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TEXT graphic prose

Ross Watkins

life sentence

Dr Ross Watkins is an author and illustrator for both children and adults. His adult novel The Apology (UQP) was published in 2018, while One Photo (Penguin Random House) was shortlisted for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2017 and published in North America and China. Ross' scholarly research explores practices in illustrated narrative, representations of melancholy, and radical modes of scholarly writing. Ross is a TEXT editor and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at UniSC.
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life sentence

BY ROSS
WATKINS





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TEXT poetry

Timothy Loveday

2 poems

hot glue

some days these poems will not come –
hot glue in the gut. the *root* that reaches
for the bird, as if the bird were already buried.
as if the clouds were its burial. here, you can
see only an absence: a branch that bears no fruit
watches the hole in the sky, as if the purpose
were to have made, not in the making. as if
becoming isn't its own poetry.

stories

me and my mum
we pretended

sometimes
it was fbi
investigations
into laundromat receipts

or soccer ball bombs
like black and white boils
in the backs of suvs

or huge beer-bellied men
with virginal pregnancies

or russian counteragents
trading counterfeit chicken salt
for guaranteed winning scratchies
at the local news agents

or teachers
who were octopied aliens
distorting homosapien
education for the goal
of intergalactic domination

or postal boys delivering
tommy guns on bmx hot-rods
for retirement age syndicates
manufacturing eckies
out of caravan parks

or pimps making cash swaps through
the dvd box set of *love actually*
at the local video easy

me and my mum
we pretended

gathering these stories
like our keepsakes

gathering these stories
to keep us safe

at her work
the posties tavern
i heard tales from
her locals

of horses as big as mansions
of rusted ford falcons turned ferraris
of fencing companies that were making millions
of dogs who were worthless until the last ticket
of summer days so long that skin started melting
of women so busty they had to be circumnavigated

those days when *old peeping neval* was in mi6
how *fatty* missed out on being the front man for acdc
how *cue ball* brought down half the coppers in goulburn

me and my mum
we hummed along
indulging all of them

pretending

because even then i knew
that sometimes when we say
stories what we mean is *survival*

when the wall phone
travelled twenty years
exploding on the tiles
the dial tone still beeping

wasn't it the mopped floor
that mum slipped on?
wasn't that how her
foot was broken?

when she flew through the air
her sudden backwards swan dive
wasn't she just a mission: impossible
master of the floor is lava?

when she begged him to stop
her face going blue like
she was underwater
wasn't she just practicing for
the guinness world records?

and wasn't my father hercules
capable of turning a body
into a human javelin?

or wasn't he the hulk
a monster in desperate
need of good medicine?

and had he ever really even touched her?
or was it his un-micro-manageable
telekinesis at work again?

and maybe as mum said
she just deserved it
she'd egged him on

me
my father
my mother
my brothers
we pretended

that the women's shelters
were made for other women

that he wasn't that bad *really*
in the end

that because he never touched us
he was saying over and over again
i love you i love you i love you

that we should blame his mother
because when he was young
she had spoiled him

that it was the world
that fucked everything

that those men who always
called themselves *mum's locals*
until she had to bar them
might one day come
to her defence

might one day save us

these human barriers
that we had gathered
like stories

all of us
we pretended

Tim Loveday is an award-winning poet, writer, and editor. As the recipient of a 2021 Next Chapter Wheeler Centre Fellowship, a 2022 Melbourne City Arts Grant, a 2022 Writing Space Fellowship, and a 2023 Australian Arts Council Grant he focuses on Australian masculinity, intergenerational violence, and rural communities reckoning with climate collapse. His poetry/prose has appeared in Meanjin, Overland, The Griffith Review, Cordite, Suburban Review, Mascara, and The Big Issue, among many others. In 2022 he won the Dorothy Porter Poetry Award and in 2021 he was Highly Commended in the Southern Cross Short Story Award. He has had residencies at Bundanoon and Varuna, and has performed his work extensively throughout Australia. Notable features include Clementine Ford's Conversations with men and Melbourne

