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TEXT poetry

Edward Caruso

Patience

transience visits when i'm awake

mindfulness

a Chinese Buddhist monk blesses a Porsche

so its owner will arrive safely on time

Lucretius declares the gods take no interest in the world

cobwebs float off twigs and street posts

a bell on a dog's collar circles the lawn

the Labradors are tired

footsteps nobody in sight

 voices renounce their owners

aeroplanes abandon the flight paths of birds
their claws manicured to match lawns

white sun
red-brown sky
in times of war
apocalyptic dreams talcum powder relief

laughter drifts
leather pants walk by themselves
may favour colours
other than black

candid communication chews language
alphabets require more letters

i forget how to live with obsession
favour vows of silence
that flee imagination

i fit through the entrance of a coat
and share its dimensions
with an echo in search
of its rhyme

mortality is an echo
calls more than once
we share antipasto
(bruschetta and a tray of olives)
it pays for an espresso
with loaded dice

produces a private pilot licence
so we fly a Cessna Skyhawk
rainbow appearing ahead of a storm

problems start as soon as i jot
lines on the page
but as soon as I finish
i really haven't finished
(besides, i have to get
some shuteye to address my ending)

i hear a tramcar going past
the sound of wood being planed
and the air-conditioner on the next floor
always switched on
with a burst of power
reverberating through the earth

after a Spritz
i miss my ending
when it knocks
i'm in my hollow

Edward Caruso has been published in A Voz Limpia, Australian Multilingual Writing Project, 'La Bottega della Poesia' (La Repubblica, Italy), Burrow, Communion, Mediterranean Poetry, Meniscus, n-Scribe, Right Now, StylusLit, TEXT, Unusual Work and Well-Known Corners: Poetry on the Move. His second collection of poems, Blue Milonga, was published by Hybrid Publishers in 2019. He has also featured on 3CR's Spoken Word program.



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TEXT poetry

Rosanna E. Licari

The Big Wet

The poetry of the earth is never dead.

~ John Keats

Under the grinding sun
water recedes into the soil's darkness
or fades into the brilliant light
a disappearance a loss
that breaks earth
shrivels its verdure
felling beasts
as the turbidity contracts.

Then by its law,
Nature tilts.

Rain

and water as catalyst
triggers life
in an arid land
of intractable seasons
filling cracks and holes
etching streams,
creeks and rivers,

water everywhere
to drink, swim and slide into
an all-or-nothing cycle
that spreads colour
to a receding salt pan
scorched riverbeds
the craving plains and wetlands:
an abstracted landscape
smeared with whites,
blues, greens and browns,

fish, frogs and the hordes
cast in shell or crust
emerge in the fluid canvas
to dart, leap,
break into flight
burrow into soil,

the territory fills
with plumes, beaks,
shrieks and caws —
tribes of water birds
bearing their intricacies
in the barbs of feathers
in webbed and unwebbed feet,

single-minded
they track flowing membranes
across a thirsty plain,
seeking fish or vigorous weed
near calm maternal waters
to bolster courtship
and nest and breed

to the rhythm.

Rosanna E. Licari's work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including ArLiJo (US), Australian Poetry Journal, Meniscus, Not Very Quiet 2017-2021 anthology, Poetry for the Planet: An Anthology of Imagined Futures, Pulped Fiction: anthology of microlit (Spineless Wonders, 2021), Quadrant, Scars: anthology of microlit (Spineless Wonders, 2020), Shearsman, TEXT Journal, The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry (MUP, 2020), and Transnational Literature. She won the 2021 AAALS Poetry Award and is the poetry editor of StylusLit <www.styluslit.com>. She teaches English to migrants and refugees in Brisbane, Australia.



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TEXT poetry

Hailey Quiazon

On learning to let go of a poem

I wrote this on my way here
Stopped at a redlight
Itching for green
Poet in the suburban wild
Tempted to write on my jeans
I begged the poem not to leave me
Made a mantra out of a line
The poetic impulse is fleeting
The poetic impulse if fleeting
The poetic impulse is fleeting
I hope I don't say it too many times
For fear it'll lose its meaning
I willed lines to brand themselves behind my eyelids
Just hold on poem, till I can pull over
And pluck you from the sky

Reminiscent of chicken feathers
Harps and guitars
I hear its song
Pull you out of thin air
Like a magician who turns ears into vending machines
And if I'm lucky I've figured out how you did the trick
I find you in all kinds of places
Like speedbumps and sitting at the back of busses
Like flies that somehow make it through closed doors
Or lone trolleys with sun faded handles abandoned at roundabouts
However, you stumbled towards me
I still think about you
It's cheesy pick-up line time
Tell me poem, do you get tired running circles in my mind?
Did you make it to the pedestrian? The lifeless zebra on asphalt
Did it hurt when you climbed out of hell?
Wait, wait, wait
That's not how it goes
Can we start again?
I've got 90gsm sheets of paper, a fountain pen and a lot of time
I'd like to write about you
I can't stop thinking about the curves of your commas
The dots above your lowercase i's
Your apostrophe's though you belong to no one
Full stop and stare
Because stanzas never looked so good
You take up space, but my page always wants you
Chewing gum on the underside of library desks

You're stuck like our favourite songs
Like that one I slow dance in the kitchen to
Maybe we're singing to each other
Or I'm just humming to myself
And Poem maybe, I don't want you to fall in love with me
Just fall into me, on top my tongue
Make a couch out of it
Tickle my palate
Climb up onto my uvula
Pretend it's a tire swing
Parkour your way onto my teeth
Parachute towards my page
You take the lead cause following you is easy
Both hands on the medium sized nib, tonight a séance
Contacting all the dead darlings
The shower thoughts
The 3am ideas
We've missed you
Killed ourselves to remember you
I'm in the mood for reunion
Possess me like I'm something to own
Poets all of us, lightning rods hoping to be struck
I'm jumping over honey banana weetbix and cappuccinos gone cold
You make me chase you
Arrest my attention
Unable to distinguish reality from imagined memory
The space between eyelids and eyeballs is growing
There's room for you to be seen

I think it's you whispering to the depths of my ear bones
Please don't do this
You are going to be missed
The fall from my desk will split you open
Come back to bed, I can't handle your fragments
I don't want to break you down further
Let's enter duck feather pillows
We'll be free from the contract of living
Sleep is our playground for temporary death
We'll wake hungry for walks
Crunched leaves in conversation
They tell us the things too hard to say
The poem yanks my eyelashes out
Scatters it so wishes are bound to come true
I know what it wishes for but saying it here will break the spell
You don't have to turn the whole world into poetry
But you want to
Who else is going to adore
Water drops and cracks in the pavement
Trees swaying in the breeze
Rain that falls diagonally
Advocate for the inanimate objects
Voices keep us lifted
I speak words out loud to the open air
Because I know I'll breathe them back in
Regurgitate resurrect the second guessing
Fought your way back to me
Earned a place in my notebook

These pages are yours as much as they are mine
You're teaching me to be impulsive
Caution at crosswalks all but gone
Reckless never felt good to me
Tastes acquired, levelled up
You've grown with me
Morph yourself into another hand to hold
I run my tongue over inner cheeks
Searching for morsels of you
Still learning to let you go with grace
One day I'll smile at the lines I don't get to write
Because if you really loved them, you'd let them go right?
That was never about a person, just about poetry
Lines of it
Because its everywhere
Found its way to photobomb every snapshot of life
Weaved itself into the threads of my worn-out shirts
Tugging at you is one of my favourite past times
Even if you unravel me
I'll tie you to the thumbtacks on our collective corkboard
There's parts of you I don't know yet
You're reinventing
And I'm rediscovering
I hope my closed eyes can find you
Because I feel you before these dead trees reincarnated can
I just want to hold you, engulf you in the safety of arms
Our shared ghosts pop and lock
We made our trauma bigger

Fuelled it
But we taught it how to break dance
It contemporary danced its way into our hearts
Like the lead of a step-up movie
You gave me stank face, that's how you know you got me vibing
Pry between the folds of my scrunched nose and hold on to a follicle
You sat at every plush cushioned stool to make sure your scent lingered
I promise not to forget about you
Take out's getting cold but in the cabin of my car we suspend time
Float in our flurry of words
Dashboards were made for you because you take it from 0-100
Call you GPS because you know where to go
Hands off the wheel, you could take it
Ride shotgun, make yourself known through all the road signs and neon no
vacancy lights
Let's be a cliché and accidentally touch hands at the dip of cup holders
Surf radio stations till you find static
Rearrange sound waves till I can make out the shape of syllables
Poke your torso out the sunroof, you'll write with stars and exhaust pipes
I'll hit the gas a little too hard, we'll hit a pothole and you'll go flying
Check the rear view and there you are
Follow me to the next intersection and I promise to write down every word
you've left behind

Hailey Quiazon is a current PhD candidate at Griffith University. She has showcased her slam poetry in Indonesia and Malaysia. Hailey was also a featured librettist at the Inaugural New Opera Workshop 2019. You can find her work in the 2020 edition of Talent Implied.



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TEXT poetry

Md Mujib Ullah

An Evening Flux

Life was neither a wine bottle,
Nor a free-flowing water tube,
Rather a cradle matchbox
And a mixture of many fluxes.

The quivering evening at home
With illumination and drum beats,
Party dance and buffet dinner,
Was teasing and horrible due to fever.

I couldn't enjoy the time with you
Due to a week of bed rest, a doctor's prescription,
And some medicine and restrictions,
There was no pleasure but suppressing desire.

Life was neither a wine bottle,
Nor a party dance and a buffet dinner,
Rather a week of bed rest
And no pleasure with restrictions.

Md Mujib Ullah is a PhD candidate in Foreign Languages and Literatures at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. His English poems have been, or are due to be, published in the Journal of Poetry Therapy, Capitalism Nature Socialism, Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature, Postcolonial Text, The Goose: A Journal of Arts, Environment and Culture in Canada, Tuck Magazine, FreeXpresSion and The Daily Star.



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TEXT prose

Jane Downing

Change the Underwear of Your Soul

The rats swinging down Swanston Street were as big as cats, the cats as big as the dingoes in Royal Park. Bags caught on the wind could easily be jellyfish blown off the rising waters of the drowned port. One trapped itself between Devon's striding legs, tripping him with imagined tentacles up his trousers. He steadied himself on a tether to the moon, a three-quarter moon sat low in the mid-morning sky which he'd been unable to describe in metaphor despite grinding away at it since they'd set out from the squat in Carlton.

Kitchener rattled away beside him, never willing to test the hypothesis that his brain would rust shut if not constantly greased by vocalisations, one-sided conversations, the unceasing, incessant stream of words that Devon grunted at, at random intervals. On such graciousness friendships are built.

When they got that far, Devon read the graffiti blazoned across the Town Hall. He read internally, to himself. Kitchener shared his reading with the wind.

CHANGE THE UNDERWEAR OF YOUR SOUL

"I'm sure I've seen that somewhere before," prompted Devon.

"No, that's pure Anton. He's always going on about the best place to do his laundry. There's that place over near the Zoo, or..."

Devon murmured underneath the comprehensive mapping of inner-city laundromats. "Nope, definitely seen it in print. In a book. It's old. It's good. It's memorable."

Kitchener sailed into the comment, changing tack from his own stream. “Old you say? There must be a statute of limitations on poems. Like copyright.”

Devon agreed. “Death plus a hundred years? Now the underwear thing is new again, reframed in red paint, printed on brick.”

“Yep, Anton’s handiwork, mark my words.”

The ambling poets had reached the stench of the animal market in Fed Square, which arrived well before the cries of the beasts themselves. They turned the corner at the alpaca carcass and ducked into the doorway of the café, careful not to incite the three roosting chickens or their host would be ropable and their breakfasts *sans oeuf*.

A bubble of voices in the back corner burst into shouts as the seated poets out-manned each other. Darling, the Old Man of the Movement, banged his walking stick on the wooden floorboards to regain attention. An affectation – his prosthetic was top-notch, pre-Crash.

Devon stopped by the barista’s cubicle to order his usual – strong black, four sugar, eggs over easy – as Kitchener sailed into the fray on a quote from the precipice of a different abyss. “Poetry makes nothing happen,” he cried gleefully.

Heads turned, grim, grimed, grimaced, mouths opening to chorus W.H. Auden’s second world war corollary, and saving grace. “It survives!”

Darling rumpapump-pumped his lips and ratatatated his walking stick. “Pull up a pew. We will have our Manifesto by nightfall.”

Devon pulled up a bentwood chair, running his hand down the soft grain, and settled amongst the twelve in the Movement. One more and there’d be a fight to see who was their Saviour and who their traitor. *Who am I kidding*, Devon scribbled in his notebook, *they each think they are Jesus*.

“Put it away,” said Richmond. “You know only the Secretary takes notes. No theft from brothers when they are in verbal flight.”

“It was only a thought I collected from...” Devon waved his hand in an Auslan intimation of out-of-doors, in defence of himself. Notebook back in pocket nonetheless. Unsaid: as if they didn’t all rush back to their squats to scribble down the stray and fair and foul details of the meetings.

He settled to listen as he gobbled his meal. High words and gossip clashed across the table. An eye on the future vying with a peeping-Tom curiosity of the now.

“What is more important than putting words on paper – and brick – as the world crumbles,” Devon murmured, hoping thereby, that the graffiti would be brought up.

“Did you hear about Anton?” asked Nguyen in a louder voice.

Kitchener jumped in predictably. “The poem on the Town Hall! Underwear of your soul! I tell you, pure Anton Bychkov.”

A competition commenced around the table. A series of witty ripostes to the command to change these underwear of their souls.

“Our souls at night need no underwear.”

“Arseholes at night need no underdaks.”

“Yes,” Darling applauded, “all we have left is the absurd.”

