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Patrick Holland

The Author

Van Truong Nguyen was the son of refugees and a student of medieval history, particularly of the Order of St Francis. Years ago Brother Fiacre, a gigantic black-bearded Irishman of the Guardian Angel Friary at Manly had helped his parents establish themselves in the city. Brother Fiacre took Van on walks in the coastal woods and tidal wetlands. The woods, he said, were the Earth's first temples. Van lived at Moreton Bay for twelve years before his mother gambled away the family home and they were forced to move to the poorer far western suburbs where the other Vietnamese lived. He left many fond memories behind at Moreton Bay, not least the memory of joining Brother Fiacre on his walks along the beach at night, barefoot and hooded and independent of the forces that moved other men and made them sleep – as though he were a part of the landscape. Not many years later, the Friars negotiated Van's release from a youth detention centre where he was incarcerated for involvement in a robbery. The friars secured him a job planting trees in Bayside parks.

Tonight, he looked out a window of the university library at impositions on the coastal landscape that had been his playground as a boy. A tract of paperbark wood had made room for a mock-village. Beside the empty houses, five floodlit acres were being cleared for a driving range.

He sighed and returned to his thesis on the compositional history of the *Fioretti*, known via A.G. Little's translation as *The Little Flowers of St Francis*. The believed author of the book was one Brother Ugolino da Santa Maria, writing in the Marches of Ancona in the early 14th Century. A 17th Century Franciscan historian claimed that the *Fioretti*, like the other choice tales of St Francis, derived from an original 'father'

text, a Latin volume called *Floretum*, ‘The Garden’. But no remnant of the *Floretum* had ever been found. It was evidence of this book Van hoped to discover.

Presently he was meant to be discussing the historical validity of the ‘Life of Brother Juniper’, added to the book in the 15th Century. He could find little documentary support for the adjunct, but at this late hour he was no longer looking. Instead, he was revisiting his childhood via a thrift edition of the book – the Thomas Okey translation Brother Fiacre had presented him on his tenth Christmas. He read to divert his thoughts from the girl he had devoted too much thought to tonight. The world lost its fangs in the presence of the heroic little Franciscans in the book, and the pain he felt was not so sharp.

Van read how *Friar Juniper, to abase himself, played at see-saw*. How Brother Ruffino, despite wind and cold, knelt long in the woods, *day and night in prayer and contemplation of divine things...*

Flipping through the pages his glance fell on the phrase:

...as gold is nobler than clay and balm is nobler than water...

He looked out the window again at the prodigies of profit that had crept across the Moreton Bay wetlands drying them up. He took up his pencil and wrote in the book. He made clay and water preeminent. Then he read how *Brother Juniper removed his clothes and entered Viterbo market place to be laughed at...*

*

Brother Bernardo sharpened his goose feather quill with a penknife. The morning light flooded the Umbrian hills and poured into the scriptorium. There were four books – one opened within another – on his table. Occasionally he changed their order, examined one, dipped his quill and wrote. Bernardo turned to the man beside him whose grey beard touched his vellum.

‘*Bella luce...*’ said Bernardo. ‘We are blessed with beautiful light.’

But the old monk called Hauswald was a visiting Carthusian who would not speak inside the monastery. He gave a quick nod and returned to transcribing a musico-astronomical work by Boethius. Bernardo laughed wryly and took up a rough-stitched set of notes bequeathed him by a scribe called Ugolino who knew those who knew St Francis.

Three hours later Brother Hauswald regretted his rudeness and put his hands together and opened and closed them to make a question.

‘It will be book of St Francis,’ Bernardo answered. He tapped his desk where sat St Bonaventure’s official biography and loose scraps of oral traditions from the region. Not all Ugolino’s. Some Bernardo had collected himself.

‘*Un libro di piccoli fiori selvatici ... A book of little wildflowers.*’

For so he had come to call the episodes he recorded.

Presently he wrote a chapter in which St Francis tamed wild turtledoves. The chapter was based on the writings of the legendary Brother Leo himself, via the word of an old carpenter in a village near Assisi who claimed to have witnessed the event. Bernardo wrote, *Ego vos eripio vos quod constructum vos cubile ... I will rescue you and build you nests*, and he sighed aloud.

‘How well this would sound in the Umbrian, so innocent as it is. The Latin is too worldly, it sneers at the little phrase. In the Umbrian there would be no irony.’

But Brother Hauswald gave only an ambiguous smile. Perhaps it was true what was said – that the Carthusian hid his dullness in silence; that his Swiss brethren sent him here as they could stand to hear no more of it.

Bernardo untranslated four sentences on a new sheet of parchment. He wrote how St Francis took the doves from a youth who was going to market, then begged of them, ‘Little sisters, innocent and chaste, why suffer yourselves to be caught?’ He wrote, *when Francis built them nests the doves began to lay eggs for the friars like handfed chickens*. Bernardo laughed. All the irony was gone and another facet of the truth had been lit: a gentle, comic facet that ever accompanied humility

Brother Hauswald stood up to replenish his ink and read over Bernardo’s shoulder. He gave that same wan, ambiguous smile he was wont to and shook his finger.

Excessive folkism could be dangerous. Even within this humble monastery the *relaxti* and the *zelanti* were fighting. Those who would moderate St Francis’ Rule pointed to the outrageous Fraticelli: village idiots pronounced holy men, and monks pissing on church walls for the sake of their souls. Crescentius and the *zelanti* accused the Order of having forsaken Francis’ devotion to poverty. They accused Rome of having succumbed to the Devil’s third temptation in the desert.

Written works on Francis were the battleground. The extant *Legend of the Three Companions* had had its miracles and adventures removed by ecclesiastical authorities. And St Bonaventure had made his *Legenda Maior* official by burning all other accounts. Bonaventure risked sectarian violence if he failed to take a hold of St

Francis' legend, thus it was his duty to keep silent on many things. A mildly ascetic and ultimately obedient Francis inhabited his pages. But in high Apennine sanctuaries and in the small sunbathed villages of the Umbrian Valley another Francis was found. To discover him, you need only walk in the woods of ilex and poplar, talk with the monks whose illiterate Fathers were the first of the order, talk with the shepherds and wood carriers who remembered their fathers' fireside stories, and there were even a diminishing few elders who remembered the wild man moving like a hare about the hills without apparent purpose...

"He wore rags and stripped himself naked to be laughed at" – "He spoke to squirrels" – "He played with peasant children."

This was the Francis who had seduced Bernardo Albinoni, son of a shepherd.

It wounded him the day the abbot of his first monastery told him the 'rude tales' he collected were worthless. They were the accounts of shepherds, poor folk and even children. With sadness and for ten years he had put away his writing and his hope to collect all the wildflowers of St Francis.

It was a child of Spoleto who had revived the dream.

He had not long come to San Marco's and his crisis of faith had begun. He walked the high goat track that pilgrims and peasants took to the town, thinking of his father and sisters back in Norcia where life was simple. Simpler than at the divided monastery. Perhaps he had been a fool to go wandering after the legend of a holy man of whom less and less was truly known – whom some would make a playful child, others a dark and suffering ascetic.

He was thinking this when a russet-haired girl – a *cafoni*, no more than ten years old – stood on his path. She stood with arms raised beneath a corniolo tree that clung to a little earth between rocks. She stopped abruptly at Bernardo's arrival and turned to face him. She wore the look of an apprehended thief. He felt as though he had chanced upon a rare spring flower. He laughed.

'What doest thou, little one?'

'What doest thou?' she chirped back.

He squatted beside her.

'I go to buy laurel leaves.'

'Dost thou have the shits?'

‘No. Not I,’ he laughed. ‘Another of the monastery.’

‘Whither wilt thou buy the leaves?’

‘Spoleto.’

‘Humphh! Dost thou prefer them mouldy?’

‘Where should I buy them?’

‘From Old Fabrizzio in the woods behind *Chiesa di Santa Maria*. Fabrizzio hath herbs from top to bottom of Monte Contessa, all according to their thirst. The thirsty at the bottom, for tis there the water gathers. Tell him Agnése sent you. He keeps the best for those he loves.’

‘So I will,’ smiled Bernardo. ‘But I wonder if I have time to climb a mountain – my friend is in great need.’

‘Tis not truly a mountain. I can run up and down it again between daylight and breakfast.’

‘Well, thou art impressive,’ said Brother Bernardo. ‘And now, little one, I have told thee my business, it would be uncivil to withhold thine from me...’

The girl put her nose in the air.

‘I was preaching to the birds – as San Francesco preached.’

Bernardo remembered the tale.

‘But why?’

‘I told the birds that Christ’s eyes are upon them and if they wished to find favour with Him they should take less of my father’s wheat and perhaps they could try Renzo Cantoni’s crop since it hath not been touched all season and Cantoni is the richest farmer of the hills.’

‘Do the birds listen?’

‘We will see.’

Bernardo rose and patted the little girl’s head and walked along the track, intending Monte Contessa now instead of Spoleto.

He turned at a whistle – the familiar melody of a chaffinch – but it came from the lips of the little girl. Then in the Umbrian, in the sing-song tones of *cafoni* children who

are raised on song, she called the birds in the name of St Francis. And birds came. The girl whistled the song of a blackbird. Two blackbirds hopped to her bare feet. She whistled the piqued melody of a thrush, and a thrush lit on the lowest branch of the tree. Then a siskin landed on her shoulder.

The girl asked the birds to let her father grow his wheat to harvest. In return she would do as she had done in the time of the barley crop – make a mash of what seed and honey she could gather or steal and leave it in the branches of the tree each day until September.

Bernardo had the girl recount the story of Francis and the birds as she would tell it to a playmate, and he committed it to memory.

He walked to Monte Contessa singing a joyful psalm.

That evening he went to the monastery library and took down St Bonaventure's biography of Francis. He had a vague memory of birds in those pages. He found an anecdote of the saint praying the canonical hours with a flock of birds on his way through the marshes of Venice. Francis told the birds to hush until the hours were said, after which they resumed singing. The preceding story was of a waterfowl who refused to leave Francis's hands; the following, one of Francis requesting song from a cricket. So even Bonaventure had let these in. Bernardo read the book for the first time in years. Between stories of mortification in accordance with the Saint's strict Rule and the story of the solemn miracle of the stigmata, grew these little flowers. Bernardo felt a book within Bonaventure's book, struggling to be heard.

*

Van Truong met Professor William Kilanowicz in the professor's office overlooking the courtyard. The celebrated Kilanowicz was a Professor of Religious Studies and an outspoken atheist. His fame was achieved by his 'loss of faith' memoir, *The Kingdom and the Exile*. He was a darling of the university, not least because he so convincingly defeated believers in the radio debates he was invited to.

A space was cleared on the desk for two bottles of the local bitter. Rose-coloured sodium lights blinked on and lit the walkways where students walked between night classes.

'How goes the work?' The professor frowned. 'You seem distracted.'

Van shrugged and sipped his beer.

‘The girl again,’ said Kilanowicz, ‘There are plenty of girls in the world, Van. Beautiful girls of your own tribe. Have you met that new honours student, Hoa Le? Lord, if I was a younger man!’

But the girl Van loved was Maria Koniordou. And she would not have him: not as a Catholic. That was the ostensible reason. For the sake of her parents, she had asked him to convert.

Van went more often than Maria’s parents to St George’s Greek Orthodox Church at West End to hear the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom sung, and especially to hear the Byzantine hymns. Sitting in St George’s one afternoon he had made friends with Andreas Tsabropoulos, the local icon painter, who talked of the difference between expressionistic Western art and Eastern instrumental art and how a painter must never sign an icon. Even so, Tsabropoulos had painted himself as the repentant sinner at Gethsemane on the roof of the church. He asked Van to tell no one.

