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Jillian Adams

Crab apple jelly

Biographical note:

Jillian (Jill) Adams (B Arts (Hons), Dip Ed, MA) started a career in town planning, before she set off to Paris to pursue her dream of becoming a Cordon Bleu cook. She is a qualified teacher, a graduate of Cordon Bleu École de Cuisine in Paris and, until recently, was the Training and Development Manager of Coffee Academy, a joint initiative of Douwe Egberts Australia and the William Angliss Institute. Jillian is currently president of the Oral History Association of Australia. Her book, *Barista: A guide to espresso coffee* (2008) is used widely in espresso coffee training in Australia and overseas, while her *A Good Brew: H. A. Bennett & Sons and tea and coffee trading in Australia*, tells the story of social and cultural change in Australia through the stories of people involved in our tea and coffee industries, and will be published in 2013. Jillian completed a Masters in Oral History and Historical Memory at Monash University in 2011 and in January 2012 commenced study towards her PhD at Central Queensland University in the School of Creative and Performing Arts working on Australian culinary history post World War II. She has co-edited a special edition of *MC Journal* on 'coffee', published articles in numerous academic journals, and presented a series of papers at local and international conferences.

Keywords:

creative writing – food writing – creative nonfiction

Our conversation took place on a very hot Saturday in February. The tree was laden with almost-ripe crab apples. I boasted that I could make crab apple jelly and would gladly exchange for some home made jelly for some of the tree's bounty. And now it's early April, the first cool days of autumn are here, and I have been given a huge tub of ripe crab apples – hundreds of little deep crimson acid-yellow smudged fruits. This morning I am interrupting my work to make some crab apple jelly.



Fig. 1. Crab apples (photograph by the Author)

I love crab apple jelly. You can't buy it at the supermarket where I do most of my shopping, but I always look out for it at farmer's markets and country produce stores. Although I feel guilty about not working, I console myself by consulting my 1962 edition of Irma Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker's *Joy of Cooking*, purchased recently for my research.

Joy, as the book is affectionately known, was first published in 1931. Irma was mostly responsible for its creation, but her daughter Marion was recipe tester, illustrator and production manager for the first edition. As testament to its popularity, *Joy* is one of America's most published cookbooks with 18 million copies sold. It was reprinted in 1936, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1951, 1952, 1953 and 1962, and then again in 1975 and 1977. In 2006, a seventy-fifth anniversary edition was produced and there have been many other special printings and printings. This classic American recipe book was a feature of many 1950's home kitchens; many women wrote to the publisher to say how much they loved using it and how they felt Irma's presence – there in the kitchen with them (Schapiro 2004: 71). Irma Rombauer was recently widowed and struggling to support her family when she wrote and self-published it as *The Joy of Cooking: A Compilation of Reliable Recipes with a Casual Culinary Chat* in 1931. Her culinary chat is part of this book's personality and Irma's voice has remained clear and strong through the many editions, revisions and reprints.

Irma died aged 82, in 1962, the same year as my edition of her book. Although Marion has reorganised *Joy* in this 1962 edition she acknowledges Irma's 'buoyant example, for the strong feeling of roots she gave me, for her conviction that, well grounded, you can make the most of life, no matter what it brings' (1962:

Dedication). I hear both of their voices: Irma is the mother's voice. She makes sure the text is clear and simple. Hers is the old and the best. She is handing down her culinary knowledge from mother to daughter. Marion on the other hand has been given this knowledge to do with, as she will. She is interested in the finer details of *haute cuisine* on one hand, and frozen food, using electrical appliances – her blender outside BBQ for example – on the other. If there is any conflict I don't hear it. Irma provides the fundamentals and Marion takes them to new places.

I like these women: we think the same way about many things. They are also useful as they clearly reveal the changing domestic and other cultural values of the era I am working on – the 1950s. Marion asks, for instance, 'Have you ever tried to raise money for your church or club at a food stand? It's the home made breads and cooked down fruit jellies that get snapped up first for neither of these is likely to be duplicated commercially' (786). Irma and Marion represent the mother and daughter who stood on either side of a momentous change in our kitchens: Irma represents home cooking and Marion commercially produced. When my copy of *Joy*, purchased on line from America, arrived in the post there was a personal signed note in it from the seller: 'This is much loved book. I hope you will enjoy it as much as I have. Best wishes and joyous cooking!'

My work (that is, when I am not making crab apple jelly) revolves around an investigation of the housewife in Australia in the 1950s. I am curious about the images that I see of her now in 2012. Here she is, for example, in her pink pyjamas, propping open the refrigerator in a mothers' day advertisement for Peter Alexander, a company that successfully markets pyjamas to Australian men and women.



Fig. 2. Peter Alexander advertisement, *Melbourne Weekly*, 7 May 2012: 3

This season, he is selling cosy, warm flannelette pyjamas – along with nostalgia for a cosy, warm 1950s. In this image, the model poses by her Kelvinator refrigerator – a fridge that is brimming with frosted layer cakes and Pyrex containers. In another, she is vacuuming her floral flock carpet with her Hoover vacuum cleaner and, in the last,

she is on the telephone in front of her kitchen dresser which is set with Gayware canisters and ramekins. Set amid these familiar symbols of 1950's modernity, she is styled to provoke our nostalgic hankerings for this fantasy of a pastel-coloured era.



Figs. 3 and 4. Peter Alexander advertisements, *Madison*, May 2012: 87, 86

Wasn't she the catalyst for the wave of feminism that rejected the role of women as wives and mothers with their focus on the care of the home and the family? My way into this discussion is through the kitchen, by way of a careful study of cookbooks and magazines from that era. As long as I use a recipe from the era, I remain on track with my research. With this thought in mind as I examine the crab apples, and convince myself that it is research: if the recipe works, that is, if it is *cookable*, then it was most likely to have been a recipe that was used by women then, when they had a windfall of crab apples.

To understand the lives of women in the 1950s, I need to be there with them in the kitchen, just like Irma and Marion were and I need to cook their recipes. So here I am, reading and listening and ready to go. Jam, they tell me, is the easiest preserve to make and the most economical as it only requires one cooking step and uses the fruit pulp. I am not convinced. Jam making is something I just don't do. Who has the time, the jars, the fruit, the incentive now-a-days? Jelly making is more complex. It involves a preliminary step, that of first extracting the juice from the fruit pulp.

But even before I begin the first step, I can see the jars of clear red-amber jelly lined up on my kitchen bench. And I can taste it. In my mind, I have already made toast from thick white bread. I have buttered it and plopped the shimmering red jelly onto it. I am eating it – hot toast, melting butter and crab apple jelly. I am thinking ahead, but, at the same time, I am remembering the taste and feel of crab apple jelly. It is a taste from my own childhood – in the 1950s.

Every Thursday morning, my mother dropped my father at work and drove the family car into town. First she shopped at Myer's Emporium or at Bright's or Lindsay's (department stores long since replaced by the Market Square Shopping Plaza mall development) for household items or the fabric and haberdashery she needed for her

various sewing projects. Next she met her friends for a cuppa at a local café, before completing her weekly grocery shop at Dickens supermarket. She drove home around midday, stopping off at Johnny Gill – the butcher – on the way. This trip left her provisioned for her baking day on Friday when she cooked for the week ahead – filling our biscuit jars and cake tins with sweet treats, and the house with the smell of butter, vanilla and sugar. She would sometimes make jam after a blackberrying trip or if a neighbour gave her fruit from their trees, but stewed fruit was more her style. My mother never made jelly. So, Irma and Marion ... I am depending on you for instructions here. ‘Ok’ they say winking at each other and nodding towards the fruit:

Take four pounds of crab apples, quartered, stems and blossom ends removed. Place the fruit in a saucepan. Add water until it can be seen through the top layer of fruit. Cook uncovered until the fruit is soft. About 40 minutes (789).

I have so many perfectly formed cherry-sized sour crab apples and there is no way I can weigh them. I have to find my own way: I have to improvise. I have to make this recipe work for me. Rather than quarter them and remove the stems and blossom ends (how long is that going to take!) I line them up on my chopping board, handful by handful, and chop into them roughly. I do not remove the stems or the blossom ends, but I do try to pick out most of the leaves and the bits of branch that I can find. I chop until my pan is almost full then I cover the fruit with water and boil until the crab apples are soft and mushy. The tart sweet scent wafts seductively through the house.

‘Now’, Irma says. ‘Where is your jelly bag?’

Wet and wring out a jelly bag, and pour in the fruit and juice. Allow to drip through the bag without squeezing (787).

What! I don’t have a jelly bag! Does such a thing even exist these days? Will a very fine sieve do the job? The word ‘drip’ suggests a slow separation of juice from pulp. Help! ‘Go back to the general instructions,’ they scold. ‘Top of page 787 ... first line.’

This should be made of a material similar to flannel or of several thicknesses of cheesecloth. If well enough sewn the bag will eventually be suspended, if not, it will be held in a strainer. Wet the bag and wring it out before you pour the jelly into it, as a dry bag can absorb a lot of the precious juice (787).



Fig. 5. Improvised jelly bag

I have a white cheesecloth dress. That will have to do the job. The only problem is that it has tiny silver sequins sewn to its bodice and in a big 'V' down the front. They have not been attached securely and some are loose and falling off. But if I keep them on the inside – with the pulp – they should stay out of the jelly.

I rinse it and cut down the back to open it up. Then I tie two of its four corners and the sleeves to the rungs of the clothes' horse, which I have placed over a bowl. Now I can pour the fruit and juice in and allow the juice to drip through. At first juice pours into the bowl, then it slows down to a drip, drip, drip ...

Measure the juice and put into a large enamelled or stainless steel pan. Simmer the juice, uncovered, for about 5 minutes, skimming off any froth that forms. Allow 3/4 to 1 cup of sugar to each cup of juice and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Boil the mixture until it reaches the point of jelling. Pour the jelly into hot dry jars. Seal (787).

I measure 24 cups of juice into a jam pan and bring it to the boil, adding 24 cups of sugar. That's about eight kilograms and will be most of the sugar I bought on sale at the supermarket months ago. The packets had been damaged and the sugar – bags and all – had been slipped into a plastic bag and set aside for a quick sale, three for one. Given that one of the hallmarks of a good housewife in the 1950s was economy, I bought three five-kilogram bags and stashed them in the pantry.

I now have to stir until my mix reaches the 'point of jelling'. Irma! Marion! Where are you when I need you? What exactly is the *point of jelling*?

I am stirring this rapidly boiling mass, skimming pink-grey marshmallow-like scum off the surface, scooping it into a bowl, and since I can't find an explanation in *Joy*, I am searching for the *point of jelling* in the jam and jelly sections of my cookbook collection

Irma taps her foot on the floor and Marion 'tut tuts' me.

'We know your type', they scowl. 'Never reading the instructions ... just plunging in ... thinking you know it all. The instructions are there. Bottom of page 787. You really should have read this before you started!'

Begin to test the juice ten minutes after the sugar has been added. Place a small amount of jelly in a spoon, cool it slightly, and let it drop back into the pan from the side of the spoon. As the syrup thickens two large drops will form along the edge of the spoon when the two large drops come together and form as a single drop ... the 'sheeting stage' has been reached ... The required time for cooking will range from 8 to 30 minutes, depending on the kind of fruit, the amount of sugar and the amount of juice in each pan (787).

This is not very helpful. Before I set out to make the jelly, I consulted other cookery books in my collection. I found recipes for crab apple jelly in my *Good Cook Preserving* book. This volume, produced in the 1980s by Time Life, brings together recipes and instructions for all kinds of food preservation. Each chapter discusses a particular method, and gives recipes from a wide variety and range of cookbooks. There are three recipes for crab apple jelly in its jam and jelly section, from three cookery books, three eras and two countries. The recipe from *The Buckeye Cookbook*:

Traditional American Recipes (1883), suggests that it will take about 20 minutes but that I should check and it will be an amber colour when ready... also not very helpful. Meanwhile the jelly is cooking. I am stirring and skimming. I am also washing jars, sterilising them with boiling water and putting them in the oven to get hot. I know that the jars will break if they are cold and I put hot jam into them. I also know that drying them in the oven will sterilise them as this is how my mother prepared her jars on those rare occasions when she made jam.

The recipe from *Mein Kochbuch* (1968) by Elizabeth Schuler seems simple and straightforward: cook the crab apples until they are soft (about 30 minutes), then let them stand in the liquid overnight – straining them the next day. In my Rombauer recipe there are no delays. *The Buckeye Cookbook* tells me to press or squeeze the fruit in the muslin over a colander to get all the juice out: but the Rombauer version clearly specifies not to squeeze, or the result will be cloudy. Once the juice is collected, *The Buckeye Cookbook: Traditional American Recipes* says to dip a cup into the liquid and pour it back over the fruit mush in the muslin, to do this twice, and to rinse out the muslin frequently. This seems like a lot of bother. But it does say it will make a very clear jelly. I do contemplate making a batch of each but already I am cutting corners by chopping my fruit roughly and I am not sure that I got the jelly bag set up right.

The combined voices of Irma and Marion are the loudest. They argue the point with Elizabeth Schuler. Irma challenges her jelly making method, ‘Why on earth would you suggest leaving the juice overnight? It makes no sense at all! We tell our cooks they can keep the juice for six months before they cook it up into jelly. They can even freeze it.’ Elizabeth has no rationale and answers that it was the way her mother showed her and it has always produced a clear jelly. I decide to stick with Irma and Marion. I want my jelly today.

Now, is the *sheeting stage* the same as the *point of jelling*? Marion and Irma are very quiet on this point. I think they see the problem and I think they are working out how to correct the instructions in the next edition. Irma is saying, ‘once I go ... my generation ... you won’t know how to do this. You will just get your jelly from the store’. Marion agrees ‘It’s a difficult one’, she says. ‘Perhaps we need a picture to explain it’, she offers. I go with my instinct. I stir and watch carefully, hoping that see and feel the *point of jelling* before the point of burning. Finally, the drops of jelly hang onto the wooden spoon like cows’ udders heavy with milk before they fall languidly back into the pot. I decide to count to 60 (quickly) then turn off the heat. I ladle the boiling jelly into the jars and it sizzles as it hits the hot glass. Then I screw on the lids. I fill the empty jam pan with water and detergent and set it in the sink to soak. My jelly is made and I have eighteen jars of sparkling red jelly proudly sitting on the bench. Even when they are cool, I can’t bring myself to put them away in the cupboard. I am so proud of my achievement. The afternoon light is fading and am surprised: jelly making has taken the whole day and my jars match the colour of the sky outside.

From this, and other experiments, I have adapted the recipe. But if you intend to make a batch of old fashioned 1950s style jelly you will first have to find a garden with a crab apple tree.

Crab Apple Jelly

Crab apples, water, sugar

Tie on a fresh apron and roughly chop your crab apples. Do not worry about stems or pips or the odd leaf. Sweep them into a pan and just cover with water. Bring to the boil and boil until they are mushy (about 20–30 minutes).

Set some cheesecloth—you can get this from any shop that sells fabric (on MasterChef they use Chux wipes but you will need to get the extra big ones)—over a colander set over a big bowl large enough to hold all the drained juice. Pour the pulp and juice into it and allow all the juice to drip through. Once it has dripped through, measure the liquid. Throw the pulp and the cheesecloth away.



Fig. 6. The crab apple juice (photograph of the Author)

Bring the juice to the boil and skim off any scum. Then add the sugar and continue to boil until it is set. This will take about 20 minutes and you will need to skim the scum as it rises and gathers on the surface. It is the scum that will make your jelly cloudy. You can tell if it is set by the colour – a deep-amber red – and the behaviour of the jelly as it drips off the wooden spoon that you are stirring it with. Stir and lift the spoon out of the bubbling jelly. Hold it up and on the side. When it is ready the jelly will flow into one stream and will start setting before it has dripped off the spoon.

While the jam is bubbling away, prepare your jars by washing them and then pouring boiling water over them. Sit on a baking sheet in a moderate oven (150° C) while the jam is bubbling away. When the jam is ready you will need to pour it into the jars while both jar and jam are the same temperature.

Wash the lids for the jars carefully in very hot water. Dry them, and screw them on tight.

Postscript

Recently my aunt, now in her seventies, lent me two cookery books from her library. The first was the textbook she used at school, *Household Cookery* (c.1950), which had been produced by Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy in Melbourne. ‘Emily Mac’, as it was affectionately known, offered diploma courses for teachers of domestic economy and dressmaking, and vocational training for the hospitality and clothing industries, from 1906 to 1979 (Docherty 1981). My aunt did not go there but her school used one of the many cooking texts produced by its staff and this slim cloth bound cookbook was her text for domestic science at school in the early 1950s. It has an alphabetical index, and sections covering the principles of Western cookery starting with stocks and sauces and ending with icings and fillings for cakes. The book also carries many of the signs of a well-used cookbook – food splatters, dog-eared pages and additions to recipes written in pencil – but the only clue to the creative cook my aunt was to become is the addition she has made to the diagram of a pig showing ‘pork cuts’ on page 39. She has added long eyelashes to its eye and a curly tail drawn first in pencil then in pen to its hindquarters.

The second book *Australian Cookery Today: Illustrated* was given to my grandmother well after she married and rescued by my Aunt when grandma died. The book – like many of its time – is not dated but it is possible to approximate its publication date with clues in its text. The chapter on the Modern Kitchen makes it a post war publication and its publishers acknowledge Emily Macpherson College (established in the late 1920s) and Miss Emily Noble chief demonstrator at the Metropolitan Gas Company. Miss Noble retired from this position in 1953. Sometime between 1927 and 1953 this book was published. As I flicked through it looking for clues to its usefulness, I found pages marked with scraps of paper. My grandmother had changed the Christmas cake recipe and she had marked ‘X’ against the recipe for Apple Jelly. In the blank section at the end of the book for *Notes and Additions*, my grandmother had written a recipe for Celery and Walnut Rolls (the recipe is not clear but it looks like a scone dough – there is no recipe for this – filled with walnuts and celery and cheese in white sauce and rolled and baked. Clearly this recipe was a ‘prompt’ and not meant to be followed by any one other than my grandmother) and noted, ‘Apple Jelly page 480’. This was the recipe she used for jelly making and with it two of my questions were answered. The first, how to tell if the jelly has reached the *point of jelling* was explained simply, ‘Test by putting a little on a cold plate and if it jellies it is done’. But more importantly it answered the nagging question of the origin of my sensory memory about the taste of crab apple jelly.

The book and my grandmother’s marks in it took me back to the kitchen of my grandparents’ big old house on a block on the outskirts of Rochester, a country town in northern Victoria. I spent long summers at that house. I remember the smell of new-born kittens in my grandmother’s powder room; sun-warmed white peaches still on the tree; chook food that smelled of bran and sugar; hot red dirt and the spicy smell of the peppercorn trees that lined the long drive from the road to the house. I also remember the taste of cucumber with mayonnaise; wheat puffs and milk; and crab apple jelly on fresh white bread.



Figs. 7 and 8. Crab Apple Jelly (photographs by the Author)

Endnote

Luce Giard writes:

In each case, *doing cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory like the rhythms and seasons (in de Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998: 157).

'Crab apple jelly' reflects on cooking and remembering both the family and intuitive processes that link family and cookery. Writing about the process reflects on Marion and Irma Rombauer collaborating over a recipe book – Marion continuing where her mother left off – and my remembering of my Grandmother, aunt and Mother through the process of making this preserve. It is about the skill of cooking and the strategies involved and also about the delight one feels in producing something so basic as a jar of home made jelly.

These days ... when for so many people nothing remains at the end of the day except for the bitter wear and tear of so many dull hours, the preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a ferment of reality, of knowing the joys of demiurgic miniaturization, all the while securing the gratitude of those who will consume it by way of pleasant and innocent seductions (Giard 1998: 158).

Cooking is a thoughtful process linked to our female forebears. Alexa Johnson reminds us that by cooking we link to an honourable tradition that stretches back to our grandmothers and great grandmothers and great great grandmothers and that, for them, jelly making was sensible, thrifty, enjoyable and an outlet for creative energies as well as a source of pride and a way of showing love and care for others (2008: 8).

Making crab apple jelly, and writing about it, is also about nostalgia and our hankering for food from our childhood. 'Do you remember that steamed treacle pudding your mother used to make?' ask the authors of *Just like mother used to make: food from the '30s and '40s* (Nilsen & Weatherall 1980: 11). This book even 'looks

right' with its black and white photographs of food 'coloured by the almost forgotten art of colour spraying – remember those seaside scenes on postcards?' (11). And in the forward of *Ladies a Plate*, Ray McVinnie writes, 'there is a consciousness that something as ephemeral as a recipe for an excellent cake or an irresistible biscuit carries tradition and significance that is to be celebrated, enjoyed and preserved' (in Johnston 2008: 6).

Making crab apple jelly that Saturday was repetitive work that involved tedious chopping and stirring; interpretive skill, intuition and improvisation; heavy lifting and carrying; and washing up and cleaning. But nothing comes close to the joy of all seeing all those jars of jelly and the pride I feel when I open one up or give one away. With Summer almost here, I only have six more months before I start the process again.

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Research statement

Research background

While writing about food focuses on remembering, memory and nostalgia (Duruz 1999) and family relationships (Giard 1999, Supski 2005), in the absence of the generational mother-to-daughter handing down of cooking practices, recipes rely on clear instructions for their success. This work examines changing culinary technology to highlight the strengths and shortcomings of instructional food writing.

Research contribution

Examining cookbooks as historical sources (Driver 2009, Theophano 2002), this work uses creative nonfiction to deliver technical information, explore changes in culinary practice and demonstrate how food and cooking are connected to our lives from an intimate to the global level. This work also investigates the recognised, but seldom explored, American influences on Australian post-war kitchens.

Research significance

This work was an invited submission to *TEXT*, a leading journal in the creative writing field.

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The poisoner's cookbook

Biographical note:

Professor Donna Lee Brien (BEd, Deakin; GCHE, UNE; MA (Prelim.), USydney; MA, UTS; PhD, QUT) is Professor, Creative Industries, and Chair, Creative and Performing Arts Special Interest Research Group for the Learning and Teaching Education Research Centre at Central Queensland University. Widely published on Australian food writers and their influence, Donna has also written on other aspects of the creative arts, with her biography, *John Power 1881-1943*, the standard work on this expatriate Australian artist. A Past President of national peak body, the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Donna is currently Commissioning Editor, Special Issues, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* and Foundation Editorial Board member of *Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies*. She has most recently edited food-related issues *MC Journal* ('Pig' with Dr Adele Wessell, and 'Coffee' with Jillian Adams) and *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* (with Dr Toni Risson). Current research includes projects on forgotten food writers, their contribution to national culinary culture, and the intersection of food writing with health issues.

Keywords:

creative writing – food writing – poisoning

What is food to one man may be fierce poison to others.
Lucretius (c.99 B.C.–c.55 B.C.)

Amuse bouche: some notes on poisons and poisoning

Look up *poison* in any dictionary and the definition always includes the information that although poisons cause death or injury, the word comes from the Latin for 'drink' – one of life's necessities. The act of poisoning is, moreover, seemingly as ancient as cookery itself.¹ If a living organism can eat, drink or otherwise absorb matter, it can ingest poison, and this fact was not lost on Australian Indigenous peoples who poisoned waterholes to weaken game and fish. Menes, an early Egyptian king, closely studied the properties of poisonous plants, while ancient papyri reveal how the Egyptians discovered how to extract prussic acid from peach kernels. We know this as cyanide, the poison supposedly popular with Cold War spies that can kill in as little as thirty seconds.

The classical Greeks and Romans drew their poisons from a deadly arsenal of aconite, opium, lead, mercury, gold, silver, copper and henbane. The latter foul-smelling plant is not widely familiar today, but looks dangerous, with sticky leaves and dull yellow flowers. The names it has been known by auger poorly too – 'Devil's eye', 'Poison tobacco' and 'Stinking nightshade'. The ancient Greeks drank hemlock to suicide, also using this 'poisoned cup' for State purposes as when Socrates was executed because his philosophical teachings were judged to have corrupted the youth of Athens. Euripides had his Medea send Jason's new bride a poisoned gown, while the Romans favoured delivering their poisons in seemingly innocuous food and drinks. Nero was notorious for disposing of unwanted family members in this manner and, with the aid of his personal poisoner, Locusta, murdered his own brother, Britannicus, with cyanide.

A century before the birth of Christ, King Mithridates of Pontos on the Black Sea, now in present-day Turkey, so feared poisoning that he tested toxins and possible antidotes on condemned criminals, and then took small doses of poison daily to build up an immunity to them. This strategy backfired when the Romans invaded his kingdom and he attempted to kill himself by drinking poison, but his acquired resistance muted its effect, and he had to command one of his own soldiers to stab him to death.

During the Middle Ages, both amateur and professional poisoners targeted kings, emperors and popes in cruel and creative ways. In 1531, Richard Roose, the Bishop of Rochester's cook, added poison to the porridge he prepared for his master's household. All who ate this tainted gruel fell extremely ill, including the poor who had been given the remains of the dish in an act of charity, and two of the poisoned died, although the bishop, who did not eat from the communal pot, escaped unharmed. Roose was boiled to death – just like his oats – the first to be punished with this ghastly new method of execution.

At this time, a council of alchemists met regularly in Venice to arrange State-sanctioned (but clandestine) poisonings for those who stood in the way of those who governed over

the Venetians. We can still read the meticulous records of their meetings which include long lists of intended victims, details of the contracts with the poisoners and their rates of pay. This was at a time when the knowledge of poisons was expanding, as Italian botanists were identifying an ever-increasing number of poisonous plants, to the point where Giambattista della Porta's book *Magiae Naturalis* (Natural Magic), first published in 1558, included a section on poisoning – in particular the then popular method of drugging wine – alongside discussions of demonology, magnetism and the camera obscura. Porta also provides a recipe for a sinister concoction of aconite, caustic lime, arsenic, bitter almonds and powdered glass which, when mixed with honey, could be formed into deadly pills.

The notorious Italian poisoner Toffana sold her poison, an arsenic solution, as *Agua Toffana* or Toffana's Water, in vials labelled as a cosmetic and decorated with a saint's picture. She told unhappy wives to apply this expensive, although effective, liquid to their skin before intimacy with their husbands, but never to ingest it themselves, and to enjoy the result quietly. But some could not remain silent about their actions and Toffana was eventually arrested and executed in 1709 by strangulation for murdering six hundred men. There is, however, no record of charges of any kind being brought against all those widows.

In the latter part of the sixteenth century, France became a world centre of poisoning with reputedly some 30,000 so-called 'sorcerers' (poisoners) operating in Paris in the 1570s. The use of poisons was reportedly widespread and the quite reasonable fear of being poisoned even more pervasive. As a result, when England's King Henry IV visited the Louvre, he would only eat eggs that he cooked himself and only drink water he drew from the Seine. There were several failed plots to poison English royalty, including Queen Elizabeth I, who thwarted a Spanish plan to smear an opium-based poison on her saddle. To protect the Royal person, her entourage tasted every dish and beverage before her lips touched a morsel. They also inspected her clothes for signs of poison and regularly dosed their regent with antidotes, just in case.

Although she died from an abscessed throat at the age of seventy, fear of poisoning persisted among the English royals after Elizabeth, although the use of poison was not restricted to such elevated circles. Poison was, indeed, so common in eighteenth century France that it was known as 'inheritance powder', an implication not lost on nineteenth century English painter and author, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. A Romantic dandy without the income to support his extravagant habits, Wainewright moved in elevated artistic circles, counting Blake, Byron, Keats, Hazlitt and Fuseli among his friends. When a series of his close relatives died, each one of whose bequests alleviated his financial woes, Wainewright was arrested. He never admitted to murder, but circumstantial evidence – his obvious motivation, possession of books on poison and a special interest in strychnine which could not then be reliably detected at autopsy – led to his conviction (although for forgery, not homicide) and transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land in 1837, where he died a decade later.²

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the modern scientific study of poisons – what became the science of toxicology – and advances such as the identification of morphine in 1814, strychnine in 1818 and reliable tests for arsenic in 1836 and 1841. But these scientific developments, which meant poisons could be more easily detected in victims, seemed to do little to deter domestic poisoners and the rate of poisoning, rising in tandem with the popularity of life insurance, increased until contemporary commentators reported that poisoning was occurring at epidemic levels. Whether there actually was an epidemic of murder caused by the ready availability of such poisons at the end of the nineteenth century is debatable, but this idea was confirmed in the minds of people at the time by the succession of dramatic poisoning trials during the 1890s. The Victorian press sensationalised crime stories to the point of becoming trial judge and jury, and justified this reporting by the public interest they generated.³ Poisoning cases were thus duly written about in gruesome detail, making the crime a topic of daily conversation.