The initial voice eventually interrupted. “That’s not actually what I meant at all,” said Nguyen. “I mean, have you heard about Anton and the French floozy?” The half at the end of the table who heard him presented all ears. “The star of the show at the Casino. Brigitte Turqua,” he elaborated.

The imagery around the French woman’s name danced like a scarf, snapping its sinewy spine, revealing flashes of flesh before stretching and convulsing on a pillowy bed.

“Point three,” read the Secretary at the other end of the table. Louder, over-the-top. “All content in a work of art is as stupid and senseless as...”

“Are they going to marry?” asked Devon, aghast.

“She knows no more than ten words of English. What use is a poet when his audience hears none but the pitter-patter of gobbledegook from his lips...”

“Point four,” insisted the Secretary. “We propose no logic of thoughts...”

“I’m not sure his lips are engaged in versifying when he’s in the presence of La Turqua,” Kitchener smirked.

Then, the loudest voice, “So who has been daubing the walls of the city’s buildings? Confess!”

The table was suddenly – *of a sudden* was how Richmond transposed it in his notebook later – quiet from end to end.

“Imagists,” Darling said.

“Who are they?”

“We are looking for a name for our Movement. They can be us.”

“Facturists?” Devon swallowed the word as it emerged. Took the chiding laughter as deserved. They were not a factory for facts nor truths, not manufacturers of goods or good.

“Alternative Facturists,” was a compounding joke.

“Imaginists?”

Coffee-fuelled brains did not have the manifesto of the movement complete by nightfall. The barista moved them out from beyond the plastic fernery and sawdust carpet as if he had a super-abundance of paying customers on their way. The poets filed out before the sun was in descent and they shuffled toward the next café, Darling reciting his latest as they walked down Swanston. *His words wedged between the din of the helicopter and the...* Devon composed three paces back.

The helicopter circled, thrashing the air into battle noises. The striding Movement below ignored its meaning – that members of the Old Guard had once again penetrated the Ring of Steal and were being hunted like rats. The red light on the underbelly of the helicopter flashed. If it were a beast, it would be the anus between body and long tail. Devon hoped he’d remember this for later, wary of unfurling his notebook from his pocket a second time, to the scathing judgement of this gaggle of witnesses.

Devon described his arsehole image on the rhythm of his feet to better embed the words. Tripped over a cavoodle, its snout bloody from scavenging down the alleys.

They looked down on Flinders Station, like Hernando Cortes and his conquistadors upon the Peak of Darien surveying the vast Pacific: *with wild surmise*. Below, the trains had stopped when the water flooded the tracks, though the thirteen iconic clocks on the corner ironically still announced thirteen departure times.

“The Altona Line is running late,” Kitchener said, as someone had to trot out the old joke.

The next café along Collins was a fishbowl of glass and light. One glimpse dissuaded the poets from making it a port of call on their daily odyssey. The Poetrix coven had colonised the Bali-themed booths, disporting under thatched umbrellas. They no longer attempted mergers of shared interest. The mutual antipathy between the movements fuelled too much inspiration.

The next coffee establishment was more promising. There was Anton himself inside, unmistakable in his Ned Kelly beard.

“What’s he doing with the young crowd? Those nostalgia freaks walking backward into denial?” muttered Darling.

“Christ on a scooter, he’s got a Driza-Bone across the back of his chair...”

“And a rabbit-skinned hat there under his hand.”

Anton’s near-contemporaries pulled their noses from the double-doors. Milled. Willed themselves to go in.

“It’s properly called an Akubra,” enlightened Devon. “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is...”

“Stick your lightening bugs up your arse, Mr Twain,” quietened Richmond.

Devon didn’t stay quiet as Kitchener braved the door handle and opened the doors inwards, exposing a décor of rough wood tables and cartwheels and ploughshares on the walls. “This is more Barley-themed,” Devon observed, as he had practiced, hoping to use the clever pun since the last café. No-one got it.

And anyway, quickly Kitchener was jeered out by twenty-somethings. He reported back. “Anton is reading from his *Ballad of the Rinehart Cowboy*.”

“Saints and Crows preserve us.” Nguyen all but crossed himself.

“Damn his plunder. Folklore is for backward-looking folks, poetry for the forward-thinking bohemian,” announced their Secretary. “Point six of our Manifesto!”

Through an open shop window opposite, where the glass once was, Devon spied a collapsed ceiling. So there’d be newly exposed beams and accessible plasterboard. Half the population of the city had retreated to the provinces; the economy had collapsed, like the ceiling, so you collected your warmth where you could. Devon considered himself a connoisseur of firewood after the initial mistakes, like the combustible cladding which burned too quickly to last a night through, and the days he’d left it too late and scavenged with the rats as big as cats, the cats as big as dingoes. The snarling dingoes. He peeled off from the pack, hoisting his canvas sack from around his neck where he wore it like a superhero’s cape.

As he crossed the road, a breath of perfume spun him around. Brigitte Turqua herself, singing bluebird, the French siren, fresh from the hot showers and clean towers of the Casino island. She swept by, evaporated like a celestial vision. Into the café. To Anton’s side. The lucky scribbler.

The Imaginists strolled onward while Devon deserted the pack to scavenge and gather up plywood and plasterboard and turn home with his plunder. A man on a bicycle overtook him. Devon contemplated his wake with envy. If only he could find a bike and construct just such a trolley of pram wheels and crates then transport would not be this back-breaking tread of one foot after another.

And give up the life of the flâneur, sacrifice the rhythms of the word for mere bodily comfort? On consideration, no!

As he left the grid of the CBD toward Carlton, he admired the graffiti down the central columns of the State Library.

HERE BEGINS THE ARSE OF THE WORLD

Devon was an equal opportunity plagiarist, stealing from the eras of both twentieth century world wars. Theft as thrift. The phrase he'd painted on the State Library was translated from the more dramatic German – *Hier beginnt der Arsch der Welt!* – thus, he believed, making it his own. It niggled that his squat-mate insisted on ascribing the graffiti to Anton and not even imagining it could be Devon, right there under his nose, with red paint still on his sleeves.

Devon's remaining energy went into the stairwell, willed him upward.

Their communal squat rose above the twentieth century city, but was overshadowed by the twenty-first sky-thrusting to posterity and immortality. It was colder on the inside. Devon dropped his sack of faggots from his back and bent over to catch his breath. He imagined himself a peasant from Provence; he saw himself too as the artist capturing this image on canvas. He acknowledged a smock-wearing peasant would never have encountered ten flights of stairs. Nor Van Gogh the acknowledgement of his genius. These musings kept him companion as he sawed his building materials into usable lengths and fashioned them into a serviceable fire, ever careful the flames stayed within the metal trough he and Kitchener had hauled triumphantly up, the first winter of the Civil War.

The flames did nothing to warm his soul. Any metaphysical underwear, were by this stage threadbare. Ever the pragmatist, his girlfriend Lilibeth had tried spinning wool from the feral alpaca before she joined the 50% evacuating north. Devon couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a live one on the streets.

On the streets it was already dark. Night was simply a shawl of black cast over an ordinary day, and yet it made everything feel so much worse.

Darling had sent a collection of the Movement's poems to New York via satellite. The editor there had labelled them "*untalented vomit*" and "*the defecation of a brainless head*", and once in her stride, added one last barb – "*eruptions from the scrota of flabby eunuchs*". Not even the saving grace of *talented vomit* left to cling to.

The editor was an idiot of course. America had blighted the world so no wonder a citizen of the empire was blind to the import of their enterprise. The Movement had no desire to make sense of these end-of-times, only to hold a mirror to the absurdity of the disintegration.

As the fire roared and the smell of burning paint coated his nostrils, Devon stood at the window watching a wedgetail eagle circle down Yarra-way. The skyline looked untouched by the antigress of the decade; the rot was in the foundations. He missed Lilibeth with an ache that took his breath away like some sentimental lyric every time he let his mind look in the other direction, inland. From where little news returned. The evacuees could all be dead for all they knew. As he may as well be.

As the sun went down, Devon had come to feel this as a certainty.

So he took himself off to his *desk* – the washer and drier made defunct in their powerless squat, transjoined by a door from the floor below in the manner of a Stone Henge monolith, because wooden furniture like desks had been the first and easiest offerings to the fire that first winter. He lit the lamp with a splinter from the fire and uncurled his notebook from the shape of his hip and tapped the nib of his pen upon a line. The fucker ran out halfway through the title of his last poem. The ink was all gone. The well dry.

Blood was Devon's only recourse, a fountain from his wrist, sucked into his great-grandfather's fountain pen, flowing, the image of the Turqua striding into the verse on a gust of her perfume, filling his lungs. Inflating them so he spiralled into the clouds like a helium balloon.

Breathing out, he read the poem back, looking his aquamarine mermaid in the eye as she swam through the sun, and saw it was good and wondered what the Movement would make of it. Darling would surely praise it, send it under the eye of Anton.

His blood pulsed and spilled and erased the beginning of the poem, making it even better.

He reached into his adjacent bed and fetched out Lilibeth's one silk scarf, abandoned there when she left in a rush on a promise of something better to the north. She called it

survival as if merely surviving was the point. Devon wrapped the cloth around the wound on his wrist. Pulled tight. Knotted it secure.

Author's note: Inspired by the Imaginists of Revolutionary Russia.

Jane Downing has stories and poetry published around Australia and overseas, including in Griffith Review, The Big Issue, Antipodes, Southerly, Westerly, Island, Overland, Meanjin, Canberra Times, Cordite, Best Australian Poems (2004 & 2015) and previously in TEXT. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts degree from the University of Technology, Sydney, the creative component of which, "The Sultan's Daughter", was released by Obiter Publishing in 2020. She can be found at janedowning.wordpress.com



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TEXT prose

Kathleen Jennings

Some Ways to Retell a Fairy Tale

follow the story exactly, follow on, look behind, before, tell the other side or reveal

that everyone was mistaken, or that events are true but the meaning forgotten,

or that the events change meaning if you shift them, or depending on the

consequences, or that a setting changes meaning if a story takes place in it,

make the mythic mundane, the mundane mythic,

or make the story itself a space, a sanctuary, a refuge outside of time to think and

breathe before returning to the world, an interlude to recover, rediscover, be

wounded, be lost, take heart, have it cut out,

or make the tale a presence that observes and pursues, that lopes alongside, that can be

perceived in the world, that intervenes in it, that you must be rescued from, that

you can turn to, that can be summoned (little house, little house),

or riff on the story, tell it backwards, turn it through, embroider it, weave it jacquard-wise through another tale, or wrap its husk around another story, or look very closely at what's already there, and dissect it, and stitch it together better or worse or wrong, or lean hard on its bruises, or change its moods, or hook chain tie yoke it to other tales,

or linger,

or drop a particular person into a role, or toss the story into another genre, or take all the ornaments from it and hang them on something quite different, ennoble it, humble it, pull its teeth, give it claws, send it to find its own fortune, to rescue its brothers,

make it a guardian for your children, or make it into a mask, or look behind one, or run beside the tale, breathless,

or consider the devastation (or delight, or minor inconveniences) left in its wake, or trace the logical consequences or the unexpected ones, or add a flavour, or dissolve the story into wine and drink it, drip poison into it and give it to another, sharpen it to a knife's-edge and hold it to a throat,

fashion it into a key, open the door you were not meant to open, ask the one question you must never ask, solve its riddles, tighten its laces, tighten the screws, add another stone to the weight, to the cairn, mark graves with this story, dig graves with it, bury it, wait to see what comes up,

or adjust one dial, kaleidoscope it, telescope it, tell something that almost looks like a story you knew but isn't quite, or make it necessarily universal or achingly particular, or a window or a door or a table or a bed or a lie,

or disclose that a part of history can be seen as this story, or through the lens of this story, or keep the story unchanged but play it in a different key, tell it in a different voice, use it to prick a conscience or a finger, get distracted by something shining on the ground while the story parades past on the horizon,

add blood, add fire, add love, take all of that away, find the bones of the story, grind them for bread, bury them under a tree and listen to hear what will sing in those branches,

make three attempts at retelling it, or seven, or twelve,

dangle it in a stream, use it to keep curses at bay, use it to call witches,

use it as a map, fail to rely on it, be failed by it, build a mythology out of it, make it jazz/punk/rock-and-roll, smash its icons, strip it for parts, make a mosaic, a shanty, a mansion, a coat, a spell,

fit it for speed, steal its names, its breath, demand it keeps its promise, keep a promise for it, or to it, or with it, be faithless, be faithful, take it in, let it rest by the fire and eat from your plate, name it (or be named by it, or give it your name), find it in the ashes and raise it up, find it on a doorstep and raise it as your own,

give it a chance to find its own feet, provide it with dancing shoes, iron shoes, shoes
that burn or cut, trade it for something better, hunt it through all the woods of the
worlds, call cities forests too, launch it into orbit, toss it like a ball,

play marbles with a dozen tales, play cats-cradle, let out its seams, make it over, hand
it down, hand it back, recreate its earliest form, crawl through it like a passage
through time, like a tunnel under a wall, use it to undermine a fortification,

use it as shade in summer, burrow into it for the winter, gnaw its carcass in a den, carry
it out of doors and pile it with others into a barricade, wave the story from the
walls, burn it in effigy,

or paint it like a picket fence, drop it behind you like white stones, unravel it like a red
thread, recreate it in marble, mud, gingerbread, attach legs to it,

brood on it to see what will hatch, flee from its basilisk offspring, stumble into a
mirage, stumble over the tale itself,

fall down its stairs, fall up its stairs, solve its murder, send its characters off to fight
crime, to fight wars, set them free,

turn them loose, wind them up and let them go, listen at doors,

fold the story so small it could fit in a hazelnut, make it into three gowns, give it to the
person who asks, hide your heart in it, hide someone else's heart in it, practise
divination with its entrails, cut off its head and nail it over the gate,

give someone what they asked for or deserved or wanted, give them what they needed,
give yourself what you lost, grant wishes, grant the story's wishes, make it all
better, make it so much worse,

dress in its fashion, adopt its speech, remove its voice, give it someone else's, steal a
rose from its garden, look in its distorting mirror,

cut the tale out of paper, see if it floats, see if it flies, burn it to see what appears in its
smoke, burn it to keep warm, fold it into new shapes, make it an invitation, an
accusation, a warning notice, a wanted poster, a challenge, a serenade, a
prescription,

a basket of fresh bread and flowers, a nightcap and dressing gown, a quilt, a clever
disguise, a very large false moustache, a gift left on the workbench in thanks, a
mechanical nightingale, a bell on a cat, the sign by which you will know the true
princess,

the irritant, the spindle, the smell of honey, the candle in the window, a hand of glory,
the news upon hearing which someone, somewhere, will spring up from beside the
fire exclaiming "Then I am the king of the cats!" and vanish up the chimney

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Gay Lynch

On Smoking

‘Do you think you’ll ever stop smoking?’ people ask him.

