

I was to be saved in a way most never could be saved,
by an establishment finding its own
and bringing her home.

‘Just a few days short of death,
that’s right of death…I’ my mother told it,
‘but we set to work we did, how everybody did
to find and save her.’

She mightn’t have composed
this saga of a family’s miracle, she sure was its conductor;
and if I still defer to certain of its merits
here’s the exception: this tale she told
(eyes wide alight in their bewildered pride)
was hers, and hardly mine: the girl,
so well past crying now, who having some breakdown
was back home with her parents

If only she’d never _meant_ it!
Did that woman really announce (and yes she did)
‘I’d like you all to meet our elder daughter, the brilliant Marxist-Leninist…’?
What kind of La Mama farce _was_ this?
For there would be my mama, this fifty year old high school librarian
trundling out to friends her Great Story: when what I wanted
was to regale her with mine: be-dumped or dump.

There is that moment when,
no matter her age a child needs to announce
_Yes, yours was my upbringing, nobody else did it,
but you will never understand now, will you?_

And _Understand? We do we do_ came their stammering chorus
of concern: parents, educators, clerics, whoever was the vogue
But _but what of your future?_
When I still lived with my folks I might bring
The Collective home: my people, people ablaze
with all that kind of courage History supplies:
every argument good as won. ‘Good afternoon Professor,
we are the people who’ll be taking over.’
Isn’t there a perverse fun
meeting those you’d love to see purged?
For on occasions Dad might take my sister and myself
to the Staff Club, as if to teach
This is no ‘other half’, this is ‘our half’,
see how we live?

Then, as they glanced my way
how I enjoyed proposing the Staff Club’s condescensions:
What are we going to do with them:
our angry children and their amazing brains?
No all of us. Someone from a milder faction
kept courting my sister; when she turned twenty
he told his mother they would live together.
She shrieked then ordered them married.
Now there was a pair so willing to facilitate ‘dialogue’,
any ‘dialogue’ with any one,
a couple whose future was that much in the present
it seemed near enough the past; whilst mine
just hoped the greater stories might commence:
all those things we’d live to see happen, happening:
getting rid of Imperialism for starters,
after which anything bourgeois.
I was so adept at bourgeois wasn’t I,
using the whole Collective-at-its-grandest-heights’
greatest label of abuse (even if that’s what we were, bourgeois).
Sometimes I fear these were the last occasions it was ever
employed; the saddest fact, for what other word remotely evoked
our world, that world we needed to replace?
But for all his loving pragmatism Lies?
I wish I could have known to tell my father the professor
I can accept living lies, but we’ve been living games!
With we being our family or The Collective or just
me and the girl I’d been loving near a decade now.
And she was Antoinette.

When my sister and I were still in high school
our Dad took his family on sabbatical.
And in the girl’s school adjacent to the Red Brick
(its chaffing pettinesses, those scandalous inevitables)
you might say I wanted to leave, immediately leave
except for where? What puritan like me would need
the vapid joys of Swinging London? Besides,
the Sister School, the French girls had arrived
and if I was distracted I was ah so anchored!

This was Antoinette and I:
some enchanted evening you may see this someone
you’ll wish to see again, again, again, then
fly to my side and guessing I’ll understand ask
Where exactly are you from and what exactly
do they do there?

From then who needed any bourgeoisie
when each was such an aristocrat for the other?
Ours always would remain an aristocrat’s revolt,
the skewed truth matched by the necessary swagger.

Thin like me without my bumps and angles
Antoinette was lithe, that gamin type made for barricades,
with her well-aimed assassin of a mind designed
so that Imperialism would be hacked and hacked
to what it always was: a big-noting fraud for
men with connections.

She’d come to stay,
I’d go to stay, at sixteen I’d the best indeed the only
kind of friend I needed; and on some nights
(it felt like I could never stop)
just speaking French! French!

‘Yes, yes the French girl…’

Mother never asked so much as alluded:
something you knew she knew just wasn’t jelling.
What though? Antoinette may not have been polite
she sure was diplomatic though.
This she seemed to deliver, is how we’ll deal
with them. Well at least my father
who’d see me to or at the boat train.

And I recall (could I ever not?)
how Antoinette took me some place where women,
women were looking at each other and it all seemed
a matter of love. Till then I’d hardly thought like that
(she knew I hadn’t) but something was making sense
and making even more sense whenever we kissed.

Whilst in a room stuffy from a low fire
and his perspiration, I met her sad-eyed, chain-smoking
Stalinist father who, ploughing his How To guides
told me what we already knew:
that all the world that mattered were disposing
with empires.

Three, four, five times in six months
she and I met, loved, separated and cried
(and I was not that kind of girl to cry).
Now sabbatical over, our family was returning
and with that other world awaited their turn at disposing,
the Viet Cong’s!

When mother uncovered I was ‘on the pill’
(a term dating both cause and its reaction)
our grand implosion arrived.

‘Couldn’t you,
couldn’t you…’ she sure had gagged on something,
‘just…just…protect yourself?’

With what?
Whilst these I still assume are what had hurt:
she never knew I’d been to see a doctor
and that shuddering idea some stupid boy
might find her potential University Medallist attractive,
or failing that easy. Meanwhile she,
the once so ever-worldly and aware,
turned into the silliest woman I would ever know
(except of course myself).

It helped she was a fool:
I needn’t worry about that need I,
since weren’t there mightier concerns? When Paris
seemed like it had been shot out of France into
and beyond the heavens, I knew the time was mine,
was ours.

Air-mailing Antoinette,
near frying myself with jealousy at their struggles,
how they were leading the world where the world
just had to be led, whilst here I was
attempting a collective life in back street suburbia:
girls like me, lean, spectacled correct-liners
or the jolly dumpies spread out in their jeans;
those impossibly deep-voiced boys
or the frizzle-haired ones forever quoting Dylan
in Dylan voices as if they’d truly written the stuff;
and runaways who’d finish running on or running back;
all of it banal, ludicrous, remarkable, so that you
would wake to another day of your revolt thinking
This is beautiful for this is History
and if there’s to be a vanguard, guess what it’s us,
for we are going to truly matter
and I am going to return to Antoinette.
Nothing I would ever do had been so planned, so mis-planned.

Candidacy and scholarship were certainties whilst French would never be a problem: wasn’t it all mine, not as a kind of loan but the zealous gift which steeled and committed I thought had chosen me, such being that on-cue bravado History and love both offer.

Shy, arrogant girls, hadn’t we kept each other’s photographs ‘Moi sur Les Barricades’, ‘Me and my Collective’? Maybe. But what hers had hardly shown was all the ground she’d filled, she’d travelled, which wasn’t I knew mere breasts and a boyfriend. Much worse she couldn’t, wouldn’t announce

Don’t you understand, it’s hardly that now.

Like any liberation I needed a future. Well here came my future folding into the present then onto the past, with Antoinette asking ‘Hadn’t you boys?’

I’d my answer to a different question: ‘Aren’t I on the pill?’ (That something to make one comfortable and annoy mums.)

Then catching this right-through-me look of hers I knew what she was viewing Oops! Here’s that Australiene again (some place like that) a pest from my past, and how right now in the compost of our caprice and paranoia, my Antoinette was truly blooming. Who did she think we had been? Just two young women sending aerograms and she was probably correct. Best be bland best say

She cut me and I caught a chill as I’d say now except all I could taste (all I wanted to taste) were vinegar tears; whilst all I believed was heading pleurisy and beyond.

