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Memoir as suicide

Abstract
Anecdotal by necessity, this essay through an act of confession considers the advantages and disadvantages of memoir as a genre for the contemporary writer who is also an academic. Employing the ruminative techniques of the lyric essay in order to question the reliance of confessional prose on anecdotal narrative, the prose style deliberately mingles genres in fragments that attempt both to stalk the subject - confessional ethics - and to free it from a narrative entrapment where content is supreme to textual expression. Considering also the notion of creative writing as therapy, and the vanity of the self-directed gaze, any resolutions are avoided as intimacies reveal the thorny negotiations of writing and revelation.
Keywords: memoir; confessional ethics; mental health; creative writing as therapy.

Tell me what happened. Tell me what really happened, they said, so I did. I wrote the memoir because a publishing director asked me to. *Really?* But first I co-wrote the play - which the publisher saw - because my former doctor asked me to. *Is that the only reason?* Before that, there were the poems, telling it all (nobody asked for the poems). *Is that the only place you tell the truth, the whole truth?* Even though that is what I do - write plays, and confessional poetry, and prose, and tell stories - I had no idea how damaging all these words could be, and until recently I was equally naïve about writers and their own sometimes stupid motivations - and the consequences.

Nobody has compiled a better list than Margaret Atwood about what motivates writers to write (Atwood 2003: xix-xxi). Reading this list aloud makes a wonderful performance poetry piece. I like to turn it into a cento and add my own irreverent reasons. To her glorious harvest of motives from the sublime ('To create a perfect work of art') and the quotidian ('To make money so my children could have shoes') to the more alarming ('To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or - the Marquis de Sade defense - vice versa'), I would add the ridiculous: writers write because, too often, they don't have anything better to do. If more creative writing students instead studied, say, medicine, there would be better health care in regional Australia. Ridiculous to suggest, but fair to contemplate - should we insist on vocational litmus tests before allowing anyone to practice either profession? And my cento would end *To tell what happened, to tell what happened*. *Before you die*. Then you can lay me down and cover me with that cloak made of patches, the cento that the poetic form was named for, that the Roman soldiers loved to wear to protect them from their enemies.

Also on Atwood's list is 'To cope with my depression'. It can't be denied, despite my growling misgivings about writing and therapy, that writing poetry was indeed a therapeutic act when I was so ill recovering from a nervous breakdown that I could not even speak. This, of course, is no reason to impose those poems on anyone else; but my doctor insisted, and then he was so offended about my views of doctoring that he wrote a poem 'back' to me, and then came the play exploring the failures of medical worlds, closely followed by the memoir. At some point on that continuum, it might have been better to choose silence. My confession is both to declare this grave error of motivation, and protest that sometimes the cost of writing is simply not worth it.

Since the beginning of textual times, critics have denigrated memoir, with its 'unseemly self-exposure, unpalatable betrayals' and 'unavoidable mendacity', labelling it 'the black sheep of the literary family', as Daniel Mendelsohn has noted (Mendelsohn 2004). Memoirs can be mortifying, so much so that even distinguished writers working in this genre are often accused of literary exhibitionism. As Mendelsohn points out, building on the notion of creativity as a narcissistic act, this association is most intense when 'the creation in question is memoir, a literary form that exposes the author's life without the protective masks afforded by fiction'. This makes the writer even more vulnerable to accusations/criticisms concerning their motives for writing, as well as the consequences: words like 'indiscrete', 'betrayal', 'fraudulent', 'enterprising', 'conceit', and 'revenge' commonly populate critical outbursts. On the other hand, we have the defenders, whose best ethical argument always sounds something like 'for the greater good'.

The 20th century presented us with the recurring theme of 'confessional culture' as obligatory, coupled with an increasing blurring of the lines between public and private. The impulse to reveal our true selves is the hallmark of confessional culture, but to what end? Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that the absence of shared and lasting human values in what he calls 'liquid modernity' is of concern. He sees for example the erosion of traditional identities that were once based on class or nationality as no longer able to define us as they once did (Bauman 2000). In this absence, life writing could be viewed as an attempt to forge an identity through public performances of the self. The British artist Tracey Emin, for example, embroidering on a tent the name of everyone she had ever slept with, arguably achieved this: she staged/performed her emotional self through a series of confessions in the quest to locate an authentic notion of her own humanity. Declaring one's own history - even if it offers unpleasant testimony - is an attempt to create a solid representation of the self in a world that is 'liquid'. [1]