‘Do you really love your Saints,’ Maria asked him, ‘so much you will not convert?’ Had she converted she would have been disowned. Being cut off from one’s worldly family did not seem so awful to Van Truong. But for a girl and a Greek, for Maria, being cut off would be terrible. And even then, Van knew those natives of Thessaly were as suspicious of his race as they were of his religion.

And now she carried his child. They told her to consider her future, to reckon on how a child would set her back at her age. It was an accident, they said.

‘Death is an accident,’ said Van. ‘Life is a gift from God.’

But Maria was a traditional Greek girl and obedient to her family in all things. He had told her he would not drive her to the clinic because he did not want it done. She had left him alone on the street and gone inside to her father in tears. He had sat for an hour in the gutter in an empty Nundah street, feeling like the shell of a man.

‘Is she beautiful?’ asked Kilanowicz.

Van remembered the years of simplicity and love. A year ago, she led him by the arm past the Greek and Turkish cafes on Boundary Road, the Mediterranean men whistling at her and offended at her choice of man. So they found trouble some nights. Once he had gone home with bleeding knuckles and a cut cheek and a fine feeling in his heart. That night she dressed his wounds in his own bathroom. ‘We don’t need anyone but us,’ she said...

‘I think she’s beautiful.’

‘Beauty,’ said the professor with calculated gravity, ‘is but a temporary condition of any object.’

He had read that phrase in a book last night and was pleased at the opportunity to voice it. But Van barely acknowledged him.

The professor sipped his beer.

‘Most every young man starts off chasing some exotic sister and ends up with a woman like his mother. You wait and see. In any case, I don’t want to lose my best student to a monastery or mission because of a broken heart.’

Sometimes Van thought of it – of missionary work. He felt quite sincere about it at times, especially when the case seemed hopeless with Maria, though at others not at all.

‘Well, you have your work.’

‘It goes slowly.’

‘It’s a strange book, the *Flowers*. So many translators and compilers. Are you still working from the Okey?’

‘In conjunction with Padre Cesari. Cesari’s seems to be the classic compilation.’

‘I’ve lost my Italian,’ the professor lamented. ‘Twenty years ago, I walked Umbria speaking with the locals. You’ve never been, have you?’

‘No.’

‘You must go. We must talk to someone in admin about increasing your travel allowance. It’s important to be *in situ* at some point in your research. For the sake of ... veracity.’

Van did not say that he had not written a note on the historical veracity of anything for weeks. He did not say that his sadness had him reading *The Little Flowers* purely for their consoling light.

‘But, as I say, it’s an odd task you’ve set yourself, Van. The historical value of most of the *Fioretti* has already been dismissed – which makes finding an authentic biographical source a bit of a goose chase. To put it bluntly, people just made things up. There’s still work to be done on works of Aquinas and Augustine – if you must study a Catholic saint. You’d get a good trip abroad on the stipend out of either of those.’

‘Lately, Bill, it’s been poetry that’s concerned me rather than philology.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Take when Francis sees the departed saints *in procession wearing raiments of gold*. That gold is the same metal he despises. I think that phrase is wrong. Think of the eleventh line of the *Te Deum*: *The white-robed army of martyrs praise you*. Or Psalm 104, *O Lord my God ... Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment*.’

Van had seen the first world meet the third in Southeast Asian bars, the foreign businessmen who bought fourteen-year-old girls by the pair for less than they would give their children as weekly allowance. And back in the provinces, some of the girls’ fathers bought microwaves and high-definition TVs with the money that came from the city. He had no special love of gold.

‘Don’t turn Protestant on me!’ said Kilanowicz. ‘That’s a worse state of the soul than Catholicism. Besides, historically speaking, think of the gold donated in times of resistance for the vestments of The Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The Madonna may not have needed her gold vestments, but the people liked her to wear them.’

‘But Francis is not the Madonna,’ said Van. He thought of the saint’s wilful poverty; the humiliation of begging; the church built of money that fell and the church built of sticks in the forest that stood... He was sure the story of the gold raiments was at odds with these.

The professor mused, ‘*Auraius... oro... ora.*’

Van had been down that road. *Aureolus* could be ‘beauty’ as well as ‘gold’. *Aura* was a breath of wind, an upper world, ether, sound or shining sunlight. What a word, he thought – that made wind, sound and light facets of a single thought. His own writing contained auditory adjectives that described visual phenomena, and visual terms that qualified aeolian: ‘a tinkling light’, ‘a bright breeze’. These seemed natural to him having grown up in the wild paperbark woods and changeful light of Moreton Bay. Perhaps Francis – or his scribe – meant to mark the departed saints with some older, stranger sign than the English allowed.

‘I will try to have new pages for you by the end of next week.’

The professor said that was good. After all, the year was getting away. It would soon be summer.

‘And what about your own work?’

Kilanowicz beamed and Van knew the rest of the hour would be spent listening to sketches from a lapsed Catholic’s travelogue-come-history of Socialist Poland, during which he would try not to look out the window for her face among those passing on the quiet paths.

*

Brother Bernardo sat on the stone wall of a garden bed sorting through the notes he collected on his walks. The almoner led a procession of oblates down to the village with bread, cheese and beer for the poor. He had begun to wish for the day he might be done with writing and could make his daily work with the earth and Men.

Every so often he would look up at Brother Beneci, the gardener, harvesting his zucchini and planting gourds in its place, scraping a little ice off the beds with a rake. Bernardo found peace in the man's rhythm.

The monks had finished baking and the almoner led a procession of oblates out of the monastery and down to the village with bread, cheese and beer for the poor.

A middle-aged oblate – a boy of twelve – came collecting firewood from the store. He sat beside Bernardo to rest.

‘What doest thou, Brother?’

‘Collecting traditions of San Francesco.’

‘I will be a scribe someday. The abbot says I have a good hand.’

‘Aim higher. Become a gardener, or a hospitator.’

‘But you are a scribe, Brother!’

‘I did not choose it. I would be a gardener.’

Bernardo patted the head of the mystified boy.

‘Have you heard how Francesco pacified the fierce wolf in Gubbio?’

The boy's eyes widened. Brother Bernardo told the story as he had heard it five days ago when he followed the tales of shepherds' children up the slopes of Monte Ingino and along a high lane overlooking the valley to the door of an old woman who claimed to be a witness...

The woman asked her middle-aged grandson to shift her to the window and the sunlight. She was all but blind but said it was there in the light that her memory worked best.

She was a little girl when Gubbio was terrorised by the wolf.

The wolf was twice the size of any wolf theretofore seen. The old woman raised her hand above her head to show how high. *The wolf devoured not only animals but men,* so everyone was afraid... The first time she saw the wolf it ran along the edge of the wood on the far bank of a shallow stream. The wolf stopped still and eyed her and she dropped her pail and made the sign of the cross, but then the wolf turned and vanished into the wood and when she looked over her shoulder, she saw the face of the holy man called Francesco who was staring into the wood and whose eyes had become fierce and frightening even like the wolf's. Then those fierce eyes turned to her and softened and she laughed because he was Francesco again, the wandering fool whom everybody loved. But the wolf remained near Gubbio...

'It came, Fra, that no man durst leave the city walls! Wherefore San Francesco, who loved our city would go forth against the wolf, albeit our people begged him go not. A crowd followed Francesco into the woods. My mother led me by the hand. And lo, the wolf appeared! *Veramente*, I saw the wolf leap at San Francesco with jaws agape, wherefore San Francesco made the sign of the Cross and commanded the wolf in the name of Christ and the wolf fell down at San Francesco's feet. Said Francesco: "Friar Wolf, thou slayest God's creatures without his leave, even destroying His own image! But I would make peace between this city and thee." And the wolf did bow his head to say he took San Francesco's words. Wherefore Francesco promised the wolf sustenance from the men of the city. "For well I ween," said Francesco, "thou hast wrought this evil to satisfy a hunger". And Francesco made the wolf promise to harm neither man nor beast thereafter and lo, the wolf whimpered like a dog and abideth.'

The grandson smiled nervously.

'*É vero*, Nona? Art thou very sure about the wolf's promise and the whimpering?'

The old woman rose in her seat and Brother Bernardo stopped writing.

'*Abbassa i toni!*... Do not contradict me, boy. Wast thou there or I?'

'Thou, Nona, of course. But – '

'Were you afraid, Padrona?' Brother Bernardo asked. 'When you went to the realm of the wolf that day?'

‘Nay, Fra. Who could be afraid in the presence of San Francesco? He was like a joke that laughed at everything but God. All powers of Darkness fled him, for fear they would be laughed at also. Nay, but the wolf did swear and take San Francesco’s heel and the two walked back into the *Palaza della Signoria* to show the people their covenant?’

‘Nona,’ laughed the grandson nervously, ‘art thou certain about the wolf’s following San Francesco even into the Palaza?’

The man was content to let his grandmother tell these stories to Gubbio’s children, but here was a friar of San Marco’s – a man who could write.

‘Dost thou think these eyes that are dark now were never lit? Wast thou there in the days of San Francesco? Thou wast not yet a gleam in thy father’s black eye! *Veramente*, there was a covenant! Though some would not honour it and the wolf needed God’s protection still. I fed the wolf for two years thereafter, put a plate of milk and mutton fat at my father’s door, and the wolf came to the bowl, and I removed the ticks behind his ears with olive oil.’

‘What happened after two years?’ Bernardo asked.

‘The wolf he died of old age. ‘Twas a great sadness, especially to me, whom the people had christened Lupina, as I favoured the wolf among animals and the wolf favoured me among children. San Francesco himself patted me on the head on the day he returned to Gubbio and asked after Friar Wolf and I told him with tears in my eyes what had passed. Said San Francesco, “Poor *Pieta Lupina*. Tell your story of the wolf of Gubbio to the little ones all your years.”’...

‘Do wolves have souls?’ asked the wide-eyed oblate who sat beside Bernardo.

‘San Francesco must have thought so.’

The boy gasped.

‘My father is a woodsman. He ties wolves up in trees and skins them. I will pray for him.’ And the boy ran off, eluding his custodian who had gone to sleep by the hay store.

Bernardo wrote by candlelight in his cell. He had been credulous when he heard the story of the wolf from the mouth of the old woman. Her great age lent the story the authority of time. But he had reservations now his own hand arranged it. Perhaps the

old woman's story, the language she used, was all she had to describe a thing she saw but could not understand, and the way San Francesco was with the wolf fell between the gaps in words. Still, he was determined to be the instrument and not the player, and to let the layman's voice sound as clearly as the voices of the learned. He continued in the idiom until the story was written.

He picked up a leaf of shorthand taken from a priest of the *Convento di San Damiano*, who recalled the tradition of how the first saints had appeared to Francis in raiments of gold. Bernardo looked at his gold-flickering candle and was pleased with this image of glory. He was pleased until he wrote words the priest attributed to God in conversation with Francis: *Just as gold is nobler than clay and balm nobler than water...* He sighed and scraped a splinter from his quill. He thought of the gold threads in the weft of a tapestry that adorned the priest's quarters. He had no contempt for a man storing the value of his work in a thing that was somehow permanent, but he wondered if the gold of the story belonged to the priest rather than God. Yet he must go on recording what traditions he heard until older stories contradicted them.

At September's end Brother Bernardo presented his work for the abbot's approval. When he was summoned to the triforium later in the day the abbot sucked his teeth and shook his head, tapped his yellow fingernail on the parchment.

'The Fraticelli are still in living memory, Brother Bernardo. There remain those in the Holy See who regard us as schismatics.'