‘Trying to increase,’ he says, ‘but there are only so many cigarettes you can smoke in a day.’

Not a recidivist – comprehensible at some level – but in your face.

Like Alf Garnett, who considered smoking his patriotic duty. His provocation – that one egg a day could be more damaging than five cigarettes. Bad-arsed humour.

Memoir essays are arguably hybrid texts, encompassing anecdote, criticism, lyricism, ontology, and theory. They range around, forging connections between like and unlike subjects, with the madness of metaphors. They make excuses – I was there – pre-empting criticism as they essay.

Sally Olds describes the hybrid text as ‘precarity in action; its mastery is visibly unstable, temporary, unsettled, its attentions in demand and split’ (88).

Take a deep, clean breath and follow me.

Smoke brings ancient ritual, pleasure, and death. It cleanses and relieves stress. After repeated humiliation by ovine AFL supporters, Adam Goodes finds himself on his

knees in an Adnyamathanha creek bed, wafting sacred smoke over his face and body, to cleanse himself of evil, to heal his broken spirit. Smoke signals fire – hospitable *and* dangerous – drawing and repelling living things. Smoke rings Australian cities on catastrophic fire days. Smoke of any kind releases toxic chemicals. Smoke draws birds of prey. Watch their behaviour, circling a bonfire with their hunting eyes, waiting for a feed – for a small creature scurrying away from the flames.

The more contemporary research nails down its coffin, and the more regulations make the pursuit of it a challenge, the more smoking lingers like a seductive, untrustworthy ghost –aggressive, glamorous, putrescent, sad, rebellious, witty – speaking back to evidence-based research and the nanny state. Technology revives blunts, bongs, bubblers, cigars, shisa pipes, and vaping – all now in vogue (Grogan & Marks 2022). E-cigarette-use by young Australians increased 96% between 2015-2019 (Heffernan, 2021).

Wait, don't get me wrong. Smoking is bad for you. Hear it from the Australian Government:

Of the more than 7,000 chemicals in tobacco smoke, at least 250 are known to be harmful, including hydrogen cyanide, carbon monoxide, and ammonia.

Among the 250 known harmful chemicals in tobacco smoke, at least 69 can cause cancer. (Australian Government, 2019)

But smoking narratives are complicated. Inhaling and exhaling smoke is performative and habitual. It relies on shared social gestures and historical assumptions, like the therapeutic value of bronchial dilation, the dopamine hit. It charges flagging cognition and concentration; it speaks back to a hostile world. Smoking associates with other addictions.

Sally Olds argues that essays have always been hybrid but [in the Anglophone literary world] 'the hybrid text is now so familiar, so ubiquitous, that we barely even notice we're reading it' (91). And so on I go.

I carry epic genes for asthma and hay fever. In my late teens, I suck in atmospheric signals and the mores of my era. A social intake of 5-6 cigarettes over the same number of hours once a week at parties brings burning, rasping morning recoveries, and recurrent bronchitis. I crave to be that girl on the backstep, who waves a slim Menthol while pontificating on Mead and Strauss. I buy cheap coffin nails at delis. Smoking is easy until I can't breathe.

At age sixteen, my friend and I take our first flight overseas, to Kangaroo Island, carrying as contraband a slim ten-pack of cigarettes. Free from Bible verse and parental negotiation, we play endless hands of gin rummy on our guest house beds and smoke. We speed on motor bikes around back roads. Before the mainland ferry docks at the wharf at 9 pm, we descend upon the Kingscote pub to smoke with locals, to invite their affection, then refuse to get knocked up or rolled in the back of a ute, choosing instead the fantasy brio of a glamorous nicotine death.

At age seventeen, I am ‘going out’ with a league footballer. I do not need to explain to you what happens in those temples of misogyny named ‘the club’. Smoking is mandatory, rampant. Appalled by the way boy-Gods treat girls they flatter with their golden company, I blow broody smoke through my nostrils in a corner, waiting until the team drops him and he drops me. Now clubs carry codes of conduct and are smoke-free – ‘hums loudly’ – which, with compliance, can be useful.

How many of you lean in when you pass someone smoking at a party or in a public place? Or in a moment of intimacy beg a quick puff? Or ceremoniously smoke one cigarette on Bastille Day? Or, upset after an argument with your lover, or stressed at work, cadge a cigarette-fix? With each lapse, does the experience prove underwhelming? Such dabbling brought me strange wooziness, until something stopped me *ever smoking again*.

At age twelve, I encounter the glamorous, troubled people I want to meet in John le Carré, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck novels, which arrive in condensed form in the *American Readers Digest*, to which my parents subscribe. Reflecting the mores of their time, these characters smoke and thus too, I assume, do their creators. In the hands of careless, beautiful women, smoking seems exotic, refreshing after sex or acts of war, as intelligent as the nimble fingers of war journalists filing stories on portable Olivettis before downing whiskies in a dark, cellar bar; as emphatic as snapping a lighter in the doorway of Rue de Anything; as currency in third-world countries and prisons; as naughty as girls’ nights out. Reading fiction may have addled my thinking but, scratch a writer and chances are, you’ll find a reformed or secret smoker.

Pastoralist John Riddock, friend of iconic and tragic Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, describes him thus: ‘...a moody unsociable man when his poetic fit was on – a great smoker.’ Writing is hard graft. Ripe for addictions.

Think Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett, think Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, think George Johnston and Charmian Clift: iconic writers and smokers. In the agitation of composition, in the turbulence of their anxious, cash-strapped colourful lives, these writers chain-smoked. Think Karen Blixon, Maeve Brenna, Marguerite Duras, Dorothy Parker, Collette and Flannery O’Connor, encircling their typewriters with clouds of tobacco smoke.

Think Nigel Krauth who sees smoking as part of his intrigue with death, even after he gives up a fifteen-year smoking habit: ‘And now writing is hard. It doesn’t have the same sensuality, the same risk and seduction, the same piquancy or sublimity’ (Krauth, 1997, p. 233).

Elena Ferrante, author of the successful Neapolitan series of novels, also believes that early on she couldn’t write without smoking because she was ‘afraid of seeing the world in all its sharp-edged clarity’ (Ferrante, 2018). Smoking helped.

Calm in the face of feminine oppression, a cigarette burning between her fingers, a fountain pen racing across page after page, Virginia Woolf created story. The protagonist filmmaker of my debut novel ***** (2005), a survivor of family abuse, smokes like a train. At the time of writing it, I’ve long given up smoking, but remember all the cues – alcohol, coffee, melancholy.

That smokers are daring, interesting, lurks in my brain. I must be a fool. At some social gatherings, whiffing the presence of clever minds a bit left of centre, to whom I have no obvious access, I do not need to sic my partner onto them. His aversion to talkfests with literary people means that within moments of arrival he locates the back door, the rear courtyard, the twitchy accomplice’s eyes roaming the room in search of release, and out he goes with them to feed his addiction.

Richard Klein argues in *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (1993) that ‘smoking cigarettes is not only a physical act but a discursive one – a wordless but eloquent form of expression. It

is fully coded, rhetorically complex, narratively articulate discourse with a vast repertoire of well-understood conventions that are implicated, intertextually, in the whole literary, philosophical, cultural history of smoking' (p. 182).

My partner returns from the pariah-smoking circles with stories.

'To whom were you speaking?' brings eye rolls.

He savours his knowledge for a long moment.

'How do you know this or that?' I may ask.

'Interesting fellow/woman. Led a rough life/ a big life they told me. Lit his/their fag outside the loo.'

Out he'll go, until his share packet runs low, gifted with private conversations with public figures, international guests, nervous keynote speakers. Should I risk death for an introduction?

At parties, reformed but vacillating addicts see him coming. 'How are you, mate? Are you going outside?' they'll say as they seize his arm, abandoning me to the carrot and celery sticks, germ-pit commercial dips, and decanted Silver Lady wines.

When a book-launch ends and we spill out onto the street, I'll feel his eyes burning into me from the lamplight across the road. Watchful. Waiting. Smoking. Brimful of other people's secrets. 'Can we go home now?' he'll say in faux compliance.

There is sufficient evidence that smoking is a risk factor for 16 cancer types: lung, oral cavity, pharynx, oesophagus, stomach, bowel, liver, pancreas, nasal cavity and paranasal sinuses, larynx, uterine cervix, ovary, urinary bladder, kidney, ureter, and bone marrow (myeloid leukaemia). Despite this, and after the long suppression of scientific information by Big Tobacco, antismoking campaigns succeed in Australia. By now, despite my disclaimer, you'll think me censorious. Reformed or smug. I love smokers; perhaps I shouldn't be with them but Reader, I married one.

On my bush maternal side people smoked. After contracting TB at a horse sale, my grandfather tries to cleanse his lungs with plum tobacco, inhaled through his pipe. In the day of this consumptive scourge, doctors recommend it: 'Clear the decks', 'Cough

it up'. After his death, my grandmother raises six kids, runs the family farm, and later becomes a small round, doyenne of the town. As far as I know, she never smoked. But my mother remembers, as a child, striking Swedish safety matches on the metal sides of the truck in order to light their home-made rollies, as her brothers and sisters pushed feed to stock stranded on small islands in the swamp. Three of her sibs died of smoking-related cancers – brain, head and lungs.

On my paternal side you will find traces of religious sanctimony, put aside for business purposes but privately preached, with theatrical opening of windows, waving of handkerchiefs and staged coughing, after offenders drive away in their cars. During teen years, at loggerheads with my father on almost everything, I pick up the cues that smokers, even the blokes, are impervious to authority of the paternal kind. Even as I abhor their barking coughs, their insouciant flouting of reasonable laws, their skulking outside homes and pleasure venues, I'm attracted to smokers – in the same way I'm attracted to Socialists. Is rebellious historical camaraderie the reason I can't completely erase smoking cues?

'Smoking is dangerous,' I tell my teenage daughter when, after sneaking out for a smoke, she sets pea-straw alight in the rose garden outside her bedroom. Her brother hears her shrieking and tells me that he helps her beat out the dancing flames with washing from the line.

'Smoking is a gateway drug,' states my vigilante co-parent, retrieving condoms and cigarettes from the children's cars, in a show of breathtaking hypocrisy.

Smoking creates a lot of passive victims. At age ten, waiting in line for work to be marked, I stand by my teacher Mr Rashleigh's desk where all day long he chain-smokes. Ridiculously close beside him, I hold my breath against the reek of stale tobacco, the palpable halitosis wafting from his blackened teeth. I recoil when he lays his nicotine-orange fingers on my hand. We like each other. I am a good student. He is a good teacher, if a filthy old bloke.

Now things are better. Australians do not smoke in classrooms. Dental hygienists scrape off tooth crud; oral deodorisers can be purchased; the law enforces smoke-free zones; fines sharpen people's willpower. Australia's adult smoking has dropped from 25% in 1991 to 11.6% in 2019 (Australian Government, 2022).

In 2004, I attend a theatre production in Cork. The Irish lead actress chain-smokes throughout the play. Has every smoking exchange between cast members been choreographed or is it ad-libbed? They hold Chekov's gun in their hands and very soon it begins smoking. I fear for the cast and the actress's health over the months of the season. I imagine a playwright creating the drama while bent over a laptop in a filthy fug.

In Australia, for every 8 smokers who die from a smoking-related disease, 1 non-smoker dies from second-hand smoke exposure. (Australian Government, 2019)

By the end of 2004, Ireland bans smoking in any workplace, imposing strict fines for infringements. Like the rest of Europe, a long way behind Australia's 1987 legislation.

Smoking can be merciful, I think, at the bedside of my dearest friend, dying of a lung cancer unrelated to smoking, at St Vincent's Hospital Sydney. Outside her window, people in wheelchairs line the balcony, attached to oxygen cylinders, fagging on death row. How do the staff wheeling them in and out deal with this occupational hazard? What should public policy do to address it?

Smoking can be intimate: remember the old joke?

'Do you smoke after sex?'

'I don't know. I've never noticed.'

Klein describes the rush of a cigarette is a 'kind of negative orgasm; at the instant of inhalation, the poison kills a brain cell, perhaps, or discharges a synapse' (Klein, 1993, p. 53).

After years of my abstinence, should my husband and I live in adjoining apartments? Even if he continues smoking outside, residual white ash packed with toxins glitters in his hair, perfumes his clothes, spots his lips, his mouth and fingers, even after he scrubs.

'Yes,' he says, 'the ash flakes are carcinogenic.'

Should I swab or fumigate him – before I kiss him?

‘Smoking starts bushfires,’ I shout at him, as he circles our gum tree on his ride-on mower, cigarette pointing due south, ash dropping every which way in the wind.

Smoking signifies poverty and sometimes pain. In the 70s, taking the tube into London central, an elderly charwoman sits opposite me. No hands, she smokes an entire cigarette dangling from her lower lip, works her mouth to inhale, twists it sideways to exhale, leans over so the ash can fall away from her seat, swivels her foot to smooth it into the floor. Bangs her heel down on the butt, before she gets off with her bucket at the Borough Market.