Embroidery requires patience. Text, if not the ideas constituting the narrative, is more rapidly produced. If I had had to sew the words of my book, I would have been far more selective. Now that the memoir is beyond the reach of my scissors and 'safely' with my publisher, I find myself beyond a contemplation of self and authenticity and simply feel frightened. Or (less alarmingly?) professionally alert to the need to justify my public performance, perhaps with grandiose claims that memoir is a personal confessional, demanding a group encounter with a blighted history, and as such is an assertion of human rights, akin to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hang on - didn't Sylvia Plath once get harangued for comparing her emotional trauma to the Holocaust? - scrap that last statement). But before this, I was perhaps writing for therapeutic reasons. Certainly the play I co-wrote for medical educators felt like that at first. By the end of rehearsals, I felt as though I had unknotted a tangled inheritance of a dozen beaded necklaces, fit for public display at last. It was only afterwards that I came to understand the confessional impulse that offers evidence against oneself as a kind of suicide. Below, an extract from

Tablet telling unsavoury stories that continue to punish; is this where it all began?

SCENE 4
Kate's surgery

Treatment Options, Wednesday October 13, 11.25am

KATE (a doctor)
In what way do you feel worse?

JENNY (her patient)
I feel sadder, I feel less and less able to cope and I'm also frightened that nothing's working.

KATE
So, um, we tried some new medication last time, how did you find those pills?

JENNY
They're all horrible. The first lot made me feel like I was a mute, I couldn't read let alone write, and the others me feel like I was colonised or on speed or something and it made it even harder to sleep. I couldn't be my own person, I didn't know who I was. Nothing is helping. I just feel sad.

KATE
So. It's obviously a really hard time for you at the moment and things aren't going the way that either you or I would have liked them to go.

JENNY
No. It doesn't look like it.

KATE
Well, in these situations, sometimes, with people that are not responding to standard treatment it is difficult.

pause

And what I'm about to say to you is a really hard thing to say because it kind of signifies how difficult your situation really is but occasionally people with severe depression sometimes need to be admitted to hospital for a while to just have break from all the external stimulus that can be adding to the feelings of hopelessness.

pause

So that's something that may need to be considered in conjunction with a psychiatrist to help.

silence

And the other thing that's still used these days in the management of depression is ECT or shock treatment.

silence

I don't know if you've heard of it, you've probably heard of it but aren't aware that it's a treatment that's being used for very severe and significant depression. So I think the best thing to do now is for you to stop that medication and for us to meet up again in 2 days. You can let me know what you think about the other options and I can try to arrange an appointment with a psychiatrist to help with this if needed.

JENNY
OK. Thanks.

KATE
So I'll catch up with you in 2 days?

JENNY
Yes.

KATE writes up her notes
Much worse. Nothing helping. Stopped medication. Suggest consider admission +/- ECT. Will discuss with psych team re urgent referral. Review 2 days.

JENNY writes in her journal/reads to audience

I remember the first time I became a mother. I used to walk every day with her in a pouch, around the Coogee cliffs. I remember having to chant to myself 'stay away from the edge'. In case I jumped. I seem to spend my whole life singing myself away from the jump.

pause

Today, Kate said 'ECT'. And a holiday in the loony bin. I didn't say anything.

pause

Perhaps I should just pretend to better then everybody would be happy. I can do that. I can write my poems, and just shut up.

And You

These are the things
That I could have been
Before you knew me,
(please tick which boxes apply):
□ restaurateur
□ mother
□ recruitment consultant
□ avon lady
□ travel writer
□ fuckwit
But now I'm not.

And you,
Who knows nothing of my before
Sit there and say:
If not
□ Hospital

Then perhaps
□ ECT.
There's always ECT.
I'll just put it out there,
You say.

And I say to you:
Sylviajanetvirginiaernest
And more.
You look abashed or possibly bored
Though more likely you are just
A gentleman of science revealing
Your ignorance
Your naivety
Your cruelty
To suggest violence
(incredible)
To cure pain.