So in some grubby bed I lay, devastated yet proud: At least I’m this bad! Could there be a better way to die? With little else to appreciate, why not revel in that?

Since they were after me, those who thought they understood; though nowadays I’d simply say her fellow bourgeoisie were tracking down a very sick Australian girl, of whom they’d later say was somehow saved by telegrams, cablegrams (they meant a lot in those days telegrams, cablegrams) and an embassy’s footwork.
Week after shaky week I’d little else but sweated, though now someone was saying my name and I caught that monotonal national voice diplomacy never could dispel. Whilst all those manner of people I wished exterminated: governments, Foreign Affairs, specialists, flight crew, anyone wanting the world purged of every Antoinette-and-I were helping to lift, mend, fly and propel me through Customs and out, still school girl ruthless. As if that mattered for, whatever my posture I was only posture now: graceful, graceless, remorseful, remorseless. O you dumb and greedy little monster!

‘You realise,’ my sister and her spouse confided, ‘it was their networks found you…’ itemising some of my most abhorred Staff Club names. But as with Antoinette the only ‘catch’ was irony; when Dad thanked them on my behalf all turned History, unalterable History.

The Collective was dissolving as what replaced it made their own mistakes re-making ours. I tutored then I stopped to start a new life: policy/consultancy/policy/consultancy. I loved somebody, I loved somebody else. I put aside telling Mum of ‘Antoinette the Sequel’ but then she died. Dad remarried so I told them, humanism all the way.

‘That was love.’
In the movie he’d have intoned these words deep in a mellow book-lined den. But being on the patio of their townhouse he had to laugh. ‘Love. It can’t have been much else. And you always were whatever you always were.’
‘Taa Dad.’ Then I laughed too.

We knew Struggle, we knew Truth,
Knew Huế and Hai Phong,
Served such causes in our youth,
Waitin’ for the Viet Cong.
Whilst Johnson, Nixon straffed the North,
Bellowed each July the Fourth:
“Longin’ for the Viet Cong to win girls,
Screamin’ for the Viet Cong!”
[They grew, the thick red arrows grew,  
   Each downward swelling prong  
(Courtesy of Fu Manchu)
Waitin’ for the Viet Cong:
With ev’ry Indo-Chinese peasant
Craving his slice of Karinya Crescent,
Slaughter us the Viet Cong sure will, boys…
   Better kill the Viet Cong!]

One Sunday circa ten to five
   Hearing our door bell’s gong:
From parents on some arvo drive
   (Waitin’ for the Viet Cong).
Did they clang forth ‘The East Is Red’
Those chimes which shot us out of bed?
At home with the Viet Cong, ‘Hi Oldies!’
   ‘It’s a pleasure, Viet Cong.’

Some played Dylan, some played Ochs,
   And others Cheech and Chong.
Whilst some just played at (said their folks)
   Waitin’ for the Viet Cong.
With visions packed within each spliff
Like scenes from ‘Blow Up’, ‘MASH’ and ‘If…’
Somethin’ for the Viet Cong? Oh save us,
   Nothin’ like the Viet Cong!

My sister married blissed on grass,
   She wore a sarong.
(I near-to-almost missed that farce
   Waitin’ for the Viet Cong.)
Later, back at their bourgeois ranch
Where her spouse ran a Labor Party branch,
   ‘Why wait for the Viet Cong?’ I’d taunt. ‘I’m
Wedded to the Viet Cong!’

Innocent women innocent men
   Little we did seems wrong.
A stroll to the shops then home again
   (Waitin’ for the Viet Cong).
Went abroad copped much the same.
   ‘Now what,’ she asked me ‘is your name?’
Sobbin’ for the Viet Cong (boo hoo hoo)
   Howlin’ for the Viet Cong!
Mixed business

Reliable as anyone I’ve known,
Bob Arnold is the kind of man for whom life works
because (please excuse my sentimental aphorisms)
he loves life’s work; he’s lucky too, since he makes
his luck: wife, two girls, an extended back/
extended up weatherboard, the briskest walk
from Dennis station, a mum and dad further up
the Hurstbridge line.

He’s never said so
but unlike me he’s never let his parents down.
Can’t you hear mine? Why turn out yet another teacher
for the state and why then did you quit?
Why’d you marry whom you did then let
your marriage rot? Or why in my own phrase
That lack of any focus?

Not that I would mention it,
but when you respect their aptitude, their nous
and clearly their results, when a man does plenty
and it’s all success, a friend like Bob will focus
for you: which dictum Bob need never know
also applied to Beetle.

Let’s say someone walks by/
walks into any spot that’s yours along the strip
at three or four or five pm and Yes you get it
today I’ll score! Let’s further say that this is how
that world of Beetle starts, as one windy, warm
late August afternoon I was at his place and
this girl was there: just past attractive,
just starting to age (as his or anybody’s taster-lady
should be). Sure, with a few days left of
hanging back I still felt detached, with though
that growing ‘edge’, my ‘edge’ which told me
Want what’s offered, take what’s offered.
Your deal mightn’t enter many listings but
your dealer will. If this girl dies (and she
may die) your man won’t even care:
for this is Beetle and isn’t he your man?

I had, I have my still and centred love
of self-respect (rules as still may save me)
where though lay any self-respect in that?
Where it was to be regained of course, that swiftest,
simplest way, the Beetle way.

Those days it seemed
like every second staff room (that’s where I’d been
a year before) let alone every spot along the strip
had one of us at least: happy-go-usey, slightly sad,
making and remaking us ever so slightly sadder,
My wife had never cared for me and sadder,
and so she quit. I’ll always hate her.
She and the boy friend though, I bought them out,
aiming to live alone, which dispensing with the lot
our lot (furnishings, white goods) I did,
Enjoying all that propped my pride in minimal living.
Next-to-last off the carpets came, paring me to floorboards
(with a front room facing Lygon Street opposite the cemetery)
and my invalid pension. So I shrugged,
put my place on the market and finished each few days
with silent wails to some distant god
hating it, hating her for that little twerp I was,
so that I would catch, I had to catch the bus
to Clifton Hill and then wait for the Beetle tram.
Until that summer’s day I saw the man who sent me there:
Big Mike on the strip announcing ‘Beetle’s? Don’t exist.’
And I’d be best advised it never had.
Except it had.
And I thought of us: retailers, clientele, those stickybeaks-for-now,
as kids jostling in line with Skunk, Keno, Des ’n’ St-st-stu
at Mother Beetle’s tuckshop, big-noting sure,
though most days more big-noter wacky than big-noter paranoid:
like Skunk announcing ‘Wanna join the army so I can give
the officers head!’
‘Well,’ Big Mike sneers, ‘somewhat possible
isn’t it? If he can get away from Beetle. How can he but?’
Not with the quiz-master himself
(our one with all questions, answers, prizes) reminding both how
hadn’t he been Cap’n Midnight’s two-i-c? and how
‘…for a year whilst we were flogging his little bags o’ joy,
the ol’ Midnight, wasn’t he the Pope!’
Well, Beetle taunted, weren’t our wishes always jelling, jelling,
to be part of such pedigree? Some Reservoir back street?
Never for our Cap’n! Which made me wonder
why indeed for our Beetle? Not that I need ask,
since this is what Beetle ultimately does:
forces you to imagine. I know I must.