In the 80s, in a railway town where I work, a house-coated neighbour, hobbles towards the deli, hair in rollers, slippers, puffing on a fag. At dusk, she drives the truck into the back hills where she and her husband spotlight and shoot roos. After they pick up the bodies and haul them onto the tray – before they skin them – they bend over a cigarette lighter to share a quiet moment beneath the moon.

We live in increasingly unequal times. You can’t miss the cues. ‘Smoking in Russia in one study is associated with poverty, alcohol consumption and western imagery’ (Australian Government (2022)). The first legal responsibility of companies, even the filthy pharmaceutical kind, the tobacco and alcohol megaliths, is to make profit for their shareholders. Your continuing desire is the object of their marketing. Smoking relieves stress – a mode of addiction associated with OCD and poor mental health.

In Phillip Salom’s *The Returns* (2020), characters suffer stress and hidden disabilities. ‘None of this health-think stops her having a guilty ciggie,’ thinks Elizabeth (p. 44). Klein quotes Kant and Freud on negative pleasure aka the death wish – ‘using cigarettes to master anxiety may be understood as preferring a certain form of dying over an intolerable form of living’ (Klein, p. 143) – and an 1856 *Paris fumeur* journal devoted to the pleasures of smoking as a kind of praying: ‘*Qui fume prie*’ (Klein, pp 2, 16). Smoking alleviates and stimulates anxiety.

In 1900 New York, women are banned from smoking in public. A woman with a cigarette is ‘regarded as dangerously sexual, immoral and not to be trusted’ (Blakemore, 2017). Klein links smoking with ‘strong currents of sexual and political freedom’ (184).

When men return home from WW2, women are subtly removed from the workforce – because of ‘jobs for boys’ – and coerced back into the kitchen with newfangled domestic gadgets. Mainstream female smoking becomes part of the impulse for equality, the kicking over of the historical feminine traces, although some women have always smoked in private.

Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977) brings women hope that they might survive post-war marriage. Her women take up smoking – *Clandestinus/clandestine* – frat women ducking away to deal with anger, boredom and grief. Allowed some education, many go under, while reliving their mothers’ lives; Michael Cunningham’s suicidal mother, for instance, fictionalised in *The Hours* (1998). The ever-flexible tobacco market responds with slimmer, cooler, cigarettes – Alpine, which I briefly smoked – that distinguish them from the harsher smokes that men enjoy ‘in the great outdoors’. Marilyn French contracts a smoking-related cancer.

Gender aside, many individuals choose sovereignty over government regulation. Will Self’s novel *Butt* (2008) savagely satirises smoking bans in a postcolonial place that resembles Australia, complete with eucalyptus trees, but it could be Iraq. After protagonist Tom decides to give up smoking, he flicks his last cigarette butt over the hotel balcony and singes an old man’s forehead – a culpable offence. Caught up in an absurd and bureaucratic legal detention, he is frogmarched on a journey of shame. Self’s gymnastic prose exposes the absurdity of the colonial government’s take on smoking – a screen perhaps for their greater sins, including the lighting of fires and smoking of Indigenous tobacco, on hospital corridors.

During his gruelling and symbolic journey to the interior, Tom seems to suffer more ‘radiant pride’ in giving up tobacco than physical withdrawal from nicotine. Despite dire prohibitions against smoking reproaching him from billboards, he rarely exhibits habitual smoking behaviour – the patting of pockets, sucking of sweets and drunkenness – or the agonies of withdrawal. Self – a smoker? – vents a lot of spleen, satirising the mutual profitability of the tobacco industry’s collusion with government.

In our wedding photos you may notice the glowing tips of cigarettes. Guests arrive in fur stoles, long elegant fingers wave their schtick, aloof aunts point tortoise-shell holders behind the piano, their dance elbows dangled over partners’ shoulders in order to smoke. Uncles snap the silver lids of portable ashtrays on their way to the garden to

smoke in peace. Forever preserved in my un-bride-like image, smoking with the best man, our heads ducked, laughing beneath a brass jardinière of lilies. We think we'd rather die smoking than quietly like our parents, in bush or suburbia. Only Europe validates our aspirations – no to a mortgage, just *Marseille* darling, – where life is authentic, where people smoke *Gauloises* at breakfast, with *Tortes au chocolat*, and think deep thoughts in *tabac* bars.

Trends show that people who start smoking as teenagers become lifelong users. My partner and his father smoke from age fourteen. His parents make smoking a rite of passage. By Year Ten or Twelve, their children smoke after dinner, while studying at the dining room table. Hitched up with a love interest, they graduate to formal Saturday night dinners, to chain-smoke with adults through eight or so Robert Carrier courses – grasshopper cocktails, vol-au-vents, chilled vichyssoise, seafood crepes, stuffed roasted birds with four vegetable accompaniments and bechamel sauce, crème brulee, moody cheeses that walk off the board, *chocolat* tortes, mints and liqueurs. Father drives a g-stripped Ford and wears tailored pants; Mother paints her nails and dyes her hair. Solid ash trays that could fell a child are set to the right of wine glasses. I find myself in a foreign country and I'm dizzy with its decadence.

Smoking doesn't always kill immediately but it gets you in the end. My partner's mother lived in a fug of smoke – fags in bed; cigarettes alight at each end of the kitchen bench while she cooks; packets deftly tucked in cardigan pockets and later taped to her walking frame. In your day, her doctor reassures her, smoking was considered sophisticated, and a natural bronchodilator. True enough. She regrets smoking, but it is too late. Lung cancer takes her quickly over six months. A better death than emphysema during which people drown in their own fluids. Lucid to the end, she skewers the politicians in the daily newspaper, cigarette poised over her shoulder.

His father quits smoking before his fiftieth birthday, just in time for his first heart attack, which he craves to diagnose as indigestion.

'Don't call the ambulance,' he tells his wife, during another event. 'They'll say I've had a stroke.' Stroke after stroke leads to vascular dementia, in a slim aesthete, until then fixed on mathematics, medicine, music.

During my first pregnancy, medical wisdom decrees it better not to smoke or risk dumbing down your child. Feeling like a nauseous, bloated toad, I light one up, my womb contracts, my baby metaphorically squeals in utero – end of story – I stop. Here

is my true confession: by age thirty, I am pretty much done with smoking, but an image of derelict mother-me persists, occasionally pushing the pram in which my infant squawks at 3 am, holding a cigarette aloft, responsibly blowing the smoke towards the ceiling, to avoid polluting my plenteous milk. Now public opprobrium targets the modern mid. Partners threaten their child's incubator-mother with microchipping, and random drug testing. Has prescient Margaret Atwood written this?

For decades, Big Tobacco barely registered the hit of health interventions, exorbitant state taxes and price-hikes, grotesque pictures on cigarette packets, bans on sporting sponsorships, age restrictions on children purchasing cigarettes for their parents at the local milk bar, on advertisements depicting prepubescent girls with slim packs tucked in the strings of their bikini bottoms. Behind the scenes, Big Tobacco creates false grassroot protests, and undermines EU initiatives to regulate the industry, obstructs courts over what they had known for decades – that nicotine is both addictive and carcinogenic. Big Tobacco continues racking up profit on a global scale. It is not until 1999, when a lung-cancer litigant wins \$US 3 billion against Phillip Morris, that companies *admit* what they have known since the 1950s – that smoking causes lung cancer.

Game over? No. The big five countries continue with sales and move on, researching vapes and 'light' cigarettes, developing patents and copyrights for Quit programs, sponsoring historical films in which it is permissible for actors to smoke. For some, prohibition further inflames desire. At the cinema I experience heightened moments of FOMO. Onscreen smoking looks so deliciously louche, so sensual, so seductive. What is wrong with me? Of course, sets and characters must look authentic, verisimilitude in adult films, a reasonable exemption from tobacco advertising bans. Hollywood's relationship with Big Tobacco has long been mutually profitable

In my middle-years, my partner and I travel a lot, for conferences and to visit family. Before I lay my head on the bed, I turn OCD, checking doors and locks, as he goes in and out until late at night, smoking in doorways on unfamiliar streets, in stairwells, on balconies and in alleyways. Freedom is relative. Should he be free to smoke – 'sorry' – or should I breathe clean air and sleep behind unlocked doors? He pays compo in stories about locals he meets and their tips and warnings; about girls' offers that curl my feminist hair; about risible outbursts from the sad and the sick and the weary. Cigarettes are 'frequently represented as democratic, international, cosmopolitan,' Klein argues. 'They overcome the barriers that war erects' (p. 150).

In China, where I visit my daughter, I know that the spittoon is part of public and political discourse, even in the Great Hall.

‘Take off your shoes when you come inside,’ she nags me – such a production – ‘the footpaths are filthy. Haven’t you seen how smokers hawk?’

China produces 40 % of the world’s tobacco and smokes a fair bit too. As a foreigner, I know that guards on every corner keep me safe, even as smoking supplements toxic pollution.

In Tokyo, I wait outside a media building, where my partner appears by Skype, as expert witness in an Australian rape case. Downstairs surrounded by suited men desperately smoking, leaned up against the walls, I cover my mouth and nose with my hands and walk away, in search of a park with trees.

When I look out of my university office window, I see smokers assembling where they think they can’t be observed. Choofing in a circle, companions of desperate habit, gossiping about management, about crises in higher education, and I want to join them. FOMO. You’ll see such formations outside office and restaurant buildings, and pubs and clubs in every city. On the ground or the roof, you will see the last addicts, clustered like lepers.

If you want to know an enormous amount about the history of European smoking and all its mannered and literary antecedents, read Richard Klein’s unrepentant book. While a nineties publication date limits understanding of contemporary mores, smoking narratives and their links with freedom and equality – ‘the closer cigarettes appear to the mouth of the subject the more aggressive is the gesture they convey’ – make fascinating reading (p. 160).

My non-smoking, healthy relative dies a fast and terrible death, her lungs and bones riddled with tumours. *This* is the bad thing that makes me give up smoking forever. Her estranged partner smokes in the house and car, a habit that continues during her dying, and feels like an act of aggression. I am enraged with her. I am cured. Her death short circuits all the illogical smoke screens I have constructed around me. I will never smoke again.

Wheeze-free, I take solace in new clean spaces now available for breathing, in rupturing memories of drinking coffee and alcohol while wagging a little white stick, but still some days yearn, to share the edgy, dark-humoured conversations of smokers. And my partner, I cannot give *him* up.

Smoking is the subject of this memoir essay but I am addicted to writing. Present in lives other than my own, I seek meaning in contradictions and, therefore, I can never give writing up.

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TEXT prose

Linda Gant

A non-anthropocentric humanity

Within the loins of the Great Dividing Range, small pools of moisture collect forming small fragrant pools, before trickling slowly down the flexured, fecund mountain body. Tall warrior-like eucalypts dabble their feet in headwaters, their flaking bark and leaves accumulating in seeps of rich tannic hue. Pliable lianas and vines tenderly wrap themselves around venerated imperial trunks of the blue-green forest kings, offering harbourage or food to journeying fauna. Dappled light paints the tussocky floor with a laxity caused by gentle fluttering of the vegetation, birds, or slowly moving sun. The crest of the range defines watershed boundaries; the troubled Murray-Darling River system snakes westward, while the eastern fall drainage basin gravitates towards the Pacific Ocean. Rivulets, small streams, creeks, and rivers held within the cupped landforms subtly increase in volume as they meander through changing landscapes, finally unifying to courageously push out to sea.

For decades I have been lucky enough to live snuggled up to the Great Dividing Range, on the banks of a small eastern fall river that forms part of the Hunter River system. A place of learning, a place to grow emotionally, a place to love. I chart rainfall, record bird sightings, note when the river retracts from continuously flowing, and when the flow returns. I have learnt the leaf droop or grass iridescence that heralds rain, recognise the sulfurous fumes of coal mines being carried on an easterly breeze, know the gibbous moon. I walk. I wander. Walk, wonder, walk, wonder.

I wonder about water. Water, H₂O, the most abundant compound on earth's surface. Odourless, tasteless, amphoteric, polar, solid, liquid, gas. Often, when captured by the

dull routine of domestic duty, watery questions fill my head. Has a particular water molecule formed with the same hydrogen and two oxygen atoms before, and if so, how many times has it floated past my place since the river was sung into time; where was the raindrop formed that splots down with concentric ripples on the water surface before seamlessly joining the waterways; if I bathe naked in the river, will the water be in the same configuration when it embraces me, as it is when it wraps around a lover downstream; do I swim in or drink the remnants of Jesus's piss? Controversial research postulates that water has memory. The theory suggests water can store information via an electromagnetic imprint from DNA and other molecules, thus having memory. Oceans, lakes and rivers could possibly serve as a great network of collected data, functioning like a conduit of communication for molecular structures. Are all lifeforms globally connected by cellular water? Is it cellular water memory that guides migrating species, or mankind to seek out their ancestral past? What history, story or memory seeps into our soul from mist, or shared breath?

And I wonder what happened to the eels. Abundant eels, now gone. These catadromous fish start their lives as eggs in the Coral Sea, spawned and fertilised in deep sea water off New Guinea or New Caledonia. The female eel sheds eggs once in her lifetime and on completion of spawning dies, then consumed by her accompanying mates. The tiny, fertilized eggs rise to the ocean surface and drift with the current, hatching into leaf-like lava along the way. The currents bring them, swimming and floating, to the east Coast of Australia where the tiny leaf-shaped larvae transform into clear tiny glass eels. When these tiny glass eels drift down the coastline of Australia they enter the river systems, and upon entering brackish tidal river mouths become pigmented and darken in colour. Eels are sexless from the time they hatch until they grow about 30cm in length. Eel population density determines the sex: males are usually dominant in a highly populated eel colony, while females are more likely to develop in the harder-to-reach upstream areas where eel population is fewer. Most males stay in the brackish waters of the river mouths, while the female embarks on a journey upstream to the freshwater creeks and ponds. Miraculously, the females have a genetic imprint that sees them return to the same body of water where their own mother had lived. Females will live for fifteen or twenty years, growing up to 1.7m long in their mother's pools, before heading to the Coral Sea to spawn and die.