'With respect, I think you overstate the matter, Father.'

'Perhaps. Nonetheless...' The fingernail came down on the page again. 'This of Francesco speaking a strange tongue to a wolf in Gubbio – this, you must see, has the hint of magic about it.'

'What would you have me do?'

'Have him command the wolf with simple words. Latin. And this of the girl, Lupina...'

'Yes, Father?'

'The people may pass on their own folklore. We must keep to works of philosophy and the acts of the saints. It is enough to say the wolf remained in Gubbio two years.'

'Yes, Father.'

'And the script, Brother! What is the point of a book of the Saint in the vernacular?' Bernardo almost answered, *to be read*, but held his tongue. 'Umbrian at that! San Francesco is already known here. Letters are for the literate,' said the abbot. 'Let us

preserve the walls of the Church, Brother. The book will be in Latin. It will not be called *Wildflowers*, as you have it, but the *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Cius*.’

‘As you wish, Father.’

Brother Bernardo went to private reading and prayer. In his cell he dreamt of the true book of St Francis that seemed destined to elude him.

He began to write again that afternoon and the sun lit the ilex woods with a hue of heaven such as was said to have accompanied Francis when he prayed there. He imagined he saw the saint kneeling. But then the twilight came and replaced the light of glory with its deep uncertainty. Shortly the night would make a falsehood of all visions. Perhaps there was no truth. Perhaps St Francis was something ordinary, lit by the light of men’s dreams. How could such a one have existed? How could innocence and worldliness share a house? A gust of wind came and twisted the candle-flame and was gone. ‘What is true?’ Bernardo asked the wind.

*

Shorncliffe was quiet yet alive with the sleepless ocean and wandering children. Up and down Yundah Street the Queenslanders were shaped by the presence of the sea, with panoramic front windows and enormous decks. Long-bearded men sat in a row on the sleepout of a ramshackle guesthouse. They wore shorts and singlets and drank beer through balmy nights watching ocean and sky. The ocean, the sky, promised infinity ... and time seemed to pool here. The men on the sleepout were ancient and disinterested Fates letting time’s thread spool out around their bare feet. Too lazy to find the scissors and make a beginning or end of anything.

High up on Yundah Street, overlooking the broadwater and the pier, was a gold-lit café. In its dining room were framed photographs of local boats, sand dunes and watery dawns. Van and Maria bought their dinner there and walked to a table beneath a Moreton Bay Fig. They ate fresh-caught whiting and chips doused in lemon juice. There was just enough light to watch the water leaving the pools in the sandflats to the north. The dank smell of the flats rose up from the water to the esplanade. He had said he would not drive her, but today came and he could not let her take the bus alone. He could not wash his hands without the stain reappearing like some awful miracle. So, drive her he did. He had led her into sin with love; her father had led her further with pragmatism; till only a small step was needed by her to consummate the thing. Van

had sat in a park across the street and waited and wondered at how an infinite amount of pain could be fit into a day. Afterwards they had driven here, to the ocean.

‘Strange to be at the beach and not hear waves,’ said Maria after a long silence.

‘I like the flat water,’ Van said. ‘So little sound over such a vast space. Space and silence are this country’s most precious possessions, though we seem desperate to get rid of them.’ He looked out into that great emptiness between water and stars. ‘The islands protect this place ... from more than waves.’

It was true the lack of surf at Shorncliffe had spared it from the tourism that ravaged the beaches north and south of here. Even from the city’s highest point, at Mount Coot-Tha, you could see the highrise resorts clustering together in patches on the coastline north and south of here.

‘You see everything.’

Maria’s high nose and long, gently-curling dark hair made her very beautiful to him and when she turned in profile he sighed.

‘Well, you’ve nearly done with final year,’ he said, having thought hard of something to say that would not recall the day.

‘I still have six-months’ probation. Dad wants me to join an agency and work casual contracts for a year or two, for the pay. After that I’ll travel.’

He hated it when she spoke of a future that did not include him.

‘Join *Medicins Sans Frontieres* in Africa.’ They had planned to go to Africa together. ‘You can do that the day you graduate. Travel and work at once. To hell with your dad and his money. He’s got plenty already.’

Maria looked down at the table. He did not mean to upset her any more than she already was.

‘I only meant it would be good for you. You’re compassionate.’ Van hoped that was not a lie. He would love her either way. Surely it was true. He remembered when they had sat at this very table and been innocently in love, when the world had not yet gotten between them. He thought how innocence lasts such a very short while in this world. If only you knew it when you had it. Then you might be able to hold on to it a little better. A little longer. He looked up at the stars that reserved a little less brightness for him than before. And he wondered why we can only know heaven in exile. And he wondered if it were possible to feel so much pain that God pitied you and you earned the way back.

‘How is your writing going?’ Maria asked.

Van took the Dover thrift edition of *The Little Flowers* from his bag and laid it on the table. ‘I don’t want to put my name to a thesis anymore. I don’t want to see my words in print. I only want to be quiet and listen.’ Van tapped the paperback. ‘I read this constantly.’ Maria dragged the book across the table and opened it very delicately and Van saw that she was crying. She was careful not to let tears stain its pages.

Van watched her and thought how a page stained by a tear, greased by her fingers would remind him of her. A book is a map of all the places it is read. One need only look up from a book to the landscape for the words to be infected, and the landscape could be altered by the words. A certain girl’s smile on one night in time might settle in between phrases and wait to be rediscovered; just as there were sentences that hid in rock pools and hung across certain sunsets.

Maria opened *The Little Flowers* at a random page.

‘Why do you love it so much?’

‘Because it’s beautiful and sane.’

Maria sniffled.

‘You’ve written in it ... you’ve changed the words.’

‘Very small changes.’

‘You said you didn’t want to write anymore.’

She pointed to the description of saints who appeared to St Francis in the woods. Now in pencil they were ‘announced by ethereal sound and robed in white light’ instead of gold garments. He had written this only a hundred yards down the beach, three nights ago while listening to the wind and watching the stars rise above the lambent water.

‘That’s different. That’s not my voice.’

‘Whose is it then?’

He thought.

‘The book’s.’

He took the book back. He did not want her to see what he had written in the margins the night before, alone in the university library. He did not want her to read where in King James’ English he had made himself the wolf of Gubbio, the destroyer and corruptor of goodness that Maria’s father took he and all of his faith and race to be.

Despite the man, Maria had accepted Van's friendship and then his love. So he pencilled in an episode of a little dark-eyed girl he called Lupina who was a special friend of the wolf and who set out a bowl of lard and milk for it each day. And this after Francis had commanded the wolf in strange silence, such as he stood in on the beach tonight, when another language, another universe seemed on the verge of erupting into this, and all their movements seemed eternal.

He flipped to that page, read the last few pencil sentences that contained the little girl, *Lupina*.

'What are you smiling at?'

'I'll show you one day.'

The sea breathed over an infinity of water making them shiver. Van looked into Maria's eyes and his heart pained.

'Come home with me,' he said.

She shook her head. And he knew then they sat in two different worlds, the closeness of their bodies was a lie. They inhabited two solitudes.

She looked down to the pier where a few fisherman and children still stood under lamps.

'Let's walk,' she said. 'I want people around me tonight.'

*

Brother Bernardo sat with an irreconcilable collection of writings. This last year of collecting the oral tradition had added a tale of St Francis wrestling with the Devil and the Devil's revenge by causing a landslide with the swish of his tail. And he had just now returned from hearing a tale of St Francis beating the Devil at dice. Bernardo filed it with the others. These sat beside the official accounts of an implausibly obsequious Francis before the machinery of Rome. Yet Thomas of Celano had written a story of the saint admonishing Otto IV as the Emperor passed the friar's hovel at Rivo Torto to be crowned by the Pope. And a letter had been discovered and attributed to St Francis that reminded all the rulers of the world that 'when death comes, everything they think they have will be taken away'.

Bernardo was overwhelmed. Somewhere in the maze of words before him – in the nonsense tales, supplemented memories, politics and ecclesiastical agendas – was St Francis, present but lost.

‘I am defeated,’ he said to Brother Hauswald.

The old follower of St Bruno looked up and smiled sympathetically and returned to accreting his own thoughts on sound and silence to the book that had occupied him this last month. Bernardo looked over his shoulder. He knew the book – he had transcribed it himself in *La Marche*. He watched Brother Hauswald’s glossing hand shape a passage of Boethius he knew well, but then one he did not recall...

Wrote Brother Hauswald:

Existeth three elements of sound: the silence at the beginning which containeth only God, the anomalous sound, and the silence after. But this last silence possesseth memory, in which the sound joineth God’s silence. Just so, God loses nothing. Though His Word break and fade in our ears as waves on a shore, and finally go to nothing, yet he can resound it. Babylon may fall and Jerusalem rise at a single blast of the horn.

A tear came to Bernardo’s eye. You sit day after day, he thought, beside a man who can write that, thinking him dull because he says nothing and undesirous of fame writes his own words into the books of others... The tear fell upon a smile.

Bernardo resolved to commit an act of faith:

Two books he must write. One in Latin for the abbot and one in the vernacular: each with episodes the other did not contain. Facsimile books would call each other original, but dissimilar sisters would suggest a forebear: a forbear his *Fioretti* and the Latin work could excuse themselves as being inadequate copies of. So, readers would believe in the true and unwritten original. For the *Fioretti* he would choose only those stories that kept with the sense of poetry and romance given him by his mother’s songs as a child. He would make the book shorter than the Latin work, that he would call *Actus*, give it room to grow. The books themselves must be the true authors, guide unknown hands through climates he could not imagine, whisper to scribes, and in some monastery, perhaps far distant in time and space, an unknown redactor, last in a line of many and with the guidance of the Holy Ghost, would write the last words of the true book of Saint Francis. The son that would discover its father and become it.

He would send the book away from Italy, to wait until the schisms were not so fierce... He cried out to the monk beside him,

‘Dear Brother Hauswald, I am defeated, but you will succeed. My book must discover its antecedent in the distant future. When do you return to the Chartreuse?’

Brother Hauswald held up a finger, turned his hand over and wriggled his fingers like falling snow. The beginning of winter.

‘I have a book for the library there. It is in Italian. It will be quiet.’

*

‘Pain is the writer’s chief instrument,’ said the professor taking up a little blue cheese on a cracker. ‘It will fuel your books. And I hate to lose a good scholar.’

Van’s eyes were not on the professor but gazing out the window, following a dark-haired girl along a path who turned into the lamplight and was not her. Let others write books, he thought. I only ever wanted one thing, it is gone and I would have given all the books in the world for it.

‘I’m sure at last,’ said the professor, ‘you would have written something memorable.’

‘There are people in this life I want to remember, who I want to remember me, and by more than a name and an article.’

‘I see,’ said the professor with knitted brow, not seeing at all. ‘But I was thinking of a book. Then you might get yourself a faculty position.’

Van uncorked the bottle of wine he had brought for the farewell. He poured two glasses.

‘I’ll be sorry to go,’ he lied, for his heart had room for only one sadness tonight. ‘But the project I started will never be completed.’

‘If some librarian or palaeographer could uncover the original *Floretum*,’ the professor mused. ‘Then there would really be material for a new angle on Francis’ *Flowers*. Though lately a despairing school of thought says the Latin *Actus* must be the first and Wadding was wrong to suppose the *Floretum*.’ He packed his pipe and smiled. ‘Bartolommeo Pisano raised Francis’ similitudes with Christ to forty at the end of the 14th century; in the Decadence, Pedro Astorgo’s ran to four thousand. But you know this.’

