

University of New South Wales / University of Canberra

Anne Brewster and Hazel Smith

AFFECTIONS: friendship, community, bodies

I wonder if I am still alive at UNSW
the dead are remembered
but those who remember them
die also

The light is on in my room and
someone else is opening
my filing cabinet
which probably has finally collapsed

That last day we took photos hoping to hold on to
that which must inevitably slip away
we grin into the camera
stiffening to a trace

Meanwhile my email address passes over into redirection

You're glad to have escaped
but you'd also still like to be imprisoned
because it's safe

Sometimes I'm sad
sometimes I claim to be sad
sometimes I say I'm not sad but I am
I don't recognise a feeling until I'm falling out of it

Everyone thinks that their experience is singular
but everything is at least double
and we all know
that memories have limited respect
for identity

The best workplace is a mobile home
and moving through means passing on
but every day your ghost kicks into me
UNSW

**

Keith Oatley argues that emotions are cognitive processes that arise from our tendency as human agents to make plans, rather like plots in a narrative. Positive emotions occur when goals are fulfilled, negative ones when they are thwarted. The situation is complex, because we usually have multiple conflicting goals; our plans involve other people; and we often have to make decisions in an unpredictable environment.

Not just one plot, then, but plots within plots, competing plots, and plots without beginning or end.

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Feelings are not always what we expect them to be. Feelings rarely even recognise themselves.

When I returned to my mother-in-law's house after she had died, I expected to be lost in loss. As we drove to Gloucester I was aware only of the guilt, remorse and sense of inadequacy that seem to accompany death.

When we first opened the door of her house I thought those same feelings would overwhelm me, and for a few moments they did. But very quickly the delight at seeing her house again, and all the objects which had surrounded her, began to rise. It didn't so much blot out the grief as transform its sourness into something meaningful and sweet. Her coats were hanging on the back of the door in the cloakroom, where there was the same fresh smell. In the living room her coloured paperweights still graced the top of the wooden chest. The copper jugs shone like kindness in the hearth, the samplers spoke from the walls. Her home celebrated its own chaotic orderliness: a bohemian tastefulness tempered by middle class restraint. I've always loved coming here, I thought, as we made tea in the not-too-floral teacups and remembered the parkin she used to make.

In the afternoon we sorted through her drawers, pulling out papers, diaries and photographs. There were love-letters and letters from devoted friends. Ostensibly we were looking for what we wanted to keep, but we were also hunting for signs of her, secrets we might have never known or guessed. And we found them, not in the words themselves, which told more of events than emotions, but in the crevices between words, the interstices of the unspoken.

In the evening we packed up all the things we wanted to be shipped to Australia, and I still felt more elation than despair. Joy in the rings and teapots that survive, in the endless love that laced her life, in the gifts she had given us that remain.

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Anne: email and the novel

I think about the interiority elaborated in the eighteenth-century novel and how the virtual community this produces is re-convened in electronic environments. The epistolary intimacy of email produces a form of subjectivity not unlike that produced in the act of reading a novel. Email is more interactive, more oriented to exchange; the pleasure of reading and writing is produced through the inter-relationality and reciprocity of the epistolary mode. But email inevitably shares the dream-like landscape of fantasy and feeling that the experience of reading a novel invokes-and in modes ever more intimately knitted into the micropractices of the everyday world. One might argue that email forgoes the epic narrative of the trials and tribulations of novel's protagonist.

However I think we become our own favourite protagonist, played out through the daily private micronarratives touched to life in the intimate public space of email.

**

Hazel: feeling it virtually

When I'm cyberwriting, I seem to change skins. My work becomes less intense and dark, more parodic and ironic. In cyberspace I'm political but satirical, social but surreal.

Because cyberspace is nothing if not interruptive: emotions dodge between screens. If I wallow, the screener will simply press on a link! The virtual is a moody fellow who never stays in one spot. As cyborgs morph in chat rooms, rage and sadness intertwingle.

Cyberspace is buoyant and throws up what would normally sink. But you have to resist because cyberspace is *only what you allow it to be*. Hold those feelings down for a moment, deadlock all those doors. If something really needs to be said, stop the surfing with the waves.