Eels were once plentiful at my place. So abundant we used them for food and entertainment. A night-time recreation provided excitement for visitors and family. My job was to carry the kill bag. An old hessian oats sack that stank of a mixed past. The sunny oaten smell long gone, replaced by the pong of dead eels, smoke and decaying jute. Eel bashing expeditions were always tainted with sadness for me, as I hated to see the poor hapless creatures come unwittingly towards the light lure, only to be bashed to death by a garden hoe. These feelings were juxtaposed with the thought that it was good for bashers to get blood on their hands from the sacrificed food they consumed. If

you kill, you eat, if you eat you kill. Eating entails loss. Loss of vitality for one species to sustain another.

From 2017 to February 2020, New South Wales experienced record-breaking widespread drought. Between January 2017 and December 2019, temperatures were the warmest and rainfall was the lowest on record. This drought was the worst since historical recording started in the 1890s until 2020. The consequences were dire. Scorching heat ravaged the landscape, inflicting pain and despair on all living life forms. Waterways retracted to occasional fetid water holes at best, too putrid to sustain any form of aquatic riverine life. Searing heat pressed down on the dry black basalt rock bed, making the surface hot and inhospitable, turning a once life-filled aquatic system into a barren wasteland. Skeletons of mature she-oaks and red river gums stood as a reminder of a verdant past, their outstretched, dying arms begging for mercy. Soft songs orchestrated by playful breezes turned to an anguished moan. Birds disappeared. The slow burn of the drought sucked the life out of anything in its way, leaving the landscape pared, exposed and vulnerable.

February 2020 brought relieving rains, and by March 2020 the Hunter River catchment waterways were flowing once again. Catastrophic floods and declarations of natural disaster have been part of the mercurial river's journey since returning in March 2020. But the water system that provides a matrix of life for the entire eco-system is now restored for the time being. Water flows, vegetation has thrived. Despite renewed food sources regenerating, many migrating species have not returned. I look for eels, but they are gone; I listen for recognisable Dollar bird and Eastern Koel melodies and chortles – silence. I wonder if it is possible that the water memory within their cells has scrambled, and they have lost their way?

Oceans cover 70.8% of the Earth's surface, making the ocean a major recipient of anthropogenic radionuclides released to the environment by atmospheric and aquatic pathways. Sources of anthropogenic radionuclides include atmospheric weapon testing, nuclear power plant accidents, water-bore discharges, and the use of radioisotopes in medicine, industry and science. Radionuclides deposited on land may be transported to groundwater, lakes and rivers which end up in the sea. Studies have shown that marine species exposed for an extended period to radionuclides in seawater can undergo DNA damage. It has also been found that when radionuclides are present in seawater alongside commonly occurring metals like copper, the DNA damage caused by radionuclides increases. Very few studies on the effects of radionuclides on biota have occurred to date.

The Lower Hunter River Monitoring Program 2017 reported on the river's health between 2014 and 2016. Findings showed the Hunter River estuary receives excess sediment and nutrients such as ammonium, nitrates and phosphates, from agricultural and urban-industrial runoff, and high concentrations of nutrients and metals from industrial discharges and contaminated groundwater. Levels of dissolved nutrients

exceed water quality guidelines. Following rainfall, levels of copper and zinc in lower estuary waters exceed the guidelines for the protection of marine ecosystems.

A United Nations-backed panel, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), reported in 2019 that

Without drastic action to conserve habitats, the rate of species extinction – already tens to hundreds of times higher than the average across the past ten million years – will only increase...[A]gricultural activities have had the largest impact on ecosystems that people depend on for food, clean water and a stable climate. The loss of species and habitats poses as much a danger to life on Earth as climate change does.

The essential interconnectivity of the web of life on Earth has diminished to such an extent that the resultant fragilities constitute a direct threat to human wellbeing in all regions of the world.

Earth's human population is currently more than 7.8 billion, and according to the United Nations is expected to reach 10.8 billion by 2100. Unbridled population growth, with its associated pollution, loss of natural habit and biodiversity, and structural damage to the landscape, has inarguably come at great cost to lifeforms and landforms of our planet. Supply of non-renewable resources is being exhausted at a rapid rate. Abram (1977) observed:

Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own man-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still need that which is other than ourselves and our own creations. (p. 9)

Human life, just one of the many equal components of a global ecosystem, exists because of other elements of nature and the world. Are we capable of reimagining human systems based on values that preserve ecological diversity? If so, how do we promote the inherent worth of life forms that are not seen to be instrumental to human needs? How does mankind move beyond an anthropocentric environmentalism which is concerned with the conservation of the environment for human purposes? Does the living environment have an inalienable legal right to live and flourish?

A global and universal environmental crisis is self-evident to anyone wishing or willing to engage the overwhelming scientific evidence. It appears there is not a society, species, ecosystem or landscape that is unaffected. The collapse of biodiversity is happening at a rate not seen on the planet for 65 million years. Disagreement on environmental issues such as climate change or the inalienable legal right for the living environment to live and flourish arise from differing environmental world views. Some environmental worldviews are human centred, focused primarily on human wants and needs. Spiritual and philosophical traditions, including the Judeo-Christian tradition, have concepts of *human specialness* that justifies the right to dominate and exploit the

natural world, including other humans. Underlying thoughts of ‘stewardship’ deem we exist to watch over nature as a middleman between the Creator and Creation. On the other hand, an earth-centred worldview believes all forms of life are interconnected parts of the total natural world, without humans having superior rights. Reciprocity, fairness, compassion, respect and care for all lifeforms and landforms are tenants of an earth-centred world view.

How do we bring challenging environmental concerns and concepts into the mindset of populations with differing worldviews? Creative nonfiction, where personal experiences are embedded with facts, has the capacity to make scientific communication powerful and accessible. Presenting information as narrative, or visually, rather than by exposition, can give the experience context and meaning. Using literary craft and techniques in the form of narrative, plays, poetry or prose can present factual accuracy in a vivid, compelling, and dramatic way. Hennessy, Cothren & Matthews (2022) claim that “Climatic fiction is a genre of crises, emerging from an anxious now and unspooling an imagined and endangered future. *Cli-fi* is a genre knotted with tensions and emotions, enacting possibilities that are frightening and confronting”. Like Hennessy et al, I think it important to “avoid the dystopian visions that lead to paralysis rather than action”. And creative nonfiction writer Lee Gutkind (2022) states: “True stories based on real-world experience are one of the most powerful tools humans have for communicating information, fostering empathy, and changing ourselves, our culture, and the world”.

First step? I will walk, wonder, walk, wonder, note take, journalise ... and write creative nonfiction.

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TEXT prose

Amie Jane McKay

Love and addiction

You are my sweetest downfall.ⁱ

Samson's voice floated over a sleeping Delilah as the morning sun seeped through the window. Delilah looked over the side of the bed to the lower part of the loft where Samson sat shirtless at the piano, his long blond hair tied loosely on top of his head, his long thin legs clad tightly in black jeans. Delilah's eyes traced the curve of his spine as he caressed the keys, moving his body in unison with his music. Delilah felt extraordinary yearning as his rasping voice moved through her. *I loved you first, I loved you first.ⁱⁱ* Every morning Samson would wake Delilah with a song. It was their ritual; sacred and beautiful. This morning it felt tainted with her lie.

Samson finished the song and turned in his seat, looking up to their bedroom above. His blue eyes met hers and Delilah felt her body ache with love. She reached out her hand and smiled towards him, summoning him towards her. His movements were slow and painful and Delilah ached for him. Every day his light seemed to dim further. He reached the top and climbed into their bed, his body wrapped around hers as she breathed him in. His skin was cold and she smelt the sour smell of the heroin that he had smoked the night before.

"You haven't sung that song in a while."

"It reminds me of you."

Samson kissed the back of her neck. Delilah traced her nails along the veins of his arm and he pulled her closer into his body. Delilah felt waves of guilt wash over her. How could she tell him? They had made a deal to never lie to each other, and to her

knowledge they never had. Trust and honesty sustained them through Samson's failed music career and now Delilah was threatening it all with her own creative ambition.

The morning before, her agent Sally had phoned with the good news. A Sydney publishing company wanted to print a collection of Delilah's short stories. For the last three years Delilah had been writing about her life with Samson. Initially it started as a way to make sense of her feelings. A way to process the overwhelming thoughts of her love, and understand Samson's heroin addiction. When he disappeared in the night, she released her frustrations and fear in writing. Delilah had agonised over the decision to send them for publication, but in the end her desire to have people read her work won. But at what cost? Her heart broke with her betrayal.

"I have to go," Delilah whispered as she disentangled herself and kissed him softly on the forehead. Samson's eyes were closed and she watched his chest move up and down with slow, tired breaths. Breaths that made the most beautiful melodies. Delilah loved this body more than her own. But before her he was crumbling. The heroin ravaged him, leaving a protruding skeleton wrapped in pale, paper-thin skin. Despite it all, Delilah still felt overwhelming desire and longing. Her love for him was agony. She craved him like he craved heroin.

Samson hadn't always been so deep in the enslavement of addiction. When they started out everything about him was invincible to her. He had a gift for writing music that felt like it was running through your veins. He would perform comfortably in front of mesmerised crowds as his melancholy voice carried across the dim-lit bars. Bodies would sway to the rhythm, and Samson, eyes closed would take the audience on a journey to another time and place, where the world's problems no longer existed.

Samson's magic wound Delilah in its spell the first time she saw him. She had been commissioned to write an article for a local magazine and had heard Samson's name whispered in social groups for weeks. Delilah had done her research before she arrived. Samson grew up in the outer Melbourne suburbs and came from a good family. His father was a builder and his mother taught music. Samson was a music student at Melbourne University and early on found success in the city's bar scene. There were many articles written about his evocative voice and Delilah felt an invisible pull to find out for herself.

Delilah entered the bar on Chapel Street moments before Samson's first set began. He posed a powerful figure, seated at his piano with the light illuminating him. His long hair sat loose around his shoulders. As Delilah made her way to a table at the front of the stage, Samson's eyes locked with hers. She sat down, still holding his gaze. He smiled. Delilah felt like she was drowning in her own body as her senses battled for the surface. He looked away and started to sing. *You hold me without touch / you hold me*

*without chains*ⁱⁱⁱ. His raspy tones vibrated through her body, and she felt like she was floating through space. Time stood still. Everything that came before this moment was irrelevant. There was only Samson.

After his set, he approached her table with a disarming smile. Delilah introduced herself. His hand slipped into hers. Perfect, soft and beautiful.

“*Hey there Delilah.*”^{iv} His voice was exquisite. The room became hot, and nerves wrestled in her stomach. Delilah forgot about the interview. Instead, she sat lost in his music. His voice was sombre, passionate and wistful and it felt as if he was singing directly into her soul. The next morning Delilah woke in Samson’s loft. Her world had changed and she knew that her very existence was inextricably entwined with his.

Delilah showered, praying the water would wash away her guilt. She could barely remember what she had looked like before Samson. Her body was wasting away. Her eyes appeared black, and her red hair had lost its curl, lying flat and dry against her face. She heard Samson cough and looked up to see his reflection in the mirror.

“You look beautiful, Del.” His voice was hoarse and he licked his cracked blue lips.

Delilah smiled warmly. God, she loved him. Deep in the crater of her stomach she felt it. The heavy pain of love. “You didn’t come home again last night.”

“I’m sorry.” His brow creased in anguish and he pressed his eyes closed. “I’m so sorry, Delilah.”

“It’s okay.”

Delilah had known early on in their relationship that Samson had demons. He openly spoke to her about the pressure he felt to write new music. Of feeling inadequate, unable to express himself through art, how it suffocated him. Smoking heroin made all that go away. He had been using well before Delilah walked into that bar. The little bit of white powder, tucked in foil, lit and breathed in before a show. Warmth and euphoria racing through him. He confessed it all, and Delilah believed him when he said he could control it. He wasn’t an addict. It was part of his creative process. He never offered it to her, and she never asked for it.

But he couldn’t control it. Over time, heroin destroyed his drive to create new music. Delilah learned the more he used, the more his desire to give up. He promised he’d stop. He would get help. But the evenings would come and Samson would be gone, chasing the high. Delilah stopped hoping long ago that he would kick it. She had tried to help. Support him. Go to meetings. Spent all their money on rehab centres. Nothing worked. The darkness was too strong. His parents had given up and moved on. Samson’s friends had stopped calling, and Delilah’s couldn’t understand why she stayed.

“I’m sorry, Del.”

She turned slowly and he pulled her towards him. Delilah ran her hands through his long hair and kissed him.

“Stay home today, Del, stay home in bed.” He pressed his forehead against hers and started to sway in a slow dance of their silent song.

“I have to go.” Every part of her wanted to stay. The itch of desire wrestled and burned within. “I have a meeting with Sally about a new book.”

“Can you reschedule?”

“Go back to bed, Samson.” Delilah kissed him and led him back to bed. He climbed wearily under the covers. “I will come back.”

Delilah returned from her meeting with Sally and found Samson seated at the piano. He had showered and changed, his hair washed and tied back from his face. Delilah walked up behind him and put her arms around his neck, letting her hands fall to his chest. *These chains never leave me / they keep on dragging me down.*^v His hands moved rapidly and Delilah felt the tension in his body as she pressed into him. *Now I’m dancing with Delilah / And her vision is mine / Different kind of danger in the daylight.*^{vi} As the tempo increased Delilah moved back, sensing the change in his body. His voice had become deep, guttural and pained. *It’s a different kind of danger / The bells are ringing out / And I’m calling for my mother / As I pull the pillars down*^{vii}. Something was wrong. Delilah’s nerves fired and her brain become foggy with panic. She looked over to her desk in the far corner of the room and saw that her computer was on. *These chains never leave me / they keep on dragging me down.* Samson finished the song and his body shook.