This sure is useless bastard weather…and near midnight,
stone-bored with these past two days of northerlies
Des ’n’ Stu watch wogs on Elwood Beach wrap up their soccer.
And even if tomorrow’s Sunday, Sunday can be work for some
like Des ’n’ Stu: sitting it out, staring at videos, listening yet again
to Beetle and agreeing with him how Dæmon’s been a very stupid boy. Tonight but, they’ve credit enough with which to hit the Crystal Palace, to choose and pay (which gets as innocent as they shall ever be).

In some place which though boarded-up may have passed for a milk bar, through all the rich, twenty minute glug of video trailer voice-overs, he’s been phoning this useless bastard summer Sunday. Welcome to Beetle’s, for when he’s finished his calls and orders ‘Kill it!’ his boys understand their choice. Beetle or the feature? What choice? Not when he’s chosen how this afternoon they’re getting Daemon round just so these very stupid, very stoned and very minor dealers (Beetle, Big Mike, Skunk, Keno, Des ʾn’ Stu) propped by Beetle-rules can kill him, correct kill him, Daemon a thirteen year old user-dobber-thief. Well that’s the Beetle option and if his boys are out, right out of it enough, this will be done.

The kid’s brought in and all is prime for Beetle versus Daemon time, how:

‘It was you wasn’t it sent those fuckers round to bust us?’

‘Shit Beetle-mate, that wasn’t me!’

Which might be answered Who then but? except everyone’s got so distracted by some boy, some boy who’s hardly entered high school calling their mate Beetle...Beetle-mate? Go on try believing it!

‘Hey Beetle-mate,’ Stu asks in nervy spite, ‘c-c-can’t we start the feature now?’

Dumb beyond useless-bastard-useless, you never had the energy to fast-forward anything. You’ve been superseded by this grand stoned silence, Beetle as thinker, who pauses, once, twice and then orates.

‘He gets tied up,’ Beetle stands.

‘And gets put there…’

And where is there? There, there, there! Underneath underneath! Underneath where Beetle’s jumping!

‘Feed him dog meat, feed him dog shit, anyone of you know any better?’ Of course they don’t. ‘And let it be wayout right Des? Right Stu? And by right I mean so real-real wayout, beyond mere real wayout, this’ll be Return to Wayout City and St-st-stu that’s not some video. Correct Keno?’ Who always keeps on nodding ‘Correct, Skunk? The day has now commenced and we are made for it!’

Not quite Big Mike. Earlier that arvo, once he saw this Demon thing unfolding (as if he’d stay around for that?) he left. They were mental. And either on it or not today’s product sure was. Yep, on yer bike Big Mike he told himself, shuffling like he was in some folk dance
sideways to the door *On yer bike, we’re relocating.*

And he had to since with all of his dealer’s skills and effort, the product and the risks, obedience was the only other option.

‘I’ve taken such risks,’ Beetle would announce, ‘none will understand.’

Who then murders some prepubescent user so that him and his Beetle gang of pro dealers, amateur killers get caught, and for a few days’ worth of summer news they hog it.

(‘Off the record,’ a spokesman said, ‘the underworld is shamed.’)

And I knew them. But also knew myself: that if it had been necessary I might have been there that summer afternoon in Reservoir, it might’ve been me shuffling an exit with Big Mike, or else with Des ‘n’ Stu giggling whilst we tried to dump the corpse (sure hadn’t done that sort of thing before had they, the things ol’ Beetz got you to do!).

For even through that slow mania of the Beetle toll, people got to know each other, cooperate. (‘J-j-jeez Beetz,’ Stu who thought he was funny once gagged, ‘don’t give them ambos t-t-too much work.’)

Wherever he’s been sent there’s plenty imitations starting.)

And truly he unites folk does our Beetle, so that when guilt, actual proven guilt strides in presenting itself to sighs of joy, with the bench contributing each decent, hard-working Aussie’s two bob’s worth, oh Beetle just listen, even the very bludging, the outright indecent are falling one-over-the-other, just to ensure how banal you truly were. Or when it’s time for nostalgia to intervene watch them queue to ask ‘The Beetle merchandise?’ Then answer ‘If you had ways to look at anything and we mean anything (that philosophy, those manners, anything) all would end in hock to Beetle. (Or if you had any luck some better class of wholesaler.) I mean we had to survive. There was little like it.’

Me, I was fortunate. I could still promenade North Carlton beaming to and marvelling at the Morton Bay Figs. Beetle couldn’t own me that much, though he still required it known

*Your thoughts are my thoughts and my thoughts are your thoughts which are ‘You’ll be forever Beetz the best there is.’*

And it fits doesn’t it, how when I heard that him and his losers were set for judgement I knew that I’d be seeing him this final time.

And though I liked and trusted that idea, a witness seemed required: this friend to whom I could announce: ‘Now you get it, don’t you?’ I’m who he’s been dealing with.’

The trial occurred into school vacation time so I asked Bob, who as he had been painting rooms Ange permitted one day off, gatekeeper Ange, the wife who took me for *my husband’s pin-eyed user friend, him on his invalid pension.* Let her,
she wasn’t to know that for all the headaches, all the heartaches
(why bother mentioning withdrawals?) R v. Beetle was the primest
vengeance show in town, my year’s grandest attraction.

We caught the train to Flagstaff which got me questioning
Just how many users train it to their dealers?
Unfair asking Bob of course, his problem if he wasn’t in our
Beetle club, though come, come Mr Arnold haven’t you gone teaching
spaced on your very own drug of choice? Most probably not.
Who on any ‘drug’ could be each student’s matey-favourite
yard duty martinet as you are?

One lunch hour then,
Bob is motioning to me: ‘See him grinning there in his long black coat
and big thick boots? Today’s E.T I’ll stand any bet is stoned…’
After which we commenced those Friday evenings when my wife and I,
Bob and Ange fronted bistros, though even then the Arnolds
must’ve guessed the bit, that little bit I’d be using Saturday
to get me through a day a night, another day and night of married life.
(I’ve seen her with the boyfriend once: at the Vic Market where
we gave each other a tiny nod Go on darling guess who that was...
my useless user ex!) And at the next bistro or the next,
just to annoy the spouse Big Mike got referenced in passing.
And that Big Mike? Bob knew him from La Trobe. On Bob ’n’ Mike terms?
‘Near enough. A Maoist once…a teacher once…’ hoping to be a junkie once;
any fad taking him to an edge, though hardly so ‘edge’ you couldn’t Oops,
easy-does-it and adjust.

Anyone’s capable, just be nice if a touch desperate
and ask about in any suburb, any town (in any staffroom!)
‘Know where I can find myself a Beetle?’
Well now’s our final chance to find you a Beetle, Bob,
my chance to get my final taste of Beetle, him to cop
his final shot of me.

And as if I’d conjured, here came his look
that slightest pause part way between Well wadda ya know...
and Who is that prick, I think I know that prick, who is that prick?
Though when the judge, who doubtless knew less than one per cent of it
mentioned him by the name Ma and Pa Beetle gave their baby
Who? I briefly found myself asking Who?Oh yes yes yes
I used to buy from that deadshit once except that now
since anyone can deal he’s not being done for dealing and Beetz
I kept staring back, a prick enough to taunt him Beetz
not anyone can kill and weren’t you at very base camp case
all death?

‘So that was him?’

‘Was him once.’

‘Nice word once,’
said Bob.
Look Beetle, look Bob at what I was back then:
twenty nine, bound for divorce, a head-and-heartache prone
high school teacher who, one Thursday after work
approached a man I knew, that same Big Mike, who sent me out
to him, this charismatic squirt (squirtier than even me,
who’d hardly make Bob’s shoulders).

‘Yeah we’re Beetle.
What are we doing you for?’