**

oestrogen

I've always thought flamenco's seduction lay in its blurring of the lines between affective dispositions-between rage, grief and triumph

I was punch drunk, without the punch, without being drunk

Oestrogen, the ruminative hormone

Why is it so hard to say, 'can we talk?'

When sadness goes on and on it becomes a question, longing for an answer. I began to feel nostalgic for its company

The bus driver was chatting to himself. He kept interrupting my train of thought

She howled several long notes. There was no clapping, the guitars were silent. Was it pain or exultation? I discovered I was weeping. I couldn't explain why

At one point the dancer stamped nimbly in a diagonal line across the stage and stopped in the front corner. He was drenched in perspiration and puffing. He looked up as if he was framing a question

Do you think it's unreasonable?

Oestrogen, the thinking woman's hormone

I was floating, slightly numbed, relieved

A friend had said, it's pointless trying to make a *logical* decision

Her back was arched, arms stretched out, fingers splayed like a cockatoo's crown. She held the pose, breathing heavily, her face a proud frown. Then she relaxed, remembering herself, and walked to the edge of the stage

There was a tension, in the striking of body poses, between the seduction of flow and that of the gaze held, rivetted. As spectators we were poised in the *between* -at the point where one switched into the other-mesmerised

**

P told me something very curious: that when he goes into a cinema and the advertisements start to roll, he begins to weep uncontrollably. He does not shed a few tears but cries prolifically. He never knows what he is tearful about, or why this should occur. When the film starts, everything changes, and however tragic the film is he does not weep.

And so the search begins for explanations. Maybe he once saw an advertisement when he was in a traumatised state, and is condemned to revisit the link. Maybe his weeping is a cathected orphan that will accept any belonging. Only one thing seems clear: it is not the content of particular advertisements that causes the weeping, but the genre itself.

So odd this disjuncture between the context, the putative emotion, and the physiological symptom! The convention (crying in the cinema) has become curiously displaced. The advertisement and the tears seem like strangers from different countries posing as relations.

And yet this is what interests me about affect: it does not obey the laws of space or relativity. What we feel is always somewhere else, embarking on an independent mission. Our hopes and fears straggle out of line, forget their words, abandon all they know, jostle furiously with others.

**

Happiness is unpredictable in its effects. It makes unanticipated connections, it links people unexpectedly.

It lives side by side with its confidant, its interlocutor, its intimate other-the misanthrop, the malcontent, the melancholiac.

Happiness is a party, open doors. It is hospitable, indiscriminating, expansive, contagious. Happiness makes you forget-it moves you from the opacity of the past into translucent potentiality: all that you dream of is possible.

Happiness spreads outwards in all directions, overflows. It is not only departure but return -from all directions, simultaneously.

Happiness is a monologue but is punctuated by the pause for applause. It is epic in its proportions but has no grand design or plot. It does not name, measure or stop in one place; it has no secrets. Happiness used to be shy but now basks in the sun, naked, loving itself.

**

She didn't want to buy into all those myths about performance. The ones about unmediated experience: the idea that raw emotions are transmitted live. She knew it was more complex than that. And yet the affective dimension of such events, and their

variability, continued to puzzle her. A few weeks before, at a poetry reading, the audience almost seemed to be performing with her. Their excitement was sensuous and intensifying: each poem was a more urgent response to their last call. And there was the delicious illusion of unpredictability: as if she was *writing* the poems while she was performing them. But a few days later at another reading, the rapport with the audience seemed almost dead. It was difficult to lift the performance from its sluggish base. Her voice wouldn't sound how she intended: it was either terrifying strident or miserably flat.

Yet she knew that there were many parts to the equation. The venue might be cold, the acoustic intractable, or the microphone crude. Maybe on those occasions the audience sensed her discomfort, and responded mainly to that. More likely perhaps, she misread their reaction, since it was easy to over interpret a little harmless fidgeting, or a blank stare.