“I read your stories, Del.” Samson remained facing the piano, his head bent downwards towards the keys.

“I was going to tell you.”

“You love me cause I’m fragile.”^{viii}

Delilah wanted to walk to him but her feet stayed planted on the floor.

“No.”

“It’s okay, Del.” He turned to face her, his eyes like broken glass. Delilah held his gaze and moved towards him, but he put up a hand to stop her. “I’m killing you slowly.”

Samson stood and walked towards her and took her hands in his. “I have to go.”

“No.”

Delilah felt like she was being strangled from inside. She wanted to speak, to explain, to tell him how much she loved him, but the words were muted by an unseen force.

“You can’t see it. Your stories, Del, they’re a journal of your death if I stay.”

“I won’t publish them. I promise. Forget them.”

“*Beneath the sheets of paper lies my truth,*^{ix}” he softly sang. A sad smile across his face.

“Just come to bed.” Delilah laid her head on his chest. “You can’t leave me.” She reached up and kissed him. With little resistance he kissed her back and held her tight.

“Come back to bed.”

Samson let Delilah lead him up the stairs. Delilah wished that she could melt inside of him. To scream, to cry, to claw her way into him so he couldn’t leave her. But he would, they both knew he had to.

Delilah woke in the morning. The piano sat abandoned and Samson was gone.

*

“Delilah, everyone is loving the book.”

Sally sat down next to Delilah and pulled her phone out to bring up one of the latest reviews.

“It’s taken a couple of years to get off the ground, but honestly, babe, you’re killing it now.”

Delilah smiled and waved Sally’s comments away. “I’m not really interested in the reviews anymore.”

“Will you just enjoy your success? For the love of God.”

“Okay,” Delilah conceded. “Let’s get out of here though, and get a real drink.”

Delilah stood up and walked towards the exit of the book shop. As she reached the door, she sensed him before she saw him.

“Samson?”

“*Hey there, Delilah.*^x”

Delilah put her hand to her mouth as a small sob escaped her. For a year Delilah had looked for him. She chased down family, old friends, everyone or anyone who knew him, and she had come up with nothing. Her grief was overwhelming. For months she

would walk around in his clothes, smelling his pillow, his aftershave. He had taken nothing with him when he left and Delilah assumed he didn't want to be found, or he was dead. The man before her was neither dead or alive. He was somewhere in between.

"You've cut all your hair." She reached out a hand and placed it on the side of his face. Her fingers touched the bristles along the top of his scalp, and he leant his face into her hand. His arms were lined with small scabs and his hands were scarred and dirty.

"You look beautiful, Del." He took her hand from his face and placed it back down beside her. "I got a copy of your book." He lifted the book in his other hand. "*Love and Addiction*, it's a good title."

"Thank you. Sams..."

"I have to go."

He turned and moved abruptly away before she could say anymore. Delilah wanted to run after him, even as broken as he was, the lure was still there. It lurked underneath like a second skin. This would be the last time she saw him. Her beautiful Samson. *You are my sweetest downfall*^{xi} she sang as he disappeared from view.

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MUSIC NOTES

I suggest listening to these songs in a quiet, secluded space. Florence + the Machine requires reasonable volume.

ⁱ Spektor, R. (2002). Samson. On *Songs*. Self-released.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p62rfWxs6a8>

ⁱⁱ Spektor, R. (2002). Samson. On *Songs*. Self-released.
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ⁱⁱⁱ Florence + the Machine. (2015). Delilah. On *How big, how blue, how beautiful*. Island Records.
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TEXT prose

Katie Pope

The Revenge of Helios

Author's preface

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) looked to the heavens and formulated a beautiful theory about planetary motion. But Kepler needed to experiment, to see if his theory was right. Kepler traced the movement of Mercury through the night sky and with great anticipation, checked it against his model. Sadly, all that Kepler's observations proved was just how wrong his theory was.

Perhaps it's not our failures that define us, but what we do with them. Kepler didn't give up, he kept slogging away at planetary motion for more than a decade. One rainy day in Germany, probably very much like the day before, Kepler made a breakthrough, which eventually culminated in "Kepler's Three Laws". 400 years later, these laws continue to be applied in a range of contexts probably beyond Kepler's wildest imagination. The laws explain not just planetary motion, but the motion of *all objects* in the *entire universe*.

One might learn a thing or two from Johannes Kepler.

But back to Earth and more mundane matters, like this experiment of *mine*. I set out to write a creative piece in the form of an exegesis. I didn't know where it would lead, but there was only one way to find out. So, like Kepler, I looked to the heavens and experimented and it's time to present my findings. I'll leave the ultimate question of success or failure to you, the reader.

But before I do, there are a few housekeeping matters to tend to.

First, *The Revenge of Helios* is written in a form I've called "creative exegesis". I wonder if the name will catch on. It's a bit of a joke, actually, because as Krauth and Nash (2018) explain, authors have been writing exegetically in creative works for thousands of years. For whatever reason, "the institution" separates these concepts, so the student puts the exegesis in the green box and the creative bits in the blue box. Jokes aside, I understand this is an appropriate model in most cases, but it might (wrongly in my humble opinion) suggest that to jumble the styles together is something odd or perhaps even wrong.

So, what do I mean by "creative exegesis"? For this piece I've been inspired by Bacon (2014) and focused on using journaling to create an exegesis, but I've also referenced other materials, even scrawl on the back of an envelope, to illustrate the writer's process. I've added a narrative to weave it together. The intention is that this swampy thing combines into something that is a creative piece and exegetical all at once. Being "creative", it's a made-up story, about researching and writing a story. In reality, it's partly true, partly fiction and some of the action takes place in the hypothetical future.

The piece *possibly* requires some familiarity with *The Odyssey*, Homer's poem from almost 3000 years ago. But don't despair, only a basic understanding of one passage suffices, and the relevant quote is set it out in full in the creative piece. Relevantly, the Sun God Helios' much loved cows are killed by Odysseus' men while Odysseus is napping. An angry Helios asks Zeus to seek vengeance on them. Zeus obliges, sinks Odysseus' ship and everyone perishes, except Odysseus.

Importantly, *The Revenge of Helios* is not intended to make a contribution to the scholarship of *The Odyssey*, but to provide a comment on research and writing processes. Or it might be an experiment with form in creative writing. It might even be a cautionary tale about how *not* to do creative writing research. Or even a comment on the dangers of fast-food consumption. Perhaps I'm not exactly sure what it is. In any event, I apologise to any *actual* scholars of classic literature who are offended by it.

I acknowledge Nash (2017a, 2017b, 2018) whose own creative/exegetical style inspired me, though I have endeavoured to put my own spin on things.

So, without further ado, I present *The Revenge of Helios* and leave my fate in the hands of the Gods.

Creative exegesis

Writing journal: 20 April 2022

Miles is napping, time to get started on this thing I've signed up for. A creative piece in the form of an exegesis, what was I thinking? I stare at *creative* and *exegesis* until they are meaningless blobs of letters, like jellyfish bobbing on the page.

I type a few sentences about the souls of dead cows hovering above a McDonald's drive-thru, but they're not quite right.

Distracted, I start scrolling on my phone through the news and weather, apparently a storm is coming. I click on Facebook and browse through pictures of kids' birthday parties. I read about the number of covid cases and wonder if my throat feels scratchy. Then something from Premier Mark McGowan catches my eye:

"Exactly one year from now at 11.27am on the 20th of April, the sun, moon and earth will align to create a Total Solar Eclipse.

It'll be particularly extraordinary here in WA, with Exmouth set to experience full darkness – making it the best land-based spot in the world to watch it from."

"Cool," I say out loud and google *Exmouth solar eclipse 2023*, until I hear Miles crying from down the hallway. The creative exegesis will have to wait.

Three days later, my writer's journal reads as follows:

Writing journal: 23 April 2022

Miles and I need to get out of the house so we go for a walk. We approach the bookstore and, on a whim, I drag the pram inside. I'm drawn to a small navy book with a hard cover. *Sun, Moon, Earth: The history of solar eclipses from omens of doom to Einstein and exoplanets*. I buy it, perhaps because I don't know what an "exoplanet" is and I think it might help me understand the "exegesis". I tuck it under the pram, away from Miles' grubby hands.

In the next few weeks, I get more serious about the creative exegesis. I stall at points, for example, an entry in my writer's journal from 3 May reads: "What's an exegesis anyway, isn't the author dead???", and nothing further. On the same day, my personal diary contains detailed notes researching return airfares to Exmouth plus accommodation for 2 adults and 2 children and a note to order some eclipse-viewing safety glasses.

Shortly after this, I appear to have a breakthrough. I develop the concept that creative writing, both the process and the product of it – might be viewed as *journeys*. I think I can tie the creative piece and the exegesis together quite nicely. I consider a number of “journey” texts in classic literature as inspiration. I want the whole thing to be a bit *literary*, you see.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is discarded since its frequent use of the “n” word is off-putting. I consider Jesus in the New Testament, but I already wrote about Nanna May’s bible in Assignment 1. I land on *The Odyssey*.

I vaguely know of *The Odyssey*. I studied Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* – and wasn’t that something to do with it? Also, there’s that Coen Brothers movie. I read *Circe*, a re-imagining of *The Odyssey* with a feminist spin. They’re great, but I need something less derivative. To my dismay, I discover that *The Odyssey* is really long and complicated so I abandon hope of reading it in a week. I don’t give up though, reading excerpts and commentary, looking for a way in. I narrow my focus to Book 12, bang in the middle of things.

I found some scrawl on a piece of paper in my laptop bag that’s worth mentioning. It’s hard to read but I think it says “*cows, vengeance, lightning bolts, darkness, empty threats*” and that’s it. I’m not sure I understand the jotting; it’s a timely reminder that if I want to be an effective researcher, I must make detailed, fully referenced, contemporaneous notes.

I flip the paper over and see that I’ve written on the back of a receipt from McDonald’s, dated 4 May. I have no recollection of visiting this establishment, but a word search of “McDonald’s” brings up the following extract from my personal diary.

Katie’s diary: 5 May 2022

I have a confession, dear diary!

Last night, Andy was out. I couldn’t be bothered cooking, so I loaded Evie and Miles into my silver Corolla and drove down Scarborough Beach Road, the golden arches of the McDonald’s restaurant enticing me, yet looming on the horizon like a premonition of doom. I pulled into the drive-thru and ordered a Big Mac meal (large) and two happy meals. As a vegetarian, I’m uncertain what possessed me to carry out this despicable act.

After we finished gorging ourselves, I gathered up the giant mass of plastic cups and wrappers, stuffed them into the brown paper bags from whence they came, and in the cover of night, hid the evidence in my 91-year-old neighbour’s garbage bin.

Last night, with a heavy stomach, I dreamed that the souls of dead cows were hovering over my house.

My musings change tack, back to the task of the creative writing researcher. One particular journal entry stands out:

Writing journal: 13 May 2022

My mind meanders to Brady (2000) and her bowerbird, which she used as an analogy for the creative writing researcher. I'm sure she meant the part where the bird was picking out all the bits and bobs to build its bower, but I think of that little bird, soaring through the air.

Suddenly, I'm itching to fly. I ruffle my feathers and stand up on the couch. I flap my wings and take off, but I flop about a bit, it's been ages since I've done proper research. Just as I'm getting into the swing of things, there's a loud cracking sound and a lightning bolt strikes the ground ahead of me. The heavens open and it pours. I return to the couch. I won't be bower-birding today.

Back inside, things have taken a dramatic turn. There's water everywhere. I panic, worried I'm going to be trapped and drown. As I look again, it's not my house, but the ocean. I lift my foot and it's slippery, my whole body feels weird. I study my reflection in the water and with some surprise, I see that I'm not a bowerbird, but a whale. Oh well, I think, at least I can swim.

Very strange indeed. I found further mention of this "whale" in other material. This was scrawled on the back of an envelope so I can't give details of the date or context.

Brady's bowerbird piece was written in 2000, over 20 years ago. Back then, there was no Facebook, twitter, Instagram or YouTube. No Wikipedia or iPhones. Only real news, no fake news, no endless commentary on commentary. It wasn't the same back then, now there's just so much stuff everywhere. Whatever this stuff is, it's all around me, weighing me down. I can't fly, like a bowerbird. I feel bloated and heavy, like a whale.

Another entry suggests I adopted this whale methodology when researching the creative exegesis.

Writing journal: 17 May 2022

I'm feeling like a whale again but I decide to make the best of it. I'm pretty hungry, so I dive into the water with my jaw open. Everything comes flooding in, the good, the bad, everything. Using my filters, I try to let through the bits that

seem good and eat them. But sometimes the wrong stuff gets in and I swallow it. Sometimes some really good stuff gets filtered out and I miss it. And other times, I get distracted and change my search terms and swallow that down as well. It's not perfect, but as a whale, it's the only research method I've got. I repeat the filtering process until I'm full.

Life moves on, until April 2023, when these issues come to a head in my travel journal.

18 April 2023

We didn't get those airfares, so we're driving to Exmouth. It's taking forever. I bring *Sun, Moon, Earth* with me, but I don't read it. I mainly fiddle with the radio, google things and try to stop the kids from killing each other.

It's become a habit to google extracts from *The Odyssey*. We're about half-way between Geraldton and Carnarvon, when I find something that triggers a memory:

"Father Zeus and ye other blessed gods that are for ever, take vengeance now on the comrades of Odysseus, son of Laertes, who have insolently slain my kine, in which I ever took delight, when I went toward the starry heaven and when I turned back again to earth from heaven. If they do not pay me fit atonement for the kine I will go down to Hades and shine among the dead."