And I say to myself:
Black dog's girlfriend is little kitty heroin -
I should perhaps instead seek a vet. (Bradley Smith & Koppe 2006)

Tell me what happened. What really happened. I want that inscribed on my gravestone. My favourite anecdote tells a story of one Lord Redesdale, an English aristocrat, who on being told in the 1920s by his wife that the book that he had just finished reading, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, was not a true story, said: 'What? Do you mean the damned sewer invented it?' (cited Hare 2004). For Redesdale, Thomas Hardy was clearly a scoundrel to have solicited such empathy on false grounds. Do we crave confessionals because we believe that 'true stories' such as memoirs faithfully represent the world we inhabit, that we are all characters on the same stage, and therefore this fidelity to rendering real life and life as real is of greater benefit to us than engagement with the imaginary? Our appetite for trespassing in other people's private lives is an insatiable desire for many and, in this scenario, the truer the story the better the fix. And therein lies the problem: as the writer of confessional prose, you remain the primary subject, and never your text. Memoirs can thus imprison the writer.

The first time I ever experienced this type of imprisonment - when the writer's story is read as autobiographical reality - was at the opening night of my very first play. I had written a story of domestic violence, based on real life events that were not mine, asking the question, 'can you remain best friends with a man who hits his wife?' I was curious about this dilemma, but even more curious after the show to have wonderful women I'd never met pressing cards into my hand, spilling champagne in their eagerness to tell me to call their shrink/lawyer/hitman because 'you do not have to put up with it'. Then with a glare at my poor innocent husband of the time, off they'd swoosh. For years I've been reading my 'nasty' albeit confessional but ultimately fictive poems about husbands and love and its failures, often overhearing guests asking my husband how on earth he can put up with it/me, as though every stanza were a snatch of reality television. So when I co-wrote the medical drama about doctor/patient relationships and made the patient a sufferer of the more dramatic mental health problem of bipolar rather than the theatrically dull postnatal depression that had caused my own nervous breakdown, it was no surprise that the mostly medical audiences who saw the play were overly fond of asking me if I was taking my meds. Was I safe to sit next to?

I had become immune to this collapse of writer with text - or so I thought. It turned out though that readers and audiences were my most sympathetic judges. They would forgive writers for being stupid enough to continually kiss men who were bounders and brutes, and for falling over, crazed and depressed; it was all one and the same. But when it came to the real auditors of fabricated or felicitous confessions, employers drew a distinctive and different line - and if you've ever been crazy, and crazy enough to write about being crazy, then crossing this line can be akin to professional suicide. It should not be so, but it is. You cannot lie on an application for employment form when it asks if you have ever had a mental health issue/episode/problem.

When Sartre asked himself the question 'for whom does one write', his 1948 (and very French) answer was that we write for the universal reader. 'As a matter of fact the writer knows that he speaks for freedoms which are swallowed up, masked, and unavailable; and his own freedom is not so pure; he has to clean it' (Sartre 1993: 50). How can we usefully apply this liberationist rhetoric to 21st-century life writing? Memoir's defining characteristic is that of confession, and as such the issue becomes one not only about interrogating genre (textual) but also about the value of story ('factual') itself. For example, while I was primarily interested in the writing and playing with meta-confessional techniques in my memoir, my publisher was stern (and correct) about reminding me of my potential readers, the point being that 'blow by blow' accounts of postnatal depression, therapy, and recovery were paramount. A frank and factual account, not textual adventurism, was the product I had contractually promised to produce. It is almost a reactionary, and at the very least a conservative, literary critical question to be asking; that is, what is the value of confession in a literary culture that has been post-Leavisite for more than half a century? Yet I must ask: should the confessional tale (before we even begin to contemplate its packaging) so seduce us, readers and writers alike? Can we help ourselves? In her work on the history of truth commissions, Debra Posel (2008) argues that in this particular contemporary context, confession has an ethical centrality that is derived from admitting moral frailty. Such admissions are ultimately humanising, as they tend to demonstrate that everyone is fallible, and flawed, and capable of injustice. Further, rather than insisting on confession's ability to resuscitate a rational, humanistic world, we can instead settle for compassion, and the ability to find meaning from suffering.

Although it may seem distasteful to analogise truth commissions with memoirs, it is worthwhile considering whether or not memoirs are capable of achieving reconciliation. Can this kind - or any kind - of full disclosure really heal, or prevent future pain? In the same spirit that Posel asks, 'what happens to the idea, power, and value of truth telling when history is harnessed to the avowedly normative, officializing project of the truth commission' (2008: 140), I too question the manufactured reality of reconciliation (the memoir) as being a surreal enterprise.