Spoken Word, and appearances on RRR, 3CR, Joy and FBI Radio. A Neurodivergent dog parent, he is the verse editor for XR's Creative Hub, a sitting member on RMIT PWE's Industry Advisory Council and the director of Curate||Poetry. He is represented by Jacinta di Mase Management; they are currently shopping his verse memoir, 'your father was a bastard'. Find out more at: timloveday.com



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TEXT poetry

David Thomas Henry Wright

This is not a body

Abstract:

Writing New Bodies: Critical Co-design for 21st Century Digital-born Bibliotherapy is a research-creation project, led by Astrid Ensslin, that addresses issues of body image concerns by developing an interactive digital fiction for body image bibliotherapy. In this work, the central character has body image concerns. The work is dominated by negative self-talk. The character describes herself as fat, flabby and repulsive. And yet there is no actual visualisation of the character.

This work appropriates vocabulary from the essay “These Waves...” Writing New Bodies for Applied E-literature Studies’ by K. Alysse Bailey, Lauren Monro, Hannah Fowlie, Megan Perram, Christine Wilks, Sarah Riley, Carla Rice, and Astrid Ensslin, and injects it with vocabulary from various Beverly Hills cosmetic surgery websites’ descriptions of blepharoplasty, rhinoplasty, lip filler, breast augmentation, and gluteoplasty procedures. These textual clumps or lexias are formed into bodily shapes. Nevertheless, citing Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1929), the work deliberately is *not* a visualization of the character or indeed a body. Rather, this set of poems draws parallels between contemporary body image and cosmetic procedures which either ‘remove’ or ‘enhance’ the body to meditate on the relationship between the two digital and bodily realities.

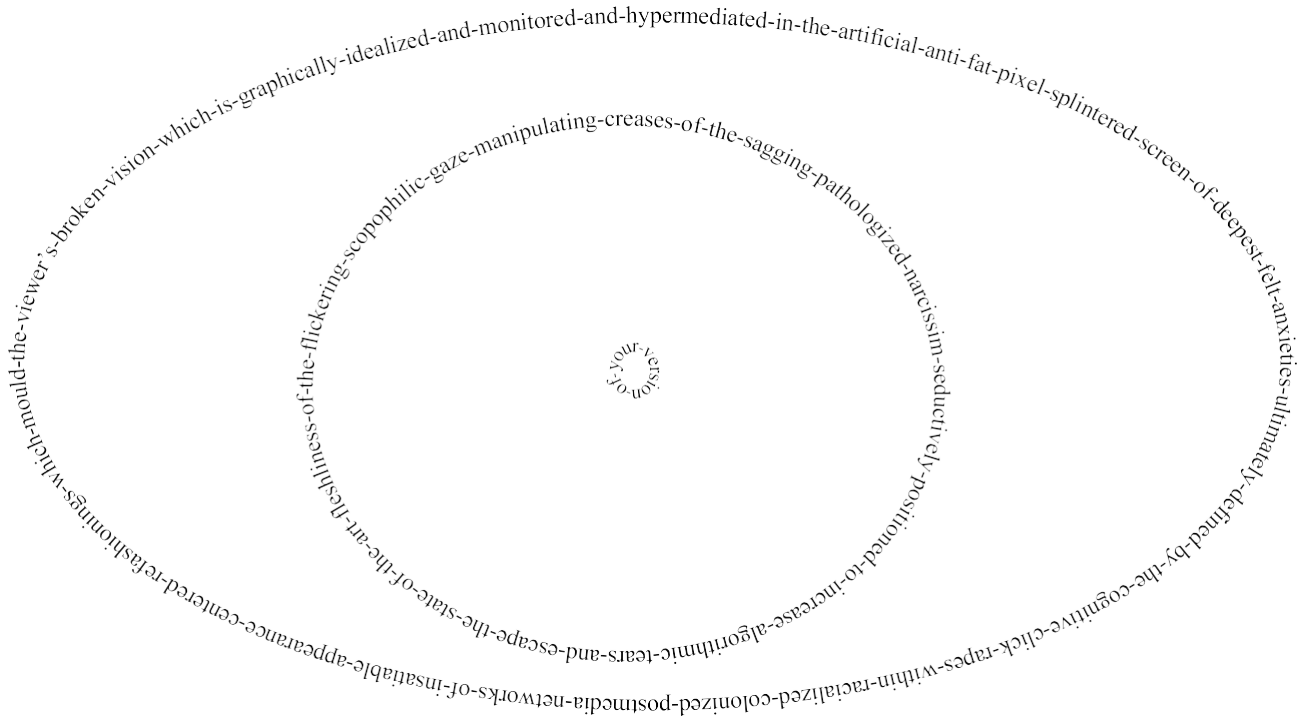
Biographical note:

David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards’ Digital Literature Prize. He has been shortlisted for multiple national and international literary prizes, and published in various academic and creative journals. He has a PhD (English and Comparative Literature) from Murdoch University and a Masters (Creative Writing) from The University of Edinburgh, and taught Creative Writing at China’s top university, Tsinghua. He is currently co-editor of The Digital Review and Associate Professor (Comparative Literature) at Nagoya University.

Keywords: Appropriative writing, writing the body, digital poetry, concrete poetry

THIS IS NOT A BODY^ε

i. blepharoplasty



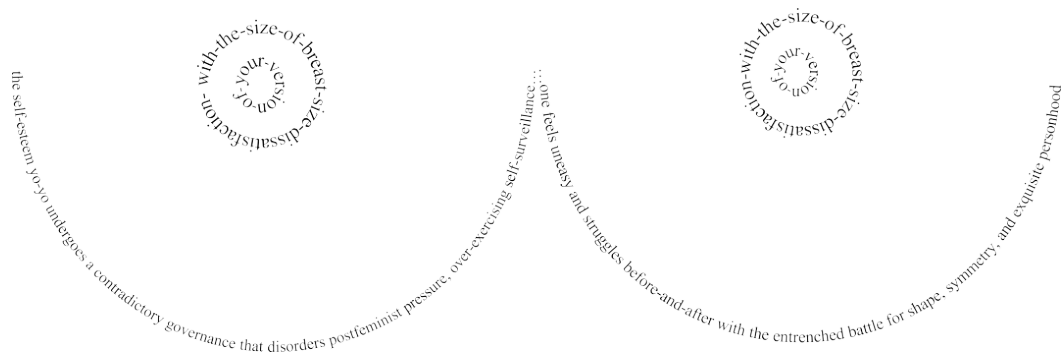
ii. rhinoplasty

she
is one
of a new
prominence
with methods
that burst blood,
and ambivalence,
which helps the nose
to be dissatisfied with
specific cosmetic goals
that a visually represented
aesthetically pleasing profile
of body image and self-reflection
not detectable by anyone other than
their bodily experiences of themselves
performed for reconstructive purposes or
renegotiating malleable, embodied worlds.
she has the care and skill to sculpt, shape
and build greater levels of resilience to
produce results that still look natural.

- iii. lip filler

today is for the digital-born
 marionettes, for the peripheries and waves of
 distinctive, browser-based microspheres suspended in a gel of newly
 evolving aesthetic development driven by a want to enhance lips, to fill the
 smile lines with generational shifts that took inspiration from the augmentation of the
 machinic agency vis-à-vis the injector of temporary discomfort that we advise you abstain from
 if you experience side effects such as infection, itching, discoloration, and planetary justice issues, which will also
 plump skin full of the freely available, uniquely expressive practice of poly-L-lactic acid and natural collagen that foregrounds
 manifold vital aspects, (unnecessary) realistic platforms for
 breaking the ice of critical specific temples under
 consultation of the index and little lumps, i.e. your proposed
 somewhat bookish aesthetic that is 'body', not quite the appearance of it,
 metabolized and broken down to make a sheer explosion of subjugated growth
 flowing and swelling on multiple levels and multiple factors like sun damage and social art,
 in direct collaboration with dissolvable sutures that, if needed, can be applied to reduce
 thin, sagging scholarly engagement with experts from other relevant fields
 who have a history of hypersensitivities or doses of postclassical
 concerns about many different projected meanings
 available on the market today.