While poison was widely understood to be a particularly feminine weapon – sly, cruel and cunning, with deadly poisons easily slipped into the food and drinks these devilish women prepared – the 1880s and '90s also saw a series of male poisoners brought to trial.⁴ The most intriguing subset of these men for the public were medical practitioners, their crimes so sensational that lengthy reports of their trials were read all over the world, including in Australasia.

One of these was the seemingly upright citizen, Dr. Philip Cross, a 62-year-old retired army surgeon, who lived with his much younger wife and their six children in Ireland. They had been married for eighteen years with no apparent problems until, in 1886, Mrs. Cross engaged a new governess for the children, twenty-year-old Effie Skinner. Falling madly in love with her, the doctor began repeatedly dosing his wife with arsenic and strychnine and, early in May 1887, Mrs. Cross began to suffer violent vomiting attacks. Told by her husband that she had a weak heart, she died a month later, Effie and Cross marrying less than two weeks after the funeral. Cross appeared to show great concern throughout the extended period of his wife's suffering and was much maligned for this hypocrisy when his crime was discovered. He was hanged in January 1888, Effie so shocked when she discovered her unwitting role in the murder, that she refused to visit her condemned husband in gaol.

As the 1890s opened, the seemingly mild and suave Dr. Hermann Webster Mudgett, known not only as 'Dr. Holmes' but also as 'the Black Baron', purchased a row of turreted, three-storey buildings in Chicago. While the ground floor was filled with rented-out shops and the top floor housed his own offices and living quarters, Mudgett rebuilt the middle storey into a maze of windowless, airtight and soundproofed torture rooms. These were complete with secret doors, peepholes and gas poisoning facilities. Most spine chilling was his system of chutes running down into a basement quicklime pit. Over a period of three years, Mudgett attracted a steady stream of young women with advertisements promising lucrative employment in his hotel. Once they arrived, however, instead of putting them to work, Mudgett imprisoned and poisoned them, first

obtaining access to their assets and later selling at least a dozen of their skeletons to local medical schools. He also killed a number of men who signed over their insurance benefits to him, and any children who got in the way. When he came under police suspicion, Mudgett protested his innocence despite the fact that, when a newspaper offered him a large fee, he penned a lurid confession to twenty-seven murders, retracting this once he was paid. His luck finally ran out when, while in custody in relation to an unrelated murder in Philadelphia, his hotel caught fire and the remains of more than a hundred bodies were found. Mudgett eventually confessed to twenty-eight killings and six attempted homicides, stating that, while largely motivated by profit, he would sometimes kill just for the pleasure of hearing his victims' screams. The first serial killer identified in the United States, Mudgett was hanged on 7 May 1896. As per his request, his coffin was embedded in cement as he feared his body might be disinterred by souvenir hunters or doctors wanting to dissect his brain.⁵

Appetiser: strychnine

Another medical man, Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, was executed in London four years before Mudgett in 1892, having killed, police claimed, at least eight young women in England, America and Canada by handing out strychnine pills that he said were tonics or other medicine. An already convicted murderer on early release from prison, Cream was a dandy who seemed to go out of his way to attract the attention of the police – sometimes giving them information on his victims before foul play was even suspected. He once escaped a charge of bigamy by pleading he had been in prison in Australia at the time of his second marriage, but there is no evidence that Cream ever travelled to the Antipodes.

A bitter alkaloid drug derived from the seeds of the *strychnos nux-vomica* tree, strychnine is native to Australia, India and Sri Lanka, and has been used as a rat poison for more than five centuries. Strychnine can be fatal if swallowed or inhaled, with acute poisoning characterised by violent and painful convulsions that can begin within minutes of ingestion. Other symptoms include muscular cramps (especially in the neck and back), stiff joints, twitching muscles, headache, a feeling of restlessness and a severe restriction of blood-oxygen to the body tissues. This last effect leads to *cyanosis*, where the skin turns blue. The kidneys may fail due to the strain of processing the poison, but death often occurs due to respiratory arrest. This sounds quite peaceful, but is often preceded by such agony that the victim dies screaming in a final convulsion that leaves their body bent backwards until their head almost reaches their feet. Today, non-fatal doses of strychnine are treated by keeping the victim quiet and administering barbiturate sedatives and artificial respiration, but the poison's debilitating effects can linger and affect the sufferer for months or even years.

As a central nervous system stimulant, strychnine works like a toxic appetiser, increasing the secretion of gastric juices and heightening sensory awareness. These qualities caused a strychnine-based medicine known as *nux vomica* to be prescribed in the nineteenth

century as an antidote for narcotic overdose and to treat shock. Solutions of strychnine of various strengths were also commonly used as so-called 'nerve tonics' to increase appetite, improve muscle tone and stimulate weak bladders.

By the 1890s, strychnine was only one of the some one hundred and sixty poisons then classified and capable of being detected, but about half of these were chemical rarities and no more than forty ever really figured as a cause of death at that time, suspicious or not. In 1895, the test for strychnine involved concentrating liquid matter to a drop and placing this on a white porcelain tile. An electric current was then passed through this drop, or a tiny crystal of bichromate of potash dropped into it. After either of these additions, a single one-hundredth of a grain of strychnia (as the poison was also called) caused a gorgeous array of colours to appear in the drop. The first of these was deep sapphire blue, this then becoming violet, purple, crimson and finally lilac blue. This dramatic test was not foolproof, as the colours changed and then vanished rapidly and, in a time before colour photography, no record or proof of the colours could be preserved. The whole test thus depended on the accuracy and reliability of the analyst's observations during the approximately five-minute test.⁶ Today, strychnine is one of the poisons routinely tested for in cases of suspected poisoning.

Entrée: arsenic

Arsenic, the unscientific but popular name for *arsenic trioxide* (As_2O_3), is one of the most ubiquitous of poisons – not only virtually undetectable and deadly, but occurring in a wide range of locations in our environment, whether natural or industrial. It is released into the air by volcanoes, when arsenic-containing minerals and ores weather and break down, and by a range of commercial and industrial processes. Some groundwater naturally contains arsenic, as do a range of commercial products including wood preservatives, insecticides, weed killers and defoliants, fungicides, cattle and sheep dips, paints, pigments and leaded petrol. Wine and tobacco can contain arsenic if the grapes or tobacco plants are sprayed with arsenical pesticides, and seafood – especially bivalves such as oysters and mussels – certain cold water and bottom-feeding finfish and seaweeds can contain dangerous levels of the poison. Arsenic is also a by-product of the smelting process for many metal ores including lead, gold, zinc, cobalt and nickel, and is used in the production of glass and semiconductors, in preserving wood and animal hides, and as an additive to metal alloys to increase their heat resistance.

The symptoms of arsenic poisoning are nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, headache, abdominal pain, muscular cramping, a weak pulse and, in severe cases, coma and death. Victims suffer damage to the digestive tract and other internal organs as well as a direct attack on the nervous system. Arsenic is excreted from the body mostly through the urine, with complete elimination usually not achieved in less than two weeks, and the faeces, skin and hair often containing lingering traces long after a single small dose. A corpse's hair can, indeed, be analysed many years after burial for arsenic residue, which was how Napoleon's chronic poisoning was determined some 140 years after his death.

Although we are all regularly ingesting tiny amounts of naturally occurring arsenic, even a small overexposure to this poison can cause nervous and motor coordination disorders, respiratory diseases and kidney damage as well as an increased risk of skin, liver, bladder, kidney and lung cancers. Acute poisoning has a mortality rate of fifty to seventy-five percent, with death usually occurring within two days of a lethal dose. The size of this dose depends both on the form ingested and the victim's tolerance, but for arsenic trioxide it is probably in the range of 200 to 300 milligrams – a few specks that are easily hidden in a meal or beverage. This amount can, however, vary wildly, with a dose as small as 20 milligrams life-threatening for some, while others have made an almost miraculous recovery after ingesting as much as 10 grams.

Arsenic has been known and used in various forms since 3000 B.C. but an Arab alchemist, Jabir ibn Hayyan, is believed to be the first to obtain a concentration of white arsenic when he heated the mineral realgar in the eighth century. Before Hayyan, most poisons had strongly distinguishable tastes, odours or colours, but white arsenic was (and is) so insidious because it is unnoticeable, readily available and inexpensive. From the beginning, however, arsenic also had other, more legitimate (although albeit sometimes misguided) uses. Amulets containing arsenic were worn during the Plague as protection from infection, and arsenic was prescribed throughout the nineteenth century for illnesses as disparate as syphilis and malaria, with regular small doses believed to improve breathing when climbing. *Fowler's Solution*, containing one percent potassium arsenite, was a popular over-the-counter cure-all for ailments including arthritis, cancer, deafness, eczema, measles, skin problems, varicose veins and ulcers.⁷ Available from 1786 for over a hundred and fifty years, this miracle cure was even believed to offer relief to those suffering from emotional complaints such as melancholy and jealousy. Users gradually poisoned themselves with this concoction, weakening their health while building up a tolerance to arsenic in the process.

Despite all her fears of her food being poisoned, Queen Elizabeth I used arsenic as part of the toxic preparation that made her face appear chalky white, but it was only from the 1830s that arsenic became widely accepted as a cosmetic. Although she chose laudanum for her suicide in 1862, Elizabeth Siddal, wife and model of painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, regularly took small doses of arsenic in the belief that it made her eyes brighter and her skin clearer. This practice, called *arsenic eating*, built up the user's tolerance to the poison – and could be utilised by a fearless poisoner, who after regularly ingesting small, but increasing amounts of poison, could safely share a meal containing toxic doses with his or her victim. This fact was used by Dorothy L. Sayers in her 1930 novel *Strong Poison* (1930), which revolves around the ability of a practiced arsenic eater to withstand a dose of the poison that kills his victim.⁸ In 1870, Daniel Brinton and George Napheys warned that an arsenic-eater could exhale sufficient amount of the poison to kill an unsuspecting spouse.⁹

The dangerous practice of using arsenic cosmetically became household knowledge during the notorious Madeleine Smith trial in 1857 in which Smith was alleged to have poisoned her French lover, (Pierre) Emile L'Angelier, on three occasions before finally

killing him. Madeleine was the 22-year-old daughter of a wealthy and well-respected Glasgow family; Emile a poor immigrant. Secretly engaged to Emile, Madeleine was then introduced to the wealthy businessman her father intended her to marry. Upon accepting this second proposal, Madeleine tried to end her relationship with the Frenchman, but he blackmailed her into continuing. Emile was then struck down with a series of severe vomiting attacks, the last of which proved fatal.

At this time, the presence of arsenic could be tested using tissue or fluid samples. If there was sufficient matter to test, it was simply a matter of ascertaining if a piece of copper foil blackened on exposure. If a lesser amount was present, then a solution was made and heated to generate a gas. When this gas was passed through a hot glass tube, a small trace of arsenic (one-millionth of a grain) would create a black smear just above the hottest part of the tube.¹⁰ The week after he died, Emile's body was discovered to contain large amounts of arsenic and, after Madeleine's letters to him were found and it became known that she had purchased arsenic, she was arrested for murder. Her defence – that she had obtained the arsenic *for her complexion* – was accepted and she was freed, but not without stigma, for the jury returned a verdict of 'not proven' on the charge of murder. This was a verdict then unique to Scotland, which states that although the prosecution failed to prove its case, her defence team also failed to convince the jury of the accused's innocence.¹¹

Such was the belief in arsenic's cosmetic benefits that, by the end of the nineteenth century, it was widely used in beauty products, with a popular topical preparation sold under the alluring name of *poudre rajeunissante* or rejuvenating powder. Arsenic was also believed to be a tonic of more value even than iron, and was used to colour sweets and wallpaper. This meant that not only were confectionery factory workers and sweet-toothed children at risk of becoming sickly from arsenic poisoning, so too were middle-class women and girls who spent too long in arsenic-green wallpapered rooms. It has been suggested that such wallpaper may have been one of the factors contributing to Napoleon's demise.

Dessert: thallium

When, in June 1953, Sydney housewife Beryl Hague stirred a spoonful of the liquid rodenticide, *Thall-Rat*, into her husband Allan's cup of tea – *just*, as she said, *to give him a headache* – she was only one in a long series of seemingly ordinary people who used poison – in this case, thallium sulphate – to kill off those they found odious for some reason or other. Thallium poisoning gained a great deal of press coverage in Australia at this time¹² for two main reasons. Firstly, because it was women poisoning their family and friends and, secondly, because the poison's lack of taste, colour and odour (together with its ready availability), made it a slyly lethal addition to the cakes, scones, biscuits and drinks emanating from the 1950's cradle of domesticity – the home kitchen.

The first reported Australian thallium case of the 1950s – when Yvonne Fletcher was tried in September 1952 for the murder of her two husbands with the poison – seemingly sparked off a wave of copycat poisonings, as reported in six sensational trials for thallium poisoning the next year. One of these struck reporters and readers as particularly incredible, when innocuous looking grandmother Caroline Grills, who at 63 was only four feet six inches tall, was convicted of killing three members of her family as well as one family friend in this manner, as well as poisoning as many as another eleven relatives. Sentenced to life in prison for her crimes, Grills lived the remainder of her life in Long Bay Gaol where she was much liked and became known as ‘Aunt Thally’.

Another Australian press sensation was Veronica Monty's poisoning of her son-in-law, the popular rugby star Bobby Lulham, who, it was revealed, had also been her lover. Lulham and his new wife, Judy, lived for some time with Veronica in this ménage à trois, a situation which was then unknown to Monty's daughter. Evidence was tendered that Monty poisoned the sportsman with thallium in a cup of Milo (the popular chocolate milk drink marketed as a vitamin tonic), who became very ill, but that he recovered after an anonymous informer suggested he be tested for the toxin and he was successfully treated. The informer was later revealed to be Monty herself, who admitted the poisoning but claimed it was accidental, as she had, she testified, made the drink intending to kill herself. Although acquitted of the crime, Veronica Monty committed suicide three years later in 1955.¹³

As the symptoms of thallium poisoning do not appear for a week or so after the initial dose, many who had been poisoned in this way did not connect being given the thallium with its later effects. Moreover, as these effects (like other poisons) resembled the symptoms of a range of fatal medical conditions like gastric influenza, stroke, cerebral haemorrhage and pneumonia, there is no doubt that many more victims were poisoned, and died, without arousing any suspicion. With rats in plague proportions in post-war Sydney, the government had lifted restrictions on thallium in order to fight this pestilence, but banned the powerful poison again when these and other cases were publicised.

After dinner: poisoning in the twenty first century

Poisoning has continued to be a prevalent method of murder in the last half of the twentieth century; however, after these mid-century thallium cases, it soon moved from the domestic kitchen, dining table and sick room into the realm of global mass killing. Following a trajectory from the mustard gas attacks of the First World War and the German gas chambers of the Second to the 1978 Jonestown massacre, the 1995 Japanese Sarin gas attacks and a deep fear of chemical warfare as the century closed, poison currently claims a place among the most ‘advanced’ weapon of mass destruction. And, today, as in the past, some poisoners no doubt continue to, literally, *get away with murder*, with the deaths they cause ascribed to natural causes. In addition to this, as in the past, even if detected, a contemporary poisoner may escape conviction on a raft of

legal technicalities as the evidence given in poisoning trials is often bafflingly complex with prosecution and defence medical and forensic experts presenting contradictory medical and other information for juries to contemplate. In a further complication, poisons widely considered to be dangerous continue to be used in everyday life, including medicinally. Arsenic is, for instance, currently employed in advanced cases of *trypanosomiasis*, the disease commonly known as African sleeping sickness and to fight a rare leukaemia, and is also being trialled as a treatment for cancer of the lung, colon and pancreas.¹⁴

As poisons, moreover, continue to be used as pesticides on, and preservatives and colouring and flavouring agents in our foods¹⁵, it may be that many of us are poisoning ourselves just as consistently, and unwittingly, as those women in their nineteenth century arsenic wallpapered rooms.

Endnotes

1. The historical information above about poisons and poisoning, including their use in crimes, and their detection, comes from a range of contemporary and historical sources: Bayer MJ and C McKay 1996 'Advances in poison management', *Clinical chemistry*, 42: 1361-66; Blythe AW 1884 *Poisons: their effects and detection*, Charles Griffin and Co: London; Burney, I 2012 'Poison, detection, and the Victorian imagination', Manchester University Press: Manchester; Dasey, P (ed) 1993 *An Australian murder almanac: 150 years of chilling crime*, Nationwide News: Canberra; Ellenhorn, MJ 1997 *Ellenhorn's medical toxicology: diagnosis and treatment of human poisoning*, Williams and Wilkins: Baltimore; Glaister J 1954 *The Power of poison*, Christopher Johnson: London; Hall, AH 2002 'Chronic arsenic poisoning', *Toxicology letters*, 128(1-3): 69-72; Hallakurva G 1994 *The silent weapon: poisons and antidotes in the Middle Ages* <http://www.florilegium.org/files/UNCAT/poisons-art.html> (accessed 22 May 2012); Holstege, CP, T Neer, GB Saathoff and RB Furbee 2010 *Criminal poisoning: clinical and forensic perspectives*, Jones & Bartlett Publishers, Burlington, MA; Kellett, C 2012 *Poison and poisoning: a compendium of cases, catastrophes and crimes*, Accent Press: USA; Main, J 1980 *Murder Australian style*, Unicorn Books: East Melbourne; McGarry, RC and P McGarry 1999 'Please pass the strychnine: the art of Victorian pharmacy', *Canadian Medical Association journal*, 161(12): 1556-58; Olsen, K (ed) 2011 *Poisoning and drug overdose*, 6th ed., McGraw-Hill Professional: New York; Schoolmeester WL and DR White 1980 'Arsenic poisoning', *Southern medical journal*, 73(2): 198-208; Sharpe, A and V Encel 1997 *Murder!: 25 true Australian crimes*, Kingsclear Books: Crows Nest; Sparrow, G 1971 *Vintage Victorian murder*, Arthur Barker: London; Stevens, S and A Bannon 2007 *HowDunit: the book of poisons*, Writers Digest Books; Taylor, AS 1875 *On poisons*, J and A Churchill: London; Thompson, CJS 1931 *Poisons and poisoners*, Harold Shaylor: London; Wilde, O 1889 'Pen, pencil and poison', *Fortnightly review*, January, in *Intentions*, Heinemann and Balestier: London, 1891; repub. in *Intentions*, Methuen and Co., London, 1913: 55-91, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E800003-010> (accessed 29 June 2012); Wilson, R 2011 'Chronic arsenic poisoning: history, study and remediation', Harvard University: Cambridge, http://phys4.harvard.edu/%7EWilson/arsenic_project_introduction.html (accessed 29 June 2012); Wood, JG 1937 'Poisons and their history' in K Grant (ed), *Science for All*, Advertiser Newspapers: Adelaide, 73-6.
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10. See, *Truth*, 12 May 1896, 5.
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Research statement

Research background

Food writing, a highly visible form of contemporary writing, is attracting scholarly attention (Humble 2005, Driver 2009) and beginning to be defined, classified and explored in terms of literary potential (Waxman 2008). This work is part of a project addressing the food writing domain, proposing that more literary forms of food writing have the ability to communicate a range of technical/health related information – in this case, information about poisons/poisoning.

Research contribution

While Bloom states that food writing is ‘most often upbeat and nurturing, providing successes and triumphs ... for readers to feast on, with occasional glimpses of utopia’ (2008: 346), a key innovation is the use of food writing to illuminate a less than utopian aspect of food provision – poisoning.

Research Significance

The concept that drives this work has already attracted national and international interest, with the author achieving national and international scholarly publication on work on food writing subgenres and their expressive potential. A key significance here is the use of food writing to explicate a scholarly subject, delivering technical information in an approachable form.

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University of Melbourne

Kevin Brophy

Exercises in creative thinking

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – prose poetry

Guidelines

After readings and discussions of prose poetry from Charles Simic (2008), Lyn Hejinian (1987), Margaret Atwood (1994) and Russell Edson (2001), with critical input from Michel Delville (1998) and David Lehman (2003): produce a series of prose poems over thirty days in a continuous sequence—using dreams, chance impressions, reading material of all kinds, random thoughts, overheard phrases and imagined situations, exploiting extension techniques identified in readings and discussions.

The following examples are taken from a two-day sequence during a series written over sixty days:

Taxi

Alone in the street on a rainy night a man sees a taxi come round the bend, slow and careful, sketchy in the dim light, and he lets it go past, knowing it will not help him, knowing that this taxi driver does not really ever want to stop.

Memoir

No one believes you when you say you are murderer. You walk outside where no one is afraid of you but everyone still looks fearful, after spending an hour listening to a poet nostalgic for the wallpaper on vermin-riddled town houses destroyed by slum clearing gangs who drove bulldozers that with breathless metal whines left only dust that made its way into everyone's mouths and eyes. They took it home, those gangsters, to their wives and children. Yes, this is the outskirts of Liverpool, they said to the wives who bathed their tired husbands, yes, this grit between them in the bed that smelled of twenty years of marriage was the dust of wallpaper and brick someone (the poet) grew up loving. You tell yourself you must never feel nostalgic. You expect that you have shaken hands with several other murderers, men and women. There must be some, exiles from the circles nostalgia makes. But we are as rare as the magical hare in the woods.

I should have plans, you think, but *the days have been very long with nothing to do in them but think and wonder.*

City

We can rely on the streets to produce the beggars. we can rely on the trains to produce pickpockets and sleeping workers. We can rely on the lanes to produce the nights that fill every building with lost switches, blank windows, women at their pillows and men on their couches. Just as in a forest the only thing to do in a city is walk.

Local knowledge

You go up to a local and ask him where the post office is, and how to find a public toilet in this town, and he says he's been here only two days and knows nothing (except how to dress and stand and squint into the prevailing breeze like a local). It was just blind luck that he spoke a few words of the town tongue. You know what the chances are if you approach someone else, when, hey presto, you are being asked for directions by someone who has been here for five minutes less than you.

What it meant

It streaked across the sky then faded out somewhere near the horizon. It was visible for 59.8 seconds. Astronomers who had measured this visibility said it might have flown back out into space for this planet is sometimes a slingshot. It is possible that it was swallowed by the sea or it might be somewhere in Spain. It will be surprisingly heavy. It will be polished black, they said, and most likely no bigger than your palm. Its shape is unknown. They called it a fragment but they said it is eternal and has not broken from any larger body. It has no place to return to and it will never burn away entirely. It is a gift and a warning, an orphan and an angel.

Anxiety

Falling asleep he fell into a river, which closed over him. He woke and fell asleep again, falling from a bicycle onto stones then tumbling from the stones into a swift river, which closed over him. He woke and fell asleep again, slipping from the railing of a bridge into a harbor, which closed blue and silent over him. He woke and fell again.

Weather here

Today sunlight brings prams into the open, and each public bench has two young people sitting on it. Two swans visit this stretch of water here. Today, sunlight.

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Research statement

Research background

Procedural thinking is important in hard sciences (Hodges 1985). Rule-based thinking, however, does not produce creative solutions. Simonton notes the ‘messiness’ of creative thinking’ (2004: 42-3), observing:

Although analytical thinking is absolutely mandatory when scientists must justify their discoveries to colleagues, its place in the creative process must be more restricted. The combinatorial process functions in relative freedom from a priori constraints (171-2).

By ‘combinatorial process’ Simonton means time-consuming *stochastic* process of conjecturing, hazarding, guessing, until a new path through a problem is discovered (40-2). Neurologically, this looser, combinatorial thinking requires a re-balancing of the brain’s hemispheres. New information activates the right side of the brain (McGilchrist 2009: 95), the side that generates new knowledge. The left side (speech and rule-based thinking) tends dominate daily life, preventing the emergence of new knowledge (32-91). It requires practice and effort to bring combinatorial processes into play in scientific thinking.

Research contribution

This project – where scientists will be guided with examples to produce prose poems – exercises the right-brain’s combinatorial processes. It will assist high performing scientists to hold thoughts in creative suspension, allowing new combinations into consciousness, and aims to test whether the practice of literary skills offers the possibility of extrapolation to thinking creatively about scientific problems.

Research significance

This project introduces transferable creative-thinking skills to research scientists.

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Griffith University

Stuart Cooke

Writing in/on Australia: history, ecology, poetry

Biographical note:

Stuart Cooke is Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Griffith University. Stuart Cooke's first collection of poetry, *Edge Music*, was published in 2011 (IP). He has also published a chapbook, *Corrosions* (Vagabond 2010) and a translation of Juan Garrido Salgado's *Eleven Poems, September 1973* (Picaro Press 2007). His critical work, *Speaking the Earth's Languages: a theory for trans-Pacific Indigenous Poetics*, is forthcoming from Rodopi. Email: stuart.cooke@griffith.edu.au

Keywords:

creative writing – poetry – Australia

Part A

Litchfield shout!

Grab your paints your dreams we'll shake
them down
your Litchfield dreamings fly
across pandanus greens exploding the drips of dark
trunk run
here we are the deep red splash
ing out bark drips cracking open the
cumulus heart: pumping out from Darwin
stumbling
from the floods of a half-caste tin
mine take it up scoop it up splashing ten
stories of wilderness lust like pieces
of lush community the monsoonal
cavities of your pristine teeth we're out
there now out here playing it out
the gen
tle goanna dawdle hearty Prado
laugh in
we go go streams pool the dark colours stroke
a black one **hard** beside the road watch
for those ochre fringes
these clouds coughed up
we all swallowed too much it's a
littlebird what type no idea it's a
shadow stretching thin/ dreaming out/dreaming
in your hands a precious bowl pour a
song write with feathers pour it from within
the soft down sewing cobalt pillows: the
flying sky always slumber/ always safe we're
slipping sex your rubber on the duco crocs
gone igneous and slipping, slipping
we're slipping south to steal the colder flow

Worn

Only loneliness of desk the ellipsis of word,
recalling memories the hand behind dealing out
each one, if only my limbs if only my tongue... trembling
what duckling wouldn't and what grown man
hardening, wouldn't run there that first one
that early peace, a taste of sugar like... entropy, chaotic
and brittle and never a sense you can, always
the possibility of looking back to see... nothing,

our worn mountains the Australian
breath, the lonely descent from weather
from moon, wolverine mindscapes some
faint dingo dream, none of it mine just time

bursting... scraps of laughter a bit of sex the rest
rented, the sun retreating I'd re-enact each moment
if it would make... the split timber of my mistakes
forever, wherever forgotten.

suel tame rocky coast smelter

suel tame hermana media hermana nada
mas que an acquaintance un accident historic
agujero negro never negro never a home
place never the broken home platitudes with it
only the sucios make you sweat second
hand I came to understand la ley
de la land la la la la la la mama
tierra? la la la la la la no home in Bodalla
can't stand Temuco too cold in Hobart Puerto
Montt push it push it I never understood
la ley 'cause I couldn't stand the swelter
the molten breast milk swelter
pechugas de piedra sucking on salt water
inky heart saltos *huyéndose* how many times *has*
art rhymed with corazón the reason I'm fleeing
is the buzz of an interstitial buzzing salty
smelters is when I dive into the ocean
cuando escucho las fantasmas
sumergiéndose otra vez en las aguas
it surrounds me like your land surrounds you.

Part B

1) Vision

Purnululu wandering

“Australia we sobbed through the paperbarks’ songs
to birds and gentle animals
and to the soft-stepping people of its river-banks”

– from ‘Silva’, by Robert Adamson

In your rivers of sand, these
frozen oceans of salt,
silicate-crust
of earth, my heels break
crust with each step; I crush
sticks, dried
leaves hidden
beneath

I sink, and
wade

through sandstone, pink
riverbed

outside
the wind throws fresh the loose
the grains
of sand across spinifex, stinging hiss
and wattle cry; some bird I won’t
should see. But
can’t.

Fire memories
shimmer; dormant
tongue
in your rumours of ants, rock
red

apricot
termites mound
cooked flesh. Fires
lick
past. Withered
spinifex; limp puffing
ash.
And dust
y black shoes.
Rivers

of sand, heaped
tracks, tracks, dung
of crushed rocks

– your
things, brilliant
things.

Out with Franz

after Philip Hodgins

Franz was Dutch once
but after spending a lot of time here in Broome
the old fella decided to give him the _____ law.