Which made her realise that she *did* buy into those myths about performance rather too much. She needed to respond more freely to the ebb and flow of the occasion and accept the lack of control. She must act on what she already knew: that any emotional interaction is multivalent, uneven. And every audience is a mixed species: suspecting and loving the gift they are offered, at different times, in changing spaces, and in varying ways.

**

The CD is Haydn
The slow movement of a symphony

a music made of sadness
drawing a sinuous and seductive arc

I am enjoying that lush melancholy and want to join in
I see my bow gliding over the belly of my fiddle
up and down
up and down

as it has many times
though not for many years
and I've never played this particular piece

I watch myself

(she is swaying
though there is no breeze)

'what's the big deal about marking in the bowing'
his girlfriend said
'it's either up or down'

it can't be both

some people are listeners
others are players
for life

notes pass by but circumvent one place

*she dumped her violin long ago
but the sadness that makes music*

strings its ghost

**

anger

she left her name aside. it was an awkward moment, one she couldn't disengage. it lapsed, that was all that could be said. it wasn't the first time but she was sure it was a skill she'd make use of. it took some time and satisfaction only ever visited her briefly. she became familiar with impatience swinging like a cupboard door and mouthed words oddly angled. her friend returned other than the experience of it. there were always days from the queue occasional, rubbery. always biting her pencil, left with the broiling carpet. the loan crouching at the navel and her name rattled.

**

I have felt too strongly she said. Been too emotional. I have allowed my feelings to dictate. My thoughts move in circles. I must try something else.

Do not indulge. Stay cool. Be dry. Disarm.

Minimise. Do not spill over. Speak low, speak little.

Turn only the pages of the book. Do not read. Do not think anything 'through'.

Refuse. Be your own space. Step aside but stay still.

Put on some music. Turn the lights down.

Quell: you are already feeling too much.

**

what others think of you
is never how you see your fault
is never what you feel they think

events and their aberrant echoes
drift apart across
the braying fields

meanwhile parched pride tells tales

you need advice?

let pain run round
but never let it stray
it's only a hungry child

if hurt
holds on
encourage it to cross the road

or think of the wounds war will bring

let fire pass
it does not kill each house it licks

and remember!
there is always
another story
contradicts the one

you are inside.

**

friendship

proximity:distance

-not a binary but a dynamic unity as Massumi would have it-

the two terms at once separate and continuous

one flips over into the other the

flipping over, unexpected,

the event, emergent

it is always the first time

there is no way of knowing this as it happens

a *recognition* perhaps later

a familiar story

we become adroit, eloquent,
moving forward picking up momentum the past

falling away like so many layers language

liberating us from the stupor of
strong feeling writing moves
it on and we think we have left

✿ ✿

Many commentators have remarked that though belief may be waning in postmodernity, there is a surfeit of *feeling* in the political and popular cultures of late capitalism, notwithstanding Jameson's pronouncement of the waning of affect. There is a concomitant interest among cultural and literary theorists in configurations of affect and feeling. Brian Massumi, for example, says that an investigation of affect is central to understanding our information and image-based culture. For him the problem is the absence of a 'cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect'. I would also suggest that we need to develop alternative poetics if we want to incorporate - as distinct from objectify - affect in our writing practices.

8/16

It's 11.30 p.m., just before Bush is to address the US. I am almost incapacitated by a tired sick feeling. I guess we have all become drugged by the American imperative to feel - outrage, fear, pride (and our intense counter-feeling which John Howard named this morning in his address to the nation as 'rancour') which started with the attacks of September 11th. We watched with a growing frustration the incitement in the US of a powerful discourse of feelings, an instrumentalist military sublime. The American president drew a justification for war-mongering on the basis of his feelings of outrage. He once again arrogates to the American people the right to be human, to suffer; correspondingly the inhuman is returned to the third world, which has no claim to a collective subjectivity.

A journalist asked John Howard this morning whether he saw historical precedents (such as Viet Nam) in the current situation and he blithely dismissed 'history'. At times like this, he said, we can only think about the present. This is precisely where a discourse of feelings is so politically expeditious; it erases the history of antagonisms and an analysis of causes (such as a rapacious US foreign policy). And so we see the insidious effects of instrumentalist feeling in what Derrida calls the grotesque 'onto-theology of national humanism'.