The social history of confession tells us that, as a personal act with value to individual interiority, the Counter-Reformation was responsible for a shift away from religious confession as part of the machinery of social regulation. It is hard to feel confession as a personal liberation resultant from reconciliation when to admit to a history of mental ill health allows institutions such as universities to over-regulate. Such machinations can make the writer within the academy feel that any emotional similitude a story may have achieved is irrelevant, or at least subordinate to the fact that the writer is categorized as exceptional in unfavourable terms. If this is true, do we writers in this category know what we are doing when we write memoirs? Are we fooling ourselves with our textual endeavours when all we are really doing is aligning ourselves

with a conservative and orthodox ritual, seeking rewards for our confessions? Similarly, confession in the history of crime and punishment is primarily and steadfastly an act of offering evidence against oneself - not necessarily a wise or beneficial thing to do in the contemporary workplace. Memoir writing, considering all this, is no easy authorial release. I can argue for my attempts at formal and radical experimentation within the genre; I can plead the case for metaconfessional practice; I can cite the paratextual dimensions of my work; but ultimately, I am not immune from the effects of my own narrativization. After all, what are most readers interested in: the text confessing to its own devices; or the writer baring all?

Suicide, or the many ways we can kill ourselves

In this business, the business of being a writer and a university lecturer, you don't say no to book contracts. I just sat down and wrote the book. My thesis is simply this: signing up to write a memoir is a bloody process, and one that I think deserves more caution than any other thing we might commit to as writers and as people who have to live with other people who have to live with what you have written. Postnatal depression and a subsequent nervous breakdown was bad enough, but to talk about it endlessly, to have words about those experiences being in libraries forever? This, I had most definitely not contemplated.

There are three threads to my memoir: the writer's story, which includes a narrative of mental health; a reflective exploration, which includes the author's poetry; and the story of recovery which is a real-life tale coupled with an exploration of the field of medical education and the role of poetry therapy. Basically, following an accusation (later dismissed) of plagiarism I had a nervous breakdown. I was eventually diagnosed with chronic adjustment disorder (having just left London to return home to Australia), post-traumatic stress syndrome (following the near-death of our youngest daughter and the diagnosis of our two youngest children with a metabolic disease), and postnatal depression, coupled with being labelled cyclothymic. That constitutes the narrative content.

There are many onstage characters that any memoirist knows the terror of dealing with, but my biggest fear is an offstage character that I call the reaper. Has writing this book been a mistake? Is it wrong to reveal too much? Certainly, the university lawyer at my former workplace censored the performance of *Tablet* at its premiere in Byron Bay in 2006. Likewise many chapters of the memoir had to be rewritten for fear of litigation. And that constitutes the beginning of the narrative fallout.

Legitimate longings and secret prejudices

I could be considered either a coward who hides within the academy, teaching in exchange for sponsored time to think and write, or what I truly believe myself to be: a shabby intellectual, a public school country girl made good through education; a girl who has never stopped saying thank you for her scholarship monies and the approbation and endorsement that such awards symbolised for me, funded by the Australian taxpayer. I am in their employ. I owe people. Forever. I serve. However since being ill, despite my complete recovery, I believe that that opportunity for me to move freely in the global industry of academia in which I work has been withdrawn. I am no longer free

to seek out the best academic home for myself so that I might do my best work. Why? Because I have a recorded mental illness. One that cost an insurance company an awful lot of money (being a work-related injury, having been unjustly accused of plagiarism with the accusation maliciously circulated). Consequently, I belong to that sub-category of people who have, because of their illness, had their performance at work affected. Have, indeed, been absent from work because of it. I went home one day and did not go back for a very long time.

> ***Diary entry August 2005***
> *I've just seen the job of my dreams. Creative writing and literary theory, perfect combination. In Cornwall. Perfect place. Very excited. Very. Will drop everything and apply. Have already approached suitable referees. And listen to this. Was told today by my admin support that she has been told that I was 'mistaken' to think that she'd be able to provide assistance on my large grant application for the medical humanities (doctors and creative writing). That's a big gut punch in the place that hurts most. If I can't work at my highest level in the field that interests me most, then I can't stay here. I think, if I think anything about myself, that I am an ugly catfish who can survive and thrive in a swamp. I seek no reef-living high life. But it feels like everyone thinks that I believe myself to be an angelfish, or some such other glamorous creature. Deserving of the most attention. Just because I work fast, and hard, with results. Because of this, I am 'little-pond-big-fish' girl. Unliked. Resented. (Paranoid?) Exhausted by the playground politics of people who wouldn't know what a worthwhile idea was even if it arrived by courier with their name on it, and a big sign saying 'happy life herein'. Fuckitty fuck. This work in medical humanities was the only thing that was keeping me alive. I have to get out of here.*