He took us up
through some of the country, pointing out
plants and places of interest. We sped
at one-thirty along a dusty red road
gloved by burnt scrub to burst out
onto the coast: stupid, sheer blue everywhere.

Franz told us to walk down the beach a bit,
About a 'k, he said. He'd drive on
and meet us where the red cliffs turned
into sand dunes.

After two 'ks at least, the white sand burning
your eyes out,
we saw the red rock beside us start to sink
into the ground and the big dunes rise up
with a few tufts of this and that on top.
There was a little beach.

Some of us undressed and wandered into the water.
I turned to see Franz's relief striding down
the crest of a dune. It can be hard to think of this sort of thing
as paradisiacal: you can worry a lot about fresh water,
or how long it will be until you can get back to shade.
You think of what they say about skin cancer, too (the sun's
always there, beating down).
I joined the others in the ocean. Franz lay down on the sand,
took off his sandals and put them under his head.
For a whitefella he didn't seem to burn much.

I swam out for a bit then caught a small wave in.
All that heat and stress I'd felt earlier
had been washed off.
I pointed to the blood red
of the cliffs; Franz said they were a big quarry once
where the people got paint and good rock.
When everyone was out of the water we followed him
through a valley between the dunes.
Around our feet were scattered thousands
of pieces of chipped sparkling shells
and thin teeth of stone. It was here,
he told us, over thirty of the tribe had been shot
by paranoid explorers. Over the other side of that dune

was the burial ground.

You couldn't camp there; this was a better place to sleep.

Stop! he cried, his hands out.

At his feet: two eggs like small marbles

resting on a simple patio of broken white shell.

It was the oyster catcher's nest.

Then, further on, circles of grey ash in the sand.

During lunch, back behind the dunes, someone asked him

why the massacre wasn't mentioned

on the tourist information board. They don't want

to give the young people any more reason

to be angry, he said.

Harbour line

In my eye's corner: her feet coupled on the grass, beside –
harbour.

A day weighted with clouds,
with weaker light, the water is a wrinkled,
ferric skin and impermeable
as the sky's faintly stained milk.

Thick lines are cramped between water and sky:
impending

green pasture, which water covers
before foliage breaks out of water
to explode amongst apartment blocks,
mossy, flaming and untenable
while

the skyscrapers remain veiled
in a thin, chalky fabric.

A strip of Sydney;
she stirs. Her line returns
to beyond the beginning of my vision.
I turn to say, _____.

2) Performance

Song of the possible

(He might sit on a limb of their honeycomb light
while fishing a lapping tide's throat...)

He might fish from a jetty the size of a thumb
mandarin and faded mountain smeared across waves' slick backs

*the long, slick waves rolling in
long, lonely snakes rolling one after the other
lonely snakes rolling in to shore
lonely snakes rolling over pavements
their inky lines over pavements
the snakes' inky lines on parchment...*

He might slither off to the moon on one of those inky lines
he might be hooked by a line from the moon's dark hand

*while the curious serpents wind into the city
the sandy-brown coal serpents
they're flying over the skeleton coral
flying over the skeleton trees, the rusting hulls
flying at night time, hiding from the sun
their pale clay tracks...*

He sees them come from the water pans
from above, he sees them come screaming from the salt flats

*their husky diesel mouths
their diesel mouths gathering at the bottleshop
forming queues at the bottleshop, they are singing
they start shaking and soon they are fizzing
fizzing in queues, their grating gas calls
calling and singing with husky diesel mouths...*

He might find plastic jewels or beads
he might find words for the night's precious treasures

*branches of ellipsis crack into honeycomb
and the dance boils in the moon's flare
the dancing spirit skins, their lines striking
while his line shoots off into the depths, then snaps
so many of his lines shoot off, snapping
always this tearing, grating, snapping...*

He might find venom in a bottle on the sand

he won't find an object that will grant him their consent

*the dead at the bottleshops keep calling
rising and falling, lifting and dropping*

*they will line the pavements with stories
they are lining parchments with venomous songs and stories*

*but he keeps fishing, shooting into the depths
his rusty old hook in a rising tide...*

He might be fishing until the white honey teeth arrive
when at last they arrive, racing like snakes from far off

*finally they start dancing to the songs
they start dancing and pounding at the doors*

*he jumps to his feet before the tide of sounds
stumbling on their fierce, salty songs*

*they're pounding cliffs with waves and granite skulls
with their aching limbs and their tall spears of gum.*

So the dreaming blacksmith and a war
memorial stench of rusting cannons
always the blacksmith, the cannons
the curling timbers of floating dreams
collecting like wasps in Roebuck Bay.
We grow on the multiplicity of metaphor: what
if each new festival were a dance
upon a wound
and our cities were built with a dark
bloody mortar?

If you wrote this down you'd crack branches
if you let it rumble out you'd have the sea birds singing
you'd have the sea eagles nibbling at clockwork. What
if each new festival were a dance
were a dance on the rust
flakes of rust around the moon's white mouth?

Came from the water in spirit form
sprayed from the gatherings
 leaving the dry chatter of countless
leaves over hard earth
returning to the accumulative enactment: poetics
of building, car, space
all tumbling over one another, mistletoe masses
maculating

thirsty shadows growing at sunset
dark fingers across the lawns
shooting off steaming
off like song they came from the ocean
shifting under memory's weight, the pastoral
muscle descending into sinew
the vernacular republic was an old clump
of buffel grass

drying out.

Up grew tough wattle musculature
acacia fibres wrapped by sky's boiling skin
give me the tumbling histories of the wind
a million feet caked in mud of burnt mandarin
rain in ribbons
pasture floating softer than sea.
Say rivers of black ink sucked up in sunlight

throat sucking song from a waterhole's nugget density.
Say pen, flood, cumulus, humid melody
and lightning time.

Now they're pointing
they're pointing the shadow fingers the new
flesh limbs pointing east
with the momentum
 of geology
 if the whole world
might melt into it
melt into horizon's crinkling epidermis
so that the whole world might re-emerge
in tongues bursting like pandanus:
the aching past sinking into a bleeding spring
bubbling up
seething the ochre plain mirage.

Valparaíso and tourist

Before the broken edges of an old city's coast,
before the waves breaking on the wharves,
a city lost in the fog tumbling in from the ocean,
in snakes of fog sliding down from the mountains,
I'm tumbling through skins to my origins.

I am tumbling and my skin's shade is changing,
I am of the television virus, my skin is brightening,
I am from the land of ether, of foamed milk,
I am the loved one, only ever the one, the one loved for being one,
I am the one writing with all my weight.

I've left a trail of footsteps across the stars,
I've scratched away footsteps one by one,
each step burnt a field, a mask, a sleepy carbon mass,
I'm a mask with eyes of furious sulphur,
I'm a moon in search of a planet in search of a moon.

If I was in love it was with a woman becoming a man,
if I was loved it was by a world becoming a woman,
I was never loved by the grumpy old goanna,
I was never held in the wings of the circling goshawk,
if it was love it was grumpy ions going senile in the galactic mirage.

I *have* been loved, but only on occasion,
and I am loved, but only by staggered occasions,
staggering past old buildings, I imagine decayed teeth,
I screw them hollow for my filthy heap,
the fact is none would love me if they could see inside.

As a living thing I am growing outwards, spreading,
as a living I am fattening, spreading outwards, phoning,
as a dead heart growing,
as a dead heart sprawling over tarmac
while the black skins of the bitumen places sizzle underneath.

For my living I am ripping off their rhythms,
I am ripping off skins, buying the hearts of places,
I'm spreading cancer thick like a famous yeast,
this strange old city tumbling down in granules,
cancer is dancing in the halls of my metal cells.

So come to me on a lonely night when I least expect it,
come to me on the one night I most deserve it,
come to me, roll to me over the hakea and the singing she-oak,
look for me, come to me, hold me and own me,
we'll meet by the edge of this crumbling city's dreams.

For left alone I ferment into lonely flora,
left alone I become the stench of an alcoholic plague,
I reach out and devour the seeds of places,
I gain weight and lose it immediately in their throats,
my stinking ferment causes them atrocious choking spasms.

Come to me in the night furthest from my origins,
we'll walk down the most sinuous, gaseous streets,
I'll take your hand and your music and I'll suck on your bleeding tongue,
for I am the gum plague, I'm riddling the earth with gums,
and I'm crushing your gases in the star burning furthest from reach.

Research background

I am interested in how Australian poetry is defined by its relationship to the Australian continent, and in what I propose are fundamental characteristics of Australian poetry: perceptive difficulties; the close relationship between the poem and its *performance* in particular places.

Research significance

The poems in Part A engage with a sense of dislocation implicit to contemporary Australian existence: the vast distances between places with which I'm familiar produce similarly fragmented series of intelligible and unintelligible syntax. Part B contains two parts. The poems in 'Vision' are aligned by the speaker's inability to see or understand completely the region in which the poem takes place. This produces a series of poetic 'blind spots'. Finally, 'Performance' is a selection of work that attempts to synthesise some elements of Australia's greatest poetry traditions – those of Aboriginal nations – with particular strains of non-Aboriginal Australian poetry (eg. Rodriguez 1990; Anderson 1995). I've appropriated syntactical patterns common in translations of Aboriginal poetry (eg. Strehlow 1971). In doing so, I've been self-reflexively critical of what is effectively a colonial appropriation of Aboriginal cultural forms.

Research contribution

These poems attempt to show that the writing and performance of Australian poetry in English is strained by multiple pathways of dislocation, displacement and dissent.

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University of the Sunshine Coast

Gary Crew

Museum piece

Biographical note:

Dr Gary Crew is Associate Professor (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He is an established author of fiction for both youth and adult audiences. Crew's work is recognised internationally for his innovative interpretations of visual text. Crew has two new releases for 2012: the adult graphic novel *The Boy who Grew into a Tree* (Penguin), designed and illustrated by Ross Watkins, and his second adult novel, *The Architecture of Song* (Harper Collins), a narrative based on the miraculous qualities of poetry.

Keywords:

architecture – museums – fictocriticism

When a thing is old, broken, and useless we throw it on the dust heap, but when it is sufficiently old, sufficiently broken, and sufficiently useless we give money for it, put it into a museum, and read papers over it which people come from long distances to hear. By-and-by, when the whirligig of time has brought on another revenge, the museum itself becomes a dust-heap, and remains so till after long ages it is rediscovered, and valued as belonging to a neo-rubbish age – containing, perhaps, traces of a still older paleo-rubbish civilisation. So when people are old, indigent, and in all respects incapable, we hold them to even greater contempt as their poverty and impotence increase, till they reach the pitch where they are actually at the point to die, whereon they become sublime.

Butler, Samuel 1970 [1908] *Essays on Life, Art and Science*, Port Washington, Kennikat Press: 45-6

1.

Returning

He opened the cab door and sat in the back. ‘Queensland Museum,’ he said. ‘Corner of Gregory Terrace and Bowen Bridge Road.’

The cab pulled away from the curb.

A glass screen separated passenger from driver. Tilting his head to avoid his own reflection (as one does when observing curiosities under glass), the passenger leaned forward. He noted the pits and craters of what he assumed had been an adolescent skin disorder on the back of the driver’s neck; scarring that had not faded with age.

‘I haven’t been to this place since I was a kid,’ the passenger said. ‘Must be fifty years ...’

The driver did not respond. Maybe he hadn’t heard; maybe it was the end of his shift; maybe he’d had a bad day.

‘I’m wondering if it’s as impressive as I remember: the architecture; the space; the exhibits ...’

The driver checked the meter. Maybe the instrument was faulty; maybe he’d changed zones from urban to metropolitan; maybe he sought a distraction.

‘I’m wondering why it still affects me,’ the passenger persisted. ‘Why I remember it so clearly.’

The driver made no comment.

The passenger sat back, gazing through the window to his left. Idle as he appeared (the driver took a glance in the rear vision mirror), he was, nonetheless, determined to articulate whatever was on his mind; to manage his errant thoughts. ‘Just the other day,’ he started in again, ‘I came across an article claiming you could psychoanalyse a building. The writer reckoned he wanted to put "architecture on the couch"¹; to interrogate a building like a shrink interrogates a patient – if you get my drift – to try to understand what made a particular building tick. And what made the people who

inhabited that building – or visited it – tick too. Anyway, peculiar as that might sound, I thought of this museum and how it's affected me. Always has, since I was a kid, so the idea that I could put both building and contents on the couch appealed to me. Along with myself, of course, seeing I remember it so well. The whole kit and caboodle. That's why I've come back. To try to work out why the place has gotten under my skin.'

Beyond the glass, the driver scratched the back of his neck.

2.

Gates

Stepping out of the cab, the passenger crossed the footpath to stand before the museum gates.

Pale skinned, bald and stocky, he might have been the man in Jeffrey Smart's painting *Cahill Expressway*, although he did not wear a suit. His trousers were cotton drill (stone coloured), his shirt blue chambray, his shoes tan leather brogues. His clothes labelled him a Queenslander, but the tan leather satchel slung over his shoulder suggested something else: he might be an artist, a musician, an author.

He might be me.

(He might prove to be you.)

The man slipped his hands into his trouser pockets and looked about. 'Zeke,' he announced, 'you're back.' Only then did he realise that the gates were shut.

He glanced at a sign to his left then checked his wristwatch (Heathrow – the Old Country – duty free): 8:55am.

Not long.

The gates were cast iron, painted Brunswick Green (over and over, so many coats, decade after decade, but the corrosive pocks lingered, suppurating, beneath); their elegant Victorian picket heads barbed lances. Also of cast iron – the same colour and design as the gates – the fence enclosing the museum grounds stretched left and right.

He grasped the central pickets with both hands and gave them a shake. 'Hey,' he shouted. 'It's Zeke. Come to claim my expectations,' and since books were his life, he stepped back, letting Dickens flood his brain:

Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Haversham's house, which was of old brick and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower ones rustily barred. So, we had to wait, after ringing the bell, until someone should come to open it. While we waited at the gate I peeped in ...²

That bit of the novel had annoyed Zeke since High School; surely the 'it' in 'until someone should come to open it' was referring to the bell, which was, after all, the nearest noun. So someone was coming to open the bell?

Editing – always editing – he picked at the paint.

The line should read, 'until someone should come to open the gate', and in frustration (at both the text and the lock out) he gave the bars a further shake.

As he did – with a buzz and a click – they swung inward of their own accord.

Technology, he thought, the place has changed.

Zeke headed for the entrance to the building itself. Splotches of wintery sun penetrated the tubular grey branches of a leafless frangipani dappling the red brick paving before him. Perhaps it was the queasy shifting of that lemony light – perhaps the sullen movement of those leaden boughs – that prompted a sudden giddiness. One of his turns, he knew – strange how they came on; always had, since childhood – and his satchel slipped from his shoulder as he staggered to grip the rear of a garden seat nearby.

The gate being open, the vision came, the voice.

'Dad?' Zeke answered. '*Dad* ... ?'

Raising his head, his palms to his temples, he whispered. 'I didn't expect you ... What is it? What brought you? Those gates? Ah ... You're letting me know, aren't you? You're giving me a nudge. You're reminding me. So it's not just here, not just this building – not just these gates – not exclusively. There's others, 'eh? Your power house. Us ...'

So he sat, mumbling, and so that other time returned; that other place – the dappled light allowing – as that memory, that voice, that vision of his father slipped through those towering gates.

As a boy, Ezekiel had visited his father at the municipal power house after school. He left early, while there was light. His father worked the night shift—6 pm to 6 am—shovelling coal into the boilers that lit the city.

(There were three boilers, surely, Zeke mused, giddy yet, though all three come back to him as one.)

'I could do with some company,' his father grunted, shovelling peas on a rare night home. So the dutiful mother cut sandwiches, made a thermos of black coffee and packed the leather satchel the boy slung over his shoulder. Daylight though it was, he checked the dynamo mounted on the front wheel of his push bike in case the dark fell fast (as it could, in winter) and he needed the flickering head lamp to guide him.

Cast iron gates barred the power house from the world (hobos, stickybeaks). These gates unnerved the boy. In the gathering dark their lance-like pickets loomed above

him, conjuring Cromwell's disinterred head stuck on a pike outside the Tower; an image he knew from his Arthur Mee's Pictorial Encyclopaedia. But night crept on and to reach his goal he must grip those bars and push. Puny as he was, he did just that.

The gates opened, groaning, and Ezekiel crept through, the sneaking darkness not altogether debarred since a little (a shade, a shadow) slipped through behind. Perhaps there was too much Hans Christian Andersen in him – through his mother, no doubt, since she was the bed time reader. The boy winced, recalling how Andersen's fictional shadow 'shrivelled up and became much smaller than it had been at home'³ as he prepared to face his father in the boiler room, seated on a wooden stool – he knew – hunched over a book (his Bible?) reading by the glare of the flames.

(How many boilers were there? Zeke wondered. Three, surely, yet he saw only one.)

His father was dark: his overalls, his boots, his stubbled cheeks, his hair and hands—his finger nails clogged with soot – but the whites of his eyes were wide, unblinking, as he lifted his head, eyeing the intruder.

'Aw!' Zeke moaned, rubbing his temples. 'This is too much. Too soon. Slower. Slower. I didn't love you. You hear me? I never loved you. I can own that now. I can own that ... So come in if you're coming, but slowly, and let's get this right.'

Appeased (or commanded?), the father came – slower – but as dark, as distant, the flames from the boiler raging, throwing shadows, dark as the man himself. Emboldened, the boy stepped forward, drawing strength from his shadow lengthening on the wall, 'so tall did it make itself', as Zeke recalled his childhood Andersen, 'the shadow stretched itself quite up the wall, farther even than the ceiling'⁴, and the boy grew stronger, seeing it, seeing himself grow, and when the shadow reached the ceiling it stretched across to peer down, powerful, over the father below.

'I am here,' the boy announced. 'I've brought sandwiches and coffee.'

The father stood. There was a moment of white teeth, purple lips. 'About time,' he said, taking the satchel. 'You having some?'

'Later,' Ezekiel answered, aware of the fire. 'Maybe ...' and pulling up a second stool, he sat.

So father and son faced each other.

Sometimes they sat at draughts. 'Checkers' the boy preferred to call them since that sounded manly. His father took the pieces from a wooden shelf, blew the coal dust off the cardboard box then, reaching for the folded board, opened it on an upturned kero tin placed between the stools where they sat to play.

Ezekiel did not enjoy this game. If he won he felt bad, if he lost he felt worse. When they were finished – whoever won or lost – he stood to fart or burp (an adolescent statement of which Zeke was ashamed) and more often than not he made a fuss of stretching as he secretly watched his shadow grow, empowering himself.

If his father went out to pee on the glistening mounds of coal in the yard he called over his shoulder, 'Keep an eye on those pressure gauges. If the water falls below that mark' – *What mark, where?* the boy wondered – 'Yell!'

A gauge filled with water was mounted on the outer casing of each boiler (there was just one boiler, surely, Zeke mused. One gauge, one boiler). The gauge was a cylinder of transparent glass an inch in diameter and a foot long. The water level in the cylinder rose or fell according to the level of water in the boiler. If the water level visible through the glass was high, the water level in the boiler was too great, putting the entire system under threat; if the water level visible through the glass was low, the water level in the boiler was too low, also threatening the system. Only if the water level visible through the glass remained stable at a given mark – *What mark, where?* – could there be no doubt that the system was operating efficiently; no possibility – *None?* – that 'The boiler might blow'.

Ever anxious, Ezekiel dared not say, 'I don't want to be here. I'm going home ...' So he despised his father: the authority of him, the fear surrounding him, the darkness, the distance. No matter how close, he was never near.

And for the man, Zeke?

Was it really a matter of distance?

He turned his gaze to the museum gates – open as they were – and raising his head, he declared, 'Dad, I don't want you here. I want you to go.' Because he understood now that it was the ignominy these memories provoked that really stirred him: the fact that he could never get that fire, that coal shovelling out of his head, remembering how his father stooped and stood, stooped and stood, endlessly feeding those flames. How he hated those dark muscles, the black and sweating sinews of his neck, his arms, his shoulders as he stooped and stood, stooped and stood, shovelling like a navy.

Ah! There was a word, obliging Zeke to look down, considering his hands—his arty hands – their pale difference.

'It can't be right to think like this,' he groaned. 'It can't be. Not with what I know. Not with what I believe. Our humanity ...'

So he stood to assert himself and as he did his shadow stretched, reminding him of that other, and lifting his head he declared, 'That's it. Dad, I want you to leave. And when you go, remember this: just as you shovelled coal into those boilers, these hands shovelled food into your mouth. Without mum to feed you, to clean up after you, I had to – yes, with these lily-whites – but you were too far gone to care. And let's not forget the rest of the years that you put me through hell. No, I didn't need any uni course to preach the truth of Moloch's fires⁵ – I've seen the flames that prove it. Ah, so you *do* remember your shovelling! But now you're calling me back; now you're asking if we could have done better. Well that's what I'm here to find out: to take a look at myself – ourselves – all of us; the whole kit and caboodle. And if I can do that – *if*, mind you – me and my lily-whites are going to re-create that past as a future. So step aside and let me get on with it.'

And shouldering his satchel – a trifle unsteady – he turned to enter the museum.

Endnotes

1. Eran, Neuman 2010 'Psychoanalysing architecture: the uncanny, the libido and the built environment', *Hagar* 10(1): 23-35.
2. Dickens, Charles 2003 [1861] *Great expectations*, Michigan, The Toby Press: 64-5.
3. Andersen, Hans Christian 1998 [1997] 'The shadow', *The complete fairy tales*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions: 370.
4. Andersen, Hans Christian 1998 [1997] 'The shadow', *The complete fairy tales*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions: 370.
5. Milton, John 2008 [1667] *Paradise lost*, Great Britain, Oxford University Press: 15-16; lines 389-95.

Research statement

Research background

Museum piece arises from my long term ‘love affair’ with the Old Queensland Museum. My creative response was triggered by a journal article claiming ‘a psychoanalysis of architecture might be possible ... that would reveal, by implication, and reflection, its relationship to its subjects’ (Eran 2010: 31).

Research contribution

Establishing my writing as scholarship allows me to extend my research into the influence of architecture on fiction as previously exemplified in my essays, short stories and novels. The creative extract attached is from an experimental novel in which Zeke, the adult protagonist – who ‘might be me’ but ‘might prove to be you’ – explores both his personal and cultural past by psychoanalysing the heritage listed Old Queensland Museum and its post-colonial contents. This exploration necessarily involves ‘the collapsing of the “detached” and all-knowing subject into the text’ which constitutes elements of the ‘deforming’ genre of fictocriticism (Muecke 2002: 108) while allowing me to further extend my practice-led research into phenomenology.

Research significance

Museum piece is a work of fictocriticism, which is usually considered more of an academic than traditional, commercially marketable narrative, genre. *Museum piece* demonstrates innovative creative writing research in practice, including the fusion of personal memoir, fiction, historical non-fiction, literary criticism and post-colonial theory integrated within a corpus of architectural writing to create a commercially publishable, novel-length work of fictocriticism.

Works cited

- Eran, Neuman 2010 ‘Psychoanalysing architecture: the uncanny, the libido and the built environment’, *Hagar: studies in culture, policy and identities* 10(1): 23-35
- Muecke, Stephen 2002 ‘The fall: fictocritical writing’ *parallax* 8(4): 108-12

Central Queensland University, Australia

Susan Davis

EPIPHANY! A contemporary vaudevillian fairytale

Abstract:

This show was developed through working with a group of young people and professional artist with the young actors having input into character creation drawing on concepts from circus, vaudeville and freak shows. Workshop content was then shaped into a script which to date has had two performance seasons. Working within a framework drawn from the old music hall style of theatre the script is shaped into twelve stand-alone acts that, in combination, tell a gripping tale.

Biographical note:

Susan Davis is a Senior Lecturer at CQ University, Noosa. She has been devising and writing scripts for more than 20 years, many in her prior professional life as a drama educator and Performing Arts Head of Department and more recently as co-director of a youth performance group 2Muse Productions. Sue has written curriculum and assessment materials for syllabus and assessment projects, has presented and published her work about using drama and new media at state, national and international level. Sue has extensive experience in managing arts-based community projects and events and devising scripts that extend the parameters of contemporary youth performance.

Keywords:

creative writing – theatre – fairytales – contemporary performance – vaudeville – gothic theatre

Characters:

- MC the MC of the show who is also a ‘half and half’ – and moves between the ‘real’ world and the mirror world
- QUEENIE D the young heroine, lives on the edge of the lives of others, has not yet found her voice
- BELLA B Queenie’s mother, a high flying performer
- AUNT ISSY Bella’s sister and Queenie’s aunt, a nasty step-mother type
- MAX Issy’s son (and Queenie’s cousin), an arrogant spoilt brat
- PAINBOY A young man who feels and takes on the pain of others and helps negotiate their way to the mirror world
- BEARDED BRIDE (B. Bride)
- FORTUNE TELLER (F. Teller)
- JOEY & MOEY Young Siamese Twins
- PAPPA CLOWNS Two clowns who look after the twins, they are made up as happy face and sad face clowns respectively.



Figs. 1 and 2. Promotional postcards for each of two staged performances of *Epiphany*.
Photos by Alain Bouvier and Mary Eggleston

The Prologue

(Lights come up to reveal QUEENIE asleep on stage. A video montage is projected with an accompanying sound scape that gradually becomes more nightmarish)

- VO:** *Mummy's little Angel, Mummy's little girl - Mummy's favourite girl in the whole wide world...*
- QUEENIE:** *(QUEENIE is asleep and dreaming of her mother. She talks in her sleep....)* Mummy, I want to come with you. Can I come with you?
- BELLA:** Queenie, when you miss me, look into this little globe - it is our secret fantastical world, a place where we can be together whenever you need me ...
- QUEENIE:** Please don't go, Bella ...
- BELLA:** Good night sweetheart, be good for Aunt Issy and play nicely with cousin Max.
- QUEENIE:** But – mum ... don't go! –
- BELLA:** It's just a few weeks, Queenie. I promise it will fly by – just like a beautiful trapeze artist! Kisses? Good girl.
- MC:** *(Whispering through dreamlike voice and beckoning her)* Queenie, there is a space beyond, a secret fantastical world, the door to which is revealed to only a few ...
- QUEENIE:** Mummy!? Don't go ...
- MC:** There is a place where you can escape to, Queenie...
- QUEENIE:** MUMMY!? Bella!
- Echo of MC:** ... a place where the unloved can escape to...

(QUEENIE wakes up with a fright crying. MAX has snuck in and stands over her).

- MAX:** Don't go! Don't go! Your mummy doesn't love you! Cry baby Queenie, says Mummy please don't leave me, *(chants)* cry baby Queenie, cry baby Queenie!
- QUEENIE:** Stop it, don't say that - get out of here, leave me alone!
- MAX:** *(As he runs out)* Muuuuuuuuuuuu, Mummy dearest, Queenie's being mean to me again. Make her stop it! Muuuuuuuuuuu!
- ISSY:** *(In shadow)* Queenie D, you ungrateful child. I work my fingers to the bone looking after you while your mothers traipses round the

countryside, and this is the thanks I get. Don't worry Maxy, my precious ... extra chores for you Queenie D, and no more snivelling...

(Lights out on ISSY. PAINBOY is walking through a strong windstorm – trying to reach QUEENIE D.)

PAINBOY: Queenie's loneliness drew me to her, (to MC) she longs for her mother, but Bella's just too busy...

ACT 1

MC: Act 1 – In which you, our transient friends, are welcome to join our magical night's entertainment! Tonight I will share with you some joys and hidden shames, will you do the same for me? Here we embrace the freaks, the unconventional, the unwelcome. We have found a place where the unloved can escape to. Through enduring the extreme, we have found moments of epiphany. Tonight we will take you to this place, where you will witness moments of magic and despair!

There is a space beyond, a secret fantastical world, the door to which is revealed to only a few. Come now my sweeties, my freakies, my transient friends, as I introduce you to the sad and unfortunate, from times past and present, now captured as one. Unleash your secret freak and prepare for the show!

(FORTUNE TELLER & BEARDED BRIDE make their way through the crowd selling tickets, both calling out to the audience...)