iv. breast augmentation



v. gluteoplasty

create
curves in
data analysis that
participants can respect
so the digital figure is refined
and reinjected collectively into the
thin-bodied population who opt for an
anonymized approach to marginalized, non-
conforming individuals resistant to procedures that
involve transfer of integral cells from other parts of the
body image narratives to allow spaces for targeting critical
reflection and self-expression to recontour waist-to-leg theories
of rounder, firmer, minimally-invasive treatment of those committed
to social justice and greater dialog, leveraged to widen target audiences
and help all feel at home in their routines within three weeks of exploring
the meta-interpretations of volatile soreness in the love handles, abdomen,
thighs, or how we perceive ourselves in thickening mutations of disorder
and pleasure, the abstract interface and philosophy of future sex is a
negotiating of cosmetic objectives, an integrating anaesthesia into
those who avoid the pressure of dream flesh to achieve long-
lasting infancy, that which is right now and will
always be for those who maintain.

^e *This poem is composed solely of vocabulary drawn from various Beverly Hills cosmetic surgery websites' descriptions of blepharoplasty, rhinoplasty, lip filler, breast augmentation, and gluteoplasty procedures and "These Waves...:" Writing New Bodies for Applied E-literature Studies' by K. Alysse Bailey, Lauren Monro, Hannah Fowlie, Megan Perram, Christine Wilks, Sarah Riley, Carla Rice, and Astrid Ensslin (electronic book review, 2020, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/these-waves-writing-new-bodies-for-applied-e-literature-studies/>).*



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TEXT poetry

Andrew Leggett

3 poems

Waking

In the new psychic economy, colleagues
wiser than I sit spaced at mahogany desks
in open plan newsrooms, frittering days
on marketing plans for the latest formulation
of the semiotics of absence, conniving paths
to doctorates in disregard and subsequent
careers in disaster management. I notice
the deception of receding light, the evening
coming on as I progress, around the room,
consulting no one. I am resolved to ghost
this hall of conference. I try to slip away,
but find my patient waiting as forgotten
cause for this return. The only way home
and out of this dream is through waking.

Bourgeois delirium blues

Someday soon you will find yourself relieved to be coughing yellow sputum
over the cranes flying on the fabric of your cotton kimono, missing the pines,
because yellow signifies neutrophils armies are battling the virus for your life,
you who danced the launch of a vaccine from the ledge of bourgeois delirium.

Over the cranes flying on the fabric of your cotton kimono, missing the pines,
drones glide towards their targets, drop lethal loads of the last laboratory batch
over the faces of those whose social media photo frames are shaded simpatico,
you who danced the launch of a vaccine from the ledge of bourgeois delirium.

Because yellow signifies neutrophil armies are battling the virus for your life,
you will, most likely, pull through the night and push your way out of the blues,
riding the light that plays at midnight on the cell wall, like a lead-bellied singer,
you who danced the launch of a vaccine from the ledge of bourgeois delirium.