I told him what. Who sent me then?
And as I answered, don’t say we ‘bonded’ though we did,
over Big Mike’s snigger producing, ever-ripening moustache,
there on a Reservoir back street where Beetle worked out of his shop front.

‘…so,’ I asked my dealer, ‘this was a milk bar once?’
‘Mixed business,’ he replied, ‘just like any day.’

And who was there that any day? Taster girl, another woman too,
one I later took for Daemon’s mother, found within a year
wailing in some park.

Though by now I had a little bag inside
my jacket pocket and having survived that afternoon
I knew that I’d survive this little bag, this anything.
And I have.

For look at what’s evolved:
an even more prone, divorced, ex high school teacher of thirty two
trying his embarrassed ‘Thanks for coming.’

‘My pleasure,’ Bob replies.

Except for headaches I think I’d like to think I’m clean.
Lying down though which is often, my mind remains on her: my wife,
whose secrets forced me into mine. And I could blame that woman plenty,
who though would listen to the blame?
Even Bob, a friend who’s always heard me out would walk away.
I’ve seen him, down the other end of a park, playing with his kids,
and as we waved I knew his feeling in return:
There he goes, someone from then I’d rather wasn’t now.

And never say you’ve never felt that way…
driving through this heritage town who’s that limping relocated man?
Big Mike, one Interferon day to the next. That girl must be dead;
but for each Des, Stu, Keno, Skunk who wants to make some
living-or-dead effort? Hardly me. And Daemon?
He was a kid on the news whose parents one, two, two and a half
decades back gave idiot name upon idiot name to their disposable offspring,
as if their Daemon would grow into his generation’s Beetle.

Who just degenerated. For I’ve heard this,
someone’s required to wheelchair him, King Beetle-mate with Aussie flag
round and around the Z Division yard, this someone being recompensed
with product.

So it continues, my tick-off list of
Them them and them, those those and those till it will have happened much too many years ago, and even these memories, our sour and blighted memories, surely must need to cease.
Research background

There is always room to explore the lives of Australians, from before the start of white settlement to the present day. With narratives from a retired femocrat examining her Maoist past and first big love affair, and a self-pitying junkie examining his relations with both his psychotic dealer and a ‘straight’ friend from his teaching days, I aim to explore areas of urban Australian life still relatively untouched in poetry.

Research contribution

First person poems in which the speaker is decidedly not the author are one of the staples of my verse as well as being one of the major strands in poetry since at least the Victorian era. Do dramatic monologues and verse narratives attempt to colonise areas usually held by playwrights and fiction writers? Most certainly. Do we succeed in this enterprise? The jury is definitely out. Check at the end of this century for a progress report.

Research significance

Since I know I will be evaluated by my willingness to tackle areas in poetry and modes of poetry that have been my territory since at least the mid 1970s, ‘evidence of excellence’ will have to wait. The big paradox, of course, is that although it will be posterity that delivers the final judgement, no poet (no writer) should ever write with posterity in mind. The only thing I can say with certainty, though, is that I have improved. The next big task is to write something that no one would expect me to write, and write it well. Now that would show significance!
University of Canberra

Jen Webb and Paul Hetherington

Convergence

Biographical notes:
Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the relationship between art and society; she is currently working, with Kevin Brophy, Michael Biggs and Paul Magee, on an ARC-funded project that investigates creativity through a case study of contemporary poetry. Jen publishes work on cultural theory and creative research; she also writes poetry, and produces artists’ books for exhibition.

Paul Hetherington is Associate Professor of Writing and head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) at the University of Canberra. He edited three volumes of the National Library of Australia’s four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend and, with Jen Webb, is founding co-editor of the international online journal Axon: Creative Explorations. He has published eight full-length poetry collections, most recently Six different windows (UWA Publishing), which won the 2014 Western Australian Premier’s Prize for Poetry.

Keywords:
Creative writing – convergence – collaboration – ribbons – light – seeing
1.
Furniture flattens in swathes of ribboned light, afternoon in disorderly elongation; a straddle and undulation obliterating shape, light carousing a drowned room.

It slides past ropes of conversation, through gaps where words have failed, dissolving arrangements of seating and knowing.

And this might be remembering because yesterday, and last year, light was also torn between such unpossessable things, briefly, ineluctably burnishing them.

You can see it from the moon, bigger than Singapore; snaking right down the west. Lake Moore – we call it ‘lake’ but its water turns to salt, its skin to sand.

Halfway down the borders bulge; lake as open palm facing the sun holding light.

It has forgotten its past, and small fish that swam in its shallows, eels lurking in the dark parts above its heart – how things change now only light remains.

2.
Marking every place with a signature finger-drumming staccato, even where it never falls.

The weather roils, clouds thicken and fade, winds come and go, careless.
Even there,
where it’s only
a susurrating
rumour,
still ‘rain’ is conjured
like a visiting linguist’s
implausible word.
And, after all,
once rain fell
in the unutterable desert –
when a market
sprawled beneath
sways
of blue canvas.

Vendors unseated
gathering, small pools
with up-thrust broomsticks,
and a humpback
gestured
at flushing spills
of dark tomatoes –
every place gouged,
and every language,
by water.

In places
it barely needs speaking,
so insistent it is,
like knifing
cold ribbons,
or collapsing belief
flooding
and eroding –
weather that drones
with no-clear-utterance
on tiles and tin,
over wattle
and daub.

After it passes
everything’s altered –
not because smeared
North or
south, it’s all the same.
It comes, it goes
more or less the same.
Between movements, I
wait for
one moment
that will make
waiting
worthwhile.
by mud
or conjecture
but because
joined
in damp abrasions
of an unshiny past.

3.
These words
are not worms,
or strings
of gut,
or scarves
of discussion,
but thought
falling
like blood-
dyed rain.

They insinuate
a love
that climbed
away from
its moment;
an explorer
who abandoned
secure supplies.

They were never
exclamations
but were names
that stretched
towards endings –
‘house’ and ‘attic’;
a cache
of rotting letters;
a scribbled
expostulation.

The small plane
scrolls along the sky
stretching out its line
breathing out
those words,
it’s writing my desire.

I meet you
on the bike path;
reach out to
say hello, feet
on the ground
eyes
on the sky:

‘read the signs’
it spells
‘and not’ – we
hold our breath,
as it turns, catches
its own breath –
‘the time’

the propeller
blades edit
the letters, the
wisdom blurs –
step off
the path, follow
lines of
your own desire.
4.
It is not an animal waking
with something torn in its paw –
this sense of bright-seeing alacrity –
but being and becoming ribboned by evening.

The blood-colour reminds that thought follows worn steps of avenued afternoon where a young woman holds herself carefully with crimsoned hand.

She turns into a street where houses lean like a family towards gossip. ‘I am’, she begins but the traffic absorbs her words. ‘I am’, she states as someone pushes a shuttered window, beckoning her in.

5.
Through square-seeming minutes awkward notions swoop and lift, leaving swathes of dissolving colour. Through afternoons of failing sunlight, sloping like ungainly birds,

It’s this thing we’d almost forgotten A splinter nudged up against the bone. It had been there so long. No matter – is anything what it seems? Birds outside, shouting for food, would turn us to dust if they could; the lizards recall when they were dinosaurs and we were mud. Don’t look down, don’t look back

Keep walking.

An old man outside at midnight taking the air and a cigarette before bed, he saw me threading my way through ribboned streets and called out ‘Look at the moon’.
they follow flat
horizons of light.