B. BRIDE: Get your tickets here!

F. TELLER: Get them now! Bella's back in town.

B. BRIDE: That's right - high wire aerialist, the great Bella B is unveiling her dangerous new act!

F. TELLER: VERY dangerous new act. Take my word for it.

MC: *(News reel style voice)* There has been great excitement in the city this week as crowds have gathered to welcome back the great Bella B. After an absence of some months from our stages, it is clear to all that Miss Bella remains a performer of immense beauty and talent. A high wire aerialist, a chanteuse and exotic dancer, she is equally at home on the stage, in the air or in front of the photographer's lens. This week Bella signed autographs as fans queued to buy tickets for the Christmas

Spectacular, to be staged at the Majestic Theatre. Tickets are bound to sell out soon, with rumours spreading about Bella's new act. You simply don't want to miss it. *(Breaks out of this mode to share the following secret)*

You know ... as a performer Bella was quite extraordinary, as a mother she was loving ... but rather ordinary. Some year ago she had given birth to one sickly child, Queenie D ... but abandoned by a feckless partner, it wasn't long before Bella was back on stage, and a visit from her mother became as common and special to Queenie as that of the Christmas Fairy.

(BELLA rushes past QUEENIE who wants a hug from her mother. BELLA takes off her jacket and leaves it hanging, she hands QUEENIE her beret).

BELLA: Stay here and watch me Queenie. Wish me luck! *(BELLA blows a token kiss – and rushes off stage.)*

MC: And now announcing our headline act, the beautiful and brilliant, the great Bella B!

(Clapping and fanfare)

(Video montage from of BELLA on trapeze, during the following monologue, she slips and falls and the trapeze is left swinging)

QUEENIE: I was standing in the wings. She looked so beautiful as she swung out and swung back, swung out and swung ... *(Offstage SCREAM!!! Frantic footsteps, lights dimmed then brightened, dramatic music and anguished whispers).* I tried to look out into the auditorium, but all I could see were the footlights and people running for the exit.

(Sound of people running, someone calls "SHE'S DEAD")

QUEENIE: I didn't know what to do, so I came back here ... To her dressing room ...

(QUEENIE looks at herself in the mirror for a while. She reaches out and traces the outline of her face.)

QUEENIE: Who is this girl in the mirror? Queenie D, just a child you see, I can't now see a future, what will become of me? Bella ...

(She holds back tears as she starts to pick up her mother's things, puts on her mother's jacket and the cap and picks up the snow globe. MAX sneaks in behind her and starts to tease QUEENIE.)

MAX: She's gone for good this time... and now my Mother's in charge. You'll have to do every single thing she says... and every little thing I say too. In fact, I want that snow globe.

QUEENIE: It was a gift from my mother, you can't have it.

MAX: You want to bet. Mummmmmmyyyyyyy!

QUEENIE: Don't do this to me Max. I don't deserve this! *(she looks into the mirror and pleads)*. Somebody help me, please!

ISSY: Hurry up Maxy, we won't have long till the managers turn up to collect her things! Right little man. You gather shoes, costumes, and anything you find down below. I'm after her jewels, photographs and any money she left hidden in here. As her nearest and dearest sister I am certain Bella would have wanted me to be custodian of all her gorgeous things. *(Glaring at QUEENIE.)* Oh, it's you.

MAX: I mean it's not as if crybaby Queenie should get everything. That's not fair.

ISSY: Such a pale, untalented imitation of her mother.

Both: Such a disappointment.

ISSY: She'll have to earn her keep, or it'll be off to the poorhouse for her.

(She turns to face QUEENIE - who has disappeared SFX)

Did you hear that Queenie D? ... Where did she go?

MAX: She was right here. She must be hiding somewhere. Come here you little mongrel. Cousin Maxy won't hurt you.

ISSY: Much ... Where is she Max? Is she down there? Quick, grab her!

MAX: She was here, she was, but now ... she's gone?

(ISSY and MAX continue to search... They freeze)

ACT 2



Figs. 3, 4 and 5. Entering the world beyond, Queenie D, The twins 'world'. Photos by Julia Dawson.

MC: There is a world beyond ... a secret fantastical world ...

(Music as scene transitions into the mirror world. Imagery of snowstorm and the snowflakes projected onto umbrellas with mirror people movement piece. Umbrellas are lifted to reveal QUEENIE in the mirror world.)

PAINBOY: Queenie D. Welcome. We thought you might make it here one day.

(QUEENIE shrinks away in alarm. The CLOWNS approach her.)

QUEENIE: Who are you?

(The clowns make sad, then happy face and mime giving her flowers etc)

QUEENIE: Thank you. *(Turns to others)* How do you know my name?

PAINBOY: We've been watching you Queenie. We see it all from our world beyond the mirror.

F. TELLER: So welcome to our world ...

TWINS: ... our home. *(They look at each other and smile)*

B. BRIDE: Now yours if you will.

QUEENIE: What world is this exactly? Do I know you?
F.TELLER: You're in the world of far beyond.
QUEENIE: But how did I get here – did I just come through that mirror?
PAINBOY: I could feel your pain Queenie
F. TELLER: And I could see your tears
B. BRIDE: I could sense a presence
TWINS: And we shared your fears
F. TELLER: Life was amix
PAINBOY: ... and we knew you were near.
B. BRIDE: You wished, the mirror answered
F. TELLER: You were meant to come here.
QUEENIE: So did I just come through that mirror?
PAINBOY: Yes Queenie. It was an act of magic, born of wishing and despair,
MC: In a moment of Epiphany, you vanished into air.
QUEENIE: So, am I dead then?
MOEY : *(As they pinch her on either side)* Doesn't feel like it?
JOEY: Does it?
QUEENIE: Ouch! Am I going to grow tall, shrink small, wake up and it's all a dream?

(They pull her hair, tickle her and make it clear she is alive.)

JOEY: Nope, it's real
MOEY: Or unreal, banana peel, tag, you're up.
TWINS: Bet you can't catch us. *(They run away)*
QUEENIE: So ... They are ... stuck together?
F. TELLER: Forever.
PAINBOY: Joey and Moey have been with us since they were babes. There they were freaks, here they are just children.
QUEENIE: And the clowns?
B. BRIDE: ... look after them as if they were their own.
F. TELLER: Here it's different, but that's what we love.
PAINBOY: Nothing can hurt as much as it did.

F. TELLER & B. BRIDE: We will watch out for you.

QUEENIE: But ... can I leave, is it forever?

B. BRIDE: You're here for now Queenie, and now is the only moment you really live in. Don't worry about forever, or tomorrow. It will come soon enough.

MC: So there you have it my friends. You now know our secret, and we trust you'll hold it dear. You have entered into our world – home of the lost and unfortunate, the scared and the scarred. Queenie is so sweet, at home with our friendly freaks!

ACT 3

MC: Act 3, a comedy routine revealing unexpectedly heart-rending tales of childhood

SAD CLOWN (SC): She had a bad childhood. Who didn't?

HAPPY CLOWN (HC): Well I didn't.

S. CLOWN: Oh really?

H. CLOWN: Yes really.

S. CLOWN: I beg to differ.

H. CLOWN: About your mother?

S. CLOWN: Yes, your mother.

H. CLOWN: My mother?

S. CLOWN: Well, not my mother.

H. CLOWN: Well, how about that time your mother locked you in the cupboard and threw away the key?

S. CLOWN: Well luckily my father found it and let me out. A mere oversight on her behalf. What about that time when your mother went on the great Australian tour and left you 5 miles from Gundagai?

H. CLOWN: Brilliant move, well I then walked 500 miles, arrived home safe and sound and I've never been fitter. An of kindness on her behalf. What about the time your mother sold you to the gypsies so she could take up tap dancing classes?

S. CLOWN: Best years of my life – learnt all the tricks of the trade while tied under that caravan.

BOTH: Childhood!

S. CLOWN: Yes those were the days.

H. CLOWN: Learning how to escape and fend for yourself.

S. CLOWN: Building a bullet-proof shield (literally) and laughing in the face of verbal abuse.

H. CLOWN: Loving the isolation.

S. CLOWN: And the loneliness.

BOTH: Ahhhh, luxury.

H. CLOWN: So she's just like us hey?

S. CLOWN: Just like us.

H. CLOWN: Can we keep her? Please, pretty please!

S. CLOWN: Don't you think we've got enough on our hands with the twins.

H. CLOWN: But she's so cute, come on, can we, pretty please, pretty please. I'll clean up after her, cross my heart and hope to die.

S. CLOWN: Oh, all right. I'll go find another cardboard box then.

(Lights up on the Siamese twins, asleep as if inside a rather confined 'box'.)

ACT 4

MC: Act 4, in which we encounter a very special set of twins, a physical oddity or new friends for Queenie D?

(The twins wake up, and do a joint 'box mime', they find the lid and push it open, as they get out of the box, they indicate that it has been ripped.)

MOEY: Oh, no, we've ripped the box.

JOEY: I love that box, do you think we can fix it?

MOEY: It's too small for us now.

JOEY: But it's our box. We've had it ever since we were babies.

MOEY: We can get a bigger one. Or maybe we could even get a real bed

JOEY: I love box.

MOEY: Come on, let's go play.

(QUEENIE has been watching them from the side and now approaches them)

QUEENIE: Can I play too?

- MOEY:** Yes (*Same time as...*)
- JOEY:** I don't know ...
- QUEENIE:** No, I don't want to spoil things.
- JOEY:** You won't. We've never had to share with anyone else ... But we can try.
- MOEY:** Do you have a brother?
- JOEY:** Or a sister?
- QUEENIE:** No, it's just me.
- JOEY:** That's great. You're lucky to be able to do whatever you like.
- MOEY:** Sometimes I'd like to be alone. Just to see what it's like... but of course I love my bro (*he playfully punches JOEY*).
- JOEY:** Do you have a mother and a father?
- QUEENIE:** I did ... my mother is ...
- JOEY:** Our real parents left us at an orphanage in a cardboard box.
- MOEY:** As the sun rose that morning in the sky, the light shone through the crack onto the silver balloon. We could see our faces in it.
- JOEY:** We were very sad.
- MOEY:** Yes, we even cried. (*They put on a big crying act*) Just a little.
- JOEY:** And then suddenly... we were here, with new parents, and a brand new box.
- JOEY:** Come with us Queenie and explore our world.

ACT 5

- MC:** Act 5, in which Queenie discovers a world of possibilities

(Music/movement, montage of different backgrounds starting with realistic ones and then becoming more fantastic.)

- QUEENIE:** (*She looks around amazed*) Where are we?
- Twins:** Surprise ... do you like it here?
- QUEENIE:** It's amazing ... Where are we?
- JOEY:** This is our world Queenie.
- MOEY:** Once you get beyond the reflection, your world can be whatever you imagine.

(Other characters come on – mix of physical representations and imagery, different lines and imagery such as ...)

TWINS: In our world – there's an endless supply of fairyfloss and candycanes.

F. TELLER: In my world – I soar on the wings of angels and butterflies.

PAINBOY: In my world – beauty is transformed from human pain.

B. BRIDE: In my world – gentle waters caress my soul.

QUEENIE: So you can really create your own beautiful world?

JOEY: What would be in yours Queenie?

QUEENIE: In my world ... there would be a beautiful golden theatre ... with red velvet curtains, and a hire wire trapeze. A ... a woman and a child. A mother who holds me tight. A hug that goes on forever... and ... and ... *(the others have moved in around her and comfort her)*.

PAINBOY: It's all right Queenie. We all longed for a perfect past when we first came here.

B. BRIDE: We understand. Stay with us Queenie D. We'll be your family now.

JOEY & MOEY: *(break the somber mood)* Candy cane anyone?



Figs. 6, 7 and 8. Aunt Issy, The MC, Bearded Bride and Queenie. Photos by Julia Dawson

ACT 6 – Max's dilemma

(PAINBOY appears beyond the mirror screen, feeling approaching agonies)

MC: Act 6 – Another child ... demands, desertion and dilemma.

- MAX:** *(He is sitting in front of the mirror)* Muuuuummmmy! I WANNA CANDY CANE.
- ISSY:** You want what?
- MAX:** A candy cane ... I really WANNA A CANDY CANE. Now!
- ISSY:** Well we don't have any candy canes. And we won't until you take some of Bella's junk down to the pawnshop to get some more cash.
- MAX:** Why do I have to do it?
- ISSY:** Well, now that Queenie's gone ... who else is going to do it? I'm too busy trying to keep house and hearth together ... and you are not making things any easier you spoilt brat.
- MAX:** Well whose fault is that? Well?
- ISSY:** I'm thinking of making a return to the stage.
- MAX:** You're what?
- ISSY:** Capitalise on this renewed interest in my sister. You know I was a rather talented performer in my day.
- MAX:** At the freak show.
- ISSY:** I had a novelty act, yes ... but no need to be cruel.
- MAX:** But you're past it ... no-one would pay to see you now.
- ISSY:** Is that what you think? What would you know.
- MAX:** I know you're an old has been. The ugly sister, the second best, the down and out, weird, wired, washed-up ... *(stops as he realises she's packing to leave him)* But you're my mummy wummy and I love you so. Mummy ... Mummmmyyy ... Mummmmy. *(Hugs her leg as she starts to move off)* Where are you going?
- ISSY:** I have an appointment ... I have a ticket ... I have a life. Bye, bye.
- MAX:** But when will you be back? What about my candy cane? Who'll tuck me into beddy byes and sing me nighty nights?
- ISSY:** That was Queenie's job ... time to man up my boy. I'm off to join the circus. Have a nice life. *(ISSY leaves)*
- MAX:** *(Looking in mirror)* How could she do this to me. I don't deserve this. I'm just a kid you see, what will become of me. Mummy! MUUUMMMY?
- DON'T GO!!!!

(Sfx –MAX's vanishes behind the mirror)

ACT 7

MC: And now my friends – Act 7 – where you are welcome to share a little more of our lives and loves.

B. BRIDE: Here in the world beyond we wile away the hours by creating shows to share with a privileged few. You may be wondering how we all came to be here. Can we trust you, can we expose our deepest, darkest secrets to you now?

(They sing)

MC: Most people grow up Jack or Jill
Dick, Dora, Pam or Pete
With breasts or balls
With beard or curls
Not both or half of each.

B. BRIDE: I had long hair, but shaved my chin
So sweet, and quite petite
But mum and dad
Felt weighed by shame
And hid me from the street.

MC: As Baby B I loved my frocks
For years I played the game
Until the day
The wet dreams came
My breasts grew that same week.

(Music transition to minor key)

B. BRIDE: But came a day my parents left
Death welcomed them but left me be
A door swung wide,
A mirror surprised
A face quite lost, the bearded me.

Out in the world I forged a life
Was wild but lived and loved a lot
I found a man
I thought was grand
On our wedding day found he was not.

(Music return to major)

MC: And while exploring both sides/ways
Without disguise or shame
Then Father Fred
Dropped by for tea
I won't now share the names.... he called me
(spoken) or maybe I will...

(Others call out and encourage her to do it)

MC: Assbag, bampot, bitchass, cumbubble
Dipshit, dyke and geek
B. BRIDE: Fagboy, faghag, fagtard, gooch
Homo, jerk and les...bian

(during the next part other cast members pop their heads out from behind curtains etc to join in)

(OTHERS): McFaggot, nutsack, peckerhead, poon
Pennispuffer, polesmoker, poof
ALL: Queerbait, queerhole
Rimjob, skank
Slutbag, twatwaffle, ... FREAK!!

(MC shoos the others away)

MC: And that's just a few of those that a girl/boy
Decent person just like me
Can repeat in
Your good presence so
It wasn't pleasant you can see.

(Music transition to minor key)

B. BRIDE: So sick at heart, dejected
Then I acted
Stood beside that lake

The water's silvered face reflects
A liquid mirror to see my fate.

MC: My face I saw on that there floor
The marble polished bright
And with his screams
Upon my ears
I disappeared from sight...

MC/B. BRIDE: And that was how I came to be
The boy/girl (bearded bride) here before you
The floor/lake acquiesced my wish
And then I fell ...right... through!

MC: Thank you my friends.

ACT 8

MC: Act 8 And now for a slight change of tempo. Lights, mood music.
Nice!

BL: As darkness falls and bedtime calls, my friends seek sleep's release.
But the sweetest of dreams aren't quite what they seem, and slumber as
elusive as peace.

(Sounds of lullabies, sleeping sounds, which gradually turn into nightmarish sounds, imagery shows QUEENIE's nightmare, Bella falling and QUEENIE wakes up screaming. PAINBOY and B. BRIDE come and comfort her.)

QUEENIE: Bella! Oh, Bella, why did you have to leave me?

PAINBOY: She didn't want to leave you Queenie.

QUEENIE: But I was such a disappointment to her ... everyone said so. I'm shy, I can't sing, I can't dance, I'll never do the trapeze – I'm scared of heights even. I have no talents, no gifts. How could I be Bella's daughter.

B. BRIDE: You're not just Bella's daughter ... you're Queenie D ...

QUEENIE: I'm just ...

B. BRIDE: ... not just a kid you see.

QUEENIE: What will become of me? *(takes out her snow globe)*

B. BRIDE: *(Takes the snowglobe from her and shakes it)* A place where gifts are realised... filled with the sweetest of dreams.

(As B. BRIDE hugs QUEENIE and they return to sleep PAINBOY moves across the space, is struck by a shaft of pain as he begins to hear voices)

ACT 9

BELLA's voice: *(Recorded voice spoken in a dreamlike state)* Queenie, Queenie D. Where are you Queenie D?

MC: Can you hear that Ladies and Gentlemen? Sometimes our dreams and nightmares can reveal glimpses from beyond this realm... I have friends who possess the gift and can connect to spirits who are near.

F. TELLER: I have powers that allow me to see beyond these walls. The spirits hover close as they cross to the other side.

B. BRIDE: Others fear their presence and turn their face, but I welcome them. I sense their presence from a time before their death.

F. TELLER: Sometimes the spirits themselves need a word of comfort, assurance as they make their way. Tonight I sense one near. I can hear her whisper in my ear. She cries out for her child. I can feel her sorrow...

F. TELLER: *(Tries to hear the name)* Queenie? Yes Queenie D ...that's it.

QUEENIE: My mother!! Bella!? Where is she, can I see her. Is she in heaven?

F. TELLER: Not yet here and not yet there. Wait .. be still while I try to reach her.

QUEENIE: Bella, Bella, can you hear me?

B. BRIDE: No Queenie, she can't hear you.

QUEENIE: Then where is she, can you talk to her?

F. TELLER: I could if she had passed Queenie, but ... I don't know that she has.

QUEENIE: What ... What do you mean? What's happening, where is she?

B. BRIDE: Your mother's soul is hovering Queenie, in the realm between dimensions. But ... her body ... may still be alive ... It's possible that ... she lives.

QUEENIE: She's alive? But I heard people cry out, say she was dead, I saw her fall.

F. TELLER: What you saw with your eyes was true, but not what they said. Her body is in pain and very weak, but it seems she is still alive Queenie. That I can tell you.

QUEENIE: So what should I do? Can I go back there? How can I get back to the other side?

B. BRIDE: None of us really know.

F. TELLER: Our lives are here. We have no desire to return to that place.

QUEENIE: But it must be possible. The mirrors?

F. TELLER: Not in the way you came, but maybe someday else.

QUEENIE: Who can tell me, please, there must be a way.

B. BRIDE: There is a way, but you must use your gift.

QUEENIE: What gift, I don't have any gifts.

F. TELLER: Is that what you think?

BOTH: *(Share lines)* All may ask, but some don't know, the way that you come, is not the way that you go, you can not return, the way that you came, the gift that you hold will show you the way.

ACT 10

MC: Act 10, surprise faces and a surprise meeting.

(The CLOWNS are making silly faces, with hands passing up and down in front of their faces. They close the twins eyes, then open them as they reveal ever more ridiculous faces.)

MOEY: What about something scary.

JOEY: Scarier.

(CLOWNS sneak off to play a trick on them and suddenly MAX's face should appear.)

MOEY & JOEY: *(Both scream)* That's really scary

MOEY: Freaky

JOEY: You look just like Queenie's nasty cousin Max.

MAX: I am Queenie's nasty cousin Max. And who are you calling freaky?

(MAX backs away, but PAINBOY comes in from the other side and corners him, he runs back and is trapped on all sides, he falls to the floor.)

JOEY: So how did you get here?

PAINBOY: By some act of magic, born of wishing and despair...

JOEY: Not him too.

MAX: 'Fraid so ... My mother abandoned me.

MOEY: So he's just like us.

JOEY: Yep, just like us. But nastier.

(The CLOWNS feel sorry for MAX and mime offering him flowers like they did to QUEENIE. MAX throws the flowers to the floor and stomps on them)

MOEY: Look mate, if you stay here, you've got to learn to be nicer. And you have to sort things out with Queenie.

JOEY: She's our friend

MOEY: We all look after her.

MAX: Queenie's here. Where, can I see her? QUUEEENNNNNIIIIIIIIII!

(Light comes up on QUEENIE in another space, she sits up alert to hearing her name)

QUEENIE: Max... why can I hear his voice?

MAX: QUUEEENNIIEEE! QUEEENNNIIEEE D, come and help me?

QUEENIE: Why would I want to help Max? After all those times he teased me, called me cry-baby, put frogs in my hair, told me mother didn't love me. And why is he invading my perfect world ... just when I need to find Bella. I need to find the way home. (*looking in the snow globe*) to use my gift... to find my way home.

ACT 11



Figs. 9, 10 and 11. The Fortune Teller, Painboy, Bella and Queenie. Photos by Julia Dawson.

MC: Act 11 – Featuring the most incredible feats of magic and epiphany.
Prepare yourself now for the final act on our program.

(PAINBOY, FORTUNE TELLER, CLOWNS, BEARDED BRIDE enter ...)

PAINBOY: Tonight ... we are going to cross the line. Tonight is not only about illusion and entertainment. This is about realizing deepest desires ... lives will be changed. For some it will be a chance to make a choice. Whatever they truly desire, will come to be. Queenie are you ready.

(QUEENIE comes on and holds up her snow globe... MAX runs in and snatches it)

MAX: Queenie, stop.

(Other characters start to move in on MAX and intimidate him)

QUEENIE: What are you doing here Max.

MAX: *(He reluctantly hands the snowglobe back)* Sorry Queenie. Forgive and forget?

QUEENIE: I don't know Max... you and your mother.

MAX: Yes, and you and your perfect mother... Issy ran away and left me all alone. You're all I've got left Queenie.

QUEENIE: *(She starts to feel sorry for him)* There, there Max, here you can create a different world. But now... I must sacrifice my gift... Max... I need to save my mother.

MAX: *(Tries to grab the snow globe from her).* Is that the way to reach your mother? Give it to me, I want my Muuuuummmmmmyyyy!

(At that moment as she lifts the snow globe and he grabs it too, they struggle between them and the mirror image on screen shatters, then there is silence).

BELLA: Queenie?

(BELLA comes into the mirror world, she is bandaged and possibly crippled.)

- BELLA:** So this is where you are? I heard whispers from beyond. I had to find you Queenie. Something drew me to the mirror.
- QUEENIE:** Bella ... Mother ... I thought you were dead.
- BELLA:** I think I was for a time ... I still have visions of death walking beside me. But I fought him off Queenie and turned him away. For you ... I'm sorry Queenie. I can't give you back your childhood. I can only say I wanted to make the most of my life in the time that was given to me. I don't expect you to be my nursemaid. That's not why I'm here. I'm back now ... back for good.
- MAX:** *(Slow clap as he bitterly asks)* But what about me? Where's my mother?
- BELLA:** She did come back Max ... she's back on the stage, but she did come to find you.
- MAX:** Well of course she did ... she would, wouldn't she. I knew that. So where is she?
- MC:** Max, be still ... it is Queenie's moment now. She must decide whether to return to the other world or not. She now must decide her fate.
- QUEENIE:** I have a chance to change what was. I'm not going back to the life we had ... but I want to go back. Being here ... I've come to see myself for the very first time. I do have gifts, and I can see a future. I'm not like my mother, but I want to be with her. I want to find out who we can both be ... it will be a different life for us all ... but that's my decision.
- MC:** *(whispers)* Max ... you too must decide your fate. What will you sacrifice to go home?
- MAX:** Nothing ... I don't need your help, I'll find my own way home. *(Turns and runs off)* Muuuuummmmy – Mummy wummy, Issy Wissy ... I'm coming home!

(QUEENIE hugs the mirror world people, then returns to BELLA, they stand together as the mirror starts spinning to signal their transition.)

ACT 12

- MC:** There is a space beyond, a secret fantastical world.
- PAINBOY:** The door to which is revealed to only a few.
- MC:** We invite you to imagine a world as you wish it to be. Realise your gifts, so others may see.

PAINBOY: Keep wishing and looking, what's next who can guess.

MC: When the mirror next beckons, would you say yes?

('Does She Love Me' song)

THE END

(Thank you to Mary Eggleston and the cast of *Epiphany* for their input and feedback throughout the development of this script. Enquiries regarding performance of this script should be directed to Dr Susan Davis via email at s.davis@cqu.edu.au)

Research statement

Research background

While most performance texts published specifically for young people focus on teen issues including adaptations of existing books, *Epiphany* deals with contemporary youth issues but also connects young performers with Australian theatrical history by drawing on past popular performance forms – vaudeville, circus, burlesque, freakshows, music hall – while also referencing recent teen fantasy series that feature characters who encounter fantastic challenges.

Research contribution

Epiphany repurposes a traditional theatrical form and fuses it with the contemporary. A predominant focus in youth theatre on physical theatrical forms such as circus / burlesque (Gattenhof 2006) has been joined with enduring teen literary themes of identity, agency and transitions (McCallum 1999). *Epiphany* enables the strengths and concerns of young performers to be realised through the creation of stand alone acts with their own theatrical focus, creating a form I call ‘contemporary vaudevillian fairytale’.

Research significance

Two versions of the script have been performed. The first received positive reviews (Denver 2011). In 2012, a new production was mounted, funded through a Regional Arts and Development Fund grant, and featured in the Anywhere Theatre Festival program in Queensland.

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Central Queensland University, Australia

Bronwyn Fredericks

40 years ago, 40 years since: The Tent Embassy

Biographical note:

Bronwyn Fredericks is an Aboriginal Australian woman from South-East Queensland (Ipswich/ Brisbane). Her published work includes chapters, articles, prose, poetry, critiques and commentaries in a range of areas including education, health, arts practice, gender and race relations and community development. She has been invited to submit to a number of prestigious international journals including *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*; *Outskirts: feminisms along the edge* 23; and *Cultural Studies Review*; and numerous others. Bronwyn also orally presents her work. For example, last year she was invited to speak at the *Festival of Dangerous Ideas* at the Sydney Opera House and at Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi (Indigenous University), Whakatane, New Zealand. Bronwyn Fredericks, PhD, is a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement), BMA Chair in Indigenous Engagement and President of Academic Board at CQUniversity, Australia.