Diaries are treacherous things. What kind of ugly, conceited gnat wrote that entry? Was that really me? My belief and judgement system at the time was poor, due to illness. I believed, for example, that life in Australia, on all levels, was harming me. So I began considering jobs back in the UK, via www.jobs.ac.uk my favourite website. I have been reading it for so long now, considering myself, imaginatively, in every job that I am vaguely eligible for, that I believe myself to have an extremely comprehensive understanding of what departments are growing in which directions at what institutions, and what level of expertise writing programs have bought in over the last five years or so. Who has writers-in-residence. Who's doing a real job of growing this sector, or an ad hoc one; and what cultural and business values incoming vice-chancellors might or might not have in relation to the creative arts. All very well and good, but perhaps I should try eBay instead.

Since being diagnosed, what used to be a titillating pastime - imagining myself in certain institutions, the work I might do there, the colleagues I would prosper with - has turned into a cruel sport. My fantasy life about my professional ambitions were focussed on England, and escape. I am deeply ashamed of myself to admit this, but it's true. Unlike most of my experiences of working in Australia, in England I believed luck was always with me. How else could I explain to myself the fact that in London one year I'd been a music journalist at a backstage party with the Ramones, and the very next year I was back home, not a journalism job in cooee, working as a waitress, serving them lobster in a Sydney harbour side restaurant? In London, in every single way, I felt

professionally rich. In Australia - well, no one accused me of plagiarism in London. I did not have a nervous breakdown in London.

So when I saw this most recent job advertised, and on the same day heard the news that my professional opportunities to work in the medical humanities were being hamstrung, I decided to apply. I updated my CV. I contacted my favourite referees. Then I got to the hardest part of the application form, the 'Confidential statement of medical history for pre-employment medical assessment'. What do I do when confronted with questions like, 'Have you any illnesses or conditions which could affect your performance at work, and result in absence from work?' and 'Have you ever had a serious illness?' And then there's the 'Are you currently taking any medication' kind of questions, and the more specific type of 'Do you suffer or have you ever suffered from mental disorders, depression, anxiety, nervous breakdown?', by which time I usually need a drink. Or a cigarette. Or a fairy godmother. Or, I need to write a poem instead. Instead of everything.

But you have to laugh. I may have made a lot of mistakes at work over the years, but I also had a decent enough history in every way that academics are measured. Immaterial. I have a history of mental illness, and am now a liability. What about people who hit their children, I want to shout? What about the even more dangerous things that people do to children? Why not include compulsory questions in the medical history questionnaire, like these:

- Have you ever participated in domestic violence?
- Have you ever used sexist or racist language and do you intend to do so in the future?
- Please estimate how many days you have been absent from or performed poorly at work due to excessive drinking or other such reckless activities partaken of in your free time?
- Do you drive too fast especially in populated areas?
- Are you smelly and can you be bothered to floss your teeth?
- Will you insist on boring your colleagues stupid with your inane conversations about your senile parents and your wayward children?
- Do you recycle responsibly?
- Do you lie?
- Do you rape?
- Sin?
- Have you planned sensibly for your retirement or do you intend to be a burden on society and a wearisome old whinger?
- Were you the person who killed my dog, Winston, or Winnie as he was affectionately known, in a hit-and-run accident in Coffs Harbour in 1974 and if so will you ever make amends?

Apparently, none of the above warrant a mention in an application package. Dog murderer? No problem: no insistence to confess that character weakness. Mental illness history? Problem. I find that I have become my own worst problem. Once upon a time, my doctor had to say to me *there's always ECT*, and this, it seems, is what must define me in a world where whether or not you've taken anti-depressants is more important than the last book you wrote. In this scenario, textual and experimental engagements with the memoir genre (despite any startling developments you might contribute) are secondary to the plot and its reception. Sometimes I wish I had saved those textual encounters for another time and place, like Pluto, perhaps, in the 51st century (and yes if I had the skills to write scripts for *Dr Who* I would - but I remain foolishly in love with life writing).