**

the news

it had until today
 whether or
 not as revealed last week a
 grave decision until yesterday
 declared the skies surround
 his strongholds
 dailytelegraph.com immediately
 defiant talk coaxed
 shock and awe
 in an hour appointed
 brandishing a
 tens of thousands a
 political pause flammable mist
 stunned
 into under cover
 whether or not
 or not or not or

**

An almanac of sorrows and angers

(Notley)

a cloud of thick intellectual rage clings to her. every day she studies the screen. it contains smoke, burnt out tanks, the rubble of buildings. she can see what is happening to these people. she is exhausted with frustration.

tonight she reads an arab-american poet. something else happens: the intervention of the particular; the personal address. to feel sorrow is to

feel your self hemorrhaging, dissolving. she is no longer watching but
a witness: convoked, sharing.

the media doesn't provide a discursive space for mourning.

*the way things
fall, supported by everything,
then
very little, then by
nothing*

(London)

the minimalism so
comforting so
clean so simple
so direct. detail
hurts too much
repeating what
is already known every
thing has already
been said words
either weigh too
much or too little

*to reconvene ... aesthetics and ethics ... to make the affective
(feeling) perform the work of the ethical (thought) (Kerr)*

a series of small shifts
shuffled throughout
the day there

was no need to hang on
to imagine that time
moved in a straight

line or
that she should follow

herself that
way

she was haunted. The sound made when she tapped the dish brush on
the edge of the sink when she finished the dishes, was the sound of the
word 'baghdad'.

**

In 'The Artifice of Absorption' Charles Bernstein suggests that poems tend to encourage
an approach to reading which is predominantly absorptive or anti-absorptive, though
most are a subtle combination of the two. For Bernstein the absorptive poem is a sponge
which soaks up rhythm, syntax and grammar. It is 'engulfing...mesmerizing hypnotic,

total, riveting'. He contrasts this with the impermeability of the anti-absorptive text, which produces 'artifice, boredom, exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression'.

Obviously the terms absorptive and anti-absorptive line up, to some degree, with the concepts 'mainstream' and 'experimental': the absorptive text smooths over the seams which the anti-absorptive cracks open. But what fascinates me is the way Bernstein evokes the absorptive in much more affective terms than its opposite face. The absorptive collects us together emotionally, and binds our contradictory responses into an overall intensive state. The anti-absorptive, in contrast, produces a diffuse, low-level, undemonstrative response.

However much I admire anti-absorptive ways of writing, I still, as a reader, want to be totally captured by the word on the page. Perhaps this is the great challenge for the inventive writer (and Bernstein himself claims that he often uses anti-absorptive techniques to absorptive ends). Sabrina Achilles' *Waste*, or Paul Auster's early novels, engage me, because they manage to be fragmented, opaque and allegorical, but are also page turning, compelling and engrossing.

**

She realised now that it was the craving for affect that drove her to write experimentally. She wanted to break up the surfaces of language: to evoke, indirectly, complexities of feeling.

Poetry had stirred her when she read the surrealist poets. Then she could be outside normalized meaning. She could become the poem when she surrendered herself entirely to language. And when she didn't have to pose in one emotional position.

And yet at the same time there was always that uncomfortable paradox: that fracturing language could flatten, disengage. By searching for affect you could find it slipping through your words. That's why she had taken to the sonic as a way of warming the pulse, loosening the semantic.

**

Is feeling cognitive?

Are feelings ideas?

Does emotion eclipse?

Can hiding reveal?

**

Ethics and affect

It's interesting how much recent work in the field of ethics foregrounds affect. Andrew Gibson anticipates a postmodern ethics which would focus on 'the will to be moved' and 'the power of being affected rather than [that of] affecting'.

He calls for a postmodern aesthetic that would be properly ethical. Central to such an aesthetic is a process whereby the role of affect is rethought. He critiques the concept of

an objective rationalism within which the category of the aesthetic is the last bastion of a sovereign, transcendental subject: master of its world.