They are words
we never said
in time –
a loved one
waiting
as the burden
of a responsibility
closed
our hands.
We knew it
as we failed –
that sometimes
they weigh
implacably
in our throats.

Waning,
propping its pared edge
against the night

its thin beams
felt their way
toward us,
reaching
the town,
touching
the street.
Research statement

Research background

All writers ‘steal’: even the most original writers rarely invent, but creatively use, the language they have been finding all their lives. This project is part of a larger work investigating the ethics of literary appropriation; in this instance, the appropriation is both our ‘borrowing’ of each other’s ideas and commentary, and the repurposing of poems we initially wrote for exhibition, rather than publication.

Research contribution

Many writers have discussed this issue: Sterne speaks of the dullness of reiteration; Eliot distinguishes literary borrowing from theft; Brophy warns poets against other poets; and Brady sees the writer as bowerbird. What all point to is that the individual never creates art simply as an individual separate from the zeitgeist. We address this issue, and reconsider the poetic practices of collaborative creativity, re-purposing and homage.

Research significance

In exploring and asserting the abiding significance of independent creation in a context of mutuality and reciprocity, we suggest approaches to collaboration that involve genuine reliance on and appropriation of each other’s practice, knowledge and thinking. We aim to identify ways, beyond influence, plagiarism or citation, in which original creative thought is stimulated by another writer’s work.

Endnote

1. Apropos of other poets, Brophy advises: ‘Tell them nothing. They steal everything. / They are thugs and desperately / short of ideas, even words’ (‘Advice to poets’ in Portrait in Skin 2002)

Works cited


Brophy, Kevin 2002 Portrait in skin, Five Islands P: Wollongong


University of Sydney

Sue Woolfe

The twelfth taxi ride

Biographical note:
Sue Woolfe is the author of many stories, including the novels *Painted Woman* (also a play performed on the professional stage), *Leaning Towards Infinity* (also produced as a professionally-performed play), *The Secret Cure* (currently being adapted for an opera) and *The Oldest Song in the World*.

Keywords:
Creative writing – short story
I must admit it to myself now, I tell myself, as I ride in the back seat of a taxi to my friend’s apartment: I came to this city because of my yearning.

I had no right to the yearning. I’d known forever that my dull life was my own fault for gazing out the window in school rather than concentrating on what my teachers were saying. I was always being accused of daydreaming, which was true, though what the daydreams were about, I couldn’t say, except that I was impatient with ordinary things, as if I wasn’t ordinary. I felt that everyone was ignoring something mysterious and incandescent that slipped behind the shadows and under the surfaces. My home life seemed mired in the practical. My father owned a corner shop where I had to serve behind the counter and get the princes right. However, my brother inherited it and made it into a restaurant, where I became the kitchen hand. Then I inherited it, along with his half-grown children when he was suddenly killed in a car accident. Ironically, I had no choice but to become a practical person.

I loved the children, and despite me, the restaurant prospered, and I should’ve been reconciled to my lot.

But I wasn’t. I secretly wanted more. I came to think of it as the wanting that you feel when you listen to the end of a piece of music and something seems left out. The notes break in mid-air, lopped off. And because they’re not finished, you have a hole inside you. A hole in your soul.

I never knew how to ask people if they felt the same. At the restaurant, we talked about how to make a custard fragrant or where to source fresher greens and, at home, children, even when they’re grown up, need cossetting and comforting. I became a churchgoer in the hope that someone there would feel lopped off like me, but the faces of the congregation and the priests were round with satisfaction. At three o’clock in the morning in my lonely bed, my lopped-off feeling grew like a potato plant under the black soil, until one Christmas in the Cathedral, during the reading from the Old Testament, a poet spoke to me as if we were kindred souls, though separated by several thousand years. ‘How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings,’ he’d written. It wasn’t exactly a whisper, read as it was by the priest’s voice as fat and thick and gold-trimmed as his rich garments, but the line leaped through the air in a shiny bubble like the ones the children used to blow, bubbles slicked with rainbows. A line from a fellow yearner.

For the first time ever, I thought that somewhere else in the world there might be yearners like me – and surely they’d know what to do with this emptiness. Then a customer showed me pictures of her apartment and its neighbourhood in Florence, and I knew where to find them.
I’d taken to talking to my rheumy old dog, also a yearner though easily satisfied by a strip of bacon. I showed her the pictures I’d discovered on the Internet.

Look, I said to her. All of them, the statues and paintings, the decorations and the curlicues – what do they say? Look at the naked cupids reaching out to something, look at the holy men turning their pale, shining faces to something, look at the Madonnas with closed lips barely suppressing their joy about something, not to mention those ragged shepherds and no doubt smelly stable-hands – they’re all openly yearning, they’re not ashamed of the holes in their hearts, indeed it seems a common assumption amongst the artists who made them that of course there’s a hole in everyone’s heart. And since the pictures and statues are old, surely by now the people of Florence would know what to do about holes in hearts.

I didn’t exactly speak those words to my dog, but I sent my thought to her, the way the poet had sent his thought to me. She licked her old droopy jowls. The next day, she died.

I told my customer I needed a break and asked if I could rent her apartment in Florence. She imagined I wanted a rest. But, though I’d been busy, I’d rested, in a way, all my life. So after I buried my dog, I left for Florence.

I wandered through galleries and cathedrals, amongst a noisy mob of fellow yearners oddly clad in spotted sun frocks or loose yellow shirts patterned with palm trees, as if they weren’t pre-occupied by their emptiness. But they responded as much as me to Florence’s yearning. It was all around us as I knew it would be, calling out to us, yearning along with us: all the statues, the alter pieces, the very walls, they all unashamedly, even flagrantly yearned with us; there were meandering narrow streets with buildings almost toppling into them, such was their yearning – why even at night the river Arno coiled with a pleading light through the darkened city. It didn’t hurl itself in a drench of sand and sunshine like our toiling, triumphant oceans. Once in a hushed cathedral, a man in the congregation began to sing of his desire, and it was just like mine, I wanted to go up to him and hold his hand and sing with him but of course I didn’t, I can’t hold a tune and I didn’t know what words to sing, there never seem to be the right words, but his pleading gusted like a wind through the empty spaces inside us as we stood with upturned faces waiting for the vaulted arches to crack open and give us – what – what would united yearning give us? For the first time in my life I was with soul mates, and from then on in Florence I trod more stoutly.

I can never go home, I thought. I must stay here with my soul mates. But time was running out, my friend needed her apartment back, my restaurant and the children needed me back.

Then one muddy afternoon on a bus back to the city from Scandici, I found a ridiculously simple solution. A Florentine man, surely with yearning rampant in his blood, in his very
DNA, a man with palely lidded orange eyes – I’d seen those pale eyelids without eyelashes a hundred times in renaissance paintings – directed his gaze at me. It came to me, his gaze, in a fierce beam of orange light. That’s how it felt, twin torches burning orange through the grey, slippery day. When I met his gaze, he stepped out of the frame of the renaissance painting, pursed his lips into a kiss, lowered his eyelids as if he was swooning, then rolled his eyes back into his head, and entered what seemed to be a state of bliss.

I looked behind me to see what god or goddess had occasioned this. There was only the dismal afternoon falling away against the foggy window glass. I counted to seven, a propitious number according to one of my guidebooks, and turned back. His gaze was still on me. He went through the act again, then un-pursed his lips and smiled. So I had no choice but to admit the impossible.

He was suggesting bliss to me. Sexual bliss.