‘I’ve seen some of them,’ said Van. And he thought of Padre Cesari’s 1822 Classic, where additions to the first known volume of *fioretti* – found in Berlin – were

accepted or declined on merits of spirit. In the age of libertines and the birth of popular literature, Cesari had avoided the *Fioretti* becoming a repository of entertainments. But there would be no more classic editions. There was nothing left to feed them. A book for the religious in the Middle Ages was not an ossified statement but an organic investigation into truth. The monks could not have foreseen the changes around the corner from their age: the printing press, copyright laws, impeccable research tools purporting to put their scientific light to all arcana forever. They could not have known that shortly their work would be embalmed.

‘Perhaps at last,’ the Professor sighed, ‘there is no truth to be gained from *The Little Flowers*. I never told you, Van, about the first time I was in Assisi. I arrived late at night and nothing was visible. When the sun rose the next day, it flooded the land with light and the old basilica seemed to shimmer. Giotto’s frescoes awoke with such a life you thought the figures might leap from the walls. Whole panels made perfect, glorious sense. Later that evening I returned from the hills. An art critic had set up a scaffold in the nave to examine the paintings. His lamp and mirror threw beams of light specifically on the walls, showing the poorly formed arms, the grimacing faces, all without harmony, grotesque. All light deceives. That is the paradox of history. We may prefer the lie told by the sun, because it is most beautiful, but it is still a lie.’

‘You object to the *Fioretti*’s miracles,’ said Van.

The professor smiled.

‘If your God did exist, miracles would be immoral. All men should be equal before God. To choose Francesco Bernardone over another man makes God a politician. Why not the mother of a malnourished son in India? Why not the father of any dead child? We forgive the authors of the *Fioretti*, of course. They are, historically, juvenile. They have the same reactions to phenomena – vague forms of trees, eerily moonless nights, as children. But, as much as we respect them, we must not remake their mistakes.’

‘How do you account for all the credible witnesses of Francis’ stigmata? Or St Pio’s?’

‘I believe in the wounds. Who knows what is possible for the human mind?’

‘You mean auto-suggestion. That the wounds are dreamed up?’

The professor shrugged. He would not have put it so bluntly.

‘It is easier for me to believe in God,’ said Van. ‘I have no luck dreaming things into reality, and some things I have wished for harder than any man could wish for anything. I pray for miracles.’

‘Do they happen?’

‘No. But I am not worthy.’

The professor furrowed his brow.

‘But are you sure you’re ready to throw it all in?’

‘Yes,’ said Van, and looked down at the students passing through the lit courtyard. ‘I’m going to Vietnam. There is a mission there near La Vang. With the language I can be of use.’

‘Noble of you,’ sighed the professor, and just then one of the faces on the path was hers and Van shook the professor’s hand and ran down the stairs.

He took a ruffled paperback from his bag, bent and dog-eared with use and marked occasionally with pencil – in the first instance, the title page where he had written erased and then written again: *For Maria and all the innocent*. She read the last word and cried. ‘I’m sorry, Van. I’m so sorry.’ And he knew he had been right to leave it in.

‘I’m going away soon. I love you. Remember me by this book. There’s not another quite like it in the world. Perhaps some distant day I’ll explain it. Take it to Africa.’

They embraced. She wiped tears from her eyes with her fists.

‘We must spend a night before you go,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said Van, knowing well this would be their last meeting, intending that.

He rode the bus back along Sandgate Road to his house. ‘A joy to me is every pain’: he remembered St Francis’ say at the end of *The Little Flowers*, and it was as though he had written the words himself, without having to alter a thing, without even the book in his hand. And he dreamt of a day that may come, in this world or some other, when he was not Vietnamese, and she was not Greek, or that they were Vietnamese and Greek both, and more, and their child was not gone. He would leave it to time, to the silence that lay on the water out the train’s window and promised every sound.

*

‘How is he?’ said the abbot.

The hospitator who had been caring for the old friar called Bernardo shook his head.

‘He has not long, Padre. It is time for the sacrament.’

The abbot went to get the oil of anointing.

Meanwhile, Brother Bernardo, for whom every breath was an effort, looked out his window to the stars and his mind travelled many years back to a Carthusian to whom he had entrusted a book. He saw the old man now, with beard the colour of the snow he walked through and with the book in a bag on his back. That monk was walking through the white stars to the Chartreuse in the Alps and wolves and bandits and even snow stood back from his way and the stars hung in the snow laden ilex and fell through the black branches of the beech and he wondered how he saw them since everything was so white. Then came the voice of the abbot reading the extreme unction to someone though Bernardo did not care enough to wonder who as a great wind had blown the words away and the wind carried with it the prayer after the Canon for all Night Vigil and the prayer was written in a sky of strange stars and in the stars he saw a dark-haired dark-eyed girl with resplendent face like the Madonna and though she was not the Madonna the children called her Maria and smiled and their eyes lit like stars in faces of shining ebony and the girl called Maria read to them from a book in which each word was a star and a flake of snow and the light of a child’s face and a flake of snow and a note of the prayer of a small ragged man kneeling alone in the woods who looked through the trees at Bernardo and smiled.

Patrick Holland is a novelist, short story writer and Assistant Professor of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is the author of seven books including The Mary Smokes Boys (2010) and The Darkest Little Room (2014), published in 2020 as La Donna del Club 49: Un noir in Vietnam by O Barro O Edizioni. Holland’s work has been recognised by such as the Miles Franklin Award, the Dublin Literary Award, the International Scott Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and has been published, performed and broadcast in Australia, the USA, the UK and Ireland, Italy and Japan. His stories have been published in The Griffith Review and Best Australian Stories amongst others.

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Julia Prendergast

3 stories

Orange

Look at that beautiful orange dress, I say, standing still on the footpath and turning to my adult daughter. I shift closer to examine the webbed lace, like an orange daisy chain, running in all directions.

You could pull that off, she says.

I have wondered, on many occasions since, precisely what it means to pull-something-off. Is it a pass or something else altogether?

Orange memories – bonfire flames in the wayward wind – relentless returns, endurable deficits, irreconcilable extremes...

Tell me it's true for you, too – the flaming rift

today's riddle, yesterday's embers.

I know you feel it, too.

Tell me again what we might do to each other – it will ignite a memory, thirty years new – the boy with the marbly biceps who scoured me orange.

Freefalling

You are here in your gone-ness.

Your freefalling a becoming.

I replay the memories in colour so I don't overlook what I mustn't forget.

That it's possible to love deliberately – when you're freefalling – when the ground is suddenly gone.

You make a run for it, kitchen to bathroom.

In the midway, in the 'living' room, your head thwacks floorboards – mottled veins, purple, spreadeagled.

Orange vomit sideswipes your face like a backslap. It pools on the floorboards, glistening in the afternoon light – catching purple like a rainbow...

Misguided hands, blood orange slippage – thoughts scramble, orange-purple.

Now I write it – *Now*, I see.

Back then, you were already here, in our tomorrows, even as the suffering turned you sideways.

Crossed wires

Our wires are crossed – a copper-lit crossing of wires – but never mind, it’s just a game – a family version of *Guess Who*?

Extended family (dead, alive, present, othered), they’re all here in the game, represented by their photo and first name.

The guessing begins.

A: *Am I well off?*

B: *No.*

Flip – flip – flip. Down go some of the options (about two thirds).

B: *Am I blood-related?*

A: *No.*

Flip – flip – flip (the board is culled by more than half again).

A: *Have I been to a strip club (to your knowledge)?*

That’s such a random question, I say. I mean how would you know?

Shush. You’re not playing, they say.

B: *Dad, have you been to a strip club?*

No, he says.

B: *He’s doing the lying face, she says, and flips him.*

B: *Do I give-off “mental health problem” vibes?*

That’s so subjective, I say. And so wrongtown...

Go away, they say. You’re not in the game.

But I am in the game – indeed I am – I see my photo.

B (repeats): *Mental health problems – Yes or no?*

If you ask questions like that the game won't work, I say – not unless you DEFINITELY know what the other person thinks.

You're being annoying, they say.

A: *Am I annoying?* They laugh, in unison, as if they are one – psychically aligned.

Flip – flip – flip.

On it goes:

Have I done hard drugs?

Do you like me?

Have I had more than 8 sexual partners?

Do I bat for both teams (or would I like to)?

Am I pretty – at least 6 out 10?

Do I have fucked-up habits?

We all do, I say.

They look at each other. Ignore me.

Am I a reformed smoker?

Do I have a criminal record?

Do I have substance-abuse problems?

Would I punch you? Wait – let me say that again – would you be surprised if you saw me on the news for a violent crime?

Everyone has a tipping point, I say.

You're wrecking the game, they say.

It's not a yes or no question though, I say.

It's a G-A-M-E, they say.

I say: Are you suggesting that some people are not capable of violence, under any possible circumstances?

Go back to your study, they say.

You'll get a false positive, I say, if your wires are crossed.

They roll their eyes. PLEASE fuck off, they say.

Julia's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Julia's short stories feature in the current edition of Australian Short Stories. Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE). Julia is a Senior Lecturer in Writing and Literature, and Academic Director Partnerships and Pathways, at Swinburne University, Melbourne. Her research has appeared in various publications including New Writing (UK), TEXT (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). She is Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia. Julia is an enthusiastic supporter of transdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.

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Peter Nash

Full Service Car Wash

Up for grabs was a novel, or a print, or money. A writer phoned a friend. Get this shit! They're running a competition. They're giving away a Steinbeck, or a Picasso, or cash. The writer friend wanted to know what the writer was smoking. They talked about it and made a bet.

The deal was one writer bet the other that his writing wasn't accomplished enough to win first prize. Hence if said writer accepted said wager and lost, said other writer would win said writer's '66 Sunburst Strat.

On the other hand, if said writer did indeed win first prize, and the story was published, they would collect a Steinbeck first edition. Or a Picasso print. Or cash. Along with the other writer's '66 Gretsch Country Gentleman in Mahogany. However, if the refereed journal chose not to publish said narrative, the writer would walk away empty-handed. Sans super sweet Sunburst Strat.

You know how it is sometimes, when you do things you understand more than likely will not end well. Things like telephoning an ex-lover after a spat with your current paramour. Or signing a contractual agreement with a gymnasium. Or eating a large pizza before bedtime.

All the above is to say, that is how the writer felt. The refereed journal didn't know the writer from Eve. Nor from anyone else. Neither did they care – in the nicest possible way. If you really want to write something. If the idea keeps you from your supper. Or from taking your rest. So be it. Just write the damn thing and send it in.

However, if the notion of writing a story appeals to you but has not engaged you enough to stave off sleep, or perhaps prevented you from polishing windowsills, maybe it might not be a good idea to submit said narrative. In which case, you may never know how it makes a writer feel to see their effort in print. Neither will you win free money, or a novel, or a print of a person puffing on a pipe.

And so it came to pass that the writer considered the idea. There were no guidelines re the construction of the narrative per se. However, the rules stated that for publication purposes the submitted story must relate to a writer writing about writing.

The writer chewed it over and a plethora of possibilities presented. Ideas about writers writing stories about other writers came to mind. And were summarily discarded due to overkill. Actually, not overkill, but because of another thing altogether. A la beaucoup braggadocio.

What then? What to fucking write about? What buckle-swashing tales of do-derring and follicle-raising adventure of the seat pants might suffice? What grand narrative? What sort of wondrous writing, about whimsical writerly folk, going about their well-read writerly affairs, in a wise writerly way, might make the cut?