Gibson imagines instead an ethics and an aesthetic characterised by openness, attentiveness and expenditure. He turns to Levinas' interest in our exposure to the other, our 'uncovering', and a sensibility that registers 'immediacy on the surface of the skin'.

I daydream about the ways that writing can open/be open(ed).

**

Curiosity, if it has no definable object, can only increase.

After she died the boxes of her possessions were shipped to your front door: the bundles of her life. Clothes and pots jumbled together, and papers brown with age. It was an excavation, except you didn't know what you were digging for.

And yet you kept digging and digging deeper. You longed to understand, to know more, however small the advance. But you craved feelings not facts: the wild underside to the smooth running of everyday life.

Each family has its own language and enunciation. Another family is always difficult to comprehend.

There were birth and death certificates: the legacy of generations. Letters, diaries, holiday snaps. Some delicate lacework passed down from the 18th century. These relics spoke, but at the same time were also curiously silent. This wasn't a family that showed what it felt, or courted demonstrative friends.

And yet the highs and lows hovered everywhere, even if they were difficult to read. E died prematurely in the First World War: his last letter begins 'my dear sis'. K was a young girl when they married, and C was twice her age. It seemed an unlikely romance. But they formed the deepest attachment, and it endured after he died. This is what you wanted to know about and wanted to be part of.

You parcel up the boxes again: nothing has been quenched. You will pack and unpack these boxes looking for new spoils. There will always be feelings you can mine, diamonds hiding under rocks.

**

Patience

Patience is the most intimate of privacies. It's hard to talk about without invoking the idea of theological allegory, yoga sutras or bureaucracy. Patience is undoubtedly discursive but also bodily. Patience lines my chest and caresses my organs. Patience sits behind my eyes and watches as I do. Patience has an other-worldly temporality. It makes me aware that I am *in medias res*, inside a process; that time passes and I can see that too, if I look with the eyes of patience.

Is patience an emotion? It registers in the body like emotion. My breathing becomes a smooth scarf. I sink into myself, but lightly. My contours become more distinctly defined. I am aware of my skin, the way it presses into the room in which I am sitting. In the centre of my torso I can feel the solid weight of the room-the things that have happened and the things that will happen. These two are so tightly intertwined they

create a kind of gravity or mass. It's a weight that holds me here, paradoxically in my body, 'in the moment'. It's as if from this point you know that life never stands still. That life *moves*, and as soon as things happen, I things happen.

Patience is transitive. Patience moves I but by holding you here in your body where everything begins and ends.

**

When she first found a book was growing in her, she always excited: the topic posed many possibilities and there was the frisson of gestation. In the future there would also be the pride of seeing the book on the shelves. But more than that, the tome would acquire an independent life: students and scholars would use it in places she could not see into, have thoughts about it that she would never share.

Sometimes this euphoria lasted for weeks, even months. It carried her through the early stages of research and writing: the book would amass itself, running on its own energy. But as she needed to deepen her ideas and organise them more stringently, there was always a period of increasing frustration and disengagement. Logics would start to break down, gaps would occur, and she would not know how to stitch the pieces back together. She would try to move, and find everywhere only dead ends to her advancement.

Each day she would dread working because the work didn't promise any destination. She would discuss the problems with others, find temporary enlightenment, but always be unable in the end to see how she could proceed.

But then, if she continued to think and read, she would stumble on an idea, almost by chance. An idea that would murmur and sway. And gradually that thought would morph into the next and then another. She could see her way again: the lines of light would bend, loop and interconnect. And like a spectacular burst of heat, the excitement would return, she would start to be absorbed, wrapped in the warmth and kinetics of her own ideas. *Now she could write.*

**

Friday night: moon

From my desk-gazing past the pencil jar, stacks of books, the computer, layers of paper, notes and assignments, past the desk light, the half-closed blind and the inside of my room reflected on the window glass-I can see a small space of night sky criss-crossed by telegraph lines, the slanting beams of the streetlight and branches of the jacaranda.

In this small triangle of sky the slight moon is a finger-nail clipping, an ethereal slice of detritus. Perfect, sharp, alive with light.