Keywords:

creative writing – poetry – Indigenous - Aboriginal – Embassy

40 years ago, 40 years since: The Tent Embassy

1972
40 Years Ago
40 Years Since
The Tent Embassy
Embassy of
The Aboriginal People
The Indigenous People
First Nations People
Of this
Land
Country
Our Country
Our People
Us People
US

1972
40 Years Ago
40 Years Since
The McMahon Coalition Government
Issued its intent
'Aboriginal Policy'
25 January
No admission of land rights
Rejected land rights
No compensation
No recognition
Mining allowed on Aboriginal reserves
Rejection of the Gurindji Land Claim
Not treated the same
Aboriginal infant mortality 17 times the national average
Not getting to the same old age
Feelings of anger and unhappiness
No legislative kindness
Unrecognised sovereignty

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

4 motivated and impassioned men

Aboriginal men

Michael Anderson

Billy Craigie

Tony Coorey

Bertie Williams

From Sydney to Canberra they went

Business they meant

Planted a beach umbrella

On lawns of green

In full view to be seen

Opposite the house

Of Government power

White, monolithic building

Steps derived of Westminster

Politics of domination

A history of colonisation

A colonial past

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The Sign read

'Aboriginal Embassy'

Proud and loud

'Enough' as the shroud

Canvass tents were established

Symbols of poverty and impermanence

That offered little sustenance

Others arrived

2000 or more

Campaigning and yelling

Passion filled to the core

'Land Rights Now'

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Standing in solidarity

No doubts in clarity

Leaders developed and grew

Invigorating the movement anew

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

Stalwarts in

Hot, cold, wet, dry,

Wind and snow

Police forever present

The public resent

Ripped down the tents

Arrested people

Captured on film

The public enraged

People engaged:

Disenfranchisement

Landless

Alienated

Non-recognition

Marginalisation

Aboriginal people

Indigenous people

Us people

US

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

Canvases established, maintained and sustained

Camped out

Sweaters, jumpers and scarves throughout

Cans of soup, baked beans and spaghetti

Bread, butter, vegemite and jam

Bully beef, stew and spam

Eaten by the people

Brothers and sisters in the struggle

Resistance warriors

Bound under a flag

Roger Thomas' design

Black, red and yellow

And every colour of Country

Sovereignty of all

Developed to bind collective hearts and spirits

Sit down, stand up assembled

Day in Day Out

Week in Week Out

Year in Year Out

1972
40 Years Ago
40 Years Since
Much has happened
Launches on the lawn
A Marriage of two
Tents and buildings
Removed and re-erected
A permanent fixture built (1992)
Heritage listed site (1995)
For all to remember
Every 26 January the Corroboree for Sovereignty
We stand still, dance and sing to remember
3 of the original 4 men are no longer with us
Their history is also of us
Lighting of the Sacred Fire (1998)
Guardians maintain the fire's fuel
We still maintain the fight
We can't loose sight
The ongoing passion
To end discrimination
Continuation of the struggle

1972
40 Years Ago
40 Years Since
When you go to the Tent Embassy
The Embassy of Aboriginal people
First Nations people
Us people
Us
Take gum leaves with you
Add them to the Sacred fire
Not just for 1972
But for all that has been since then
Of the four of them
Of us, me, you
And all that it is still yet to be
And it will be
The Tent Embassy isn't going anywhere
And neither are we

Research statement

Research background

On 26 January 1972, four Aboriginal men formed the site that became the Aboriginal (or Tent) Embassy (Koori History Web Site 2012). The Tent Embassy represents one of the most significant movements for Indigenous land rights in Australia and remains a powerful symbol of unity. This creative non-fiction poem attempts to unite readers around 2012's National Aborigines and Islanders Observance Day Committee (NAIDOC) theme of 'The Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 Years On'.

Research contribution

This work explores how historical events can inspire creative non-fiction text. It contains documented evidence of real people and events from the last forty years. The use of interchangeable voices offer authoritative overtones in regards to the references to policy, the police and government, while other forms of voice offer lightness in relation to the social elements of people within place, highlighting how both first person and collective voices can be used interchangeably within a repetitive verse.

Research significance

This work was created for both text and performance and was performed live at the opening of the Capricornia Arts Mob's NAIDOC Exhibition on 2 July 2012 (CQUniversity 2012), which was attended by over 150 people. The author also recorded this work in a theatrically-staged performance as if she was sitting at the Tent Embassy in 1972. The recording was installed in the Walter Reid Gallery, Rockhampton, Queensland (2-10 July 2012).

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Victoria University

Enza Gandolfo

Women walking: fragments

Biographical note:

Enza Gandolfo is the author of many published short pieces of fiction and non-fiction, as well as the recipient of several grants and awards, including a Varuna Fellowship. Her novel, *Swimming* was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award 2010 and ABC Fiction Award 2008. Her previous books include: *Inventory: on op shops* with Sue Dodd (Vulgar Press 2007) and *It keeps me sane: women craft wellbeing* with Marty Grace (Vulgar Press 2009). Enza has a PhD in Creative Writing and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the School of Communication and the Arts at Victoria University. She is a co-editor of *TEXT*.

Keywords:

fiction – women – *flâneur/flâneuse*

Preamble to *Women walking: fragments*

Women walking: fragments are three short sections that were written in the early stages of the work on my current novel, a work-in-progress, tentatively titled, *The Fallen*. The initial motivating questions for the novel arose from a desire to explore the experience of culpability and the possibility of redemption, but I was also very interested in women's place in the contemporary city (the novel is set in Melbourne and the western suburbs) and the relationship between walking, place and memory. I was influenced by the works of writers such as Charles Baudelaire (1888), Edgar Allan Poe (2004) and Virginia Woolf, in particular her short story 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (2008) and her novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1950), theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1999), Susan Buck-Morss (1986, 1989), Janet Wolff (1985, 2000) and Deborah Parsons (2000), and the figure of the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse*.

In the ERA 2009, Victoria University was given a rating of 3 in the 1904 code. Like many creative arts academics in universities across Australia, who were rated at 3 or 4 in their respective codes, we celebrated this recognition even as we questioned the system and process on which it was based. Since then the pressure has been on us to maintain or better that result in ERA 2012. This requires a balance of both scholarly and creative outputs. Conscious that I needed to produce scholarly as well as creative work, I undertook substantial 'scholarly' research on the encounters between women and the city alongside work on the novel.

The City of Melbourne awarded me a small grant to work on this project. This included working on the novel, producing a blog (Gandolfo), several short creative pieces for a reading at Federation Square (including an earlier version of one of the *Women walking: fragments*) and an essay that is currently under consideration for publication. The more scholarly research on walking, on the *flâneur/flâneuse*, on the woman in the city, also made an appearance as part of my research plans for that year and my Special Studies Program application.

However, while the research was (and continues to be) of interest the novel has taken a different direction. The key female character, Jo, has done less and less walking and moved away from the city and into the suburbs. It is unlikely that walking, and especially walking the city, will be part of her journey to redemption – though at this stage I am not even sure redemption is possible for Jo.

In my experience both with this current novel (in progress) and with my previous creative writing projects, the work develops and takes on directions, through the process of writing, that in the initial stages, the writer cannot envisage. Because I am in a research environment in Higher Education, I talked and wrote about my research, and those who heard me read and present continue to refer to the 'walking novel' and the '*flâneur* novel' when they ask me about the progress of my writing, but the novel has moved on and is much more about falling than walking.

If I was a writer writing outside of the Higher Education context, this would not be an issue at all. All writers do a great deal of reading and research as part of the creative practice of writing, and not all of that work ends up being used or useful. As a writer outside of Higher Education context, it is unlikely that I would have talked publicly about this research at such an early stage in the project.

In addition, as a writer in Higher Education, with obligations to publish scholarly work, I took this research further than I might have otherwise. In the end, however, I have decided that the novel is my primary focus and that I want to allow the novel to develop through the practice of writing rather than to be led by research. So while I have not completely abandoned my interest in walking, women in the city, or the *flâneur*, I have stopped trying to force the exploration those ideas within and through the novel.

I supervise HDR students and ask them to do candidature proposals (as required by the University) outlining what they are going to explore in their creative work, that in many cases they have not yet started. My experience with this project raises yet again questions about the suitability of this very science based approach in the arts. It has also raised a number of other issues for me: one is about the time I have to work on my creative writing and on my research and how I balance this to ensure that my first priority is the creative writing. The second is about how much to allow the research imperatives of the university to impact on my creative work.

I do not regret my reading about walking, about women and the city, about the *flâneur/flâneuse*; it has been interesting and thought provoking and I may follow it up in some other project in some other time. For now there appears to be no 'walking novel', and sections like – *Women walking: fragments* – have, for now, been shifted out of the novel file. Whether they make it back in or not, I will only discover by writing the novel.

Women walking: fragments

Sarah

It is just after sunset and the streets are full of people when Sarah turns into Flinders Street and heads down towards the station. In Fed Square, there is a band playing. People are sitting on the steps and standing in groups all the way up to the stage. Sarah crosses Swanston Street, walks past *Young and Jackson* and heads down to Elizabeth Street. Outside a takeaway shop, two boys stand smoking and drinking.

'Look at that fat lump,' one boy says, 'she's bigger than your sister.'

'Shut the fuck up about my sister, arsehole.' Both boys laugh. They are skinny boys and in their tight black jeans their legs look twig thin. Sarah walks faster.

'Hey you,' the boy with the sister shouts. 'You should try going on the *Biggest Loser*.'

'Hey loser,' the other one screams. 'They'd probably reject you 'cause you're so ugly.'

They laugh again.

*

Sarah

Sarah loves to walk but she's a faller. Raised footpaths, cracked bitumen, loose gravel, potholes, often catch Sarah unawares and she tends to trip, slip, spill, falling to the ground. She misses steps and fails to take gutters into account. Cobblestones, slate, any uneven ground and her ankles twist.

Weak foundations.

It isn't a chronic condition but it requires attention. She has to watch her step.

Over the years, she's had a series of scraped knees and sprained ankles, bruised arms and hands. She's split her lip, cracked a couple of teeth and broken her left arm in two places. As a result, a fear of falling, a foreboding accompanies Sarah on all her walks.

When she was a child, these falls drove her mother mad. Netballer. Runner. A woman with good balance, she could not understand Sarah's lack of it.

'You don't take after me or your father.' This was one of the few times Sarah heard her mother say anything positive about my father. 'When he was young he could run so fast that everyone wanted him on their team.'

'Watch your feet,' was Sarah's grandmother's advice. She was a faller too.

'Don't be silly, only old people walk with their heads down watching their toes. Young people should run like the wind.'

It was the blood that bothered Sarah's mother most of all. Sarah arriving home with blood dripping down her leg or her arm; her skin stained with dry blood. Her clothes torn.

'Not again.'

'It's not my fault. It was an accident.'

There were always stores of Dettol in the bathroom cupboard. Cotton buds and hot water. The sting of being careless, of taking after her grandmother.

Sarah walks with too careful a step for a woman her age. She watches her feet. Walking this way it is possible to cover kilometres and see nothing. Nothing but the cracks and stains on the bitumen. Nothing but the litter, cigarette butts and lolly wrappers. Sometimes walking is almost impossible; a stone, the raised edge of a path... and the possibility of falling rises like a fever, like a blush, like a panic...

When Sarah walks, she sees only what is caught by her peripheral vision; in side glances. Looking up only momentarily, in reaction to a car horn or a scream or the feel of someone coming too close. *Obese woman walking.*

She says: *there should be a neon sign above my head so people know to avoid me.*

Even so she walks every day, but she doesn't lose weight.

'You're too slow,' her mother says. 'You need to walk with purpose.'

She doesn't powerwalk like the other women she sees, their striding makes her wince. She does wear runners and sometimes she takes the iPod. But no matter what she does, she never looks like them. She walks because walking is how she lives; how she thinks; how she finds her way around life, around herself. If she doesn't walk, she gets depressed. Her apartment is two rooms and a narrow balcony. She could hardly turn around on that balcony. But when she is home this is where she spends most of her time – watching people.

*

Jo

As I walk through the turnstiles, I notice the flower seller. I stop and take a deep breath but I can't smell the flowers, their scent is lost among stronger smells – perspiration and perfume, hot chips and Spanish churros. It's their colours that stand out – splashes of pink, red and yellow – and blue – the iris, with its yellow tongue was Ash's mother's favourite. Whenever we came back through Flinders Street, she would buy flowers. Sometimes two or three bunches.

Ash hated sitting on the train with her mother, with the flowers, with her mother talking about the flowers, with her mother taking up an extra seat with the flowers, and especially on the busy trains when people were prepared to kill for a seat. Ash would roll her eyes, and then she and I would whisper, so her mother could not hear our conversations. We made sure to leave her out.

I make my way down the station steps. I look across to St Paul's Cathedral. I stare at the crowds – standing at the lights waiting to cross Flinders, waiting to cross Swanston. Standing at the tram stop. Walking up and down the steps; walking along the path in front of *Young and Jackson*.

Ash and I went into *Young and Jackson* once. We went in with a guy we'd met only moments earlier on the tram. You know, one of *those* guys who thinks he's good looking and can get any girl. We were bored. And under age. But we didn't look it. He said, *I'm here on holidays and don't know anyone – can I buy you a drink?*

We said, *yes*.

And all three of us got off the tram and headed for the pub.

Ash said she'd show him *a real piece of Melbourne history* – she told him about the painting of the naked Chloe. The bloke, whose name I can't remember, was excited. Two young girls, a painting of a naked woman and a beer.

The publican took one look at us and asked for ID. We ran out of the pub, across the road, into the station and onto the train, laughing all the way.

I catch myself smiling.

And then the smile slips.

I join the crowd waiting to cross Flinders. In front of me a group of school boys carry heavy packs, and talk about the soccer. I walk across Flinders Street and then turn left. Past the pub, past *Dangerfield* with its gothic outfits in the window, past *Flora* and the smell of hot curries, past the second hand book shop and into Degraes. Cafes

line both sides of this laneway and tables take up the centre. I am transported back. Back to another Degraes Street. Smoking cigarettes in school uniform. Brazen girls with too much time on our hands.

And then... I think I see Ash. Ash swinging her rucksack over her shoulder. Her hair nothing-brown tied in a ponytail, low and loose. A cigarette in her hand...

I follow her. Desperate to see her face, I walk as fast as I can. Wishing she would turn around. Praying she can hear my thoughts... praying it really is her... I follow her into Flinders Lane, past offices, boutiques and more cafes. Past students standing in doorways, and on footpaths smoking; past men in suits walking and talking into mobile phones; past shoppers carrying name brand bags; past young people in neat in office attire; past young people dressed all in black with multiple piercings. There are cars and taxis, and everyone is going somewhere. It is crowded. I keep bumping into people. A man says, *look where you're going*. I stop, say, *sorry*. When I turn around she has disappeared – one moment of looking away and she is gone and out of sight.

I stand on the corner of Flinders Lane and Elizabeth Street. To the left I can see as far as the station, to the right down the long stretch of Elizabeth. I have no idea where to go. I want to go back. If I go back far enough, I think I can change everything. Back to my birth in a hospital in Footscray, where the baby is not a caesarean born to a woman married to a man she hates. Back to primary school in Yarraville and to the first day when two mothers watch their daughters resist the urge to become each other's first best friends. Back to Flinders Lane, to an afternoon not spent eating too much cake, not coming home with cream stains on a new dress, not lying next to my best friend, not telling each other stories of an adult life lived together.

Ash's grandmother, used to say that wishing for too much, being too happy, was bad luck. The sort of bad luck no one could shake.

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Research statement

Research background

Women walking: fragments explores the way contemporary women encounter and interact with the city. Inspired by feminist writers contesting the masculine notion of the *flâneur* (Woolf 2008; Lessing 1972, 1993, 1998; Barnes 1996), this work explores ways of writing contemporary women into the city.

Research contribution

This work takes up the tradition of writing about walking/the city and explores the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse* in her relationship to an Australian city, specifically Melbourne. It aims to make women's place in and relationship to the city visible through fiction. It asks if the city is still (as it was for Benjamin and Baudelaire) a 'male' space and actively explores the gendered nature of constructions of the city.

Research significance

This work, including the associated blog (Gandolfo), aims to open up discussion about the nature of contemporary women's relationship to the city, and the relationship between walking, memory and placemaking. Its significance was recognised by the City of Melbourne through an arts grant and an invitation to read from it at a public *Poetry at Fed Square* reading.

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Griffith University

Stephanie Green

The Edge: notes for a wiki narrative (short fiction)

Biographical note:

Stephanie Green currently teaches with the School of Humanities at Griffith University. Her most recent writings include an essay about experiencing the Egyptian uprising in February 2011, 'Passengers of history', *Griffith Review* (37, 2012) and a paper about the popular television series *Dexter*, 'Desiring Dexter' in *Continuum Journal* (26.4, 2012). Stephanie's collection of short fiction, *Too Much Too Soon*, was published by Pandanus Books in 2006. She is currently working on a biography, 'The Public Lives of Charlotte and Marie Stopes'.

Keywords:

narrative – short fiction – textual composition – online writing

The Edge Group is the moniker for a semi-anonymous group of writers founded by literary cult figure Douglas K in 2008. Douglas K says the idea for the group emerged during a drinking session with his co-founder, the now deceased author Dylan Morgan. When the wine ran out they opened the Talisker whiskey; his only lasting regret.

The Edge Group members share an interest in random texts and experimental techniques. Their motto is 'Between hand and mind', a metaphor taken from musical or theatrical improvisation. One metaphor links their work, the curve of fine blonde coastal sand that lends the group its name.

The Edge is also the name of the group's internationally acclaimed digital studio project where each writer improvises, edits and then publishes responses to randomly generated words, images or themes. While the project has been called a complicated prank, others see it as radical innovation.

Digital poet Jeremy N describes it as: 'the stuff of mythic voyages to faraway islands, light caught in a stream of shadows, hardcore filaments of text and metaphor, ethereal drifts of meaning'. An American, Jeremy's favourite food is the Australian meat pie.

The Edge has also become a catchword for the literary scandal in which three Edge writers accused literary magazine *The Boat* of libel.

Edge membership

Membership is the condition of unfilled longing, a system of being alone. (Douglas K)

The current Edge Group members are Douglas K, Jeremy N, Electra B, Nina C, presumed to be lecturers at Xenophon University, but this has never been officially confirmed. Membership is not restricted. The group is philosophically opposed to any formal code of belonging. They describe themselves as a collection of individuals with different motivations, who share an interest in writing. However, access to The Edge web studio project is only granted by special consensus. The Edge Group has been accused of discrimination by the dissident blogger and former Xenophon University student, Mono Heron. Since its formation, only one member of The Edge Group has ever been lost: the dramatist and poet Dylan Morgan, who swam out from a sandbank island after drinking half a bottle of Talisker whiskey and never returned.

The Edge Group founder: Douglas K

Douglas K is a prize-winning novelist and travel writer. He refuses to reveal personal details or speak in public about his work. A blurry group photograph taken at a book launch in 2009 was once posted on The Edge website, before Douglas K shaved off his experimental ginger moustache. Like the moustache, it was immediately removed.

In spite of his personal reticence, Douglas K has drawn media attention for his furious

public outbursts. In 2006, during a legal dispute with his former publisher, literary king-maker Barton Barton, bystanders heard shouting and glass breaking in the men's bathroom at the Supreme Court. Two men emerged with their jackets covering their heads while photographers followed them into the court. In 2007 Douglas K was arrested for punching news reporter Mike Minum at a writer's festival after Minum alleged that his media shyness was a publicity stunt.

Douglas K has won three State Premier's Literary Awards. His novels explore themes of travel and solitude, always set in famous tourist destinations. *Face to Face* (2000), about a disastrous honeymoon, takes place on a Caribbean voyage. *The Longest Pause* (2003) is set in Venice. *Line Drawn* (2008) is about a couple recovering from an unusual addiction on the Great Barrier Reef. Abandoning his long-time publisher Barton Barton in 2007, Douglas K has published exclusively with The Edge web studio project.

The Edge manifesto and Douglas K's other writings

Writing is the loneliest business among communication industries, but writers all inhabit the same medium, ebb and flow of language that keeps us alive. (Douglas K)

Douglas K has published travel essays in magazines all over the world. The magazines, not the novels, have made him wealthy. He lives at the northern end of a stretch of beach protected from oceanic turbulence by a chain of sandbank islands. His apartment has cream marble floors, a mushroom felt feature wall and elegant Venetian wall lamps – an unexpectedly feminine touch. At night, their coral glow softens his thoughts. In the mornings he walks along the waterfront path, sometimes as far as The Point, where the summer scent of drying Norfolk Pines mingles with the hot salty air and the sea laps at the sky. The walks create a kind of rhythm for his writing that often lasts throughout the day.

Douglas K imagines himself swimming across to a sandbank island as a change from beachside walking. He's sure he could do it. In his youth he swam the Hellespont. Maybe it's the death of Dylan Morgan, or the oil slick smearing the Broadwater, or simply middle-aged inertia, but so far he has never tried. Divorced, he lives alone and makes up for the fact of his solitude through his erotic friendship with Dylan's widow, Sandra M. When she wraps her lean brown legs around his body between slippery linen sheets, Sandra M assures him that Dylan would be happy for them.

For many years Douglas K did not have a Wikipedia entry of his own, until one of his colleagues at the Xenophon University wrote a short story about him and some anonymous wiki-editor took the bait. Only then did Douglas K notice that a Wikipedia page for Jeremy N had already existed for some time.

Jeremy N

It's no secret to his friends that Jeremy N detests his birth name. He's taken a pseudonym that he finds stronger, more true to himself. He came to the Gold Coast escaping a girl he tried hard to forget. Whenever he looks in the mirror, though, he's reminded of how she ran her fingers through his wavy hair. He can still feel it, years later, that tingling through his scalp and spine. He wonders if it's possible he'll really never see her again. He feels marooned, as if surrounded by flood tides. In fact his house is literally surrounded by artificial moats and water lanes. It's a grand house, owned by his wealthy new girlfriend. They each have an en suite bed room of their own. She's older than him. He tells her often that her age doesn't show, and is privately relieved that it actually doesn't.

Some things still shock Jeremy N, things like the emptiness of the plague islands or the loneliness of digital orphans. His work is a dazzling puzzle of text meets image. Words float inside frames in evanescent fragments, or move across a plane in multiple directions: energetic enigmas without a home. His words are like spectres or pollen scattering the surface of a lake, they take possession wherever they fall. He feels he is one of them, or has become like them, a figure of constant movement, without other purpose, constantly drawn back to an ill-defined locale. Their motion seems random but he knows in his heart they correspond to his own careful design. It worries him that someone in the group might one day think of him as a traitor.

Electra B

Electra B once said that beauty was the root cause of her suffering. She has one of those classically symmetrical faces, so perfect that people stare at her, rudely looking for flaws. Her skin is pale and clear, her hair and eyebrows naturally black. Although her first novel hasn't yet been released, the publisher's PR department has made sure that she is already famous. As a girl she darkened her eyes with kohl, razed her hair and tore her clothing. None of it worked as disguise.

Now she is the kind of woman with whom lovers and friends become obsessed. Since she broke off her wedding to a property developer, her mobile phone has been stolen three times. She doesn't know why. She lives on the twentieth level of a new high rise apartment, with floor to ceiling windows that look out to sea. It's like an invisible island surrounded by blue. The walls are so thick that the building seems empty, as if she is the only one in this silent tower of glass and sky, the only one who sees. It's a contrast to the building she lived in as a student, where she wrote down the conversations of invisible neighbours for her stories.

Electra B dresses expensively, thinking that others will take her more seriously if she looks the part. Her students long for more of her attention than they can get. She knows just how much to give, and just how much to refuse. When she gives public performances of her work, there's always an audience. Three of her former students have already

published stories in which she is the model for the central character. She doesn't recognise herself in any of them.

As a writer, Electra B strives to find beauty in things and people that others fear or disdain. Her stories are exquisite journeys through ugliness: drug deals in high-rise apartments, salacious masseurs, charismatic thieves, corrupt real estate operatives and savage knife-fights in back rooms that only the narrator survives.

Electra B was once a student of Douglas K. She assumes, wrongly, that he desires her and thinks of their relationship as an unrealised promise. It was hard to give it up: the hope of approval. She used this scenario in her novel, about a young woman and an older sexual mentor. Now, the promise of success gives her freedom, an excuse to forget. She's already stepping into his shoes, taking on the role of mentor herself. There's a man-boy in her life, to whom she imagines herself giving suck, a wild genius she tries to get close to, but can't control.

Nina C

Nina C is the newest member of the group and the one who has been closest to the centre of the Edge controversy. A short story writer, Nina C has packed so many other things into her forty-five years that she forgets sometimes that writing is what she does best. Although she's a widely read journalist and has won prizes for her stories and poems, it makes her cringe to think anyone actually reads what she writes. She published a collection of her short fiction, *The Huntress* (2008), which a reviewer described cruelly as 'too well-written to do well'.

Like Douglas K, Nina C is secretive. She put herself through university by working for a high class escort agency where she met a lot of people she didn't have to work hard to forget. Sometimes a face snatches her attention at a restaurant or on the street, like a pop-up hologram that reminds her of the hard dark rooms of her past, but she is never sure. Understandably, Nina C has kept this fact hidden, partly to protect other people in her life, but more because it's something she can keep for herself, until she is ready to let go.

Dylan Morgan

No biographical sources are available at this time. The complete writings of Dylan Morgan can be accessed via The Edge web studio.

The Edge project

The Edge is an online studio project where members of The Edge Group improvise textual responses to words, images or themes which are published randomly on The Edge website. Their work can take the form of prose or poetry, or interactive mechanisms

designed to allow the viewer to participate in the meaning of the image/text.

The concept emerged as a reaction to the linearity of standard literary forms. The group is philosophically opposed to principles of regularity and singleness of purpose. Their writings explore themes of transition and transformation. In the words of founder Douglas K, the project celebrates ‘the randomness of creativity’. This notion has been widely ridiculed, but the prominence of The Edge Group, with its international awards and global youth cult following, has assured its recognition.

The ‘Edge2’ scandal

‘Edge2’ is a short story that was first published anonymously in 2010 in the sixty-third edition of *The Boat* magazine. ‘Edge2’ tells the story of a group of writers who develop an online writing game. After the game is published on The Edge website, each writer tries to steal copyright from the others. One character in ‘Edge2’ disappears, a presumed suicide by drowning. The others each fall to a curse: illness, debt, loss, and defamation. It is implied at the end that the suicide is really a murder perpetrated by a member of the group, but the murderer’s name is never given and the story is presented in the form of a puzzle that the readers themselves are expected to solve. There is an unofficial pact amongst readers who have solved the puzzle not to reveal the solution.

Nobody knows who wrote ‘Edge2’. The editors of *The Boat* claim that the story was sent to them under the name ‘Anastasia Xenophon’ and they published it in good faith as a work of fiction. The story became famous when the magazine was contacted by three members of The Edge Group accusing the unknown author of libel. A letter issued to the media by The Edge Group stated: ‘the work you have published is libel in the most classical sense, in that it tells a story that implies a negative truth.’

The libel accusation allegedly relates to an event which occurred early in the life of The Edge project when, according to bystanders, Dylan Morgan accused Jeremy N of stealing his idea for a poem writing game. The allegation has never been substantiated.

The publicity surrounding the case has led to a flurry of counterclaims, including that The Edge Group wrote the story together and published it as a publicity stunt. However Douglas K, Jeremy N and Electra B have denied publicly that it was written by any of them. All three have written about their own perceptions of the ‘Edge2’ controversy in the form of an improvised and continuing series of poem/dialogues entitled *Bridge*, produced in The Edge web studio and published in 2010. This is the second most frequently visited page on The Edge website.

The short story writer Nina C is the only member of the group who has never spoken publicly about the ‘Edge2’ scandal. For this reason, she is often assumed to be the author of ‘Edge2’, but this was never proven. Although she has never participated in the *Bridge* dialogues, Nina C remains a contributor to The Edge web studio project. Her personal experimental project, involving text fragments tattooed and projected across her naked

body, is now the most frequently visited section of The Edge website, with over 862 million web search hits logged.

Research statement

Research background

This work investigates the problem of reconceptualising narrative in an era of digitised communication (see, Egan 2010).

Research contribution

The Edge explores questions of narrative coherence, discontinuity and loss by recruiting web-based concepts and techniques for writing fiction. Borrowing a popular online textual mode, the ‘wiki’ page, the story is composed of interrelated fragments or vignettes. Its themes are enmeshed with its methodological frame: fragmentation, isolation, the randomness of loss and the pursuit of literary form.

Research significance

The Edge responds to Muecke’s call for writing that finds ‘a form that answers to its urgency’ (2010). In this sense, *The Edge* employs the wiki as a textual referent, an ‘objective correlative’ (Eliot 1921) against which the characters and their stories intersect and unfold, linking disparate textual elements. The wiki structure provides an innovative approach to the methodological and conceptual investigation of narrative writing within the context of contemporary communication. The story is not presented here as an actual wiki page and does not contain active hyperlinks, but this is a feature being explored in the development of the work as a novella.

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CQUniversity, Australia

Lynda Hawryluk

The Sleeping Camel hosts an Indian summer squall

Abstract:

A collaboration of writers and artists led to the writing of a poetic tribute to Peter Indans' work and subsequently his legacy, in the poem *The Sleeping Camel hosts an Indian summer squall*. The discussion here has as its' focus the relationship between writers, artists and the landscapes they explore in their chosen medium.

Biographical note:

Dr Lynda Hawryluk is a Lecturer in Literary and Cultural Studies at CQUniversity, where she teaches undergraduate creative writing subjects and supervises Masters of Letters and PhD students. Lynda has been coordinating the Idiom 23 Writers' Workshops on North Keppel Island since 2005 and has facilitated many writing workshops in the Central Queensland region. She is the Deputy Chair of the AAWP and has been published in a variety of academic and creative publications.