I take a screenshot (I'm making better contemporaneous notes at least) and save it to images on my phone.

20 April 2023

We're standing in a small crowd in the flat expanse of the resort grounds in Exmouth. I look at my watch. It's 1123 am.

The sun is beginning to disappear. I'm a bit distracted, flipping through my phone. I scroll to the quote I saved from a few days ago.

My stomach sinks as I realise its meaning.

"Oh my God," I say to my husband, "it's happening."

"Pretty amazing, hey?"

"No, something terrible is happening! Do you remember that assignment about the *creative exegesis*?"

"No."

“Well, ages ago, you went out for a work dinner and I said I made a vegetable stir-fry and the reason there were no leftovers was because it was really tasty. Actually, I ate Maccas. I fed it to the kids too. It didn’t feel right, I thought it was indigestion, but now it makes perfect sense! Don’t you see?”

I point up at the darkening sky.

“Can we talk about this later?” he says.

“Through all my study of *The Odyssey*, I’ve become a *comrade* of Odysseus. When I almost got hit by lightning, it wasn’t an isolated storm like the Bureau of Meteorology reported. It was Zeus, sent by Helios, to avenge the *kine*, the Big Mac I ate. The only thing that saved me from Zeus was the whale analogy I came up with for my research!”

My husband looks puzzled, even concerned.

“I have evidence. Records!” I shout.

I show him the quote from *The Odyssey* on my phone.

“That’s just ancient gobbledegook,” he says.

“Well, it’s not that hard to interpret once you get the hang of it, but I’ll explain. Helios asked Zeus to avenge the killing of his *kine*. He means cows, or more specifically, the burger I ate. But Zeus failed, he didn’t drown me so there was no atonement. Now Helios is *going to Hades to shine among the dead*. No more sunshine on earth ... there’s going to be complete darkness for eternity!”

Suddenly, the sky turns black. I feel tingles down my spine. This is it – *the revenge of Helios*.

At this moment, my husband very calmly reaches into the bottom of the pram and hands me a book that looks vaguely familiar, *Sun, Moon, Earth*.

“Did you read it?” he asks.

“Umm, sort of,” I reply.

He frowns. “For God’s sake, did you even look at the pictures?”

I shake my head. “I read the first bit about omens of doom, but after that it was scientific mumbo-jumbo.”

He opens the book to page 50.

“Read this,” he says. “Kepler’s laws.”

“Kepler?” I say blankly.

“The orbit of objects in space. This book explains what a solar eclipse is, an alignment of the sun, moon and earth. By tracking orbits, Kepler’s laws can be used to predict the time, place and length of eclipses. Look here,” he says, pointing, “this eclipse will last 67 seconds.”

By the time I finish reading about Kepler, 67 seconds must have passed because daylight returns. I realise it's not Helios' revenge after all...

"Wow," I say. "A solar eclipse, cool. Ha-ha, Sun God, what a lark! I guess I got carried away with my research."

We stand for a moment in awkward silence.

"You know," he says reflectively, "I'm a bit disappointed in you. If you're going to write about things, I thought you'd do proper research, not just from a literary perspective, but that you'd get the science right as well."

I look at him in surprise.

"You're talking about Brady's bowerbird," I say.

I realise that I've done it all wrong. I'd thought that reading modern interpretations of *The Odyssey* was enough for me to place the story in a contemporary context. But to understand *The Odyssey* in relation to a solar eclipse, I had to do the *right* research.

I needed to research from all fields, not just literature, but science and nerdy stuff, like Kepler's laws. I was meant to pick out all the blue bits from everywhere and weave them together, like a bowerbird. But instead, I filtered all the research I did into a narrow concept, like a whale. Just because it's the age of google doesn't make Brady wrong, I still had to be a bowerbird.

"I feel so stupid," I say.

I intertwine my fingers with my husband's as we walk.

"You know," I say, "people have this idea that creative writing research is *easy*, that we don't really do anything. But it's actually quite hard, to get it right."

I realise I've been shaping everything that's happened to fit a particular idea about *The Odyssey* and Helios' revenge, rather than seeing what it actually is, a family holiday to Exmouth to see a solar eclipse.

I feel a weight lifting as I put this failed experiment, *The Revenge of Helios*, behind me. The kids are playing happily as my husband and I walk, the sun warming our backs.

It's a rare moment of harmony.

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Notes to the creative exegesis

The Facebook post referred to on page 2 from the page of WA Premier Mark McGowan, posted on 20 April 2022 and accessible at
https://www.facebook.com/MarkMcGowanMP/posts/541225117366338?comment_id=509571457529963

The full citation of the book referred in the first paragraph of page 3 and referred to elsewhere as “*Sun, Moon, Earth*” is Nordgren, T. (2016) *Sun Moon Earth: the history of solar eclipses from omens of doom to Einstein and exoplanets*, Basic Books.

On page 3, the reference in the fifth paragraph is to Twain, M. (1994) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Penguin Books.

On page 3, the reference is to Joyce, J. (1992) *Ulysses*, Penguin Books.

On page 3, the reference in “that Coen Brothers movie” is to Coen, Joel and Ethan (2000) *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* [Film], Touchstone Pictures.

On page 3, the reference in the sixth paragraph is to Miller, M. (2018) *Circe*, Bloomsbury.

On pages 4 and 7, the references are to Brady, T. (2000) A question of genre: De-mystifying the exegesis. *TEXT* 4 (1). <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.35896>

On page 9, the quotation commencing “Father Zeus” is from Homer, *The Oddysey*, 12, 377-383 accessible at
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0136%3Abook%3D12%3Acard%3D364>

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TEXT script

Kirk Dodd

*The Tragicall Historie of Agamemnon;
Victor of the Trojan War and Husband to Queen Clytemnestra*

Extract from a “Shakespearean” blank verse drama
a companion play to Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*



Developed with the assistance of Create NSW

[1.2] Palace of Troy

Enter AGAMEMNON, exultant in his gleaming bronze. He walks downstage reading a scroll and glaring at the audience; plucking his thoughts from their very brows. Enter the GHOST of Iphigenia (invisible to mortals). She moves contentedly throughout the scene, sometimes interacting quietly with the action or amusing her solitary self.

AGAMEMNON

How jauntily naïve this jaundiced Spring,
 With Boreas' breath and Phoebus' warmth stretched thin;
 Whose dazzling beams find work enough
 To penetrate these mortal dusts of fallen Troy.
 What luxury to wake in old King Priam's bed, 5
 Still warm with sagely age, though now, usurpèd.
 And gazing out his windows spy a horse!
 [*His eyes rise slowly to the rafters...*]
 Whose giant splintered head looks down at me
 As if I held some apples or some oats!
 This feat we have achieved daunts me with awe. 10
 An enterprise of war ne'er seen before...

Enter NESTOR, rummaging for papers, with TALTHYBIUS trailing...

NESTOR

Knock-knock, dear Agamemnon, Lord of Men!
 I have thine Ode amongst my files
 And bringeth here these trophies to peruse—
 Just there, methinks, Talthybius son, good man. 15

TALTHYBIUS brings three heads on platters and places them on a bench (or else they might be stood on standing pikes)—the heads of Priam, Troilus, and Paris.

AGAMEMNON

Much thanks. I called for Menelaus, has he—?

NESTOR

Thy brother comes, yet by and by.

AGAMEMNON

He comes yet by and by...? How fare the men?

NESTOR

Like lions surfeited, they lounge and preen;
 Ay patting at their bellies and their groins. 20

AGAMEMNON

I'faith; my brother lags, I summoned him!

NESTOR

Talthybius, please—hie hence to fetch Menelaus.

TALTHYBIUS *exits*. AGAMEMNON *broods*. NESTOR *admires the gruesome trio of heads*. The GHOST of Iphigenia *glides behind them*.

AGAMEMNON

By his white hairs, 'tis old King Priam?

NESTOR

Eternal wise, but for one foolish son.

AGAMEMNON

The pretty one, must Paris be, then, hum?

25

NESTOR

If pretty canst thou call this grisly sight.

This is the face that cursed ten thousand graves;

Who would have thought that he could kill Achilles?

AGAMEMNON

Young Troilus, there, methinks, must be the third?

NESTOR

'Tis Priam's youngest prince; slayed by Achilles.

30

AGAMEMNON

The lottery of this war shall haunt us yet.

NESTOR

Would'st care now for this Ode thou didst request?

AGAMEMNON

What Ode is this?

NESTOR

Doth not recall?

Ay, deep within thy cups and roaring song

You did command an Ode upon the horse!

35

Now, typically, the poet calls it "draft"—

Proclaims this too poor yet for thy great taste.

And yet, I hold the draft, if 'twould it please?

AGAMEMNON

Though mystery this to me, harrumph! Deliver!

NESTOR

I know not the balladmonger's scheme;

40

But harbour yet some age shouldst find the rhyme.

[*Putting on his spectacles. Reading.*]

"(I) When the Greeks on Troyan shores their Fates opposed

*(Lest all the ten years' war did seem in vain),
 Ulysses, full of ample hopes, proposed
 A full retreat their fleet till none remained; 45
 But for a statued Horse of mountainous size,
 Re-tumbled from the timbers of lost ships;
 Their gift to th' God Athena thus to earn
 By Troy's devoted faith their safe escapes.
 Yet within that horse's belly laid disguised 50
 Full forty valiant Greeks braved to surprise
 By night the Trojan gates—as th' Greek ships all returned.
 (II) And so, three faithful barks, their ribs were fleeced
 (For the horrid toils of war left boats unmanned);
 Upon Oak frames were Pine and Fir planks braced 55
 Till stood the Man-Made Mare of ninety hands—”*

AGAMEMNON

'Tis a large horse.

NESTOR

'Tis a very large horse; now shush.

*[Reading.] “As patient as a spider's sack unhatched,
 Or a nest of wasps yet brimming for assault,
 The pregnant Mare was stallioned with teeming heirs, 60
 Enwomèd in the dark and painted black,
 While the Greek fleet sailed away in feigned default;
 And th' Trojan knaves all marvelled round this vault
 To learn—from engraved words—this gift was theirs.
 [III] Elated now their ten-year siege withstood 65
 (And careful not to earn Athena's wrath),
 With ropes into their gates this Horse they pulled,
 And Troy all night great celebrations had!
 But as deep and bumbling slumbers lumbered all—”*

AGAMEMNON

O, I like that rumble-bumble! 70

NESTOR

*It tumbleth off th' tongue, indeed.
 [Reading.] “But as deep and bumbling slumbers lumbered all,
 The Pregnant Dam let slip her brood of men;
 Whose sabled arms smeared black as panther's hide
 Did splash all Troy with blood and coagulate gore; 75
 Smok'd hot with slashing swords, Troy's gates forced ope'
 To admit the Grecian troops, turned back again,
 Who from within, did rescue then their Spartan Queen.”*

[*Beat.*]

AGAMEMNON That's it?

NESTOR

Concision bares a cherished soul, my Lord. 80

AGAMEMNON

Ugh...! Is not all this great Hubris, Nestor?!

NESTOR

T'is politic to fuel th' fires of greatness;
And greatness smooths the roughness of misdeeds;
For misdeeds should be gilded with glittering feats—
And what mean feat but greatness Hubris cheats? 85

AGAMEMNON

Thy honeyed words do reek of poisoned flattery.
[*Gazing about.*] Out there upon the Hellespont, Nestor;
Upon those sandy planes or Bramble Hill;
At night with fires to murderous Nyx ascent,
Or in the morn, as daylight peeped beneath 90
The curtained dark—I felt belike a 'gantic
Bovine bull: head high and lowing loud
Above the fielded crowd of muscular herds;
Mine armour primed; my shoulders staunch; my nostrils
Snorting steam; my hooves scraping th' dust— 95
My balls swung free and wide as Hades' lair!
But now 'tis done, and these cloud-kissing walls
Of Ilion we've brought down... who were we fighting for?

NESTOR Why, for Helen.

AGAMEMNON For Helen?

NESTOR For Menelaus.

AGAMEMNON For my brother and his Queen?

NESTOR For all of Greece. 100

The GHOST stands close to AGAMEMNON (the red slice on her neck streaming blood).

AGAMEMNON [*Fraught.*]

O, Nestor. What have I done?

Knock-knock. Enter MENELAUS with TALTHYBIUS trailing.

NESTOR

We'll tend outside th' door, good gentlemen.

Exit NESTOR *and* TALTHYBIUS.

AGAMEMNON

I thrice did call, why such delay?

MENELAUS

Wherefore such haste when we have all of Troy?

AGAMEMNON

How fares thy wife?

105

MENELAUS

Why, all do know: my Helen is the fairest!

AGAMEMNON

Do not play coy with me! Doth beat thy wife?

MENELAUS

She's far more beaten me these past ten years.

AGAMEMNON

Who tacks into the wind beware the *boom*!

Is Helen safe?

110

MENELAUS

Of course she's safe, she's rescued now from Troy!

AGAMEMNON

The men report much screaming from her rooms.

MENELAUS [*Singsong.*]

With biting and scritchng the cat gets kitling.

AGAMEMNON

We did not fight to have thy Helen harmed!

MENELAUS

She is my wife; she is not thy concern.

115

AGAMEMNON

I beg thy pardon!

MENELAUS

I beg thy pardon thee!

AGAMEMNON

Doth say thy Helen is not my concern?

MENELAUS

I say, indeed, my wife's not thy concern!

AGAMEMNON *slaps* MENELAUS *hard*.

MENELAUS

Forsooth! Art lunatic? Blind folly pollutes thy brains!

AGAMEMNON

Doth say again, thou insolent dog?

120

MENELAUS

Thou hast no business in my wife's affairs!

AGAMEMNON *strikes* MENELAUS *again, who comes up with his sword drawn*.

MENELAUS

Thou art the lion: destroyeth all his pity,
And having lost his heart now knows no shame!
How durst strike me!