The clutter and lassitude of the work day is punctured in an instant and I am moved along that shining edge of reclamation.

As I write the moon sinks towards the foliage and I scramble for the words to fix that moment of looking, of sudden feeling, struck like a match along the incandescent seam of memory.

**

'[For Foucault] the body site is less an object of analysis and more a rhetorical gesture - a trope - that justifies the textual analysis that he conducts'

Punday

'the body was simply there, given'

Nancy

'The Pentagon still insists that it is going to great lengths to avoid any unnecessary loss of life'

Sydney Morning Herald

Frrustration

again. body churned up and over like the rough sea. it's rough living. it's rough times. what living isn't and what times aren't? the body churned up and tossing, talking, talking, talking. when the voice falls silent, stalled in the throat, the rest of the body takes over like a crazed mechanical wind-up toy, rehearsing the pretext of metaphor. its elegiac pulse thumping like a jackhammer, its discursive fluids leaking, bones grinding, muscles clenched in this olympian task of speaking. the recursive body shivers, it dissolves, it reconvenes the fabulous scene of its troping. when the voice falls silent the concrete body works its concrete: its slabs of refusal, its ethical grief, the teeth of despair, the warm blood of exorbitant hope. insistent, its anamnestic flesh, the bread of stories, torn, consumed. the inexhaustible, talkative body. do, do, do, wedged into the world, feet first, kicking, streaming, pressed into style, into struggle, into love, raging and striking against the page, raging and leaking away like the man riddled with bullets. the handcam recorded it all and activists clamoured for justice. he gestured limply while dying, his blood the signature, still wet, still insisting

**

Change of season

The tree was tall and perfectly symmetrical, the shape of an inverted heart. It was on the point of losing its leaves, turning a mottled brown with the season. It looked immaculate in every detail and as though almost imperceptibly it had stopped living while the world went on around it. But it was quite alive, turned inward and retreating down its veins, shedding itself, letting go, falling away, not gripping or grasping. Like thinking withdrawn into the body, suspended along networks of fluids, tissue, organs, intestines and bones. Thinking no longer in the order of expectation or wishfulness, no longer reaching out, hooking and fluttering. A body that no longer addresses other bodies. A body that no longer signifies, or represents. A body exposed but folded inwards, no longer leaking from its surfaces, disappearing into the world. Its surfaces dissolve, relinquished. A body feeling itself, rounded off, smooth, brushing the air. Taking the world in like a lung, and releasing it. Significance vanishes; the body, given, but not held. It holds its own weight, it lets it go.

When I come back this way next week I will see the tree again, tall, symmetrical, pared back to its perfect bones.

**

She is pushed into a room and the room is black. The door is locked from the outside, and footsteps fade away. There is only blackness pressed against her eyes. She tries to find patches of light, streaks, variegations, but she is rebuffed. The darkness drags her in and ties her up.

This is beyond death, beyond time, beyond language.

Everything in her pushes this blackness away. But it holds her down, screams at her, repeating its slogans.

I cannot endure this.

I cannot endu

I c n ot

I

Then a moment breaks loose, one amongst others. The black seems to purr at her, arching its back. She strokes it, and begins to feel calm. She sees light where there is none; movement where there is only stillness. Her thoughts are clearer for the lack of light. She hears the sound of herself.

And she starts to think. Letter by letter words appear, like glow worms on the walls. Words that did not exist before, thoughts born of this cave. They leave the walls and whirl round her, then fall like snow to the floor.

Flakes torn from intimidation, flares wrenched from the night.

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Note

AFFECTIONS: friendship, community, bodies is part of a collaborative, fictocritical series. The first part, *ProseThetic Memories*, was published in *Salt. v16: An International Journal of Poetry and Poetics*.

Memory Writing: 199-211. *ProseThetic Memories* has also been realised as a collaborative multi-media project, with real-time sound and programming of the text in VRML by Roger Dean. As such it has been performed in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane.

Our thanks to Roger Dean, and Raya Massie, for reading and commenting on a draft of this text.

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