You know how it is at times when things you think you understand refuse to be understood. Like writing. Like when you come up with an idea for a story, but the story idea doesn't make sense. The narrative works, but not the way you want it to. Like when you purchase something that seems as if it will do the job perfectly. Except, when you get it home, it works okay, but not nearly enough okay, to justify the expense.

The above was how it seemed with the writer's story idea. Every idea about writers, and writing about writing, seemed sauteed with similar sauce. As if the cornflakes were barbequed. Or burnt toast was spread with ice-cream. Or sardines came paired with mandarins. It was the lack of a story idea that kept the writer from both rest and repast. In fact, it drove the poor scribe up the wall and over the top and down again – to descend in despair to the basement below on the antithetical side. What the fuck to write about? And how the fuck to write it?

More than that, no way in any kind of hot or cold or tepid purgatory was said writer gonna miss out on a chance to win a Steinbeck signed novel. Or a preeminent print by a preponderant painter. Or a motza of moola.

Accordingly, altogether at wits end, fit to be tied, and beyond bereft of brainstorm, the writer sought refuge in an old trick. An ancient trick from antiquity. A trick with patina and provenance. A trick lots of folks talk about. But deep down disbelieve.

The trick is to open a book. Sans any contemplation. Simply look at a page and note what jumps out. And if there isn't anything, turn a page and more pages and yet more pages until something does. And if things are still not jumping from those pages, on to other pages. At that point things will more than likely be jumping off anyway.

The old trick worked. The old trick worked well. The writer opened a book. A big book. A big book with big words. And small words. And big words that meant small things. And the very first word that the writer's eyes happened to gaze upon was the word *exedra*. Not much there.

According to the big book with big and small words inside, the word *exedra* had to do with recessed spaces within which raised spaces conducive to sitting upon manifest. The Macquarie Dictionary (circa 1985) went on to explain that recesses with raised seating arrangement originated in classical architecture. The very next word caused the writer to straight away retrieve a cold and delicious beverage from the refrigerator.

The writer considered the above. It seemed that there was something there. How might the word *exegesis* work? How might it inculcate itself? And what did it mean anyway? This strange word. This word that somehow brought with it visions of old men with old beards in old caves peering with old eyes, beneath old candlelight in age-old ways at archaic text of very venerable provenance.

A light appeared. It was an idea about the exegetical process. An undertaking the writer somehow understood to indicate a methodological audit of one's own writing. How could this be possible? It did not make sense. If the writer perceived the word *exegesis* to mean what it supposedly meant – that is to say, if the writer's supposition was correct – then in turn it could only mean that those very old men, in those very old caves, must not be very good at writing, if they were still trying to figure out their own writing all these hoary years hence.

Surely the above was incorrect. Another light came on. Maybe the word *exegesis* means an examination of one's own work for some other purpose. Perhaps to explain *why* a writer might write the things they wrote. Further, why a writer might write the things they wrote in the methodological way they wrote them.

At that point in the proceedings so many lights came on it caused the writer to again approach the fridge. So, the refereed academic journal was interested in writers writing about writing. In that case make something up. About a PhD student perhaps. And in turn have something go diabolically wrong. Perhaps said student loses the plot. Or their mind. Or both.

Not enough. The story needs to be much grander than that. Make something more up. What about a story wherein a PhD student becomes a ghost writer for another PhD student who fails to obtain their doctorate but becomes a billionaire anyway?

Perhaps their thesis concerned some futuristic scenario to do with writerly manifestation – an archetype in which the contextually impossible becomes contemporaneously pedestrian. A subject such as what occurs inside a writer’s mind when a writer writes.

For example, imagine said scribe scribbling. All sorts of unseen things must take place. Images appear and are rapidly replaced with other images instantly morphed into more images. Snapshots of repartee blend fragments of riposte with recollections of time in some recondite fashion and then a writer writes it down. Hidden things. And much more. Except of course, in the aforesaid thesis all the above is visible outside said writer’s head. And then one glimmer glow glowed with a peculiar and incandescent luminescence. At least it appeared to said writer that way.

The idea-glow met the rules. A story about a writer writing about writing. The plot was simple. And allowed ample scope for character arc. So much so in fact that the writer would have to be on high alert. Those damn characters can plot a coup de tat faster than a good line’s worth of providential prose can vanish into nothingness if not captured forthwith.

The writer was weary. Tired out and tired of figuring it out. There was so much. And so much to achieve. The protagonist and the plot. And the accordant agony. The writer wanted to go to bed. Sleep seemed a good idea. Sweet sleep sweetest sleep of sweetest slumber which soothes so sweetly. Oh, dazzling dreams of halcyon days and Bacchanalian nights!

And then from somewhere so secret that even if you knew where it was you couldn’t locate it, came an intensified radiance. It was the aforesaid glow glowing with even more glow. Thus, the writer wrote the idea down. And at once ascribed to it the following:

Marbles and Nightmares and Exegetical Exigence

It was an account concerning a PhD student who upon completion of the creative product determines to celebrate. Hence, in due course, libation appropriate for an occasion of such ascendancy arrives on said PhD student’s doorstep.

It was a big night. A very big night. A night of very long and very late event. A celebratory night of celebration most celebratory. Folk were happy. And manifested their happiness appropriately. A guitar was procured. And song and beer and wine and whisky were sampled and sung not necessarily in that order. Someone told a joke. Another person thought it amusing. And told another joke. And then somebody told one more.

Piles of plates upon which sat fat sandwiches. And other plates with slices of bread wrapped around green asparagus and some sort of blue cheese. And those rolled around green asparagus and blue sort of cheese were skewered neatly with thin triangular toothpicks.

Anyway, it was a big night. And later on, a bag of marbles inadvertently hit the floor. And a whole lot of marbles came out. And rolled around everywhere. First out of the bag were the Cat's Eyes. And hot on the heels of the Cat's Eyes came the Devil's Eyes. Then the Red Devil's rolled up. Followed closely by a rare Lutz. Next to roll up was an assortment of Aggies and a passel of pearl-coloured Pearls. There were a lot of marbles, and they fucking rolled around all over the place.

At the end of the night everyone went home. And the worn-out PhD student staggered sideways seeking sleep. Only to awake hours later sweat-soaked and layered in lather. A nightmare. A nightmarish mare indeed. A horrible horse. The sort of horrible nightmare that haunts you for days.

Dark dreams. Darkest dreams of darkest places. Foreboding and evil in nature. Dreams about places where writers routinely die. Where unspeakable acts occur. Places writers don't want to talk about. Where all manner of abominations cause said writers to shudder and shiver and dither most ditheringly. Terrible things come to pass there. In places where writers are required to write about their own writing. Where writers and their writing can perish swiftly. Never to be seen again. And other places where writers write about all of the above.

Thus, the hapless PhD student, snatched from slumber in a manner most brutal, hit the kitchen, desperately seeking salvation. Oh, coffee most saviour-like! Frantically, the hastily attired, brutally awakened, PhD student fumbled in the dark kitchen. And, after having circled the toaster twice, and a whistling type of teapot thrice, he got said saving coffee percolating. And an anticipatory joy of jiving java jivingly jived the hastily dressed and brutally awakened student.

It was found later that the culprit culpable for causing said student to smash his head against the sink was an Aggie. And before long an egg appeared. A great big egg. Not quite as big as that of an ostrich. But nevertheless, a rather large egg indeed.

And before long a problem manifested, as these things sometimes seem to go. That very day, the PhD student determined to commence work on his exegetical component. Except now something was not right. The egg-headed PhD candidate could not recall writing the writing. Or put another way, could not remember writing the creative product or about the apropos writing process – questions such as why the structure established itself in that specific form, why certain things appeared within the narrative at certain times and other things did not. And all manner of other things like that. And of course, standing on a marble and smashing one's head against a

sink, and the attendant journey to the downside, made it impossible for said student to proceed with exegetical exigence.

The End

The writer adjudged the above somewhere between a six and a seven, on a scale where one is shit and ten is shit-hot. And he held out hope that the judges at the journal of academic repute might consider the tale worthy of a higher score. Possibly as high as an eight or even a nine. A ten would be a rare thing indeed – more than likely removed from the fucking equation entirely.

Be that as it may, the writer believed above all in powerful positive thought. Thus, a space was set aside suitable to display a signed Steinbeck. And a space beside that with which to display the '66 Gretsch Country Gentleman in Mahogany.

It was a rare day. Birds chirped. And a cat watched a bird. Red bus at a stop. Looking up, the blue sky seemed somehow scoured. White cloud from a Full Service Car Wash.

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Dean Kerrison

Squiggly Red Lines

Light smashes through the single-laned forest road, through the glass sunroof onto the steering wheel and shining Elvira's crossed thighs.

'Will you write about me?' Elvira's tone is of curiosity and controlled excitement.

Often they're indifferent as long as you change their names. But sometimes they'll demand you don't write anything about them at all, even though you weren't planning to, or even if they're given an alias, even when the stakes will never rise above surface level. Squiggly red lines, ever-present, waiting to be straightened out into bloody blades. If Elvira has these lines, they're faint.

'Nah, probably not.'

'Why not?'

'Doesn't fit my niche of a stranger in a strange land. I'm in my home country.' As if we're not exploring novel terrain now. But it still feels familiar – I've been here before and we all know how this narrative arc shapes up, where it ends. But we come back for more, for the next experience, recapturing the past with the rush of the new. Then the tale might be immortalised as words on screen, or at least the way it's reconstructed, etched into digital cement as if photos and videos within our phones and heads don't already tell the full picture. I have no plans to write this story. But whether you like it or not, yarns have a funny way of persisting.

‘Plus, I don’t write about many impactful things...’ I continue, thinking of someone else, then another one else from the past few years. ‘...It’s just about narrative, a lot of the time – how I think the story or event will look on the page.’

This is only partly true. In some cases, maybe stories were never pencilled because our plots haven’t fully been resolved in my mind. Perhaps the words are withheld because I haven’t accepted those short stories have come to their natural ending, even when they’d moved on and I’d flown off, again. Hitting the keyboard equates to closure. Part of me may’ve been hanging on for another section, chapter, part, sequel, series.

Elvira was once the stranger, in this country. She told me half an hour ago, after I’d collected her from the train station. A shy kid in Manila poverty, she was only twelve when her family moved to Australia. She was living with her aunt while her parents were often working abroad, in Hong Kong and Singapore, to eventually afford her and her brothers a better life.

‘Can I drive?’ she asks in no timid manner.

If I were surprised, I’d sigh or roll my eyes – the same old process that many women run in courtship. She doesn’t actually want to drive. Rather it’s a test of my strength, resolve, boundaries. Women love being told no. So, I play the part, the character.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’re not allowed.’

‘I’m a princess, I get what I want.’

‘Yeah. We’ll see about that. I bet you don’t even have a manual licence.’

She does not have one. She wants to open the sunroof and presses buttons around it and all over the dashboard.

‘Stop touching stuff.’ I sip a high-protein chocolate milk – Elvira is lactose-intolerant – wondering in what chapter the bratty makeup might dissolve and reveal the natural skin.

At the Monday end of a boys trip in Melbourne, four of us wind up at a Southbank bar. Sunlit, open-air, riverside. It’s 10am. Sleep-deprived. Not sober. Elvira serves us espresso martinis. On the second or third sip I drop my glass, smashing it on the

ground beside us, the cocktail spreading over the concrete. I blame a mate for bumping the table. When Elvira sweeps up the shattered glass, another mate says, 'I'm so sorry', on behalf of the group.