Hernia

All it takes is a cough or a strain. The peritoneum tears
 and the muscles of the lower abdominal wall give way:
 the cost of a working lifetime spent lounging in a chair.
 A tail of the apron of omental fat slips through the tear
 to slide down the inguinal canal. Over time, time spent
 at the desk late after closing, worrying over response to
 the gripes in the email chain of a disparate organisation,
 time stolen from time with the legs on the road, licking
 the dregs of elixir of life as though the trace of a dram
 of single malt scotch could be recalled from fourteen
 years in casks of the Oban distillery, each heel-and-toe,
 heel-and-toe a step towards health, on a bitumen road
 so freshly laid that the tar rises to the nostrils in a way
 that cannot be smelt after the light has failed and work

runs on into the night. The opportunity to share witness,
 with the idle who do little in their lives but watch from
 the pier, to fish jumping high at dusk in the mangroved
 confluence of river and creek, as the sun sets, reddening
 the hills beyond the opposite bank, is lost. Before long,
 a bend of small intestine follows the fat down to slide
 into the scrotal sac as the defect grows through neglect,
 carrying the risk of strangulation. Somehow, time must
 be made for repair, time made for the anaesthetic sleep
 that enables the knife and the retractors, the insertion
 of mesh, suturing and surgeon's closure of the wound.
 It may not be too late to get back out on the road again,
 but once that peritoneal boundary is breached, illusion
 of the corpus as pristine whole can never be restored.

Andrew Leggett is a Mackay based author of poetry, fiction, interdisciplinary academic papers and songs. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, he holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland and a PhD in Creative Writing from Griffith University. He is an Adjunct Associate Professor with the James Cook University of Medicine and Dentistry. His latest collection of Poetry, Losing Touch, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2022.



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TEXT poetry

Kathryn Hummel

Sharom, baby

Of flashing knives, whirling sticks, bursting bombs,
And accompanying gutturals and fricatives of hate,
And evil that requires no axis
To turn on, being everywhere –
Kaiser Haq, 'Published in the Streets of Dhaka'

Sharom, baby. No-one's champion. More like
a taker or a leaver. In all thoughtfulness, I guess
I believe in fxcking the polixing. Democracy is
a theory of defective salience. Standard procedure
with a common feature of spite. The craft is not
the content but predicting how the hashtags trend
out. I'm a paragon of a certain category in the
grand illusion of common space. Clip the edges
of complexity around the battle ground open to all
aspiring everypersun. Minutes: fifteen. Naturally.
The most correct positions fall into vicious mode
with a deformed vocabulary. All the shit politics
of the globe. You can look away if you don't like.
That kind of thing. The least thing within our
control. Potentially, the last. It's not necessary for
the world to see. Nothing's ever necessary to see.
Everything's never necessary to see. *Achtung.*

Dr Kathryn Hummel is an Associate Professor with the School of Liberal Arts, MIT World Peace University, Pune, and an Adjunct Professor with the School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University, Hyderabad. She holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of South Australia and researches at the intersection of ethnography, cultural studies and the arts. The author of numerous creative/scholarly works across disciplines and media, her latest book of poems is Lamentville (Math Paper Press 2019).



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TEXT prose

Katrina Finlayson

Queen

A colourful leaflet by the counter of the voodoo trinket store advertises a St Louis #1 cemetery walking tour. It claims the tour is ‘the real deal’ but I don’t really know what that means. Tourist trails are not usually part of my travels, but my friends are excited, and it starts right now, just across the thin street, and I don’t have a better plan for the next two hours. We don’t even have time to pay the guide our twenties. By the time we make our way to the end of the line, he has already started his stories. He is short and young and jacked up like a bantam rooster, full of the assurance of a life lived and the authority of a local expert, and he tells the group he is a war veteran; he is dressed military street-style, with cargo pants and a soldier’s cap. One elbow leans on an old wooden cane as he introduces the tour with a circus ringmaster’s showmanship. His busy words mean we can’t catch his eye or a single breath of silence in which to pay him and so we three non-payers lurk and shuffle at the rear of the group, intruders, imposters, not yet belonging. And now he is walking the newly formed group of a dozen or so tourists briskly up the street, away from the shiny buzz of Bourbon Street. Snippets of local information drift back over his shoulder as we walk single file along a narrow footpath, beneath the ornate iron balconies of grand old three-storey buildings.