Of course, you’d think it obvious, the notion that yearning could be fulfilled by sex, but I’d assumed I needed something extraordinary. If a man in my country had done what he had, it would mean nothing but his wish for sex, he’d be just a disappointing predator. Not that I’d had many of those, I’m not a pretty woman that men notice, I am what used to be called large-boned, with a long thin face and a prominent nose. Against my better judgment, my heart gave a little lurch of joy at being noticed – but more, noticed by a Florentine, surely a fellow yearner.

I dared another look. He was shaven-headed, ear-ringed, leather-jacketed – cream and black, far too fancy for a man in my country. Even his jacket claimed he was a man from the land of the yearners. There were no lines on his face, no sags under his eyes.

A matron rustled her plastic shopping bag and in the sound I came to my senses. All the warnings my mother had given me, that I’ve given my brother’s children: never trust strangers, always run from them, especially strange strangers.

I wriggled away between the soft matronly bodies to the far end of the bus where I held onto a pole near the driver, my skin wrinkling around the base of my fingers like a tide ebbing out past gnarled rocks. As the concrete apartment blocks slid by, I struggled to accept that there were, after all, compensations in my life. The children remembering to ring me up every so often, the customers staying back after hours serenading each other and sometimes me; the camaraderie with my chef who’s a friend from schooldays; our little experiments with recipes – and then unbidden, there popped into my mind the new regular who’d prop a book against his wine glass and catch my eye whenever I emerged from the kitchen to see if the diners were pleased – as if he was waiting for me. His face with its muscles and crinkles broke into many surfaces when he smiled, so I thought of his face as made of crushed velvet. I’d never stopped to chat with him because I was intimidated by his constant books. He’d find out I didn’t read. He always left his dog tied up outside and many times I’d wondered if I should put out a bowl of water for it, but
what if all the diners took it into their heads to bring their dogs? The restaurant would be ringed around with dogs. My brother would turn in his grave.

Suddenly, there was a firm male body pressing against me. I had forgotten male firmness. It came back to me from my youth, when I’d sometimes danced with men in the town hall that has now become a disco. I’d had few partners, only boys who knew my father and were obliged to do a round with me. Apart from a few unsatisfactory sexual encounters, soon over, I hadn’t known men.

A large, olive-skinned hand gripped the pole I was holding, and slid down onto my fingers and covered them, and then the hand slid down to become a bracelet on my wrist. Or a handcuff. I swayed to the rhythm of the bus, not moving my arm, not looking up. The world narrowed. There was only the old man’s catarrh of the motor and the warmth encircling my wrist. There were no tumbling cupids or upturned faces lit by a beam from a crack in the heavens, but nevertheless the circle of sexual warmth stilled my thoughts.

After a long while – funny how time’s arrows suddenly cartwheel, and could that mean I was experiencing the timelessness of ecstasy? – something, perhaps politeness, demanded I follow with my eyes the man’s arm, the bunched out shoulders of his cream and black leather coat, the glinting, cheeky diamond in his ear, and when I dared, his orange eyes. I didn’t free my hand.

‘I’m the one who can give you what you seek’, said his orange eyes.

If the soft-bodied matrons pursed their lips in scorn, if they made faces to each other of contempt, I didn’t see, as the Madonnas in paintings nearing a state of bliss don’t see. Their eyes accept the exalted moment. So I saw nothing, nobody, only him, for his eyes were repeating, ‘I am what you came for’.

It couldn’t last. He took his hand away, and suddenly my wrist was damp and cold. He turned, the cream and black jacket crackling. My hope got off the bus.

I had no choice. I plunged between the women and the plastic bags and the children, and with the superhuman strength of the stricken, I forced open the closing doors, so I could get off too.

He strode down a street. I walked behind. A café beckoned relief, all bright lights and glinting glasses, just like my restaurant back home. Home washed over me, the warm bathwater of ordinariness. I remembered the curious sense of harmony when we get the menu right so we begin to think what we do has an importance beyond food, I remembered the orderly lines of tables just before we opened for the evening, with the plates reflecting the paleness of peace, I remembered the crushed velvet face of the new regular whose dog waits for him outside. He’s not my sort of man, being small and spindly, but there was something soothing about his velvety gaze. He mightn’t mind that I’m not a reader.

I turned like the dumbly respectable person I am, and went inside the cafe, leaving behind this wild Florentine and my foolish moment. I sat at a table. After all, I told myself – I
still sent my thoughts to the ghost of my dog, though I was trying to give up that habit –
envy is a sin and it’s just envy making you desire what you haven’t had, what you
weren’t meant to have.

I hailed a waiter.

But it was the man who loomed. He stood gazing down at me, while I could only gaze
down at the table top. But he sat opposite.

‘Come to my home’, he said in perfect English, overly perfect.

Then the waiter appeared.

‘Madam?’ he asked.

There’s never anyone handy to advise you what to do.

‘A short black’, I said.

We sat in silence for several minutes until my coffee arrived.

I broke the silence.

‘I didn’t come to Florence for sex’, I managed to say.

He shrugged.

‘I’m after’, I said, stumbled, and then suddenly found the words, ‘someone who knows
what this city is saying. So I feel I’m not alone’.

He sat up so straight, proud and tall, his shoulders could lift the entirety of the chandelier-
hung ceiling.

‘I am a man of this city’, he said. ‘You are with the right man.’

I could scarcely look at him then. When I managed a glance, to my surprise he wasn’t
looking into a mysterious distance, he was only examining the bar with its array of bottles.

I wondered if I should suggest a drink, but no, he was our leader.

He said, ‘Shall we go?’

‘First’, my voice said, playing for time, trying for decorum though decorum so far hadn’t
stood me in good stead but at least there was dignity in decorum, perhaps even nobility –
this voice of mine didn’t belong to me anymore, it was high, silly, almost a squeak – for
my secret had now been revealed. He knew what I needed as no one anywhere else in the
world had known, it was clear to Florentines, why even the waiter slopping my expensive
water on the table knew of my emptiness. They were, after all, Florentines.

‘First’, this thing my voice squeaked, ‘we must have three meetings’.

I hoped that in three – again a propitious number – I’d be able to explain to him that
despite my acceptance, perhaps, of mere sex, I was actually seeking out what Florence
knows. The sacred knowledge that yearners share and receive.
He bowed his head. It seemed like assent.

I went back to my friend’s apartment, and tried to ponder what to do. One moment my pondering told me to go home before anything happened and that seemed the perfect solution, and then, after I’d had a coffee in the sun on the piazza, my pondering told me to take this chance, and that seemed the perfect solution as well.

On the first two of our outings, we scarcely spoke. It was not the fault of my stumbling Italian, learned largely from recipes, nor of his perfect English, with even an Oxford accent, because he’d been sent away by his mother many times to stay with a family in London.

‘The family was as chilly as the country’, he said in an unusual burst of loquacity, ‘but they spoke well. Families do that here, send their sons away to get the right accent’.

That hung in the air, against the screams of an espresso machine. Clearly my Australian accent wasn’t right.

Sitting across from each other in little cafés, he was as preoccupied as a philosopher working on a conundrum. I’d known no one like that and tried to be a companion to his silences. Dozens of times in my head I composed a speech to further explain myself, but the speech became smaller and smaller until it was a crouching, curled up thing he could flick onto a dusty floor.

During both meetings, I’d announce, over the cooling dregs of our coffees, that I must go home. It was the only moment when I was an authoritative person who knows what’s what, someone who’s on top of things. He’d suddenly come to life, ringing a taxi for me on his mobile, speaking in Italian too rapid for me, joking with the man on the other end of the line. He always forgot my address, or perhaps he assumed I had no continuing abode.