My three mates leave as they've got a flight at 2 or 3pm. My flight isn't until 8. So I stay at the bar alone. Pints of beer consistently empty and refill. I tell Elvira, 'You're *that* fuckin' hot,' which makes her smile warmly. Weeks later she'll tell me that it was this 'magnetism' that attracted her, this directness and not caring, unlike the usual male customers who would ask a friend to go up to Elvira to ask her number for them. She'll also later tell me she'd asked her female colleague if I was hitting on everyone, including said colleague, but her answer to Elvira was no.

Despite having not showered in a day or two, I grace through the half-empty bar as if I own it. With Elvira standing next to me I photograph a passing dog wearing a sky-blue saddle; I don't remember this until Elvira messages me the next day to send her the photo. I tell her I'll skip my flight home and sleep at her place tonight. When she suggests this probably won't happen as she'll finish late, I ask her when her break is so we can 'walk along the river and maybe even hold hands'. My smile shows awareness of how ridiculous a thing this is to say. She laughs and says she doesn't know what time her break is but we can do it the next day if I'm still here.

Sipping whatever number of beer I'm up to, I try reading John le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. The main character Leamas feigns becoming a decadent alcoholic to win the trust of the enemy. But there's no acting on my part, nor any subtlety, too out of sorts to make much of the words, tossing the book on the table.

Avalon Airport is way too far away, it's decided. I don't go to Elvira's but a mate's place. A Jane Austen novel is on his bookshelf. I message Elvira that I recently found out I'm a distant relative of the famous novelist herself. This is true. It doesn't occur to me why she'd believe me or why she'd even care. I sleep on an inflatable mattress.

At 5am the air bed is deflated, waking me up to freezing tiles. The past few days have caught up with me. I don't go anywhere near Southbank. I take a new flight and tell Elvira to let me know if she'll ever be up my way.

We're too early in Noosa to check in so we stop for lunch to kill time. On the street I go to hold her hand.

'No. Not yet.'

'Yeah, it's *way* too early,' I reply and create further distance.

At a pub, over chicken parmys and vodka lime sodas, among many things she asks, 'Why do you like to be a writer?'

This is a question I should have a readymade answer for, a rehearsed script in my head. Why do baseball players play baseball? Why do chess masters play chess? Why do vampires only come out at night?

'It's a way of trying to make sense of the world and my own mind.'

About to cross the road, she grabs my hand.

'I thought it was too soon for this,' I react.

At the resort, we try charming the European receptionist woman into giving us an upgrade as it's my birthday tomorrow.

'It's our five-year anniversary and she's come up from Melbourne to visit me.'

The receptionist says they can't as it's supposedly booked out, but gives us a bottle of champagne.

After putting our stuff in the room, we walk down the hill to the beach for sunset. She acts coy about me taking a photo of her. Sitting on the sand she tells me she saw phosphorescence on a beach in Sydney, shows me random pictures of the phenomenon on Instagram in random places.

'Phosphorescence is a myth,' I say. 'I haven't seen it so it doesn't exist.'

Elvira tells me this orange-pink sunset is as pretty as in Byron Bay when she was there a few months ago. When a dude she was sleeping with there noticed she was on the Gold Coast yesterday – so close yet so far – he asked why she didn't tell him she was nearby.

'I wanted to see you,' she tells me.

In reality, it's because her story with him has already played out in full. No epilogue needed. With me, the plot is new and could go in any direction – most importantly, a trajectory unknown.

In some arcade bar, we're the only patrons. After a few minutes of air hockey, we drink shit cocktails on stools at a nearby table. I tell her I like how the artificial light refracts and reflects across her face. The reds and blues and the in-between purple shades are all fake, like everything going on here. I mime taking a photo of her with my hands, then tap on the memory bank of my brain, saved.

By dinner, raindrops are falling and the restaurant we stop at is full besides a few outdoor tables under umbrellas that aren't completely rain-proof. An acoustic guitarist is strumming inside. The host says we need to sit socially distanced, meaning we can't sit next to each other, must be facing. Everyone inside the restaurant is basically on top of each other. Tables cramped to fit as many as possible indoors. Families lined up on a booth. People swerving through the gaps back and forth.

'Fuck him,' I say. 'We're here together.' We share pizza side-by-side, listen to the chillout tunes, drizzle leaking through to my shirt and pants but not Elvira's, drowned out by espresso martinis.

The hot tub in the apartment takes forever to fill. I pour in the entire bottles of complimentary shampoo and conditioner. While waiting we dip in the main guest pool, then chill in the adjoining spa. Elvira says she's not a good swimmer. In the heat we talk, kiss, chat some more amid gulps of Vodka Cruisers. With the jets pumping our backs, she talks about her and her mum, all good things – details I can't remember. I dive into the cool deep expanse, swimming eyes-closed underwater to get to the other end. It seems I'm veering offtrack. I stop moving but momentum carries me forward.

Thump.

My head and then shoulder rebound off the side wall of the pool. Bubbles shoot from my mouth as I wince. Re-emerging above the surface, my hand grips my head.

'Oh my god,' Elvira says poolside, 'are you okay?'

'I think so.'

Inside, the foam has reached up and out of the tub, spread across the floor. Grazes are above my eye and on my shoulder.

Elvira takes a video of me. 'What happened?' she laughs.

'What do you mean, "what happened?" I was born like this.'

She laughs more. 'Why did you hit your head?'

I reach for a towel.

'You're actually bleeding pretty bad.'

'It probably looks worse than it is.'

'Yeah.'

‘Lucky it wasn’t worse though. Don’t think you would’ve been diving in to save me.’

Music on Bluetooth speaker. We immerse in the foam. Cruisers turn into the underwhelming champagne. Steam and candles.

She talks about polyamorous relationships, how they’re better.

‘Everyone in normal relationships end up cheating on each other in some way anyway,’ she says.

I tell her I think it’s cool for people to live the way they choose and I have no judgement about that. ‘But are you really into it? Or are you running from something? Like a defence mechanism.’

People are free to do as they wish, she says, to fulfil their desires in full openness with their partner. You can’t break trust if there are no secrets to hide.

I keep digging, probing. It’s as if Elvira’s trying to convince herself as much as me that she believes it. Eventually she cracks.

‘Because it wouldn’t be sustainable,’ she says.

Foam. Heat. Darkness.

In the closeness lies a gulf.

A few days later after she’s gone, she’ll message me that she wants to learn how to write short stories. ‘How do I do it in the beginning?’

‘Honestly best way of starting is just to simply write without thinking too much about it. Not worrying about how it looks, sounds, or what the grammar is like, etc. Just getting whatever you want down on paper/screen.’

Thinking too much about anything is a sure-fire way to screw yourself up.

I should take my own advice better with our short story, moving more back and forward in time as I please, because that’s the witchcraft that writers are supposed to possess, time-travelling, presenting worlds that we’re apparently in control of. And because I don’t recall most of our narrative as neat sections of plot with complete sentences of descriptive setting and specific actions and recorded quotes, I won’t write the rest of it that way. Elvira is etched in my mind as fragmented images.

Hungover. Fuck all sleep. Café. Host checks us in manually for the COVID-safe record. Pull out chair for Elvira and she doesn't realise until about to sit on another chair. 'I'm not used to anyone doing that for me.' Benedict eggs and orange juice.

Email from my PhD supervisor detailing all the changes I need to urgently make to my one-year milestone report in short time.

Think of silly things Elvira's done. Had drunkenly booked her flight up here for the wrong week and day of the week. After I'd booked the Airbnb and double-checked the dates with her which she confirmed were okay, she came back a day or two later saying she has plans to catch up with a friend in Brisbane the first night of the Airbnb, so I cancelled that night and paid the fee. Left her debit card and ID at her home as she was high, realised at airport, I told her set up your phone for contactless pay.

Lie on grass at the top of Noosa Headland walk. Elvira taking constant selfie photos and videos, me feeling dead. Return birthday calls. Takeaway chicken poke bowls to the apartment. Nap in air-conditioning. BYO candles at restaurant for dinner. Her ex-boyfriend who died. He is dead and she is here. My non-attempt to provide comforting words because words rarely do this. I have eyes and I have hands. She writes me a text at the table. I don't open it until later.

Happy birthday!!! I know it's late but I wanted to let you know that you have an amazing soul, love that you're spontaneous as me and definitely do not regret spending my days up here with you. Keep being real. And cheers to many more dates in the future, Love El.

In the sheets. Going to Gold Coast late tomorrow. Elvira on Tinder talking to girls she'd matched down there, looking for someone for a threesome. Would you like? she asks. Whatever, if you want, I say. I really don't care. Do you use Tinder? she asks. I have, I say, but I prefer meeting in real life. More chemistry that way. Stories with those from apps are pre-written in a specific limiting genre, never evolving as anything deeper.

A skydiving booking. Delayed for hours, massive winds. A café while waiting for updates. My cappuccino. Her beetroot-something-latte, purple mirage of hopeful emptiness. She drinks lactose – we don't go skydiving.

A Gold Coast writers event. My supervisor saying a creative writing PhD isn't just writing a novel, you've gotta read more. I tried coming in from the cold to read in Melbourne but Elvira brought me right back out of it. Listen to her, Elvira says, I can feel her energy. Shut up, you have no idea about the situation. Watching other writers read their work. Nonfiction. Fake fiction. Poetry.

On a nightlife strip a fight breaking out on footpath and road. Four on one. We're in my car and stuck behind another. Elvira films out the window.

'Don't film. Put it back in the fucking car.'

'Why?'

'Are you kidding? I don't want them attacking the car or you. You don't know this place.'

Hotel. The last night. In the room can't find her handbag containing her house keys. Thinks she left it in my room on the Sunshine Coast.

At a rooftop bar she breaks down in detail her thoughts on the earlier performances. What worked about the writing, what didn't. In a far deeper way that I could critique. Because writers are often frauds. Not the bearers of infinite knowledge and truth but artists who steal all the good bits and say this is mine. The truth is within the squiggly red lines. In her.

Elvira not allowed in any other bars without ID. Sitting on beachside steps. She says counting down from ten to one, kissing at the end. On two she leans in. I remain still. She says the first time she's tried to kiss a guy first. We only got down to number two, I say, not zero. Walks down road. Why are you walking away from me? I'm not. Okay, I'm here.

The room.

Closeness, almost something, void.

She sleeps. I cannot. Move to the spare bed. Take the distance that's already there.

Morning. Handbag beside spare bed entire time. God knows how it got there. False alarm. Beach too windy to swim but we absorb sun.

'I could fall in love with you if I wanted,' she says.

'What do you mean? You can't just decide if you love someone or not. Doesn't work that way.'

'Yes, it can. I just choose to block those emotions when they happen, if I want.'

I don't tell her you're missing out on life and being less human by avoiding your feelings and not acting on them. It's not my job. She writes her own story.

Dean Kerrison is a PhD candidate at Griffith University, Australia working on his first novel. His work often focuses on the (dis)connection of the outsider in foreign lands. He's had a playscript, fiction, nonfiction and poetry published in TEXT Journal, Meniscus, The Bangalore Review, Joao Roque Literary Journal, The Lit Quarterly, Allegory Ridge, among others.

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Gay Lynch

On dance

‘So we dance, we dance so as not to be dead,’ Ray Bradbury recounts his waiter friend saying,
who danced from midnight until 5 in the morning, after 10-12 hour shifts
at a restaurant near the Eiffel Tower (Bradbury 1951)

‘Dance as if you are dying because during Covid we could be,’
Annie Dillard allegedly said,
and many of us felt this urgency last year (Dillard 1989)

Expressing emotion through dance predates language. Along with many other creative practitioners, I write/dance/write. Movement and music free my thinking but especially in crises. While most of us do not dance forward to spear our enemies’ throats, during Melbourne’s Covid-19 lockdowns, online dance and kick boxing set to music bring me strength. When tension tautens our bodies, dancing releases endorphins that prevent us hurting ourselves or others. It offers creativity and release.