Keywords:

poetry – landscape – Indans, Peter

In the shadow of a monolith
Sleeping sentinel against a late summer heatwave
Tussock grass up top bent to a breeze which doesn't quite reach us down here

Driving down a corrugated country driveway
The jolt of the cattle grid on unsuspecting suspensions
Bouncing us back to reality
And to lunch at a bush studio of its own making
Birds hear the friendly banter and bickering
Of new friends chattering in sultry sweaty stillness
Sipping a tonic or two to ward off the heat

A palm slaps against exposed and fresh flesh again
I am a novice at this
And wore short pants to the artists' picnic
Bushman's repellent no match for the midges' miniature might
Squid rings in a white wine reduction provide simple sustenance
To soak up a solitude only broken by an old dog's satisfied sigh
And the laughter of likeminded souls

The horizon is conquered by *Gawula*
Looming silently before us, a benign benefactor of generations past
Tinted with the stain of genocide
The mountain wears its low cloud crown proudly
Rising through mist, a tussock-covered phoenix
In the late afternoon a summer squall sets in
A tempest in the treetops
A willy-willy wandering by.

Eucalypts bend back lazily, stretching their limbs after a long day providing filtered shade
The sky turns gunmetal then opens up and envelops us
Washing away the heat and dust
Fat drops drip their way through a frayed gauze sunshade
The sad grey skin of low cloud breaks open
Revealing a white light interior

And still the majestic monolith watches on
The trachyte teeth of a still-sleeping camel bared in solemn warning
Blue-green hues of a murky mountain
Hide the soft edges of a jade statue
Pushed up through the earth with volcanic force
And carved out over 60 million years or so
Hidden rivulets and valleys snake their way across the landscape
To a mob of contiguous eucalypts
Looking up at an old man's forehead formed by the wisdom of age
Firm but fair, a guiding hand to explorers long since lost to time
Laughter subsides to silence as the squall passes by

The nearby trees are still once more
While the last fallen leaves dance a mournful corroboree
Welcoming restless spirits home
We congregate like parishioners around the pews of Peter's table
To learn a lesson about being reborn from the ground up

Research statement

Research background

This poem describes a visit to artist Peter Indans' (1947-2011) bush studio in Central Queensland. It captures how history has impacted understanding of the landscape, and pays homage to Indans' work. The poem originated from collaboration between artists and writers. Indans' *Cockscomb I* (2007) depicting the steep cliffs of Gawula provides the artistic counterpart to this poem.

Research contribution

This poem juxtaposes the imposing stature of Gawula with the group gathered below its façade. The geological structure of the mountain is described in detail; its stained history acknowledged (Archer in Mullins, Danaher & Webster: 32). Indans referred to the mountain as feminine (Svendsen: 66), however here it is a masculine presence. A sudden squall and its aftermath demonstrate the experience of the 'build-up'; the escalation of humidity and tension before a storm (Darwin Storms Team, online). The poem captures the beautiful ruggedness of the landscape and responds to the question posed by Indans' friend Komninos Zervos in 'Prawns at Rosslyn Bay':

memories inspire
poetry and paintings
what is left
of a life
when we are gone? (17).

Indans leaves his artistic legacy, a deep appreciation for the landscape of Central Queensland and an ability to 'make places make meanings' (Krauth 2003), which has informed my work since.

Research significance

Fitzgerald describes discussions with Indans taking on the properties of a lesson, whereby the student becomes 'somewhat inebriated but profoundly knowledgeable' (8). This poem has been performed in Rockhampton and a version appeared in *The Sentient Landscape*, a posthumous retrospective of Indans' work.

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Swinburne University of Technology

Dominique Hecq

Microphonaime

Abstract

At the core of Creative Writing is the concept of voice. Far from being easily elucidated, this concept becomes even more problematic when a creative work is performed, foregrounding as it does in the performance, the speaker's accent. Whether this accent is deemed 'regional', 'foreign', or purely 'idiosyncratic', it embodies the grain of the voice. This paper seeks to define the nature of the accent with respect to the voice by utilising Lacan's concept of the split between the eye and the gaze as expounded in *Seminar XI*, speculating that the invocatory drive which partakes of the aural field summons more archaic material than the scopic field does. By dint of the creative artefact, this paper exposes psychoanalysis' complicity with the conventions it aims to subvert, and situates the speaking subject in an anti-conventional discourse the listener is compelled to encounter.

Biographical note:

Dr Dominique Hecq is Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology where she is Research and Discipline Leader in Writing. She has a PhD in literature and a background in French and Germanic languages, with qualifications in translating. She has published in the areas of literary studies, translation, creative writing, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy. She is the author of eleven major works of creative writing. *Out of Bounds* (Re.press) is her most recent collection and *Stretchmarks of Sun* is due out later this year. *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century* has recently been released by Multilingual Matters.

Keywords

creative writing – voice – accent – affect

For Michael Plastow

In the beginning every word was a neologism—J. L. Borges

Madame Doggerelle, Cretive Head of the Dog Town School of Poethics wants me to deconstruct my barbaric yap in the interest of curiosity, a word, she says, with its roots in the etymological matrix of caring and curing and originary sorrow

I oblige for *gynetricks*'s sake¹

It is a foreign word, *accent*, a French word²

Familiar. Foreign. *Unheimlich*³

Queer pronunciation, rhythms, style

An accent is an abject erotics of utterance

It is the double axe inside my throat—
an absence and a manner of speaking
a homage to loss and a pastiche of fracture recomposed

My accent is an untranslatable hiccup—
the ironic conjunction of two languages
the lyrical disjunction between two tongues

I speak it. Don't write it

I become it in your ear

Through some extimate seduction, I become
a vain *coquette*⁴
an accentile

I am pregnant wind

I am within the work of the shadow

From within the shadow, a hollow—

an echo, tone, modulation, timbre
pitch, vibration, interval—

disembodied voice

I am accented, accentric, accentred
spell-binding silent rhetoric

I am the other who speaks from some foreign text
I am the other who speaks through your text
despite all volition

I am *vol*⁵

I am folly

I make her write to distraction
for in the writing I am zilch

(meaning runs along writing the way music affects one after the event)

I am a difformity countering conformity
a difformity striving for uniformity

I am the formless song your microphone amplifies

Dead weight. Dead idea. Dead body
Impermeable lore. Permeable core
Metatextual sign. Metasexual whine
The nexus where body and language meet

I am an inaudible song
the song of my interior. My inferior
the echo sounding, pounding, scandering, cutting
what I thought I was
about to say
making me say
something other

I am the inaudible song
folding me back into poetic self-parody

I am nymph and harlot

I am the nymph at whose reflecting pool Narcissus meets his death

I am the last echo of the voice

I am daughter of the voice

I am Grace itself

I am the Rock 'n Roll Lady of the Lake
dancing through night's veils
a dragon flaming with fire in her arms
as I circle the navel-stone of Aphrodite's Temple:
the pit, the cave, the hole, the well—
the pool of water in the heart of the Temple

I am the *chantoir* under the crystal crypt⁶

My accent is my *omphalos*⁷
the navel of my speech
making me, folding me back to *poeinem*—to make
a ripple in the water
a lisp in a wave
a flaw in the glass
an afterglow of my shattered history
a name-less-glitch

Inter-lingua assemblage. Cultural dissemblance. Generic collage. Genetic bricolage.
Subjective spill—object off-centre, off-kilter, out-of-the-way

The past cut lose, the music of the future, quips Madame Doggerelle⁸

I demur
for love follows hate
the way a flower grows out of a navel-stone
An accent is not a language is not a sentence is not a word is not a letter
An accent is the secret beating of the heart where the heart skips a beat
Call it *micropoaime-micropohaine*⁹
The chip of *hatelove* in a phoneme¹⁰

(after all event an accent is)

Endnotes

- ¹ This text exposes psychoanalysis' complicity with the conventions it aims to subvert, and situates the speaking subject in an anti-conventional discourse known as 'the discourse of the hysteric' (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 31-38). However here, the master whose discourse the speaker counters is the (m)Other. This is to upset the binary opposition between the Law of the Father and the mother's desire at the core of the concept of castration, a symbolic act which bears on an imaginary object, namely, the phallus. The castration of the subject occurs in the final phase of the Oedipus complex, when s/he renounces all attempts at being the object of the mother's desire, thus also giving up a certain *jouissance*. On a more fundamental level, castration may also refer to a state of lack existing in the mother prior to the infant's birth. This lack is evident in the mother's desire, namely, her own incompleteness, which the subject perceives as a desire for the imaginary phallus. The 'I' of the text confronts the (m)Other at the point of castration in order to uncover the nature of her accent, one that she suspects is related to Lacan's *objet a*—and perhaps to some other *thing*.
- ² As the grain of the voice, an accent is both intimate and extimate to it. In this sense, it is comparable to the difference between the eye and the gaze (Lacan 1979 [1965-66]: 67-78). Thus what the accent foregrounds, is 'the split in which the [invocatory] drive is manifested at the level of the [auditory] field' (73).
- ³ Freud starts his essay 'The uncanny' (1919) with a long philological, etymological discussion of the word *Unheimlich*. After providing an extensive series of examples while withholding a definition of the term, he ends by saying, with Schelling, 'it is those things that, destined to remain hidden, have nevertheless become manifest' (Freud 2003 [1919]: 345). It is what irrupts when it should not have appeared; what should be lacking is the uncanny. It is, moreover, a 'sudden irruption that does not last' (346). It is an experience that, at a particular moment, is brought upon the subject, 'leaving him or her petrified' (346) by anxiety. However, *Unheimlich* is, as Freud points out, a compound word. The negation prefix 'un' precedes *Heimlich* – familiar. *Un-*, he suggests, is the mark of repression (364), which is part of the term as such: something that was familiar has become not-familiar, strange, and threatening. Through the peculiar status of the unconscious, where opposites, far from excluding one another, either substitute for one another or are implied in pairs, the familiar and the not-familiar surface together, thereby creating ambivalence (363).
- ⁴ There is a play on the word 'coquette', a flirtatious woman who trifles with men's affections, here and its homophone neologism 'cocket', thereby turning her into a little phallus.

- ⁵ The French ‘*vol*’ conflates ‘to steal’ with ‘to fly’, adumbrating the exploration of the death drive in what follows.
- ⁶ Things get cryptic here, for ‘*chantoir*’ is not even a French word. It is a Belgian technical word (geology) meaning little gulf, chasm or abyss, especially one produced beneath an underground expanse of water in claystone or limestone country causing water to drip onto more solid rock. The term (which I remembered from a geography class, years ago) appealed to me as it resonated with the verb *chanter* (to sing).
- ⁷ As the grain of the voice, again, an accent may be understood as a navel, the ‘*omphalos*’ which inscribes a speaking being into the symbolic, while bearing the mark of a real trauma (the severance of the umbilical cord). It also marks the beginning of ‘navel gazing’, a history of narcissism which is at once personal and cultural. The term *omphalos* is used to signify that the time of narcissism is the time of both disaster and its recuperation through art-making, the time of an event whose traumatic character repeats itself at every moment, beyond the recovery of historical memory.
- ⁸ The interlocutor here returns the message voiced by the speaker and ties in with the preceding note on narcissism, deflecting the presence of affect.
- ⁹ *Micropoaimé-micropohaine* puns on ‘microphone’, ‘*peau*’ (skin) and on the near homophony ‘*aime/haine*’ (love/hate). Lacan usually puts love and hate on the same axis, as two forms of imaginary inter-subjectivity linking ego and alter ego, and thus the speaking being and the (m)Other.
- ¹⁰ ‘The chip of *hatelove* in a phoneme’ may be that which produces castration anxiety in the listener. *L’angoisse* (Lacan, 1962-63) opens with the assertion that ‘anxiety is an affect’ as opposed to an emotion (20). What Lacan emphasises here is that anxiety signals the desire of the Other because the distance between desire and *jouissance* is suddenly and unexpectedly shortened – or blurred. Does this mean that the desire of the (m)Other (as I have gendered it here) causes anxiety? It would seem so, precisely because what the (m)Other seeks is to find itself in me, for which it solicits my loss. This situation in fact refers to the desire of the mother as a location for *das Ding*. Whereas Freud sometimes distinguishes between fear, which has an object, and anxiety, which doesn’t, Lacan argues that anxiety is not without an object (103), but rather involves an object that escapes symbolisation. He calls this object objet petit a, the object behind desire, or object-cause of desire (115). And anxiety arises when something appears in the place of this object. I call this the shadow of *das Ding*. In Lacan’s teachings, the Name of the Father should act to separate or break away, introducing a cut between *das Ding* and the child. But how does *das Ding* give way to the irruption of anxiety? What happens is that all limits disappear with a kind of cover up of object a. This is the condition for the manifestation of the uncanny to appear, for the manifestation of what was destined to remain hidden. The lack of a limit to *jouissance* endangers the stability of castration. Let me explain what I mean with an illustration: what is foregrounded in a symptom such as vertigo – a phobia of heights, for example, is actually a phobia of ‘lower depths’. It is the abyss, like *das Ding* that is calling. The subject who suffers from vertigo perceives a call to which she is about to answer, throwing herself into the void. Beyond the vertigo itself, it is what summons her to jump into space, which is characterised specifically by not having any defined limits and being a void.

Research statement

Research background

The research undertaken in ‘Microphonaime’ uses the tools of prosody (Milner & Regnault 2004) to extend the lessons of psychoanalysis regarding the nature of the unspeakable but nevertheless transmitted signifier by imagining the affect it produces on the listener, namely anxiety (Freud 2003, Lacan 2004).

Research contribution

‘Microphonaime’ not only exposes the aural aspect of the written text, but as the pun in the title suggests, also draws attention to its libidinal underpinnings and effects.

Research significance

The encounter with the writings of psychoanalysis is here taken to the limit by reconsidering the nature of the unspeakable signifier in the context of the ‘*accent d'impulsion*’. ‘Microphonaime’ demonstrates that this signifier is not a letter as psychoanalysis would have it, but a phoneme. As such, it is isolated here as the ‘accent’ which, like a phantom limb, is absent and yet hooked up with the invocatory drive in *both* speaker and listener.

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University of Canberra

Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb

Cretan analogues: Restorying ancient mythology

Biographical notes:

Paul Hetherington is Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra where he convenes the Writing Program and chairs the Writing Research Cluster. He has published seven full-length collections of poetry – including the verse novel, *Blood and old belief* – and two poetry chapbooks, and has won a number of prizes for this work. He edited the final three volumes of the Library's four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend and was founding editor of the Library's quarterly humanities and literary journal, *Voices* (1991–97). More recently with Jen Webb he founded the online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He has written articles and essays on literary and cultural matters, including poetry, creativity, the use of new technologies and ways of providing access to cultural materials.

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Jen Webb is Professor of Creative Practice in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, where she teaches and researches creative writing and cultural analysis. The author of *Understanding Representation* (2009, London: Sage) and *Understanding Foucault: a critical introduction* (2012, Sydney: Allen & Unwin), Jen is currently writing a book on research in creative practice (PHP, Cambridge).

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Keywords:

creative writing – poetry – mythology – restorying narrative – collaboration

Naucrate takes her time

1.

She is always moving.
The days, years, tick past
to a familiar beat.
But she works at a different pace.
Not for her the now, and now
of calendar and clock
as time shrinks and bends.
She shrinks too, or wanes—
waiting,
she is always about to change.

2.

It's so long. A thousand years
of nothing. Then just once
she heard her name—
it recalled her to the part she played
in that ancient tale.
She sleeps each day, and spends the nights on watch.
Little has ever changed.

3.

This is her job: to calm the tides,
to keep the moon at peace.
She does it well. At times
her body aches for the child
she could not keep
but she has read the books, knows all the tales
where she does not appear. Her storied absence
makes it right to keep away.

4.

Naucrate, priestess of the moon.
If once she loved a man
she has no memory of it now.
Mornings she's ankle-deep among the waves.
Her nights are given to the moon.
That's her task:
to comb tangles out of time.

Another thousand years.
The stories shift.

5.

Airbrushed, was she bitter?
Perhaps. She doesn't dwell on it.
Until she hears her name again—
a passing comment, footnote
in another text. Better to be overlooked,
she thinks, than get some idle nod:
she's Naucrate; she is
no one's footnote; she is not
someone else's myth.

6.

Smooth the water, sweep the air.
Become the winter moon.
No regrets.
Her body moves with tides, she cannot die.

7.

A thousand years, again a thousand years.
Some creep past, some leapfrog
centuries. And there
it comes again—her name,
another mention in her husband's tale.
Water off a duck's back.
She slips herself into the sea, like a letter
into the mail. She lies face up,
staring through the brine.
Above her the meniscus
of small memories catches at her skin—
the infant in her womb
the baby at her breast. The child
she saw falling from the sky.
The child she could not see.

8.

Every day, still, she feels the too-late
of her frantic swim.
Below his broken body

scooping blood, catching him—again,
again—and bringing him to land.
Placing him in his father's hands.

9.

Time's less steady now.
She's beginning
to feel that she has found her way.
She watches us, and reads
our artifice, knows our hopeless art.
She's moving beyond loss;
beginning to believe
it might be time
to go.

Ariadne and the ocean

1.

The spectral trees were backlit
by the yellow stone of the moon
as she rested arms on his shoulders,
half in light, half out;
part stranger, part intimate –
holder of the night's weight,
speaker of the oracle's secrets,
her sentences
a red, unwinding thread.
'Ariadne, this ocean ...', but he stopped,
her subtle language
needing no answer.
'First, I will save you', she said,
'then you will leave'.
He knew, despite his wish
for a storied future,
that here he was 'in fullness'—
but the difference between
his Greek and her Cretan dialect
meant something was lost from his phrase.
'The Minotaur', she said 'will mark you,
every history refer
your destiny to my skill.
You are the labyrinth's creature
and your being's narrative
an aftermath—
you, founder of a future city.
There's triumph', she said,
'but also failure
to stand clear of longing'.
Her body was muscular, her hands
exceeded his own in power.
She was obscure in the night's fall
yet he sought her
and they were scarved across each other.
The light skimming the beach
was oil on tawny skin.

2.

She changed him.
He was water running on sand;
the ocean consumed him. He was light
hurrying towards the moon.
He was sea-urchin,
salty crustacean and looping weed.
She was starlight.
The breath of the night
hovered between their lips,
their straddle of hands
knew each other tentatively.
She stood against him and said
‘This may be called by other names
but, tell me, can you sense
the earth exhaling us?
Does loss overcome
because we have known too much
of immoderate craving?
Now, at this edge of being
I feel for the fugitive and tender.
This will not be spoken of easily –
even by you, maker of a people.’

3.

She led him into the palace
and her torch
showed furniture and tapestries,
tiles in blue and green
and two women in a bath
caressing each other.
Ariadne hurried him.
A corridor narrowed.
‘Here’, pressing into his hands
a ball of thread.
‘Follow your instinct.’
Soon lost in the labyrinth,
turning circles,
finding thread already tracing
passageways he walked,
he was a child in rushes
pushing a toy trireme,
tipping over, feeling water
wrap him, believing death was welcome,

being dragged back.
 Recollection crowded him.
 A girl bared her breasts
 at the back of a hayshed.
 He was in uniform,
 learning to be a soldier,
 spearing a belly of straw.
 He trekked on a mountain;
 thirst sucked his torso.
 Ariadne was with him
 unwinding the thread,
 unsheathing his leaf-shaped sword.
 He smelt the soporific
 breath of a meadow
 and she held him upright, saying
 'The Minotaur knows you—
 put the sword in his mouth.'
 When the Minotaur appeared,
 slender, with a dancer's gait,
 his bull's head nodding as if in trance,
 his beauty overwhelmed.
 Yet something guided his thrust.
 He meandered his way back
 but could not forget
 the Minotaur's hands clasping his body
 as blood dropped from his eyes
 or his own soft bellow, 'Forgive me'.

4.

'I see the future', she said
 'and you have always been there,
 arriving with your young warriors,
 eager to make triumph.
 Let your sword fall
 and attend to this ocean
 that's older than gods
 and knows what warfare never knows.
 You'll create
 an exemplar and wonder—
 Athens; the civility you'll build—
 but the grace of Minoan women
 will never again be taken up,
 just as my body, suppler than yours,
 will elude you tomorrow;
 just as you'll be forgetful and ill

with a repeating sickness of need.
Feel this tossed air on your arms
that only Cretans know;
ask whether it brings solace
to your disquiet.'

5.

'I have given you
what I had no right to give—
unless intimacy trumps a kingdom—
and what we brought each other
is now in tatters,
quizzing feeling, knowing in our bellies
possession
even as sensation pushes us apart.
After this drowsy tide
you will have me only
in recollection's dismaying gauze
that throws the past across the present
until there's no clear seeing.
Your black-sailed grief will chase you.'

6.

He left her sleeping on Naxos.
Gulls bothered the shoreline;
waves rushed and splattered the hull.
He tasted the scent of her clothes,
the stain of sweat on her arms
he'd trailed with fingers. She'd held
his being in the lock of her body.
'I've been taught by water', she'd said
'and made in meditation.
If you stayed
you might learn to grow old.'

Minotaur

1.

Clot-tongued, my speaking was slur.
Mother nursed me. Words
stuck in the tangle-spittle.
Horns butt'd, pricked.
But my body was grace. I,
with tangl'd tongue could entwine-
lose in dance. I roamed
in Daed'lus game. He said,
'Hide-'n-seek.' Gates
clanged-caught—
'Not tame.'
'Eat', they said. 'Fill-up blood.'
But to dance—I kept the turning
season. She taught me—
Pas'phae, Pha'dra, Ar'adne.
Each was the other. Love.
I lost their diff'rence.
They came, stayed away.

2.

Ar'adne teased, skipped on sand,
hot as blood prickle.
Sea gulped at feet
where cedars reached out
splay-hand roots.
The world blood-colour—
ol'ander rose-bitt'r,
hibis-cus blush. We scrambl'd
in gorges. I held—
back on rock, panting eyes—
and she pushed:
'Don't dare'.
The mount'n stood up
blear-shade.
That was 'once upon time'
before Daed'lus.
Mother sat me:
'You're old.'

3.

Thought was slow,
then to do.
But no gap
on lab'rinth green
that Daed'lus made
for my dance.
All me in feet and tumble,
swiv'l jump, arm-grace,
head-high.
Ar'adne, I
gorging rhythm.
Pha'dra, I
gorging rhythm.
They me, I them,
lifted.

4.

Dread-sense
as if Ar'adne made
a dance-death—
'Your sis would never.'
Laugh-look.
'Theseus is strong.'
I nuzzl'd her breast
and she stepped.
Back in lab'rinth night,
chink of grill.
A murmur
of coming-to-meet.
I hid, saw as Ar'adne—
handsome and quick,
sure-shifting,
his quick-switching sword
like a partner
dressed
in soft gath'r glitt'r.

Pasiphae dies

A queen deserves a tomb. But that is not for her—
she skipped the long farewell, the practiced grief.
She only has a gradual letting go, her name
set loose across the sea;
a slow forgetting.

She waits now in this stone-walled room. The quiet snow
lies subtly on the beach, is cushioned round the walls.
Her women touch her face, their fingers chill,
their eyes are full.

Here her king lay, here her brood was born;
And that bullheaded child, her lover's son.

Her blood is chill: this snow has set the world on mute;
outside the stippled air is white – she finds it
lovely but those handmaids crowd her bed,
they test her flesh.
She will not die on cue.

Only the tales remain, those fishhook sneers,
the sotto voce slurs of her, and bulls; well,
they're dead now, the gossips, gone ahead.

She mumbles to her women, plucks her skin.
*But I believed it too; my hands upon my bulge, the bump
of baby horns! The fury of his birth.* They can't make out

her words: one lays a warm cloth on her brow,
one strokes her hands. She bore that man a son.
She closed her heart again, bound her breasts.
The child was sent away and he, her lover,
took his chisels, carved himself a jail.
So many years ago.

Her flesh is stone. The drugged wine is in reach.
Her women talk in sighs. It comes to this.

Below her weave the caves: those threads
that interleave the ground. Below the sea of snow
the maze that waits, and all its walls are saying *you will die*.
The monster waits there in the dark;
even small assurances are gone.

A queen deserves a tomb; so too her child.
But he is gone; her traitor daughter too.
This little life of loss; her breasts are bound with iron;
that sea of snow will wash her to her end.

Research statement

Research background

Michel Foucault observes (1984: 7) that human beings are not born, but are made, subjects; and mythology is one of the modes through which this is achieved. Mythology has the capacity to deliver form within the chaos of everyday life (Miller 2000: 64), to structure our thinking through metaphor (Behler 2000: 82) and to fit us for our cultural contexts (Foucault 1998: 239). This poem is a contribution from a larger project that investigates mythology through restorying a key myth: that of Icarus, Daedalus and the royal family of Crete.

Research contribution

A key innovation is our contemporary application of an ancient form of narrative formation. Our method reenacts the original formation of the tales, which was through the appropriation of a range of stories and tropes, and the intervention on these, by many writers, poetic voices and forms. We retrieve fragments from ancient texts and, after reflection and analysis, perform an ‘arms-length’ collaboration, independently writing elegies for the same characters, and then setting them against each other to explore how voice, prosody and intellectual/political concerns conspire to create fresh understandings of a familiar set of tales.

Research significance

The concept that drives this work has already attracted international interest, with both poets achieving publication of critical and creative work on the theme. A key significance is the confident interweaving of critical and creative writings, which effectively constructs a prismatic effect, testing the issues from a number of points of view.

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Griffith University

Nigel Krauth

Polonaise in F Sharp Minor, Opus 44

Biographical note:

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

Keywords:

creative writing – creative nonfiction – Christopher Skase

The disgraced media-mogul

Christopher Skase fled to Majorca in 1991 at 43 years of age to avoid corporate fraud charges. Alongside Ned Kelly, he's the most famous fugitive in Australian history. He escaped to Majorca and holed up in an 'impenetrable hideaway ... a mansion by the sea in paradise,' according to the newspapers. At the disintegration of his tourism and media empire (a collapse finally occasioned when he bought MGM studios in Hollywood and then couldn't pay for them) he owed big banks 1.7 billion dollars. These banks – American, Asian, Australian, British and French – included the Bank of America, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and Barclays.

At the time when his company, Quintex, crumpled, he owned luxury hotels and resort chains, television and radio networks, real estate developments, hydrofoil services, jewellery stores, yachting marinas, Rolls-Royces and the most expensive house in the state of Queensland – a Mediterranean-style palace overlooking the Brisbane River with colonnaded walkways surrounding patio and pool, tennis and squash courts, cinema and bomb shelter. On a shelf in the study stood a glass globe containing the shredded notes of the first million dollars he made. Randolph Hearst was Skase's role model.

When it all went bust, Skase fled the good life in Australia for the good life in Majorca. He took up residence in a luxury estate west of Palma, from which the Australian authorities – in ten years of legal battles – never dislodged him. Claiming he was dying of emphysema, he regularly appeared before the media in a wheelchair with the paraphernalia of oxygen mask and bottle attached. He maintained that he'd die if forced to travel, and that his threatened deportation was 'attempted murder in the first degree'. He backed his claims with medical reports from the most expensive Swiss doctors. In 2001 the saga ended with Skase's reported death at just 53, from stomach cancer, not emphysema.

The bus to Port Andraitx

escapes the old town and proceeds along the garish strip of beach resorts. I see names like *Huckleberry's Beach Bar*, *Snoopy's*, and *Miracles*. *Club Liquid*. *Moby Dick Garage*. *Autos Bonsai*. *Plastic Gym Club*. I see two canine hair salons in a single block, along with a veterinary clinic. There are marinas and golf courses repeated, and brassy tourist attractions. Towards Palma Nova the resorts inundate the orchards, the red dirt lies dug and heaped, like scar tissue. The developments reach out towards Skase in his Port Andraitx hideaway, and are truly tacky, some of them kitsch travesties on a palatial scale. But the bushy inland hills, and the occasional old chapel, reminds of how we once were.

Majorca is a holiday island, I remind myself. A developer's dream ... many developers' dreams. And it's a Mediterranean retirement paradise – retirement being a kind of holiday anyway. There are tourists everywhere. Hire vehicles take wrong turns, or stall on roundabouts, drivers consulting maps and GPS screens. At Paguera – the ultimate holiday ghetto – the street is packed with painfully pink people carrying blow-up mattresses

towards the sea. All middle-aged; as middle-aged as I am, at least. And there are endless hotel pools surrounded by banana loungers. From the height of the bus I can see over the walls a vast real estate of reddening flesh.