AGAMEMNON

How durst strike her!

MENELAUS

She's mine!

My wife; my property; my adulterous—

AGAMEMNON

Queen!

125

Thy Helen is thy Queen, and Sparta's Queen.
You much mistake "what is" for what it means!

MENELAUS

And lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds!
Augh! Each day an eagle feasts upon my liver!
Regrows it o'ernight to feast next day—
Puh! Sometime she is the victim of his crime...
Sometime she is the villainess of elopement!
She looks on me with inklings so estranged,
The remembrance of her place all long since strayed...

130

AGAMEMNON [*Waving scroll*.]

I have with me the scroll of all our dead.
A reckoning, whose grim and costly toll
Shall see us curbing civil strife back home.
Some thirty thousand men, our side alone.
Some thirty thousand souls, whose graves doth mortify,
Yay desecrates! when thou doth raise thy hand
Against the emblem of their sacrifice! Zeus!
Thy duty now is to forego thy pains.
Find valour in restraint; write nobleness
Beside thy valiant name! Let virtue on
Our brazen tombs be scribed;

135

140

145

Let everlasting fame be all our guide!
 No king has been affronted more than thee.
 No king yet forced to shoulder so much shame.
 But do not be devoured by that shame.
 Climb high to clutch at reasons where there's none! 150
 With nobleness and heart crush down that shame
 As we have crushed the hard-stone walls of Ilion.

MENELAUS *approaches*. AGAMEMNON *holds out his arms*. MENELAUS *punches his brother hard and the pair fall about brawling like schoolboys—drawing their swords, they stand to joust with clashing blades—bringing* NESTOR *and TALTHYBIUS in shouting*.

NESTOR Gentlemen! Ánakes! Lords!
 Put down—! Put down thy swords, or the brittling air—!

TALTHYBIUS
 Put down thy swords ye scatological brains! 155
 Or by my troth, the brittling air or Nestor here
 Shall thunderbolt yay clap thee in arrears!

AGAMEMNON *and MENELAUS halt their combat (turning oddly) as they catch their breath*. AGAMEMNON *confers quietly with TALTHYBIUS, sending him offstage*.

NESTOR
 Need I demand the cause of this unrest?
 Whene'er my brothers and I did fight or brawl
 Mine uncle with our hulking heads would dash 160
 Like so [*claps*—like two great flints; and by Chesu, Lord!
 We gazed upon th' unnumbered sparks of heaven!
 Impassioned men like fleetest hounds unwisely
 O'errun the scent of truth; and must retrace their steps.

AGAMEMNON
 Forswear it now; that he his treasured wife 165
 Submits to brutal threats against her life!

MENELAUS
 Hildings and harlots! Hildings and fucking harlots!
 I should have kill'd my torment when I could!
 How swift her sight quick flew into mine eyes
 When rushing into the temple I did find 170
 My Helen cowering under th' tumbling walls of Troy—
 Stopping my breath, yay, choking my throating heart!
 We gaping stood: with grand and fretful scrutiny;

And stepping forward, frowned I in dismay;
 My sword upraised—for surely she must die! 175
 But from whence she knelt, as I encroached,
 Her eyes rolled back, she swooned, she swayed,
 And toppled down to ground she lay, collapsed.
 A vision of light confined to my enthrallment.
 Her shifting dress exposed one full breast... 180
 [*Beat.*]
 Eight lives I slew sith I escaped that Horse,
 And Helen should be nine, but my sword dropp'd.
 My rapier's-point; extent beneath her breast
 Did lift its pleasant wonder whence it lay,
 So firm yet pillow-pliant on my blade. 185
 'Twas then (but accidentally) my sword cut—
 An incise slight, but an eyelash slice that bled,
 And from her parted lips escaped a moan
 That launched me back to Sparta, our sweet home.
 I knelt, so my coarse knuckle could trace her blood, 190
 Whose crimson drops did strew her bosom up
 And there made blush th'more her rosen bud
 Which strained like rubied turrets under touch.
 Entrancèd now, I stooped to kiss her breast;
 And like the thirsty deer: that a moonlight pond doth lap, 195
 I licked her breast and hungered forth more moans;
 Till waking, then, she smiled, methought, and groaned,
 And in that strangest instance we alone
 Did share eternal sanctuary, atoned.

Enter TALTHYBIUS silently behind MENELAUS with HELEN (who has a black eye).

'Twas then, her Menelaus spied she there, 200
 And modesty to fly not knowing where,
 With groans again she swooned and 'gan to cry;
 As all betwixt us stood, again! most jeopardized!

AGAMEMNON

God ye good-morrow, Helen. How so, thy broken eye?

HELEN

I haply am returned to Menelaus. 205

MENELAUS

How dare ye fetch my wife without my say!

AGAMEMNON

Why is't that Helen sports this bruised eye?

[*Beat.*]

MENELAUS

For that she went and blackened our sweet name;
So I, in rage, have blackened one her eyes.
Yet thy chiding words here gentles my condition;
And knowing now great love earns great remits,
Beyond the two fraught souls who people it—
[*Tapping head*] I enter in my ledger my restraint.

210

HELEN *kneels weeping and wailing—distraught. The men look confused and perplexed. HELEN extends a trembling hand towards the severed heads...*

HELEN My husband! My husband!

MENELAUS [*Enraged.*] Thy Husband?!

215

[*Grabbing the head of Paris menacingly.*]
This was thy foul abductor, thy husband not!
Thy husband stands before thee full of flesh!
And more than he a broken bloody mess!

MENELAUS *throws down the head and kicks it—needing to be restrained.*

AGAMEMNON

I forget our coarse and brusqu'ish ways.
Talthybius, please, return her to her rooms.

220

TALTHYBIUS *exits with HELEN, weeping.*

MENELAUS [*Seething.*]

Thank you! And now will I to her seem like a brute!

AGAMEMNON [*Roaring.*]

A name thou earneth smartly, well enough!

NESTOR [*Arm around AGAMEMNON.*]

Something today, Menelaus, sets him on edge.

AGAMEMNON

Aye, 'tis true, i' faith; if truth be truly known.
[*They watch him collect his thoughts.*]
This morn, before the dawn, when all these walls
Did lachrymosely weep cold tears for Troy:
Methought I saw my daughter on the stair.
My neck hairs stood saluting silent company.
And turning I, with blanching terror gripped,

225

Did see the shape aloof—there, on the stair. 230

NESTOR

There's been much strangely sightings like to this;
Now that our frosted hearts begin to thaw.

AGAMEMNON

She wore that fine blue dress that long before,
With grace and poise, within her final hours she wore.
'Twas then she turned and stared—and neither was 235
She fraught nor hurt nor scared but sad... And then
She smiled, which broke my heart; for still her throat
Was sliced and steeped with gout's of blood.
Her skin was pale; her bones most marrowless;
Her eyes did gleam with such low ashy lights 240
They glimmered like coals left smould'ring overnight.
Her hand then slowly reach for me, which I
Regarded happily until I saw
The blade she held, its handle toward my hand.
This was the sacred sword: the brutal brand, 245
The ruthless instrument of sacrifice
That deep within those cooling sands of Aulis...
Content within the barley basket there...

NESTOR Agamemnon—?

AGAMEMNON

Ten years ago, in Aulis, I lay buried. 250
'Twas then, a night-wandering weasel shrieked [*shrieks!*]
Draining my blood to Lord-my-Zeus-knows-where!
I looked: th' weasel pointed to the stair—the stair!
But when I turned again, 'twas no one there.
[*Beat.*]
What can I hope to say to my dear wife...? 255
When I our daughter took; then took her life?

MENELAUS

How 'scaped I death, provoking thee thy wrath,
When so much gained upon thy sacrifice?
Yet speak no more; this dream let us misplace;
Till well-content, my brother, I've made peace. 260

MENELAUS *embraces AGAMEMNON tightly.*

NESTOR

'Tis a final cause that Agamemnon needs;

Some fine design to conquer home again.

MENELAUS

Well, as th' adage says: thy Clytemnestra's fair!
So woo her, win her, and wear her!
By "wearing" her, I mean as yet to say—

265

AGAMEMNON

I know what means to wear my wife.

MENELAUS

Like a glove upon thy hand; or a whetstone wears thy knife!

NESTOR

Inflame her heart; engulf her womb; make thick
Her breasts and swamp her with thy love!
Yet mark those scowling clouds upon his brows.
Let us vacate his rooms, but soon I will
Return with a prize for thy esteem.

270

AGAMEMNON

Get thee gone. Make whole what's long been torn.

NESTOR and MENELAUS *exit*. AGAMEMNON *stands with the GHOST of his daughter*.

AGAMEMNON

I would as lief take physic from a quack!
'Tis the bane of men to balk at grave concerns
And balm discomforts more than brave the cause.
This breach cannot be stitched, cannot be medicined.
But like a broken limb yet might be braced;
Might yet be grafted against some splint
Of purloined reason—so with cautious steps,
With a crooked gait and wary hobbling limps
Might stagger I yet to stumbling doomsday.
So many thoughts condemn my manly grief.
As when I held at tender age her limp
And listless form, that with hot fevers shook;
And ferried her (for air) upon the ramparts—
There urging her to live; to strive for breath!
Yay kissing her flaming cheeks my tears made wet!
O, Trust...I've murdered Trust!
All trust with my remaining children—gone!
All trust with Clytemnestra lies—deceased!
I wrote with glee my wife to send our daughter;

275

280

285

290

With feigned delight did I forswear my lie—
 That great Achilles sought her for his bride;
 What mother would'st not send her virgin child? 295
 But why? Why slay my sweetest daughter thus?
 For th' honour of all Greeks, or mine own fame?
 [*Pause.*]
 With colours new must I advance my feats;
 And govern all the senses of my Queen.
 Her vision—with pomp and grandeur must be filled 300
 To show great worth can flow from gravest ills...
 Her hearing—shall my spoken words be trimmed
 With modesty, constraining all my hubris.
 And as for those remaining tactile senses—
 As touch, as taste, as scent—sweet Zeus, my Lord! 305
 Lend me a share of every soldier's hoard
 Upon return from wars, to consummate
 His conjugal rights; her garrisons must I infiltrate
 And scramble so her signals with distraction.
 This much may I expect from mine own Queen: 310
 With chaos must I flush her venom'd veins.

Knock-knock. Enter NESTOR with CASSANDRA wearing a bridle, her hands bound behind her back. She is made to kneel.

Author Note

This Shakespeareanisation of the tragedy of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra (occurring after the mythical sacking of Troy by the Greek forces following their ten-year siege to rescue Helen) arose from my interest in developing new “Shakespearean” blank verse dramas by reapplying some of the rhetorical precepts for composition used by Shakespeare to create forceful blank verse that has an archaic aesthetic akin to the language observed in Shakespeare’s plays. I was initially inspired by teaching the *Agamemnon* play by Aeschylus and discovering this play might be called a “proto-tragedy” because it was written before Aristotle’s *Poetics* and seemed to lack those formal elements of *peripeteia* (tragic reversal) and *anagnorisis* (tragic recognition) – that is, these things happen offstage in the Aeschylus play so the prospects of an audience experiencing a strong catharsis by sharing these moments with the protagonist seemed diminished. I therefore attempt to reinstate these elements in my script with a view to strengthening the prospects of catharsis. I was also impressed by the presentation of scenes from this play by a group of female students who viewed Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon (through the lens of the #MeToo movement) as a justified reaction against the patriarchal violence subjugating women of her time. I

have tried to be faithful to this observation in my development of Clytemnestra's character as a justified usurper of her husband's throne and a politically savvy manager of her "queendom" in her husband's absence.

I felt Shakespeare's dramaturgy could also bring vibrancy to the Agamemnon story – where all the action of a Greek tragedy occurs outside the castle walls, Shakespeare typically takes us behind those walls into the banquet halls, the dungeons, and the bedrooms. In 2020, the Shakespeare's New Contemporaries award run by the American Shakespeare Center was calling for authors to submit a "companion play" for any one of four Shakespeare plays listed – including *Troilus and Cressida*, which was Shakespeare's quizzical "Greek play" of the Trojan War that ends before Agamemnon's forces have devised the giant wooden horse to help seize victory. So construing my drama as both a Shakespearean response to the Aeschylus play and a "sequel play" for *Troilus and Cressida*, I obtained a Covid-styled stimulus grant from Create NSW to assist development of the play which then became a semi-finalist for the Shakespeare's New Contemporaries award before further Covid restrictions in the US crippled finances and the award was indefinitely "paused", the finalists never being announced.

This scene (1.2) was inspired by Shakespeare's willingness to break the three unities (*Antony and Cleopatra* being the classical exemplar), particularly the unities of time and place, allowing me to dramatize the liminal hiatus between Agamemnon's ten-year siege of Troy and the domestic war he will soon face at home – where the remainder of the play is set in Mycenae. In this scene, Agamemnon is grappling with the momentousness of his achievements while preparing to sail back to Greece, confronting the fact that ten years earlier he tricked his wife Clytemnestra into sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to the Gods. Agamemnon knows that the life he fought so hard to preserve is never going to be the same again – and the sacrifice of his own daughter's life seems incredibly cheapened when his own brother is beating the very woman (Helen) whom he fought so hard to rescue. Indeed, the fuller scene depicts several forms of violence against women (that is often overlooked in romantic renderings of the myth) and this helps, dramatically, to establish the patterns of violence against which Clytemnestra will rise, heroically, to take vengeance. Shakespeare's penchant for bringing ghosts onstage has informed my decision to bring the silent ghost of Iphigenia onstage, haunting the scene at times conspicuously and at other times more subtly. This helps create a tragic momentum and works with Agamemnon's monologue and soliloquy to generate forms of *peripeteia* (tragic reversal) and *anagnorisis* (tragic recognition) that the audience can share, building modes of catharsis throughout the play.

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