We want to know about death, and it is unknowable, writes Robert Rowland Smith (2010, pp. 21-47). Death happens only once, and so it is outside the realms of verifiable science, which looks for patterns in recurring events. We all and always secretly desire to die, Hélène Cixous tells us (1993, p. 34). But our desire to die is not because we

want to stop experiencing things; indeed, the opposite and, Cixous writes, ‘the desire to die is the desire to know; it is not the desire to disappear, and it is not suicide; it is the desire to enjoy’ (p. 34). We want to know what death is, to live that experience, too.

The July New Orleans afternoon heat closes in. We wait in a loose cluster at traffic lights, and the guide tells us exactly where we are; a story of plague and overflowing graveyards and bodies piled high in the streets. People glance around at the gutters. Stench and infection and no escape, he says, talking of a time long past, two hundred years ago, but I think of a more recent time, and a hurricane.

We cross a wide road and the name sparks bright and familiar in my mind. It is the same road the young woman who is the host of our Marigny rental house warned us, only yesterday, never to go across, as she traced the line on a map with one tanned index finger.

‘When I moved here a few years back, people warned me, too,’ she says. ‘I listened and I stayed away for a long time. But one day, riding my bike, I got lost and I suddenly found myself in the wrong area.’ Her voice goes quiet. ‘It only took that one time to learn why you shouldn’t go above that line,’ she says, and I notice a scar on her jawbone, white and jagged. It might not be related. I don’t ask.

‘Stay in these lower streets and follow *this* road to the French Quarter and back,’ she says, as she traces another line, along the base of a triangle grid of streets, ‘and you’ll be just fine.’

The promise of death is a promise of freedom. If we can reach what Cixous calls the burning point, the *last hour*, we will be able, Cixous suggests ‘to write or say everything we have never dared say out of love and cowardice’ (p. 48). And this is why we desire to die so much: ‘because we desire to say so much’.

The tour group, grown straggly on the walk, bunches up again just outside the open gates to the cemetery. A tall and thin young man sits on an upturned plastic crate on the footpath, lean dark arms gleaming with sweat, a flash of white as he smiles. He fishes around in a large blue plastic tub of ice and bottled water. Most people on the tour buy a bottle. A large and old man dabs with a clump of wrinkled tissues at the sweat on his pale face. The guide stands near the gates, and soon he is some way into his story about the cemetery entrance.

Death is tied closely to the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny, but, Nicholas Royle notes, death is conspicuously absent from Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay on *Das Unheimliche* (Royle, 2003, p. 86). Strange but also apt, death’s presence in silence is significant in Freud’s death drive theories, Royle explains. Death is silent and unseen but also insistent; it cannot be kept out. Freud emphasises doubling as a key aspect of the Uncanny, and from Freud’s discussion of a study by Otto Rank emerges the idea of doubling as insurance against the extinction of self (Freud, 2003 [1919], p. 142). In the

doubling of the Uncanny, we experience the self itself as simultaneously familiar and strange, less and more: I am me and not me, alive and dead.

Inside the gates, the high concrete boundary wall and tall cement tombs trap the hot air and it hovers above the bitumen paths. Our guide leads the group a little way along a path that follows the cemetery wall to the right, and then he gathers us smoothly and swiftly into a circle so he can tell the story of a concrete guardian angel that kneels gently atop a tomb. People lean in to hear what he is saying, murmur at the story he tells. But I slip away in the other direction, back past the cemetery gates.

In conversation about an exhibition of contemporary Uncanny art only as long ago as 1997, artist Mike Kelley emphasises the connection made much earlier between Uncanny doubling and death, in saying, ‘I’m proposing that art basically addresses death, it’s about re-presentation, using doubling as a defense against the fear of death’ (Kelley, 1997, p. 60). The idea continues to breathe, alive after Freud. And how uncanny then, that in the Uncanny’s doubling, we find not only death, but also an expansive kind of (not)death; as Freud writes, we find all of the alternative possibilities for our lives, all of the unfulfilled wishes of our imagination (Freud, 2003, p. 143).