People whom I admire who are much better at bleeding in public than I am

In his recent book *Fast, Loose Beginnings, A Memoir of Intoxications* John Kinsella writes 'What the hell is a book like this? I started writing it, frankly, because I needed the dough. Then I didn't want to write it, because talking about the living and the dead in such a way is particularly difficult'. He then reveals why he surrendered to the project: 'Then I decided I was writing to understand how a "literary life" unfolds. I think it is a work about making sense of a world I distrust and often dislike but feel compelled to be a part of' (Kinsella 2006: 219). Money is one reason why we write, but for Kinsella, memoir is largely about experimenting with a literary genre and its possibilities for revelation. There was a scandal following the publication of his book. Consequently not many people paid attention to its writerly ambitions - critical reaction primarily concerned content. Content is king. I, like many memoirists spend far more time thinking about how I was saying something than what I was saying, but I am not the first writer to realise that no one will remember me, if at all, for that. Probably. They may remember everyone you 'named', and your excursions into hell, but rarely the liquidity of words that gave such stories life.

Kate Holden's memoir *In My Skin* (2007) is about a time in her life that involved heroin and prostitution. In an essay published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (a prestigious national broadsheet), 'I'll tell you all except my name', she reflects that when her memoir was published no one in her family seemed appalled, but that she herself was, and kept wanting to ask, 'Aren't you shocked?' What happened instead was more sanguine. She was contacted by long-lost friends, and elderly relatives lent the book to their friends: 'In the end it was I who was most startled'. Harder, though, was being continually introduced at writers festivals with the 'bald "ex-prostitute and drug addict"' moniker, and readers forever claiming that they felt as though they knew her, and interviewers feeling they had permission to ask her intimate questions that should instead belong to lovers or best friends. Most troublesome of all is her confessed fear that she 'may be forever known as "the girl who wrote the hooker book"'. But Holden was also wise to the fact that publishing a sex memoir under her own name had its professional advantages, in that it was a 'forestalling of any prurient investigations that might come up later in life: job interviews that reveal mysterious gaps in my resume …' (Holden 2006: 28-29). Can you ever watch Hugh Grant in a movie without thinking about his arrest after being caught buying a fellatio favour from a streetwalker? Maybe. This collapse of the public and private is the ethical dilemma at the heart of this concern - when should it be permissible to withhold damaging information about oneself from one's professional resume?

Maybe Holden will win every award under the sun for her writing, and nobody will recall her beginnings. Maybe all of Kinsella's work is much larger than the story of his life as an addict, and of course this seems logical, historically decided even, given his output and international reputation and lived life since. But which of his many books received the most coverage? Maybe no one will ever look at me differently because I have had mental health problems and been such a loudmouth about it. Maybe the advertisements encouraging people not to be ashamed about being mad/depressed will work. Or maybe silence remains the more sensible option.

An argument for publish and be damned

Cynthia Fuller, who with Julia Darling edited *The Poetry Cure*, points out that: 'It is not a new idea that in time of loss, distress and pain we turn to poetry - to read it and write it.' Fuller argues that poetry can do more than comfort us by speaking to our experience: that the process of poetry acknowledging the intensity of our feelings 'can make us feel better, can make us better'. When Darling asks 'Why is poetry so important? Why do people who have never read or written a poem in their lives find themselves suddenly searching for poetic language to make sense…?' (Fuller & Darling 2005: 9-11), in answering this question she suggests that poetry uses images and metaphors that help us - and our doctors - see things afresh. In medical education (in faculties that embrace narrative medicine pedagogies) poetry is often cited as a valuable educational device because it provides a means of attending to stories/narratives/expressions and confessions of the self other than those presented in habitual professional situations. In my case, a doctor gained entry into my lived subjective experience as a patient through the illuminative possibility of poems discussing my illness and treatment, not through anything said in the consulting room.

Sometimes I believe in the therapeutic benefits of writing for the writer and sometimes I think 'writing and wellbeing' is nothing more than commerce. As memoirists know, confessional writing traffics in the intimate, and sometimes unflattering, information about personal lives. Is it truly therapeutic, writing about illness? I'd make no such claims. For a start, those words, once they're printed, they're printed. Sometimes, writing is an absolutely traumatizing experience. *Tell me everything, everything*. Today all I can say is that while I believe in the confessional, I remain unable to calculate its cost.