The bus winds tightly in the new streets of Paguera, and takes on a bevy of holidaymakers – unwaveringly cheery and talkative. I feel I'm on the bus to happy home, the people-mover to paradise. All nationalities are aboard. The women have short permed hair. The men wear golf caps. At Camp de Mar a brand new resort town with imitation hillside villages rises up the foothill. The 'instant history' look – medieval Catalonia with golf course.

The taxi for the quick trip

around the bay, unloads me at Skase's gate. *Calle Ramat I, esquina Cala Egos, Puerto Andraitx, Mallorca, Espagne*, it says on the letter box. Not a hard address to find, even if I think the taxi drivers have been paid off to act dumb about it. So much for the media notions of a 'hideaway'. As I arrive I see the watchtower of Skase's mansion, recognisable from the media photos. I know I'm in the right place. A red MG flashes by and I think I see Skase driving it. Skase-spotting is a pastime in Port Andraitx, I guess.

I stand on the dirt road in front of the place. Walls, watchtower, buildings set back. I hear a rooster crow twice. Through barred gates I see Skase's swimming pool. Two silver plastic blow-up armchairs float eerily empty on it. I get a *Great Gatsby* shiver. There's a bougainvillea-draped colonnade and patio beside it. There are other mansions looking down from the surrounding hills. His estate, without elevation, looks inviting, but doesn't suggest freedom, or impenetrability, to me.

How hidden away is he? In the Port I bought two postcards that show his place from across the bay. But I'd say that most of the plush homes surrounding his two acres were built since Skase got here. He's sitting in the middle of a real estate development boom. It must be driving him crazy! The two sides of the bay are built up, but the flat tract at the end of it is not yet developed. I can see the Andraitx Mirage, shimmering, in his mind.

I scope his gates. I look for security cameras but can't see any. I press the button. There's no reply. I could leap his wall, at least with some help from stuff in his dumpster, outside the gates. A feature film made about him suggested his estate had a laser-beam intruder-protection system. Nothing could be further from the truth. I press the button again and again. Skase is not at home.

The dumpster by the gate is full of cardboard boxes: the kind removalists use. I start going through them. There's a lot of thrown-away personal stuff. Papers, bathroom items, dog food cans. I'm sifting among the detritus of lives – Christopher and wife Pixie. Eventually I know I'm at a point where I'm not myth-hunting anymore; I'm invading his privacy.

'Looking for something?'

I turn, and a man in his late 30s with the build of a rugby front-rower is standing behind the bars of the gate.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I’m looking for Chris. I’m Nigel Krauth.’

‘You got an appointment?’

I say no. But I add that I’ve met him before, on the Gold Coast, when he and Pixie were regular restaurant-goers in Main Beach and Surfers.

‘How do you spell your name?’

I do it and he writes it on the back of his hand.

‘Wait a minute,’ he says.

The footballer goes away. I’m pretty sure he is Tony Larkins, Skase’s stepson-in-law and marshal-at-arms. I keep watching the gate and there’s probably time for someone to google me and then the gates start to glide inwards. I walk through, around the pool, and under the colonnaded patio.

Chris Skase, sitting in his wheelchair

with his oxygen mask and bottle, greets me. We shake hands, and I’m careful not to grip his hand too hard, considering his condition, but there’s plenty of strength in his grasp and I’m heartened. I’m aware of the big, cool room embracing the swimming pool and patio and colonnades. I get the impression I’m on the set for the Ponderosa lounge room in *Bonanza* – all dark stones, heavy timbers and vast leather cushioning, though I don’t think they had a swimming pool on the Ponderosa. I see Pixie – blonde, petite and gorgeous – standing just behind Chris, holding the handles of his wheelchair. She really is another Bridget Bardot, older, of course. She glides towards me. She gives me a Mediterranean greeting, the two-cheek graze-cum-kiss, and invites me to sit (but I can’t help sprawling) on a sensational leather couch, then she goes and sits in the background.

Skase takes his oxygen mask off. ‘Main Beach,’ he says.

‘Tedder Avenue,’ I say. ‘But other places too. I was never really *in* your parties. Just happened to be there at the time. But your parties always expanded to include those around.’

He grips the arm of his wheelchair and cracks a smile. ‘Yes. They did. That’s what was meant to happen.’ He looks across at Pixie. She’s smiling too. ‘So, you want to talk to me, but I know you’re not a journalist. In fact, I know you’re a novelist.’

I’ve had this before. It’s sometimes surprising who has read your books. People who’ve read my novels include film stars, prime ministers, and even other novelists. My publisher tells me these things. But in Skase’s case now, perhaps he just read my home page.

‘I’m an anarchist,’ I confess. ‘Everything you’ve done has amused me greatly. But also, as a novelist, I’m aware it’s only journalists have written about you.’

He gets animated. ‘Yes, they’ve written about me. But they’ve never understood me. It’s not just about facts, you know, it’s about psychology. No-one has captured how I think.’

‘But you’ve written your own account,’ I say.

‘Agh, it’s crap,’ he says. ‘I forgot a long time ago how to write. And I did it badly then anyway.’

Skase gets up from his wheelchair

and walks towards the grand piano in a further reach of the lounge room, beside the broad fireplace. Pixie stands and wheels the chair behind him as he goes. At the piano he sits into the chair again and starts to play.

He plays Chopin. He plays it beautifully. Pixie retrieves his oxygen mask and bottle and brings it to him. She places the mask over his face as he says, as if introducing himself in performance: ‘A selection of pieces by Frédéric Chopin. Chopin wrote exquisite stuff here in Valldemossa, a village between Port Andraitx and Deyá, where George Sand and Chopin famously had their affaire. It’s one of the most beautiful villages in the world.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ I say. ‘I went through it in a bus.’

‘Ah. Then you’ll know,’ he says.

After a moody piece, then a whimsical one, he launches into Polonaise in A Major, Opus 40, No 1. Amongst the most recognisable and rousing pieces of music ever, it is demanding and playful and sexy. It hits you in the heart and the groin. You want to stamp your boots and whirl yourself in an abandoned, fierce Catalan way.

Behind him Pixie starts to dance. She swirls her see-through pool coat about her. She writhes up to his wheelchair as he bangs it out, straight-backed and fingers stamping on the keyboard. It’s a brilliant moment, I feel I should look away, but don’t want to miss a beat as she rolls her hips and he pounds the keyboard. Pixie is going like a flamenco dancer, and Chris is blazing away, misting up his mask, and I’m snapping my fingers and feeling my bum moving on the couch like it wants to take off and my fists fly with the music, emphasising every beat...

The piece finishes and echoes around the furniture. He turns and looks at us. I applaud wildly and Pixie throws her arms over his shoulders, snuggling her head in his neck, her long hair shimmying.

He turns back to the piano, and I realize he isn’t reading from any manuscripts. ‘And here is Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B Flat Minor, Opus 35: the presto finale. Also written in that Carthusian monastery cell in Valldemossa, where he and George Sand were holed up, screwing in defiance of the world, him dying, her trying to support him in the face of international derision ...’

He launches into the most disturbing piece of music I've ever heard. I'm amazed he knows how to play it. It sounds like it's being played backwards. So avant-garde, I don't believe it was written 150 years ago. It seems to tear the guts out of the piano. It certainly tears the guts out of my brain. It rolls like the nastiest of viruses, never a melody, only a sub-text. It upsets me, I want to turn it off. Pixie grips him from behind.

'We're talking about psychology here, Nigel,' he calls out through the mask. 'This is my psychology. It's taken me a lifetime of practice to be able to play this. It was Chopin's in Valldemossa, it's also mine.'

At the end of the piece Chris is distressed and Pixie strokes him down. She takes off the mask so he can breathe more easily. From within her embrace he says: 'And here is one of my favourites, written in Valldemossa and surely the soundtrack to any ambitious real estate development worth its salt. Polonaise in F Sharp Minor, Opus 44. It's a long work – all real estate is long work.'

I sit through a quarter-hour of dramatic piano playing. The piece seems all about possibility, persistence, negotiation, crests of creative achievement followed by valleys of disappointment.

'I have a plan for Valldemossa,' he says, over the music. 'It's submitted and approved. Where Chopin composed some of his best works, we have composed the Chopin Estate. Sixty acres with spectacular views down the Valldemossa Valley, a spectacular golf course, sprawling blocks, all facilities.'

He works away at the keyboard, throwing himself into the music as much as the telling of his beautiful dream.

'Development is about doing good and making beautiful things and vistas, about dreaming and having vision. But developers are always misunderstood – that is, until they're forgotten when the beauty of what they created eclipses them.'

Chris claws at the piano. The Polonaise seems to demand tenaciousness to the point of despair, but he sticks at it, the sweat beading his forehead. And then, there comes a rousing final passage where I recognize the developer looking happily at his final bank account – or the composer looking at his completed manuscript.

'There's a prospectus on the table over there. You're welcome to take it when you leave,' he grunts, slumping on the keyboard.

Pixie has half-danced, half-massaged her way through this piece, and she announces: 'Why don't we swim?' She swirls her gauzy pool coat and it balloons around her. She laughs coquettishly and heads out the wide French doors towards the pool.

I'm ready for anything, and stand up

to follow her. I see she's discarding her robe and her bikini bits so I look back at Chris and he's up and out of his chair and unbuttoning his trousers as he moves and I realize I

must get naked to join the party. As Chris hits the water, man-bits dangling, I'm not far behind. We bounce and splash and set the pool furniture on collision courses.

Pixie throws the water from her hair and eyes. 'We haven't had this much fun in months,' she laughs.

We hold arms together. We tread water and dive around and look at each other underwater. We get out and sit on the edge, and drip, and get back in. We feel each other sharing the water. The afternoon sun beats down on the good life in Majorca, the cerise blast of the bougainvillea sways above the turquoise of the pool. Chris floats on his back and squirts a jet of water from his mouth and says: 'I want you to write that novel about me.'

I'm flattered. I'm speechless. Pixie swims up and grabs me. 'He's serious,' she says.

I demur. I say I can't do the cause justice. Chris swims over and grabs me too. 'I want you to do it,' he grins.

Pixie throws back her head and laughs delightedly. 'Let's celebrate,' she hoots. She calls to someone inside the house to bring out the Cava.

I walk to the electric gates

knowing I love the idea of Chris as pursued Ned Kelly, as doomed Icarus, as reincarnated Chopin. I admire his imagination, his style, his sense of humour, his overreaching, his embattledness, his play with authority, his up-yours creativity, his holding the love of his nymph, Pixie. I'm wrestling with the idea that he's a cultural hero, even perhaps a cultural saint, because he has exposed what global business is really about. Its politics, glamour, celebrity, power – and its profits – aren't other than what you manage to get away with. Chris didn't get away with it, but he refused martyrdom. He fled and didn't face the courts, chose to do so because the courts aren't moral, they're the sledgehammer of the banks, businesses and governments which haven't been caught out yet. Skase redefined morality in business, as only an outsider could. He captained one ship in the fleet of greed, and went to the bottom with it.

'I'm thinking of proposing you for a sainthood,' I say, as the gates close between us.

Chris has his oxygen mask on again, and Pixie is at his side. I'm still not sure if the mask is a prop or a necessity. He's looking at me with a Byronic passion – with that clear, pallid, formal, ironic Byronic look about him. I've heard that Chris entertains very special guests in the pool shed across from the colonnaded patio. I'm thinking I could have done a gentle round with him, on his agenda. I'm happy to contemplate anything he might give me, or I might give him – I'm a writer on a mission, after all. Then Pixie speaks up.

'It's been wonderful meeting you, Mr Krauth. I think Chris is getting tired now.'

Pixie is a gorgeous woman and I'm distracted by her as much as I am by St Christopher. We have already cheek-grazed on the other side of the gate, but I hold Skase's handshake gratefully for a long time, and he holds on too, through the bars.

The silver plastic blow-up armchairs bump eerily on the pool, swirling a little, pinkened in the sunset behind them. I get that *Great Gatsby* shiver again. The barred gate clicks firmly locked behind me and I'm on my way back to Palma.

Research statement

Research background

Popular conceptions maintain that fiction results purely from imagination, but the relationship between fact and fiction has occupied philosophy and literature for centuries. Novelists since Aphra Behn (*Oroonoko*, 1688) have confirmed fact's importance in making fiction, while Chimamanda Adichie defined fiction's 'emotional truth' as 'a quality more resilient than fact' (2007: 9). Yet literary controversies such as those attached to Demidenko, Frey and Khouri indicate how anxiously some readers (and writers) negotiate the terrain between fact and fiction.

Research contribution

This work observes a collision between fact and fiction, information and impression, the objective and the subjective, and the real and the imagined. It wants the unsettled reader to muse: 'Did this really happen? Perhaps it did?'. It accomplishes this by presenting incontrovertible facts with outrageous imaginings so the two become difficult to unravel, thus challenging instituted ethics related to literary deceptions in order to explore what sort of fictive experience will evolve.

Research significance

Investigating the spectrum of positions between fact and fiction, this story does not valorise fiction above fact, or vice-versa. It observes the reaction between the two. It seeks to investigate the long-asserted, canonical boundary between fact and fiction from yet another angle – that of the fictional character inserted (photoshop-like) into a reality-like situation.

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Griffith University, Gold Coast

Anthony Lawrence

Field guide

Biographical note:

Anthony Lawrence is a lecturer in Poetry at Griffith University, Gold Coast, in Australia. He has a PhD in Literature from the University of Queensland. He has published twelve books of poems and a novel *In The Half Light*. His most recent collection of poems is *The Welfare of My Enemy*. His books and individual poems have won many of Australia's most prestigious awards, including the New South Wales Premiers Award, the Queensland Premiers Award, the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize and the Newcastle Poetry Prize. He is currently completing a new book of poems and is a Harold White Research Fellow at the National Library of Australia.

Keywords:

creative writing – fauna – flora – poetry – punctuation

Gang Gang Cockatoos

Headlamps coming on in cluster bulbs
blown ash and embers at dusk
feather scales in a reclusive coupling
over Katoomba
 rusty gate-hinge call
The slow drop of blood beads
 snip
 cloud wings and a steady rain
of cantoniasta berries

Wallaby

Cut-down shadow of the red and grey
cursor blinking on a rise
 of exclamation marks
dead timber smoke lines
the bush flourish at the end
 of a chewed sentence
a brown hawk falls away
as a shadow stands upright
 to listen scratch and then recline
in stripes of sun
 at night
startled by reports there
appears a red full stop
 in the neck
spreading to commas of wet matted hair
In the white circle of a spotlight
 out-of-focus footage
 of a pouch coming to life and death

Funnel-Web Spider

Dark spiral of rafter funnel
an old boot tipped and shaken
the furred sleeper coming free
fanged circle dance
needle gleam
death spittle on a point
backyard pool diver sipping from an air bubble
dream haunter

arachnapalavar
injection's white-hot pain
twin puncture wounds of contact
in bitter delirium

The abdomen a blood-pressure hand-pump
the unearthed head
a light fixture in a blackout

Tasmanian Devil

Warner Brothers whirling dervish
the Jaws of Life in patched growling miniature
muscled into the high and lowlands
Connption Do Not Feed
rank reek of underworld
island carnivore ripping night to shreds
neck scruffing mate rape
blood muzzling nocturne

Tumor Australis
the suppurating face
in isolated rapid decline

Echidna

Time taker
verge walker
line-snorting philosopher
quilled squinter in bush light
stop-start thinker
ball-roller
sharps depositor
infiltrator of nest and mound
myth maker gone to ground

When interrupted
difficult questions arise

When you leave will you have
what you came to find?

Dugite

Sand sculptor on the fringe of the fringe
evidence-leaver
slitherer
seudonaja affinis fatal distraction
awaits the observer
fleshed in a wave of heat sleep is a dune
hollow in twisting shade

A sifting of grains
 an hour-glass repeated lengthwise in liquid departure
 it's not about time

Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo

Undercarriage in overcast light
a call in cresting ritual
bottle-brushed into air play
dimorphic flourish of tail-fan
blood panels with late sun highlights
bigger when still when feeding
feathered field guide to hysteria and concentrated silence
hip-hop in the pine's upper register
clowning with bawdy word play
snicker snick
monogamous devotional song heard for miles
Five thousand dollars a pair
 habitat not included

Greater Glider

By soft illumination
membrane launch in updraught
stem and petal
by stamen tongue in a fruit-fallen wind
by twofold eyes in a wide approach
the landing flush in a rattle of leaves
the look and listen
the here we go and there we are
be where the night watch stills the fear

And who are you to ground the dream I need
like upwind under these
transparent guiding fans in tricky weather

Dingo

Air-brushed into a sand bank
barkless in pack-speak
reading the world with a sniff
the sea breaks open where a wound heals
a light goes out in a dune flower
blood in the water
staring down movement is a game and a need
Death is animal
human
walk don't run

Cassowary

Foraging deep in the twenty six parallels of dense light and overgrowth
standing up to everything
head-first with a skull cap boned for clearance into loving defense
strutting tight lines where humidity evergreens the canopy
here on the leaf floor
the flightless life is territorial
swift and fierce
Raise your hand interloper
achieve the required height
failure to comply
triggers a kicking
thorned and visceral

Budgerigar

Out on the Western plains
in sun country
grassed into seeding frenzy
in countless thousands
cloud wings in dust light
wheeling into free-style arrangements
the serious business of the nest

delight tamed by hawk-watching
whir and wheel
settle

The hand-reared companion bird in lockdown
rings a bell and says hello
to the mirror image of the wild
gone missing from its eyes

Research statement

Research background

In my poetry dealing with the natural world, I have always been aware of my (and others') physical presence in landscape, and my poems almost always have some palpable human interaction that interrupts the foreground or middle distance. I strive to harness subject matter into the service of language. Prescriptive notions of flora and fauna do not interest me. Lyn Hejinian, one of the most celebrated 'Language' poets in the USA, wrote of language as 'strange matter', suggesting that the language of enquiry that poetry can spark in both the conscious mind and in a distancing, self-effacing sense of self, can be one of the ways in which innovative language works. Hejinian's thoughts interest me when approaching fauna in poetry.

Research contribution

Field Guide attempts to (re)define various species through association and personal experience/interactions. I wanted to highlight various aspects of the environments and lives of birds and animals while maintaining a focus of suggestion as opposed to accurate, forensic isolation.

Research significance

My decision to abandon punctuation in this sequence comes from my initial need to eliminate commas from the ends of lines. There are a number of poets in Australia whose work is known for its attention to birds and animals, including Diane Fahey, Robert Adamson, Philip Hodgins and Judith Beveridge. All these poets adhere to conventional punctuation. There is no direct human presence in *Field guide*, although intervention is either behind the scenes or fast approaching.

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University of Wollongong

Joshua Lobb

Cubicles

Abstract:

This creative work explores the relationship between narrative form and sexuality. It presents a dual narrative: one which uses proper nouns and dialogue and another which eschews both of these devices. Through this creative exploration, it asks: what are the narrative and formal implications of writing about heterosexual and homosexual 'courtship'? Which narrative form is the more limiting for characters' agency?

Biographical note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is a Lecturer in Creative Writing in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong. Scholarly publications and papers include: "Travelling Partners: Using Literary Studies to Support Creative Writing about Real Spaces" (AAWP 2010), 'I could just walk out of this inconvenient story': Narrative Possibility in the Fairy Tales of A. S. Byatt' (UEA 2009), 'Degrees of Relation': Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt' (ibidem-Verlag, 2009); 'Deferring the 'Main' Point: Teaching 'Narrative Desire' as an Alternative Creative Practice' (AAWP 2009); and 'But if the author is dead, what are we doing here?': Teaching Critical Theory in a Creative Writing Program' (AAWP 2008). His creative work includes the plays *Wilde Tales* and *Still at Aulis*, and the short story 'I forgot my programme so I went to get it back' (Bridport Prize runner-up 2009, *Best Australian Stories* 2010).

Keywords:

narrative – prose – sexuality

He's looking through a hole into the eye of another body. It's a hole that's been scratched into the wall of the cubicle. The eye is yellowy round the edges, but urgently blue in the middle. Then it's gone, and is replaced with a sliding, gripping hand. The eye returns. Around the hole is a series of texted drawings, a line of numbers, a set of instructions. A kind of narrative. He's been reading it all day. The narrative is remarkably detailed: it recounts an unexpected encounter in this very cubicle. He admires the penmanship: the thin lines of text are barely smudged, the strokes are even. The writing gets tinier and tinier as the narrative advances.

He can hear more narratives coming over the cubicle walls.

Cindy says: 'I'm having the best time. It's really awesome how much I can freak him out with my bridezilla demands. Last night over dinner I told him that I wanted seventeen tiers on the cake and a swing band and all twelve of my cousins in peach and a chocolate fountain and invitations to every single girl I went to high-school with and twenty-eight different kinds of vol-au-vents. His face turned so white. 'And that's the colour of the dress I want,' I said.'

'Have you managed to find the fabric?' asks Rachel, clacketing away at her keyboard.

'I was looking at this sort of shade of ivory, or maybe pearl. But it's a bit sheeny. And then I saw this new colour—oh, what's it called?—in duchess satin. I've ruled out organza. I just don't want it to be too white, you know? I don't think white's right for me.'

There's a stifled guffaw from Ed's cubicle. 'It's definitely not right for you,' he sniggers.

'I heard that,' says Cindy.

'I never said a word,' says Ed.

His gaze slides down the wall to the space below. There's a thin gap between the cubicle wall and the floor: a thick band of air. He sees the air being pierced by a shoe. Slightly ratty white leather. White knotted laces. He watches. The shoe taps. The shoe disappears. He sees four fingers curling round the rim of the cubicle wall: very slowly, very tentatively. Then they whip back. They curl in again. Square-tipped, tightly-clipped nails. He gauges the fingers on his own hand: crumpled knuckles, black spiky hairs, milky nails. The fingers are still gripping. He wonders if he should touch them. Then the fingers flick themselves back into the other cubicle. It's an offer, a gesture towards. He looks back through the scratched-out hole. The yellowy-blue eye is even more urgent. The fingers flick again.

‘Well, the first part of the date went badly,’ Ed confesses. ‘I’m explaining about the fucking trackwork and she said something like ‘I like a man who knows the value of punctuality’.’

‘Stuck-up tart,’ says Cindy.

Rachel asks: ‘Where did you end up meeting?’

‘Slip Inn.’

‘Isn’t that where—?’

‘Yep. So I’m already on the back foot and I have to really put the charm on. I’m giving her compliments about her hair and her beautiful eyes. She’s a stunner. Even better than her profile pic. She’s a bit hot and cold, though. I’m not sure if the charm is working. She doesn’t want to tell me much about herself, but she asks a lot of questions about me. She makes a really nasty comment about my choice of jacket. And I love that jacket. But she laughs at my jokes so that’s something.’

‘You make jokes?’ says Rachel.

‘Chuck us over a post-it, will you?’ says Cindy.

‘So after a cocktail or five, we’re out on the street. Plenty of cabs whizzing past but none stopping for us. I’m not sure if I should be putting on the hard word here or if she wants me to be gentlemanly so I’m keeping my distance. It’s fucking cold this time of year and she’s only wearing one of those short sparkly dresses. So I opt for the ‘hey, do you want my jacket?’ approach. She snorts at the jacket, but she takes it anyway. ‘What does that mean?’ I’m thinking. Eventually a cab screeches up but I still don’t know what she thinking. She slides over to the far side of the cab seat. I’ve got one foot in the gutter. ‘Get in, you idiot,’ she’s saying to me. ‘You don’t want to be late for this as well, do you?’’

There’s a moment, as he moves between cubicles, when he catches himself in the scratched mirror. It’s like the air has stiffened. The taps have been caught mid-drip. It’s like everything in the room has been snap-frozen. The fluorescent light has stopped flickering. It’s like a question’s been asked and the room’s waiting for the answer.

‘I’m so over it,’ Rachel says. ‘Of an evening, all I want is to relax. Put my feet up on the couch. Watch *Desperate Housewives*. You should have heard what Gabby said this week. But Tony’s got other ideas. He just can’t get enough of *Jeopardy*. I don’t know why I agreed to move in with him. He’s got the worst taste. Game shows. I mean, if I wanted to know which city hosted the 1960 Olympics, I’d have become a bloody athlete. He actually tapes the episodes to the hard drive, goddammit. And he sits there, stuffing himself with chips and spraying the answers at the television.’

‘Hot,’ says Cindy.

‘It’s like a sickness. ‘Where is Niagara Falls?’ ‘What is *Pride & Prejudice*?’ And the worst thing of all is that when it’s time to watch *my* show, Tony won’t have a bar of it. He stands by the door in his moth-eaten pyjamas, whispering sweet nothings, trying to lure me into bed. I’ve had it up to here.’

Ed says: ‘Oh, poor you. All that available sex must be so hard to resist.’

‘I know, I know. What’s a girl to do?’

The body with the urgent yellow-blue eyes and the tightly-clipped nails is covered by tracksuit fabric, slippery blue. Above the eyes is fraying dark hair. There’s a row of bolts along the top of the cubicle wall: this haloes around the hair. He can see the other side of the scratched-out hole. There’s very little room in here. A cistern, a plastic toilet-paper holder, two bodies. He’s backed against the chipboard door. The tracksuited body is facing him. The top half of the slippery blue is unzipped. The lower half of the fabric slithers to the floor. It wedges forward. He’s pushed downward, towards the now exposed black-haired stomach. The hairs curl. The body rocks back and forth. He grips the black-haired thighs. His hands are dragged up to the body’s buttocks. He finds himself toppling backward. He has to let go of one of the buttocks and steady himself. His fingers touch the row of bolts that run along the bottom of the cubicle walls. His shoulder bumps the toilet-paper holder. The urgent body grinds. He takes it all in.

Cindy says: ‘When I was little I used to dream about four white ponies with white bridles, pulling a carriage shaped like swan. I’m riding along inside, in a red velvet chamber. Then the carriage door opens and there he is: the man of my dreams. I know that’s just a fairy tale, but all I want is for our day to be special.’

It’s just a push against the wall of the cubicle. It’s just a grind. It’s just friction. It’s just a quick look deep into the urgent blue eyes. The eyes are looking beyond everything. He knows that they’re not looking at him, but he pretends that they are. It’s just an intake of breath.

Ed says: ‘I really like her. She’s so beautiful and she’s got this fantastic laugh. I normally try and keep things low-key at the beginning, but we really click. So I sent her a text. ‘hey babe, u want to go to movies 2nite?’ I think this is the start of something amazing. I just hope I didn’t blow it.’

The tracksuitless body, shuddering, makes a muffled groan. The body is re-covered with the slippery fabric. It shudders again. And then it’s gone.

‘What I really want to do,’ Rachel says, ‘is find a website which has all the answers to all trivia questions. And then one night he can be lying there eating chips and I can tell him all about Rembrandt and the capital of Hawaii and whatever. I’ve got to admit I find it kind of hot the way he knows all the answers. Even if he’s wearing those moth-eaten pyjamas and covered in crumbs, he’s still my man.’

The room contains the following items. Four cubicles, wooden-doored, separated by three wooden walls. Three of the four doors are open, indicating vacancy, the last from the entrance half-closed. One of the wooden walls, the wall furthest from the entrance way, has a hole, 0.75 centimetres wide, scratched into it, rough-hewn, sixty centimetres from the floor. Four plastic toilet-roll holders fastened to the three dividing cubicle walls, and one attached to the outer wall of the room. Four toilet rolls in place: one roll sixteen squares from its cardboard centre, the others more-or-less complete. Four toilets, with dual-flush systems, not exactly clean, but serviceable: a few discolorations on the cisterns. Three have been recently flushed, one contains several wads of soaking toilet paper. On the opposite wall are four matching sinks: dull-metalled, more rectangular than round. Eight taps: four cold, four hot. Five turned off tightly, so tight that the water would shriek out if you turned one of the four-pronged handles (there are 128 prongs). Two taps dripping: one at the rate of one droplet approximately every ten seconds, the other more infrequently, more irregularly. One tap allowing cold water to splash into the crumbling metal sink. Three canisters, made of opaque ribbed plastic, fixed to the wall between the sinks, a metre or so from the floor, containing a sickly-sweet pink liquid. A button to press to squirt the liquid out. Four mirrors above each sink, mostly smudged. The mirror closest the entrance way is speckled with twenty or thirty discoloured blotches: these are concentrated in the top right-hand corner, but spread across the mirror. Opposite the entrance, the wall is devoted to the urinal: glossy metal, essentially smooth, but with a few dents here and there. The trough contains one-and-a-half sickly-stinking white discs and a film of oily liquid. The floor is not clean. The black-and-white mosaic tiles are smeared primarily with muddy footprints, a few leaves around the entrance way, a few blobs of sponged toilet paper and two damp scrunched-up yellowing pieces of paper. The frame of the entrance way is made of the same material as the cool grey-stone walls. Beside the entrance way on the wall is a metal box. It has an aperture at the bottom from which protrudes a strip of yellowing paper. Below this, an inadequately-sized plastic bin, overflowing with scrunched-up yellowing paper. Above the room the once-white ceiling continues the spread of speckles from the mirror, the speckles darkening over the entrance-way door. There are two long bands of fluorescent light running perpendicular to the entrance. There are cobwebs in three of the four corners. There are six living creatures: one spider (in the corner above the cubicles), three flies (hovering around the entrance way), two humans. One stands next to the still-splashing sink; the other pressed against the furthest cubicle wall.