By November 2020, my mind dwells on my mother, trapped in her failing body, poised between life and death in Adelaide. I write this essay in hotel quarantine, waiting to reach her side. At nightfall, during part of my childhood, a neighbouring plumber practises his bagpipes in blue singlet and workers’ stubby shorts, marching up and down our road, drunk as a laird. My mother lifts her skirts above her knees, to Highland fling with great precision, as if the swords of domestic servitude have fallen to the floor, and she dances between the blades. I learned from her, always to dance, for connection, for creativity, and for joy.

I present a paper, on the morning my mother passes. Over six months of lockdowns, both my parents die. In strange compelling ways, my body answers the call to dance. It grinds and pumps with the coffee machine, shakes and spins to the rhythms of the washing machine. Eight months stuck at home since Covid, the kitchen bench serves as ballet barre while I wait for the kettle to boil. My mind seeks ideas, my arms lift in *porte bras*, my pelvis sinks deeper into *plie*, my cat feet *pas de chat*, *glissade*, *glissade*. My body seeks fluency. Explores space around me at every level, tries to enter the air itself, in rhythm and symmetry.

Children do this too – mine anyway – even in the absence of music, flip their heads and hair to staccato sounds, or gyrate to domestic machines. As if they have no choice. Dancing expresses art and instinct, life and death. Dance attacks, fights, flows, fucks. Dance embodies and disembodies. Body/brain, brain/body: deep in the muscle of both.

Robert Dessaix believes that dancing is a mode of thinking, that it boosts cognitive function and that it signifies happiness as an art (2020: 8-10; 273):

Dancer-thinker Jo Pollitt learned from her teacher ballerina Lucette Aldous, “one to think / one to spin, one to think / one to spin. How to make them one I want. To be both ///////////////...” (2020: 33)

During Covid, all around the world, people dance. Professionals stuck at home, maintain flexibility, repertoire, and strength; consumers of TikTok, a Beijing-based tech company ByteDance, exercise to socialise; regular dancers take online classes; families and friends ham up routines; street dancers seize back roads and parks. Dressed as a black cat, my daughter dances online for her students; my cousin raps with her Accident and Emergency staff at the Royal Darwin Hospital; First Nation Americans revive the Jingle Dance, created for powwow healing during the Spanish Flu; Ghana revives funeral dances; Dance Theatre of Harlem dance in the streets to promote mask-wearing; cross-dressing Victorian men dance bringing out their rubbish bins. Contingent grief immobilises many of them. For others seeking catharsis, dancing breaks up the flow of bad news.

Three months after I draft this essay, Helen Garner shares *her* kettle dance in her ‘lockdown diaries’:

While I wait for the kettle, I do a little dance in my woollen socks, pointing my toes and stepping lightly... (Garner 2020).

‘See!’ I want to shout out in recognition, ‘me too!’ I’d like to ask her whether she’s raddled by Covid or whether, like me, she always dances to the kettle.

How do we write dance or dance write? Fiction abounds with examples of writing about dance. In Helen Macdonald's short essay 'Inspector Calls', a caged parrot leads a wary autistic boy into dance – 'swaying sideways, dancing at each other ... the bird so delighted he's screeching at the top of his lungs' (13-15). Even inter-species dance can forge connection and recognition. Anthropologists suggest that dance may be prehistoric and that even primates used dance for social connection and ritual. Literacy, speech, and dance may evoke/provoke each other. Perhaps this is what cellist Yo-Yo Ma means by 'music turns the other into us' (2019).

'The music evokes its dance and dance evokes its music: neither comes first. That is why we call ourselves an academy of music as much as an academy of dance', says the dance teacher in the last of John Coetzee's Jesus novel trilogy (2019).

A dance encounter might spring from encoded muscle memory – perhaps a primitive one with fire at its heart. How do we dance if we've never experienced it? Impossible, some might say? Dessaix decides that even 'walking is really a kind of dancing' (304). Pollitt quotes poet Eileen Myles:

I think dancing is desire not a form of it.
I think writing is desire not a form of it.

Wrote the dancer. (2020: 32)

Myles and Pollitt link dancing and writing, as I do. There is the small matter of a desk to which I chain myself, hour after hour, like Prometheus to his rock. Zeus must be the monstrous anxious part of me that craves to complete work before the virus eats my brain or heart or liver. Fingers dance, body attunes. When music plays, words dance faster from brain to keyboard to screen, creating images. And even when they don't, a kind of writing rhythm develops. In old films, writers pound the keys of their typewriters, swing the carriage across with a flourish, throw their hands in the air, a wondrous finale.

I joke with myself about sitting too long in metaphorical dance, like some of my writer friends who have suffered blood clots. During Covid, 'Step away from the car', should be 'step away from your desk' and move, find music, or beat, shift consciousness, flow somewhere else. Even without choreography, creative movement in a passage or doorway is surely dance. Our curfewed, locked-down bodies yearn to flow into something?

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that dance is rhythmic movement, its purpose 'to represent [mankind] men's characters as well as what they do and suffer'. During this pandemic, more than ever, we need to transcend our fear of annihilation and find traction.

This essay seeks to situate dance as something that calls down, and is called down, into the body. To imagine impossible beauty that cannot be schooled only enabled, to capture the smallest movement on a page and refine it.

Dance Art (instinct and joy)

A mathematically gifted, apartment-dwelling child I know, could not walk in time to music. Two years later, the child attacks beat via a computer program *Just Dance* that allows dancing in confined spaces. Around the globe children enjoy this program – 54 million copies sell during 2020 global Covid confinements. Competition drives the dance players to correctly mirror avatars on a screen – to score points for performance. The *Just Dance* logarithm measures accuracy and trains the dancers to score higher, to beat opponents or just the bot. Dance elicits a response so strong that the child I mention becomes disinhibited and hurls his untuned body into music.

When dance attack and unity are felt and understood like a maths solution, or a perfectly parsed sentence, a kind of joy appears on the child's countenance. Competitive ambition is not inherently malicious but, like dance proficiency, trained, rewarded. What will happen next with this child: learning or unlearning? I am a firm believer in multiple gifts and intelligences, but also in honing technique to provide enough proficiency for joy rather than self-parody, when responding to dance memory.

In order to experience formal balls during our country postings, my husband and I took ballroom dancing lessons. He, a man of science with a can-do confidence, counted the number of steps into my ear as he jacked my arm and me around the floor. Even the dance teacher, a fiftyish gay man, who borrowed my husband as his demonstration model, struggled against this determined mathematical agency. In a feat that thrilled me, he encouraged my partner to listen for the melody as well as the beat.

Ballroom dancing can, in any case, challenge feminists: 'following' anyone around a dance floor an anathema, especially if body receptors pick up control or lust or social face. Memories surface of disentangling myself at school socials from the body of a smelly adolescent boy with curly hair, who liked to push his boner up against my hip as we cornered. That was the price I paid to take to the floor every time the band struck up.

'A time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to dance' (Ecclesiastes: 3, 4). 'Dance as if no-one is watching...' is attributed to Mark Twain. And now, during Covid, it's true for many of us.

Dance as sexual drive

Aerobic dancing enlivens my solitary, sedentary writing body, during Covid lockdowns, in the same way city-dwellers crave the reopening of dance clubs. Performative, TikTok videos display body and self as agents rather than passive isolates craving connection. Perhaps dream dancing.

Dance also carries the biological energy of courtship and conquest rituals. Historically, big box-office dance movies – *Dirty Dancing* (1998), for instance – are oiled by romance, simultaneously expressing the characters’ *joie de vivre* and sexual attraction. Robert Helpmann’s choreography in the premiere of *The Display* (1964) captures a lyrebird dancing so thrillingly that a girl, danced by Kathleen Goreham, forsakes her human lover for him. Is dance all about mating? ‘A poet asks me about the erotics of dance,’ writes Pollitt, ‘and why we don’t talk about it. I think we feel about it’ (2020: 106).

I once sought answers from my beloved peacock Aravinda, who watched *me* working at my computer from his perch on the verandah balustrade and, during my breaks, teasingly tiptoed back and forth, before finally taking blue-vein cheese from my hand. In the aviary, he showed no urge to dance with me, but drove his bird Shandani into corners, subsided, retreated, and then ground towards her again. Massive, pumped, paisley-blue tail erect, feathers shimmering with agitation, eyes intent, feet prancing rhythmically. Twice only, in my sightline from the laundry doorstep, did I witness the full culmination of his sexual determinism when, from a surprising height, he leapt upon her, beak pinioning her head and tiara to the dirt, and cried out in his exotic way, as his shimmering body climaxed over and inside hers. I don’t know if she sat down for him, and I do not know why I witnessed it so rarely – whether he was a private male or rapist – but the experience left me breathless. Did Aravinda love the dance or the hen?

Leading such short lives, birds face imminent death, and dance must be their life force. Had Aravinda been rehearsing before jumping Shandani, or sneakily waiting until I hung washing and moved inside? And yet, before spring each year, he always managed to fertilise her eggs.

Danielle Clode describes how Ahutoru, the first Pacific Islander to visit Paris, seemingly uninterested in linguistic knowledge, expressed his brio through sexuality and dancing, to which he was culturally attuned: ‘the only show which pleased him was the opera as he was extremely fond of dancing...’ (Bougainville in Clode: 189). On the 1776 French scientific vessel, Ahutoru immediately recognised a woman dressed in men’s clothes, a fact that had for months evaded the crew. How can we know how he linked dance and sex? Clode acknowledges Ahutoru as ‘invisible and unknowable’ (246).

In her 2018 memoir, Deborah Levy describes how post-divorce, she feels ripe for joy – ‘whistling in the dark ... had to survive her [my] losses and find some rituals to celebrate them’ – and only dancing will save her (69). Logging eight hours on a computer becomes easier for me. But at regular times I need to hit the living room floor, to surrender muscles and tension to percussion, to weep with surprising recognition at the joy of onscreen dancers and dance combat teachers, who shout from the screen, ‘You, go gal’. On I flow, on foot, and later in writing.

Pollitt’s writing rushes across the page; commas instead of full stops enhancing her flow; dance notation; white space as important to writing as performance space to her dancing. ‘I am all red shoes but without the romance of an ending’ (2020: 21). Dance compels her.

Dancing for survival

While mainly a healthy impulse, at times of crisis, pandemics for instance, people dance and write to survive. Does Covid dancing resemble the historical manias of 1518 Strasbourg France, during which 50-400 people danced unwillingly for days, later theorised as a mass psychogenic disorder during plague? Or the desperate, ritualised danceathons depicted in *They Shoot Horses Don’t They* (1969), during which, people in dire poverty danced for prize money to survive. In both cases, dancers died.

Yoann Bourgeois’s work *Celui Qui tombe* (2016) shows dancers trying to keep their balance on a giant rotating platform not unlike a children’s playground merry-go-round. Watching it during a pandemic is profoundly affecting and disorients the viewer as much as the dancer. Professor Jen Webb loves ‘the way the dancers boldly launch out on their own and then are flung back together’ (FB post). In the end, the clip serves didactic purpose because the girl participant, whom we cheer on for outrunning her competitors, falls and brings them all down. Individual resilience during a crisis, feels intrinsically wrong when it fails; we must look to humanity and help each other.