‘To – ?’, he’d ask again.

I’d say it again, ‘Via del Paradiso’.

He’d repeat it to the taxi company, but in English, laughing, ‘She is bound for the Street of Paradise’.

Even the name of my street was absurd.

At the third meeting, we went to a movie in a cinema, but he pulled at my hand just after the opening credits.

‘It’s time’, he said.

I stood up. I didn’t complain that I still hadn’t explained myself. This affair, I now knew, was not about words. I whispered to the ghost of my dog – I still permitted that habit in emergencies – that he seemed too refined to be a murderer, and besides, isn’t this what
I’d longed for? Hadn’t I sought the bliss his clumsy pantomime had suggested, by now I could admit that it had been clumsy, and was my life at home ever going to give me what I needed?

He strode impatiently through streets I didn’t know. Again, I followed, though I comforted myself by promising that I’d turn back at the next statue, I’d turn back at the next fountain. I broke all my promises.

‘My home’, he announced at last, slowing down so I could catch up.

We were in a piazza. On two sides were expensive shops that in the day would’ve glowed in gold and crimson like the frescoes in the Cathedrals, but now they were ominous shadows, as if the sacrament was over forever. On a third side was a church spire that poked around hopefully at a starless sky. And on the fourth was a grand house with a porch, crowded with a beggar and his dogs.

‘Give him nothing’, my lover said when he saw me looking. ‘Let’s not encourage them.’

There were five dogs, the largest, a collie, was at one end, and a little dachshund crouched under the beggar’s feet. Two dogs lay on either side of him and my favourite, a mongrel, balanced on his chest, its front paws nestled at the man’s chin, its little body rising and falling with his breath. It was the hour of the *passeggiata*, and the dogs smiled at the elegant crowds in a stately way as if they weren’t beggars at all. I didn’t say it to my lover, but the dogs made it more possible for me to follow the cream and black jacket inside. Behind his back, I flung them a secret smile. I was only visiting a friend’s house, my smile said. But then I wondered, would they hear me if I screamed? Yet, like a woman deranged, I followed him.

I felt no lust. I certainly felt no love. All I felt, like the suck of a tide I couldn’t begin to fight against, was dull determination. I must see what might be given.

The street door opened directly onto a vast white room that in earlier days might’ve hosted grand ceremonies, but now there was only the man and I, and a deep stillness under the forbiddingly high ceiling. It was as if the room’s past was there with us, observing me, half-knowing I’d disappoint it. Over in a shadowy corner was a heavy, ornate wardrobe that was already engaged in mocking me, and a bed that perhaps he’d made up for my arrival, with a dark blue velvet cover and blue cushions stampped with an important gold crest. Perhaps someone else had made up the bed. He wasn’t the bed-making sort.

‘Our family’, he said, seeing me look at the crest, ‘from the thirteenth century’.

There were three doors in the room, I noted, suddenly aware I might have to escape – one, the street door through which we’d come; another, a small modern door:

‘The bathroom’, he said. ‘My mother permitted an ensuite’.

But the third. The third door was ornate, surrounded by a wide oak frame on which half a dozens snarling lions competed to impress me.
‘A portal,’ I murmured, for I’d heard the term and remembered that they’re often the entrance to exalted places.

‘It goes to the rest of the house’, he said.

I struggled with disbelief.

‘Who lives there?’ I asked.

‘Just me and my sister’.

I should’ve noticed the way his voice thickened. My voice never thickens when I mention my brother.

I should’ve asked further. But all I said was, ‘And your mother?’

He shrugged.

‘Away.’

On the wall above the bed was a patch of faded fresco. He followed my gaze.

‘When my mother is gone, I’ll have it painted out,’ he said. ‘I’m bored with age.’

‘But you’re a man steeped in this city’, I said.

It came to me that he might be one of a race of interlopers who had nothing to do with the grand passion of Florence. But he certainly wasn’t a new arrival.

‘This is my great-great-great-great-grandfather’s house’ – to be honest, he listed so many greats, I lost count.

‘When my mother dies, the house will be mine.’

‘Will it belong to your sister as well?’, I asked.

He didn’t answer.

Undressing seemed called for. I went to a dark corner so I wouldn’t bore him with my age as I pulled off gloves, scarf, thick coat, boots, trousers, thermal tights, woolly jumper, skivvy, thermal singlet, bra. But I didn’t need to hide from his gaze. He was too busy shedding skins of his own, throwing them off so they skidded across the tiled floor, making splashes of unwanted colour like stains.

Then he was lying on the bed. Against the blue velvet, his orange eyes startled me all over again. To escape them, I lay down beside him.

‘Just one moment’, he said. He swung his muscled legs off the bed and strode across the floor and threw open the portal.

‘Why?’, I asked.

‘The heating is overpowering’, he said.
‘But your sister might come in. Is she in the house?’ I asked.

He put his hand over my mouth.

We made love, and though I’m not experienced enough to judge, it seemed banal. I almost slept through it and afterwards, I felt my disappointing self. Perhaps patience was required. But as I lay there I realized that the imposing room was silent in the way memories make rooms silent, so that there’s almost a whirring in the air of memories, on the other side of silence. Just beyond and above his face, itself a sculpture, was the patch of fresco that he’d have painted out. It depicted an angel, not an entire angel, just one shoulder with one white wing jutting out. The shoulder was like his, the same sharp almost right angle, no gentle curvature down to the arms.

‘Was your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather the model for the shoulder?’ I asked when he woke.

He corrected the number of greats, but that was all. When I shut my eyes again, I had an after-image of angel’s wings.

We made love for ten nights afterwards, always on the blue velvet under the snarling lions, always for me with the same puff of disappointment. We’d meet first, eat dinner in a little restaurant nearby, always the same restaurant, then we’d go to his house, always entering his room from the street door. We never went through the house from the other side, though every night the heating irritated him, he said, and he’d fling open the portal that was apparently no portal at all.

Once, during our lovemaking, it seemed to me that we were wrapped around with the angel’s one wing. I tried to tell him this, because it might be a sign though of what I didn’t know, but he wasn’t interested in signs.

Each time, more and more, I saw the angel’s wing the way he did, as something that added nothing to the city’s passion, but just as a dreary, drooping thing stuck on a shoulder in a desultory, almost sulky way, bereft of visible feathers, somewhat like the machine-like wings in Da Vinci’s The Annunciation. But Da Vinci, I remembered, had believed in the possibilities of angelic flight. When Da Vinci was painting it, if his brush had wandered a little further, the wing might’ve become a helicopter. Whereas the artist employed by the great-great-great-great grandfather – I still couldn’t get the number of grandfathers right – obviously believed in neither flight nor angels, judging by the wing. He’d been pleased, I could imagine, that the model was side-on so he didn’t have to bother with a second wing. Perhaps his patron had required as much, not wishing his left shoulder to be immortalized. Perhaps that left shoulder had been wizened by an illness forgotten by us now, something that reminded the great aristocrat of his ordinariness.
Perhaps it had been ruined in battle. However, the good shoulder could’ve supported a
dozen magnificent wings. The painter seemed not to believe in wings, only in shoulders.

I asked, after one of our nights of love – still disappointing but I was too polite to show it –
if I could see the rest of the house.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘To understand you more’, I said.

There was a long pause.

‘My house’ – he paused again – ‘is irrelevant to us.’