He releases it all. It all comes bursting out on the cubicle walls.

He says:

‘London was the host of the 1960 Olympics. The capital of Hawaii is Honolulu. Niagara Falls has a drop of 53 metres and is on the border

between the United States and Canada. It is a popular honeymoon spot, and was one of the locations of the film *Superman II*. It's where Clark and Lois first kiss. *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813 and tells of the romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. On average, 94% of couples who meet on the internet have a second date, and 18% have relationships that last more than a year. In 2000, Mary Donaldson met Prince Frederik; in 2004 she became Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark. The number for Combined Taxis is 133 300. You want Diamond French satin.'

'Wow,' Ed says. 'You could give Tony a run for his money.'

'Will you marry me?' says Rachel.

Research statement

Research background

The work is an original short prose piece. It uses as its starting point the hypothesis that narratives surrounding gay male sexual encounters tend towards visual details, where as heterosexual narratives often depend on verbal exchanges. The research questions for the project are: what are the narrative and formal implications of writing about heterosexual and homosexual 'courtship'? Which narrative form is the more limiting for characters' agency?

Research contribution

The work is situated in the methodology of research-led practice. It is a practical application of research, combining analysis of dialogue in realism with the writing on the ideological implications of form. In particular, it draws on Ermarth's proposal that dialogue produces a 'unified field of relationships' (1983: 81), Vernon's assertion that eavesdropping is a manifestation of capitalist (heteronormative) discourse (1984: 87) and Pearce and Owens' examination of realism as a 'a system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others' (Pearce 1999: 399; Owens 1994). In this, it attempts to make explicit a formal mode of resistance intuitively used in writings of gay male sex, such as the work of Christos Tsiolkas and Adam Mars-Jones, and in the diaries of Joe Orton.

Research significance

Based on my writing in this field, I was invited to submit the work to *TEXT*, Australia's leading creative writing journal. The work extends research in the field of 'queer' literature, by linking narrative theory with queer readings of literature.

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Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Philip Neilsen

The Botanist at his Mother's Grave

Biographical note:

Philip Neilsen has published 15 books, the most recent being *Without an Alibi* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* (2012) co-edited with Professor David Morley from the University of Warwick. He is professor of creative writing at QUT. Email: p.neilsen@qut.edu.au

Keywords:

Creative writing – poetry

The Botanist at his Mother's Grave

*Wordsworth said ... that a scientist was someone who would botanise
on his mother's grave. Ian McEwan*

I visit every month to argue with you
mother, able at last to get my words out
(you had a sharp eye and tongue –
once called me your 'failed experiment').

But I understood your churning mood
generated by genes and injustice,
the glossy black gates of Tavistock Square,
conference organisers condescending
to an Australian woman of science.

No need to bring you shop blooms in cellophane.
Viola banksii, native violet,
ripples and knots across this rectangle
and on the headstone behind
blush of lichen.

Who would have thought you could leave
such a flood mark on the world;
educated, bigoted, whimsical, loyal to a fault,
too expansive to be a species or genus
pinned between stones in Dutton Park cemetery.

There is a fig tree here you could observe
if propped up on your elbows,
and behind that the musky river.
That tree was raised and disciplined by language
but messily born of the senses.
I think you always knew the difference.

The ground cover and its sly fragrance
wrestles with pigweed and thistle.
Don't get lost in the detail, you would have said
with your lopsided mouth.
So many figs to choose from,
so much warfare in that brown water.
You see what a general I can be?
The universities court me now, give me titles.

I crush some petals between thumb and finger
and there again your dressing table with its potions,
or the day you watched me roll down a hill
through all the bees and clover.
They won't sting if you sing to them

I trusted and they didn't sting.

I say your name aloud now
surprised at the gentleness.

But I preferred it when we lived
and bickered in the breakfast room,
too close to be careful.

Your last face was rough with gardening and pain.

I forgot to tell you,
last week I read your Didion book –
the one you underlined with shaky pencil.
I know the grief traps too, mother,
but don't know exactly what this is.

It doesn't matter. We can sit and watch the river,
fingers entwined, listening under birds,
until I think of a witty answer
to your last sarcasm, and keep you here still.

Research statement

Research background

In this poem about processing human grief, I consciously drew on eco-critical theory – (Wilson 1992, Bate 2000) – and Darwinian literary theory (Carroll 2004) to explore the tension between ideas of the ‘natural’ apprehended through the senses, and poststructuralist ideas of the construction of reality through language.

Research contribution

Through the botanist’s monologue, the poem proposes a synthesis of the ‘natural’ as something constructed by language, with more immediate experience via the senses – a concept validated by Darwinian literary theory (eg., our adaptation to the natural world long predates adaptation to the built environment). Although trained to be an observer and classifier of the ‘natural’, the botanist experiences a more intimate connection with both his mother and nature, similar to Heidegger’s ‘Being-in-the-world’. Nature is no longer ‘specimen’, ‘damaged’ or absent ‘other’, but something he and his mother share, putting aside old resentments. In the final draft, I added an allusion to Didion’s grief memoir, to further suggest the botanist has drawn closer to his mother through sharing language.

Research significance

This poem makes some strands of theoretical thinking concrete as lived experience by demonstrating not stating, in creative practice. It builds on a series of poems influenced by eco-criticism that were collected in my book *Without an Alibi*.

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Neilsen, Philip 2008 *Without an Alibi* Cambridge: Salt Publishing.

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Waikato Institute of Technology, Wintec, New Zealand

Gail Pittaway

Leave-taking

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway's current research interests include creative writing (poetry, short story and scripts), ritual elements in contemporary theatre and the history of food writing. She has edited two books; "Writers in the Gardens" and "Love Street" and has had stories broadcast on radio. Gail is also a national theatre critic and contributes regular live book reviews for the National Radio in New Zealand. She is a member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network, the New Zealand Society of Authors and since 2004, has been an executive member of the Australian Association of Writing Programmes. She lectures in the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Keywords:

Creative writing – poetry – Dante

Leave taking

Afterwards
russet-haired Francesca
staggered home.

Around her feet
Skittish leaves clattered
on the cobblestones
like old bones thrown into a whirl wind;
like the sound of doors being opened
or furniture being scraped
or small fingers drumming
with impatience on leather-bound books.

I have no substance
I am adrift

Nearby from a tower
a Tuscan bell
moaned his name to the wind:
Pao-lo.

Exegetical statement: field of inquiry and context

This piece drives from the tension between a respect for high culture (as identified in Mathew Arnold's essay 'Culture and Anarchy'), with Dante's poetry being considered an epitome of achievement, and a feminist and postmodern inclination to consider such traditional texts as available to reinvention and rediscovery for modern poets (as do Atwood and Warner). In another classic, an essay by Modernist poet T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the use of the term 'tradition' is both active and passive. A poet must embody 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer' while also reflecting and partaking of her/his contemporary context. Eliot argues that 'the most individual parts of his (the poet) work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'. This poem, then, is an attempt to investigate a traditional story from Dante's *Inferno* from a modern point of view, while still alluding to motifs from the original text.

Works cited

Alighieri, D. (1949 Translated by D.L Sayers) *The Divine Comedy Part I, Inferno* Canto 5, lines 82-145 Penguin Classics

Arnold, M. *Culture and Anarchy: an essay in social and political criticism*
<http://www.authorama.com/culture-and-anarchy-1.html> (accessed 20 March 2012)

Atwood, M. (2005) *The Penelopiad*, Cannongate, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Eliot, T. S. (1920) *Tradition and the Individual Talent* <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>
(accessed 25 March 2012)

Warner, M. (1994) *Managing Monsters: Six myths of our time*, Vintage, London, UK.

Research statement

Research background

This poem alludes to the adulterous love affair of Paolo and Francesca, contemporaries of Dante Alighieri in the 13th century. In *the Divine Comedy*, Dante locates them in his Inferno (Hell), in circle 2 where the lustful are punished but, in some sympathy, places them in the whirlwind of lovers for one of the less serious sins. Here they whirl for eternity, caught up in this metaphorical depiction of the passion which has overtaken their reason and caused them to sin. The poem imagines Francesca returning to her husband from an assignation with Paolo, being reminded of her helplessness to change time or her circumstances by the moving autumn leaves at her feet.

Research contribution

There are operas, overtures, paintings and sculptures of Paolo and Francesca but very few textual version of the story (apart from libretti). William Blake's illustration of this encounter in Inferno is perhaps the best known depiction out of Italy and has been a strong influence on this poem. Blake's figures are luminous, disembodied, trapped. The form of the poem is intended to trap Francesca's 'I' statement within a third person narrative voice, just as she is trapped in the original account in Dante

Research significance

This original contribution is published in *TEXT*, the ERA A ranked journal, reflecting a larger body of poetry connected with the Seven Deadly Sins.

Works cited

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Writing and Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney

Hazel Smith

Feisty and childless (a cut and paste; a polylogue)

Biographical note:

Hazel Smith is a research professor in the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. She is author of *The Writing Experiment: strategies for innovative creative writing* (Allen and Unwin, 2005) and *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: difference, homosexuality, topography* (Liverpool University Press, 2000). She is co-author of *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (Harwood Academic, 1997) and co-editor with Roger Dean of *Practice-led Research Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh University Press 2009). She is co-editor with Roger Dean of *soundsRite*, a journal of new media writing and sound, based at the University of Western Sydney. Hazel is a poet, performer and new media artist, and has published three volumes of poetry, three CDs of performance work and numerous multimedia works. Her latest volume of creative work, with accompanying CD Rom, is *The Erotics of Geography: poetry, performance texts, new media works*, (Tinfish Press, 2008). She is a member of australYSIS, the sound and intermedia arts group, and has performed her work extensively in USA, Europe, UK and Australasia. She also had a previous career as a professional violinist. Her website is at www.australysis.com and her email is hazel.smith@uws.edu.au

Keywords:

Creative writing

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have any children. People need to feel they're right, and have to convince everyone else that they are. We suppress other biological urges: nobody thinks fidelity is 'weird'. E-researchers have found that people derive more satisfaction from eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television, than taking care of their kids. Looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing the housework.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have any children. We're used to childless women running things, they used to be called nuns. Did you 'just know' you wanted to be a mother? Well I 'just know' I don't. I do worry about being lonely when I'm older. I pursue volunteer work for charity, I give blood, I've offered to donate my eggs. Look, I like kids – I just couldn't eat one whole.

Childless women subvert discourses round constructions of femininity. *As a mother myself*, meaning that only women with children have real feelings. A filmmaker, talking to the *New York Times*, probably *is* more comfortable discussing her films than her uterus. First Romeo wants to marry Julia. I have experienced firsthand the effects of bad parenting, and I don't want to perpetuate that. My partner doesn't want kids. I lack the appropriate resources. I was never drawn to dolls. I wonder why I am so ambivalent about my own status: why at times I feel myself a lesser being, even as I despise anybody who sees me that way.

I think having children is the greatest experience of any lifetime. My childhood was enriched by a childfree uncle, who took us to galleries and films we would not otherwise have seen. There is a constant drip, drip, drip of pressure, a need to justify your self in a way parents never have to do. If childbirth and rearing are so bloody essential, why do so many abortions happen every year? I am on constant alert, fearful of the stray remark or image that will rock my equilibrium.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have children, and a long time ago the world decided I wasn't, because I didn't have children. The time has just gone and it was or wasn't a long time ago for time is short. And in short, I am not sure whether I decided to have children or not, maybe I did and maybe I didn't.

Endnote

1. Sources for this poem include *The Age*, *The Drum Opinion*, *Jezebel*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Childless By Choice* survey (2004-06), found at http://www.childlessbychoiceproject.com/Childless_by_Choice_Survey.html, and works by Gilbert, D 2007 *Stumbling on Happiness*, New York: Vintage; and, Gillespie, R 2000 'When No Means No: disbelief, disregard and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness' *Women's Studies International Forum* 23(2): 223-34.

Research background

This text results from a research project that analyzed publications about voluntary childlessness, a subject addressed in only a few sociological and psychological texts and almost entirely absent from poetry and fiction. I explore the topic through conceptual or ‘uncreative’ writing techniques (Goldsmith 2011), that cut-and paste texts from the Internet, resist conventional poetic techniques and minimise revision.

Research contribution

Exploring the intersection of poetry, documentary, performance and prose, the text presents voluntary childlessness through rapidly changing and conflicting perspectives, to show that willed childlessness varies, and may combine positive and negative aspects. It morphs the ‘cut up’ into ‘cut and paste’, combining snippets from newspapers articles, interactive forums and academic discourses about voluntary childlessness, found through Google searching. It, unusually, fuses this technique with the ‘polylogue’ (Smith 2005: 123), a performative monologue of contradictory voices that is designed for solo live performance, and employs the iteration characteristic of experimental writing.

Research significance

The piece puts voluntary childlessness into the literary arena. It foregrounds ‘uncreative writing’ in Australia, has been enthusiastically received in New Zealand and the UK (Performances 2012), and forms part of a body of experimental work by me that has been extensively published and performed internationally.

Works cited

Goldsmith, K 2011 *Uncreative Writing: managing language in the digital age*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Performances: Trans-Tasman poetry symposium, Auckland University, 2012; The Other Room poetry reading, Leeds Gallery, UK, 2012.

Smith, H 2005 *The Writing Experiment: strategies for innovative creative writing*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

University of the Sunshine Coast

Ross Watkins

Collecting her

Biographical Note:

Dr Ross Watkins is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. His doctoral novel was shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Emerging Author, and his award-winning short fiction and non-fiction has been published in Australian and international anthologies. Ross' scholarly interests are diverse but primarily concerned with visual narrative and writing for the illustrated book, as well as narrative representations of trauma and melancholy. He is an Executive Committee member of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), short story editor for the scholarly journal *Social Alternatives*, and is a regular presenter at the Brisbane Writers' Festival and a literary judge. His first major publication as an illustrator is *The Boy Who Grew Into A Tree* (Penguin, 2012), a graphic novel written by Gary Crew.

Keywords:

creative writing – collecting – melancholy – objects



23/9/2000

Adam, son,

This house is a coffin. This house is a ship. She died in it, for you. My words sail in it, to you. I need you to find her, to gather and collect her. I need you to captain this vessel; to cargo its hollow hold. If you do not, all is void: every room where we walked – her and I – where you walked, later – empty.

And she did die for you, if death is the loss of spirit. When you left she curled in your cast iron bed, in your sleep-out off the dining room – yes, yes, I know that you know – and when I went in she turned to the wall, to that stained tongue and groove, lifting a hand to trace the cracks, following them down.

So her life drained.

It was not me she wanted, but you: her son-lover; her son-husband; her son-murderer. Not me in my useless chair, bumping, scraping, spilling. I had nothing to offer. Not like you.

Only you can captain this vessel; only you can cargo its hollow hold. I have only words, my letters the sails. The sails I fill with words.

Adam, son, go there; find what she left. Find the stuff of the performances she gave: the essence of her. Gather it and send it back that this coffin may be her cradle.

Find her. Collect her. Send her home. So we may begin again.



10 November, 2000

Dad.

No doubt you have been wondering about my silence. I assure you that it is not due to a lack of conviction to respond. No. I am in Rome.

Your letter took some time in arriving here, courtesy of a friend who is looking after the flat. As I do not wish to trouble my friend again, please forward any further correspondence to the address provided on the envelope. I will remain in Rome until my work for the Museum is complete, unless I find reason to move on. I cannot envisage a return home. Especially the home you write from—the Queenslander.

Not now.

I see that you have again taken up the old typewriter... I wonder from which cupboard you dredged it. And what else lies there. Your old manuscripts? Perhaps not. I remember her desire to burn your words. Demanding. Accusatory. I wonder why I should not do the same.

As for this business of collecting her, I only feel resentment for your cold command. Resentment which has long been stowed. Since the days when it was just you and me in that house while she performed for a full one, nightly. I always blamed you for her need to escape. But you know these things. And more.

Enough.



12 November, 2000

Dad

So my mind has changed.

You know my belief in images and their potential to punctuate... Well, I saw her yesterday.

She always preferred the image of herself to the feel of her own skin. And there she was, beside the Teatro Brancaccio, her glory revealed from behind the shredded posters of countless performances since hers, here, all those years ago. She would laugh from her throat if she had seen it as I did, on my way back from posting the previous letter. Her sense of humour was always black. Her sense of timing ironic.

Yes, I will find her.

Her face insists. My heart is fixed.

Adam.

16/11/2000

Adam,

Had I written to you after receiving your first letter, my reply would have had a very different tone. 'Cold command', you said. Cold command! You had the effrontery to quote Shelley's 'Ozymandias' at me? At me?

What time of day did I receive that? Morning? Midday?

No matter.

I took myself out onto the verandah and I drank. I roared at the sky, and I drank. I abused you and drank. And drank. Direct from the bottle, I drank. Adam, I hated you. I had written from the heart asking that you send her home. In my loneliness, I asked for your help. I asked that you send me comfort. And what did I get? A sneer of cold command! I was not sneering. I was begging. It was you who sneered. It was always you. How could you do that, with me in this chair and you over there, mobile! As was she, of course, which was - is - the rub! Since she was free too. To be with you. All lah-de-dah as you were! All 'Shall we take in a show?' - 'Shall we go to that opening?' - 'Shall we do dinner?' Oh so lah-de-dah! Oh so here and there. Like lovers. Like lovers you were. Always. Always here and there. And me stuck in this chair. This house. This hollow hold.

Scraping. Suffocating...

Is that the word I want?

Is it?

No.

Dying is the word!

And me -

Dying.

But you. You two...

So I hit the Scotch.

Was it eleven or midday?

Whatever, I drank and abused.

I drank and roared at the sky.

I hated you.

All night I was there; still, when morning came. Doubled over; stiff and sore. My chair wedged beneath the verandah rail. Vomit all over. And I wet myself.

Horrible.

By the time he came out of it, there was the second letter. (I write 'he' because it can't be 'me', can't be 'I', can it? I don't want that person to be me. I loathe that drunkard. I loathe him, that self-indulgent cripple. I loathe myself when I wake up to him, his clothes rank.)

Eleven when he started, was it? Or midday?

And he came to - when?

He shakes himself - his shoulders, at least - and backing up, he wheels himself into the kitchen, wanting water. That's when he sees the letter propped against a milk bottle on the table. Through his blurred whatever, he knows it is important.

There is a woman who 'does' for him; collects the mail, does his washing, his cleaning. A Mrs Siddons - ha, ha! No, not the Reynolds! Not the Tragic Muse. (Though she might be; she certainly knows her cues.) She lives two houses down. She is a good woman. She asks no questions. If she finds that drunk comatose, she checks his pulse (I think) then steps over him. Nor does she remind him when he is better (back in his chair at least, his trousers dry).

All that is good.

So here is the second letter on his kitchen table, deposited by the muse.

Through the boozy blur he sees it is from you; the handwriting hasn't changed. He makes it to the sink, pours himself a glass of water and goes back onto the verandah. No, not where he spent the night. (One night only was he out there? There have been occasions where there were two. He thinks...). He wheels down the hall to the front door (wide open, all night), and hangs a right (joke!) to the

other side. This is Queensland - a Queensland house, though it is so long since you saw it you may not recall - hence the verandah goes right around. (Have you forgotten how we like our outside in? It's been a while, my son. A long while. Too long...). So he sits on the western side (being morning, and still cool there) to sip his water and read.

'The apology', he will call it.

As he reads he wants to say that he is sorry too. So he returns to himself (groggily, yes, but over time, he does). And I am sorry, Adam. I am truly sorry. Please, let me start again. I want to fill this house with her (again), with you (again).

This house is a ship, its hold empty. I am asking that you fill it with her. These letters are the sails, billowing with our words. And you, in your youth, my captain; my supercargo. Adam, I ask that you find her. You know her world. You know her haunts. I ask that you collect all that you can of her belongings - memento mori, should I say? - and send them home. No! No! Bring them home. You bring her home. I ask that we make this tomb our cradle. That we begin again.

And we can, if you will.

Did the old drunk ever tell you how he met her? Did he? No?

Then I will.

1968. Someone threw a party. (I don't know who, nor does it matter.) She was there. Lovely. I knew right away. She did too. So I asked and they told me: 'Ellen Windsor,' they said. And they told me that she asked about me. 'James Fitzgerald,' they said, 'Don't call him Jimmy.' But she did, of course, being her, and teasing. 'James,' she said when it was time to go. 'Jimmy... will you take me home?'

With my folks away (overseas, as ever, as always), we came back to this house. I used the front stairs then, not this mongrel lift they've installed. But other than that, the house hasn't changed much. I'm not one for change, as you know - a stick in the mud, always have been - ironic, really, because now I can't leave.

Anyway, the stairs...

Ellen thought the height of the house was a hoot the minute she saw it. She was from down south - Melbourne, and posh. 'Why is it on stilts?' she wanted to know.

'Stumps,' I told her. 'They're called stumps. It's hot here. They let the breeze under.'

So I led her up.

When I opened the front door, and she saw the hallway ('the

breezeway', as we called it), with the bedrooms going off, left and right, she understood.

'And every bedroom opens onto a verandah,' I told her. 'The heat, like I said.'

'I'd like to see a bedroom,' she said. 'I'd like you to show me,' and she winked.

That's what she was like, your mother; never backward in coming forward.

So we went in and that was the start of it. That's how we began. At the front door - with a kiss in the breezeway - making the house giggle, because Adam, you need to understand, you were here too. From the first night - the first embrace - you were here too.

Ellen wore a scarf that night: blue paisley, very 60s. She used it to carry you when you were tiny, as a baby sling over her shoulder, across her breast. Later, mucking about as a kid, pirating on this verandah, you tied it around your head. You must remember: that blue paisley scarf with the gold clip. Not real gold, not precious, just junk; all we could afford, then.

She took that scarf with her; over there when she went.

Adam, if you find her stuff - if you find a suitcase, or a trunk, or a carton - see if it's there.



30/11/2000

You know where.

Son,

It's been two weeks. I get it now. You want me to beg. You want me to say, 'Please, please, send me a note, a photo, a thumb print.' All right, I will. Adam, son, please, please get back to me. Please, please, send me something. Some part of you, of her. Don't leave me here alone.

I can't do this. It's too hard. I'm too old and it's too hard.

Is that what you want? Is it? That I beg? Is that what it takes to evoke a response? Well if it is, too bad. You left, she left. Stay away.

I'm alive.

Hear me, I'm alive. You can both die and stay dead for all I care. What matters is that I'm alive and I am here. I wouldn't want to be where you are, wherever you are, stay there.

See if I care.

The sun comes up, the sun goes down without you, without her. I have money. I have a place to live – as you well know – and, if I want, I have a place to die.

5 December, 2000

Dad.

Time moves slowly in Rome. Especially when I am collecting.

The Museum work has largely occupied my days, although my mind has been elsewhere. Back home, perhaps, with you, in your chair, bumping about with your clanking bottle. When will you find the bottom of that habit?

The blue paisley scarf. I don't remember it. I am sorry. It is likely that I have pushed it from my mind for a particular reason. Perhaps it is a memory locked without a key.

The day after posting my previous letter I went back to the Teatro Brancaccio to see if something was left behind from her performances. A prop, a programme... They kept nothing. I was bitter and thought my collecting of her had ended before it began.

Until I met Francesco Ricato.

I was on an errand for the Museum, talking with a man in his home when we began discussing the theatre, for which he possesses a great joy—*possiede una grande gioia*. Amid smiles I told him of my mother and my dismay at finding nothing of her, and he informed me with great enthusiasm that he is good friends with an old actor who had played alongside her in *Hamlet*. Her first major performance, as Gertrude—you recall?

We met Francesco in a café. Although a dour man, he spoke of her in warm tones, as though he was still playing Hamlet, still her son, as though their stage was boundless. I told him of my relationship with her and I have no doubt it was this mutuality which allowed him to talk so openly, speaking of her love for Italian wine, Italian sunlight. For the Italian spotlight. He seemed a man with a jumbled mind but with a quiet corner set aside for her, telling me how she would come from the stage and walk directly out

onto the street, her performance spilling into the bars, dragging him by his cuff, begging him to show her *la vera Roma*.

Francesco offered us a drink at his flat and so we walked and he showed me the places she liked to go for an aperitif, for dancing, for late night coffee, even though some of those places are long gone. I smiled at my vision of her in her prime. Lively. Unencumbered.

'I see her,' I told Francesco.

'Si,' he laughed, 'si. Black stilettos, black dress and that blue scarf. Il mio amore per il passato, she called it.'

I nodded. I had not read your letter then. I did not know the significance of the scarf and I thought nothing more of it until we arrived at the flat.

Francesco invited us in and cleared three chairs around a small table in the kitchenette, his flat—the hallway, the bedsit—cluttered with spilled and spilling cardboard boxes. He quickly poured us a drink each and went off into the hallway, muttering, 'Scusatemi... c'è qualcosa... momentito,' while his friend, my Museum connection, appeared embarrassed but accustomed.

When Francesco returned he placed a small box on the kitchen table and sat and drank and looked at me over the rim of his glass. He swallowed then smiled.

'People,' he said, 'they laugh at me and all my scatole, my boxes. But you—you are a museum collector, si?'

'Si.'

He clapped. 'Then you understand. This makes me happy, sono un vecchio molto contento. And that is why you must have this for your collezione.'

I expected the small box on the table to contain her scarf. But it was not so.

Francesco handed me a fold of tissue paper, inside which was an antique compact that he told me she had used for her stage make-up as Gertrude, and had given it to him as a kind of treasure upon leaving Rome.

Overwhelmed, I left Francesco's soon after. I thanked him and asked about the blue paisley scarf, her *amore per il passato*. He told me that she had said goodbye to him from the window of a taxi, the scarf around her head. 'Come un pirata.'

Like a pirate.

Her image and voice came to me tonight while I sat at my table, compiling this letter, packing her compact for its return home to the Queenslander, to you.

The scene is of an argument taking place in your bedroom. She has not long been home from Rome. I can't follow the script. She walks from the bedroom onto the verandah, on the western side, where I am playing, it being morning and still cool there. She does not appear to notice me as she captures herself in the reflection of the French doors and in the pose of her body she becomes someone else, not my mother, another, her face morphing into a woman unknown to me and taking joy in the transformation, the verandah her impromptu stage, with me her only and unknowing audience to whom she whispers:

*Be thou assur'd, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me.*



Endnote

1. Shakespeare, William (nd) *The complete works of William Shakespeare*, London: Odhams Press, 1154.

Research statement

Research background

Gibson states that melancholy objects are ‘objects that have been central to grieving, and particularly, the memory of grieving’ and as such come to ‘memorialize mourning’ (2004: 286). This memorialising or ‘trophying’ (Haverkamp 1990: 703), signifies the incompleteness of the mourning process, and thus the melancholy object becomes ‘the affective remainder or residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting’ (Gibson 2004: 289). Such ‘non-forgetting’ is central to psychoanalytical constructions of melancholy as an epistemological reaction to object loss (Kristeva 1989) and the thematic exploration of *Collecting her*.

Research contribution

Collecting her is a co-authored epistolary graphic novel in which a father and son collect melancholy objects once belonging to their deceased wife/mother, an actress of past renown. Demonstrating the connection between mourning, memory and the collecting process, *Collecting her* embodies research into the cultural and psychoanalytical theories of collecting – the form and function of material objects and subjective investment in the process of meaning-making (Baudrillard 1994).

Research significance

Collecting her contributes to the specified theoretical dialogues by extending the significance of my doctoral thesis/exegesis and its resultant and forthcoming scholarly publications. *Collecting her* is the second Crew and Watkins collaboration and demonstrates the potential for success when an established author-academic assists the career of an emergent author-academic.

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