Below, the contents of the final powerpoint slide in a lecture to first year undergraduate life writing students, on ethics and confessional prose:

RULES FROM THE CREATIVE NONFICTION POLICE

- Become an expert at securing interviews, and faking them.
- Learn how to make new friends and family. Fast.
- Marry a lawyer otherwise defending yourself from defamation might bankrupt you.
- Remember your heroes. Remember that we all die. Write what you have to, then run.
- It is much safer to write about dead people because they can't talk back (or, as my former GP joked, never offer ECT to someone who can argue back).
- Thinly veiled facts passing themselves of as fiction represents an act of cowardice that should be more greatly respected - go and write a novel if life writing frightens you.

'Thanks, and good luck with your writing,' I said, concluding the lecture. I had shown them an excerpt from the contract for my own memoir, the clause extracting a contractual promise that: 'The work does not contain libellous, defamatory, obscene, privileged or improper material.' So if I don't upset the lawyers I'm allowed to cannibalise anyone, including myself? I told my students that life writing is a dynamic, exciting form. I told them that, yes, it can both corrupt and humanise. I did not tell them that such confessions might stain your resume forever. When I signed that book contract I still had two children in nappies, and now their eldest sibling is starting university: it is fair

to say I knew a lot less back then, and it is also fair to admit stupidity - of course, it is inevitable that children will one day learn to read. Of course, if you insist on telling everyone about your squalid little nervous breakdown, it is a tattoo you will take to your grave, one that will be fully visible in every staff meeting and job interview hereafter. You cannot control how you are read. No. I neglected to say all that.

To lose old friends

Medical records are medical records. The past is the present is the past. Reality is an imaginary construct. In the end, I wrote my memoir because when I was almost dead with the grief of postnatal depression, I had no one close to me to do the job that a good book could do. My hope is that my own book will become sodden with tears of relief from every woman who reads it, that it will bring them some kind of grace of a shared space. The title of this piece, and my musing on the memoir as suicide, was inspired by Peter Porter. His beautiful and cautionary poem 'Old friends' worries about the virtue of writers writing, for example, 'spacious memoir[s]', despite their elegance. Is it right, he asks, that we spike our life like this? Porter himself made his own decisions about this, famously returning his publisher's advance for his autobiography. Regardless, I blame Porter for helping me form my own decision. As he says in that same poem, 'We're packed too tight/to trust ourselves in this existence' (Porter 2001: 31-32). It is my sincere hope that despite the perils of the genre, the reading of memoirs leaves us with more discriminating appetites, trustworthy ones. So I wrote the book. I unpacked myself from that tight, caught place. And there I stand. Naked. Still.

A few years ago, I sent a copy of John Kinsella's memoir to Peter Porter as a thank you for his generosity in launching a collection of my poems in London. He wrote back, thanking me for the 'mad tome', declaring himself to have been considerably shocked by the text. He had known of the hardships of Kinsella's youth, but had not expected 'such a series of mishaps and so large a cast of dreadful people'. Coupled with a private warning of personalities to avoid, Porter concluded by expressing his deep pleasure at still being able to be shocked. Even for people who have known each other for decades, serious revelation can indeed be shocking. One of the consequences of writing confessional prose is that people will read you differently: your text will rewrite the self. You may call this realism, you may call this a metafictive farce, but no matter what you call it, you still have to fill in the application forms, every time your ambitions exceed your own tight circumstances.

It is not possible, perhaps, to care too much about it in the end - only someone who believes they chose writing and not the other way around could persuade themselves they have any authority in the matter. Writing a memoir can be both suicidal, and life affirming - negative commemoration has its own deep political life. Hopefully, the immoderate yearnings of both writers and readers counter the small deaths of exposure, offering thanksgiving as antidote. Therefore, my considered response to Sartre, and Atwood, is that we write seeking versions of happiness; we write for ourselves. Ironically, this desire is also a great chore, for as Stendhal said, 'how can we describe happiness, if it leaves no memories?' (Stendhal 2004: 104). Will happiness terminally evade us if we do not hunt its trace? Writing down the memories, for this memoirist, was a core enterprise in the quest for happiness, and if that process was and is painful, so be it. And finally to Lord Redesdale, with apologies for the fallibilities of all genres, I would say: I am no damned sewer, but I have been in a few. And that's the truth.

Notes

1. Tracey Emin's 'Everyone I have ever slept with 1963-95' (1995) was destroyed in the London Momart fire of 2004. return to text

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