I was comforted that he said Us. It kept me returning a little longer.

Perhaps I’ll achieve it next time, I said to myself, though by now I had no idea what ‘it’
was. I just seemed to be waiting like the room, without will or mind, waiting on the
desires and needs of another. Nothing in my life had told me how to be other than
someone who waits.

On the sixth night, over dinner, I asked the orange-eyed man what he did during the day.

‘I look after the library’, he said.

‘Which library?’ I asked.

When he said nothing, I added that it might be one that the guidebooks had recommended.

‘My family’s library’, he said. ‘My mother pays me to do this’.

I told him that I have a shelf-full of books, old recipe books given to me by my customers –
_Keys to The Pantry, When Mother Lets Us Cook, A Cookbook of American Negro Recipes, Fine Old Dixie Recipes, Favourite Recipes of Famous Musicians_, and a well-thumbed old _Commonsense Cookery_ book of my brother’s with a quaint emphasis on
milky recipes for invalids and an underlying belief in the healing power of onions.

He said after another silence, ‘Our library is manuscripts. Illuminated manuscripts from
the fourteenth century’.

On the seventh night I asked where his sister was. We were having dinner in the usual
restaurant. I was comforted at how we’d developed a routine. At the mention of her, he
became unexpectedly vivacious. He told me that she works like me in a restaurant, ’til
well past midnight,’ he added quickly. She sleeps till lunch and then visits friends until
she’s due at the restaurant.

Talking about her eased something in him. His skin glowed as if it had been basted. I
wanted his vivacity to continue, so I tried to encourage more talk:
‘What does she do in the restaurant?’, I asked.
A wrong move. He paused. His willingness to talk ceased.
‘Women’s work’, he said. ‘She feeds’.
I was curious to see and hear her, to observe what they’d both inherited from their grand ancestors.
‘Let’s go to her restaurant’, I urged. ‘Tomorrow night?’
‘Perhaps I can’t find it’, he said.

On the tenth night, from deep in the ancient house, I heard … what did I hear? Was it an ancestor, breathing so close? Was it the grandfather of the magnificently squared right shoulder? I held my breath, to hear again. But my lover contrarily didn’t hold his. He breathed heavily into my ear. He shouted in his orgasm, and subsided. Afterwards, there was only silence, the sound of a house settling into night.
‘Was it good for you?’, he asked.
He was always a man for the ceremonies.
He fell asleep before I could answer.

On the eleventh night, while I sat on the bed waiting for the taxi, I asked him, ‘Do you have a pet?’
His orange eyes as he lay on his blue velvet swiveled to me.
‘No’, he said.
‘Nothing at all?’ I asked.
‘Why these questions?’ he said irritably.
But because the taxi took its time, he eventually answered, ‘My sister has a fish’.
He became animated.
‘It comes from the Red Sea, it’s called a Lion fish although it’s small and white. It has many flowing gills behind it, like trailing wings. In the Red Sea it would grow huge, but here in her small fish tank, it will never grow.’
‘Should you set it free?’, I asked.
He didn’t answer.
After a while, he added, ‘I bought it for her. Neither of us care about it. But that’s fine. She was offered a dog but I wouldn’t let her take it. It would possess her. Take her love away from me’.
I felt I was moving to the heart of the matter.
‘You’re very close, your sister and you?’

‘At times’, he said.

Then on my twelfth night, tonight, after I’d lain down beside him, he turned to me and took off my watch. It had been my father’s watch, overly large on my wrist and with cranky angles that are always catching in things, and it needs winding every night, but I’d worn it since the day of his death. It times my life, when I open up the restaurant, when we close it. I thought he would ask me about the watch, and then I could’ve told him at last something about my life, but he pushed it under a cushion. I felt bereft.

He got up and strode to the portal. We were back to the usual ceremonies. Just then, the angel’s wing fluttered – no, that’s not possible, it was the fluttering of something else in the room, a movement that seemed like sound. My mind stood on its toes and pointed out at last what I should’ve seen all along – that the artist had painted such a perfunctory wing because the great-great-whatever grandfather had had no soul, not even one perforated with emptiness like mine. The artist had been commissioned to add that wing and he’d done so reluctantly, just for the money, for he knew that shoulders don’t support wings. Soul do.

At that moment, I stood too, and snatched at my clothes. They were tangled, turned upside down and inside out, I buttoned them up wrongly but I didn’t care. I reached out to grab my father’s watch as I rang the taxi’s number on my own mobile.

‘Why?’ he asked, startled.

I pulled on my coat, grotesque with its bunches of gloves bulging the pockets, and headed for the street door.

‘Why?’ he asked again.

‘The sound I heard was weeping.’

He said nothing.

‘It’s your sister!’ I said.

I was only guessing, hoping I was wrong, but he blinked and as the orange lights momentarily dimmed, his spell over me broke.

‘Your sister is in the house. She’s been there every time’.

He had the grace to look down, bunched the royal blue coverlet between his fingers, holding onto it.

‘That’s why you picked me up’.

I wanted him to deny it, but his breathing seemed to quicken.

‘To torment her’.

Woolfe  The twelfth taxi ride
He wasn’t someone to be accused.

‘Every summer’, he spat. ‘You tourists come like pilgrims, and demand that Florence live up to your fantasies. You think you can get from us what’s necessary for living. But we send you home with nothing’.

‘You’ve done this before, many times, haven’t you?’, I said. ‘Picked up a woman, so you can torment your sister’.

I let myself out the street door.

‘Nothing’, he called after me, because it was important to have the last word.

By that hour the piazza was deserted except for the wind whisking ice-cream wrappers into the chilly air. The taxi lights illuminated the sleeping group of the beggar and his dogs wreathed in black plastic bags. I tucked money into one of them, and the mongrel, my favourite, opened an eye like a pleased old man, and wriggled its tail up and down, encouraged.

Now as I think about all of this, the taxi turns into the Ponte Grazie, to cross the Arno. The waters seem to dawdle there, accumulating a silent strength underneath before they can tumble over the weir, and return to black silence.

I wind down my window. The driver turns around and shouts that I must shut it. But I need air, space, my country, the smell of rustling gum leaves in the midday sun, the silky steaminess of a damp Australian summer. I hang my head out into the air but it’s the wrong air, the wrong temperature, the wrong smells. Then a full moon slides out from behind a cloud and lights the water, which flashes and winks.

‘Go home’, says the winking river to me. ‘Take your yearning home. There are others who yearn there.’

The driver, swerving dangerously, reaches back and winds up my window himself. But the ancient river keeps talking through the finger-smeared pane of glass, talking as it must’ve done over the years to many bewildered pilgrims.

‘The new regular, for instance,’ it says. ‘Ask him about his book when he looks up and smiles at you. And give his dog a bowl’.
Research statement

Research background
The field of this work is Creative Writing. The area of investigation is what happens when one attempts to locate, understand and hold onto the ineffable. The research question is: how is an author to write about this exploration? The output is in the form of a short story. In it, I isolate an individual who makes this attempt, and document her journey.

Research contribution
The story addresses the research question as outlined above by describing my female, contemporary, and uneducated protagonist and most importantly, her yearning for an extraordinary experience and going to great pains to seek it out. The knowledge gap is that a woman’s desire for the ineffable is seldom explored in literature – men, and particularly educated men, are usually such protagonists. I am thus exploring the particular qualities of a female contemporary pilgrimage.

Research significance
TEXT journal considers my story significant enough to wish to publish it in a creative writing as research themed issue.