I’ve wept through two dance funerals, the first for a fourteen-year-old dancer friend of my daughter, the second a relative. On both occasions, the troupes of dancers eased me away from the murderous rage I felt against the men who, at best inadvertently, brought about the girls’ deaths, one by reckless, drug-fuelled lack of care of a minor in a car, the other through domestic control and violence. Funeral dances offer beauty as compensation for loss.

Success stories trade off the historical exploitation of dancers. Through sheer determination, artists, dancers, writers develop virtuoso passion in the direst

circumstances. Anna Pavlova, sickly daughter of a laundress and raised by her grandmother in a Russian village, successfully auditioned for the Imperial Ballet School and achieved towering international fame.

Cun Xin, an eleven-year-old, rural Chinese boy danced his way first to the Beijing Dance Academy and then in 1981, during a cultural exchange to the United States, created a 21-hour standoff with Chinese Consulate officials and defected. Xin married an Australian dancer and settled in her homeland, where he is now artistic director of the Queensland Ballet Company. His memoir and Bruce Beresford's film adaption *Mao's Last Dancer* (2003, 2007) simultaneously shape a narrative of Xin as 'darling of the west' and an embodied critique of China's/Mao's cultural revolution, thereby linking dance and writing as modes of surviving crises.

Dance flow: expression and transcendance

In *The Death of Jesus* (2019), Nobel laureate John Coetzee plays with the idea of dance as abstract and esoteric. Protagonist David dances to numbers that he identifies with stars. Presented as gifted and enacting his dream of transcendence, he is singled out by his dance teacher Arroyo to lead his classmates. It is only through following him that others learn to understand dance 'as the master key or master language, except that it was not a language in the normal sense...' (177).

...when he began to dance, dance became music and music became dance.
From him the dance flowed into my hands and fingers, and into my spirit too.
I was the instrument on which he played. He exalted me... (151-2)

We must decide whether Coetzee's gift of dance is mysterious or inculcated by master creators. Without doubt, dance is seen as restorative. Simon, David's adoptive father dances 'with his eyes shut, long enough for his mind to go blank', to put himself to sleep (41). He is receptive to dance but not chosen to convey its meaning.

Does Simon's self-conscious coldness destroy his access to dance as a gift, as Arroyo implies? Robert Pippin puzzles – in his essay 'What is the Question to Which Dance is the Answer?' – about the point of dance in this perplexing book (144-158). Coetzee's dance conceit cannot be reduced to a metatext or even a riff. Nor simply the story of dance bringing an asylum seeker grace and redemption in a tragedy like Jesus Christ's. David removes negative energy from his body through dance; but his life is cut short when he fails to convey the message of his gift. 'Why could he not have delivered this message in dance?' asks his uncomprehending father (177-8).

When the boy dies, his teacher says that dance is not important. 'Maybe it is not in the power of dance to deliver messages. Maybe dance and messages live in different

realms' (177-8). Is this Coetzee's moral? Neither David nor dance offer salvation. 'When David danced he was somewhere else and if you were able to follow him you would be transported to that place too – not always, but now and again, definitely' (177). He lived a spontaneous life and shows that 'art can transform such abstractions into a living form'. Here lies esotericism, rather than dance instinct or training. Pippin's question stands. If not transcendence, perhaps during Covid, somatic knowledge and respite will suffice.

During my Honours year my coursework focused on ante-bellum literature, which developed into a dissertation on the Black Power movement. Material included the music and dance of African plantation slaves which evolved into jazz and a plenitude of dance styles, including hip-hop and tap which the Americas now exploit as their own because it has become so. We argued long and hard about the dance advantage of being rocked in a sling, as your mother intoned soulful elegies about freedom, and yet rebelled as she worked, with every muscle of her jiggling body.

Do some babies learn the dance of the body before they walk? Only newly acquainted with Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978), we exoticised something we retrospectively deduced because we loved our Motown LPs and the funk of newly emerging Afro-Harlem. We read Leroi Jones's *Blues People...* (1963: 25-6). What is the evidence that 'they' dance better than 'we' do? In their mammies' soul-suffering hearts? In their father's restraint that can turn explosive in the face of violent racism? In the rapping and jiving in dingy bars, where 'whites' paid to watch a 'black' spectacle produced by trauma?

Now, more than ever, dancing bursts onto racist streets. How dare we ask this question in the face of continued inequity and vulnerability for people of colour during Covid? In 2020, Black Lives Matter marches against police murders and street-dancing expressed, distilled and redirected energy: 'There is righteous anger, and we need all types of disruption' (Burdon-Manley 2020).

In 1999, as part of an activist group supporting Ngarrindjeri people's fight against the construction of the Hindmarsh Bridge, I saw the importance of dance, as story, and at the site. Cross-legged in the dust at dusk, at a *Tal-kin-geri* dance festival, I watched dancers of all ages move through clouds of smoke, morph precisely into twitching spirit animal bodies, and raise weapons against evil spirits, including I suspect, whiteness.

In 2000, I organised a cultural exchange between middle-schoolers camping in the Coorong and Ayeyonga community members fluent in several Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri languages. During the wake-up morning dance routine I led, choreographed to Yothu Yindi, language became embodied in movement and exultant cries. All campers spoke dance, rather than English.

Dance space

Pollitt draws on memories of dancing in domestic spaces, and like Coetzee, she counts:

This is a dancer writing as dancing. In your hands her hiding. Hands as hiding place. Five, six, seven, eight; Dance floor; stage; theatre; kitchen; inside spaces with doors and windows... (2020: 30).

In June 2020, dance academic Gretel Taylor invites dancers in lockdown locations to respond to Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) in screen works collectively titled *Poetics of Home*. Taylor's research and teaching is practice-led. During this period, she also led Mayer Park training sessions for the dancers and others 'climbing the walls and needing to get out of the house during Covid'.

The dancers choreographed in small spaces – corners, in miniature, nests, shells – making themselves rounded in isolation. Taylor curated the work online and, during a Deakin University Zoom launch, led workshop critiques of each piece in relation to the way 'Bachelard transformed domestic spaces by articulating their psychic and mnemonic effects, to render these relationships alive, intriguing, shimmering' (Taylor 2020).

Many of Taylor's dancers had been confined for weeks in small apartments and hotel rooms. In the clips, Diane 'listens well to the tumult of the body' and builds a nest of pinecones in her bathroom; Charlotte dances the transience between sleep and wakefulness, fire and dusk light, while housesitting a weatherboard house in the regions; Gretel dances with costumes in her wardrobe, her body reaching out and drawing back, as she tests the messiness, tactility and theatrical potential of her fabric and hardwood space; Jonathon considers corners, architecturally, and how Covid and dyslexia reduce him further; Tony, convalescing from illness and in exile from his homeland, explores light and shadow in his empty share apartment. Taylor supports their thinking about the relevancy and resonances of Bachelard's text when dancing and articulating affect in locked-down house spaces. During the symposium, dancers acknowledge the challenge of sharing work generated in small, very private spaces.

Watching dance researchers inhabit and move around their physical spaces moves me as a viewer and reinforces my belief in the generative power of Bachelard's text. Dance embodies feeling, knowledge, and ideas in space that can be captured in film and on the page.

Hands with webbed fingers; one hundred touch receptors on every tip. Pull her spine apart. Gently. Prise. To make more space. Read to breathe. Dance is her alibi. This telling her seek. (Pollitt 2020: 30)

Why are we dancing during a pandemic – when space should further constrict our imagination? Perhaps we *are* feeling our way out of restraint? Perhaps moving our bodies *is* instinctive and we hope to discover ourselves while at our most compressed, our imagination of necessity most expansive.

Dance work

Imagine, dancing at the top of your form, confined to a one-bedroom apartment that you usually only go home to sleep in. After the Australian Ballet Company's rehearsals of *Volt* shut down in March, Jill Ogai, Rising Star winner of the 2019 Telstra Ballet Dance Awards, grieves and then goes back to basics: to keep limber and injury free. *Grand jetes*, lifts and leaps don't work well in a confined space, so at dusk, she sneaks to the park to 'dance in the half-light like a Ninja'. 'It's not just about performing for others, but the joy that dancing brings to me,' Ogai says. Dancing works this way with professional and social dancers.

Every day, over the month of June, in their 60th year of operation, the Queensland Ballet Company offers its '60 Dancers 60 Stories' promotion – daily premieres of brand-new short ballets – hoping to raise a million dollars to keep their dancers on the payroll, and enable them to maintain strength and fitness, and to innovate new safe programs after the lockdown.

This is a heart and mind endeavour, firstly watching dancers risk their lives, do barre work on balconies, dance on less-than-optimal performance-surfaces: in tiny apartment kitchens, stairwells, foyers; fish lifts over concrete carparks and walkways; pirouettes on sloping and elevated spaces; leaps across uneven ground and at speed through public parks. And secondly because the closing of a premier state ballet company is beyond our cultural imagination.

During 2020, social media swells with stories that bring me to my feet to dance and weep, to my computer to process the grief. Tragically and not unexpectedly the arts in general, and dance in particular, do not qualify for the government's JobSeeker rescue packages or for industry-specific aid. Bangarra Dance Company cancels its national tour of a new work *SandSong* because they can no longer tell stories and keep audiences, dancers and communities safe. Sydney Dance Company cancels its national tours of *Bonachela* / *Forsythe/Lane* and promote their online studio.

The October Australian Federal budget offers little solace for any of them. Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young asks Parliament how much of the money finally set aside for arts workers has been spent, how many dollars, and at this point, the answer appears to be zero.

Perhaps during a pandemic some dancers have turned to writing, both to explain the plight of their industry and as a kind of dislocated praxis. Dance has long been part of creative arts academies. Pollitt changed her focus after a ganglion interrupted her career. Injury in her body becomes a kind of grief that might resonate for many whose work has been stopped by Covid: ‘...it is dark it is too light. Hours press in. there is no room. off with her head. she pushes thoughts into her legs like rescue, like lactic acid. Like the grief of stillness...’ (Pollitt: 2020, 45).

Pollitt’s research deepened into a PhD novella and exegesis, for which she gave these connected forms of self ‘permission of the dance ... permission of the dancer’ to produce art and work. Soon after, the work reiterated in a commercial novella. In each iteration, she wished to expand the notion of ‘write like I dance’. She regards her writing as a kind of spying on her own practice: ‘I wanted evidence. And I wanted to be able to read it ... revealing a process, an un hiding of dancer, and of dancing, a heavy book of evidence’ (Pollitt 2020: 1).

Covid ruptured programs and made performance-spaces unviable and unsafe. Dance companies searched on social media for funding to keep paying their dancers.

Conclusion

Fearing injury in hotel quarantine while my mother is dying, I dance/work out carefully across the room and back, my laptop syncing music with the smart TV. My space is severely limited. I think of Gretel Taylor’s dancers and, indeed, her own exploration of two shelves of her wardrobe. Of choreography created for bathrooms. I need discipline. In any case, I must not cross the red plastic line inside my door, because potentially my breath may contaminate guards and workers in masks and Hazmat suits. Dancing has blessed many of us through months of lockdown, expressing our powerlessness, sustaining our bodies and minds, sharpening our creativity when we have felt most vulnerable. For me, dancing and writing become inexorably linked with death (Lynch: 2021).

My mind dwells on my dancing mother, trapped in her failing body, poised between life and death in Adelaide. Surely, she dances in her dreams. On and on, I write. On and on, I flex and flow around my hotel room, drawing on deep muscle memory, expressed in my mind as image and word, in my body as rhythm and attack – body/brain, brain/body – and, yes, death feels present. I write dance; I dance write. As Dessaix argues, dancing amplifies emotion and intellect. I dance grief, I dance joy, I dance longing, I dance rage. I dance to the kettle. I write dance.

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