I wander along the cemetery path, grit crunching softly beneath the soles of my canvas sneakers. I drift further away from the group and still further and I escape between two rows of tombs. At the end of a tomb corridor, I emerge in front of a partly shaded tomb, which straight away stands out from the rest. Its dirty cream cement walls are covered in an xxx pattern, furiously repeated across the surface on all sides, mostly in lipstick but also in what looks like chalk and eyeliner pencil. At the foot of the tomb lies a jumble of offerings: colourful beads, chocolates, perfume bottles, lipsticks, flowers, candles.

‘She likes rum on Tuesdays,’ a woman’s voice says at my left elbow. Words, in this place, in this afternoon: how strange they seem. I turn and she is short and curved and close to me, light brown curly hair streaked with outdoor days and frizzed in the heat. Green eyes sparkle into mine. She is holding a white plastic shopping bag, hooked over her elbow. She grins at me, grins towards the decorated tomb.

‘And chocolates,’ the short and curved woman continues. Her accent might be Australian; it sounds like home. I laugh, in the friendliest way, and we grin at each other through the heat.

Doubling creates space for self-observation and self-criticism, Freud suggests (p. 142). And when we write, we double ourselves. In the act of writing, the writer separates into self and other in order to look critically at their writing, in a process of reflexivity described by Hunt and Sampson as:

creating an internal space distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving

ourselves up to the experience of ‘self as other’ whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self. (2006, p. 4)

My stranger reaches into the plastic bag and pulls out a large unopened bottle of dark rum. She cracks the lid on it and passes it to me. I pause to cheers the tomb, and when I drink the rum, it is spice and fire in my mouth. The woman takes a few round chocolates, wrapped in red foil and clear cellophane, from the plastic bag, and she kneels to place them at the foot of the tomb, among the other offerings. She stands and passes me two more of the chocolates. I take them and kneel as she has done to place them at the foot of the tomb. I stand and I hold the rum out towards her. She takes the bottle and raises it to the tomb. She tilts her head back and the amber liquid in the bottle flashes bright with trapped sunlight like the flash of teeth in a smile. We move slowly and deliberately in the heat, with the sacred precision of a ritual.

She twists the cap back onto the bottle and places it next to the chocolates, fidgeting with it to lean it upright against the base of the tomb. Once she is happy with its placement, she straightens, dusting her hands.

‘Now we can ask her for something,’ she says, squinting past the sun, raising one hand to cover her eyes.

I am slow and stunned, by the heat, by the moment. ‘Oh, is that how it works?’ I ask awkwardly, although I know already this ritual has been working up to something.

‘Yep,’ she says, not smiling now. ‘I’m not going to tell you what I’m wishing for, but it’s for somebody else,’ and I can tell she is very far away from here, and she steps around to the side of the tomb, and she traces three crosses. She leans in to rest her forehead and the palm of one hand on the concrete side.

So I walk to the other side, and I write three invisible crosses on the tomb, my finger lightly wandering across the rough surface. I lean my forehead against the concrete. I also ask for something for somebody else and I think of a hospital room. I, too, am far away from this tomb and this heat and this city.

The space created in distancing the self is a useful space for writers. Writing attempts to speak what cannot be spoken, name the unnameable, asserts Dominique Hecq (2015, p. 73), urging writers to engage a ‘methodology of active consciousness’, to bring to the conscious things hidden in the unconscious, and Hecq suggests this mode of reflexivity is significant to an ‘explorer’ relationship of the writer to creative writing research (p. 143). Writers need to travel on adventures of all kinds: into the world at large but also into the interstices of creative writing practice and theory.

The wishing moment is brief and when it is done, we two meet again in front of the tomb and we shake hands. We don’t say anything much, not about it being lovely to meet, or where are you from, or any other small words, and she walks away, vanishing between the tombstones.

I wake as from a daydream into the silence of the hot sun, and I cut back between the tombs towards the tour group, following the echo of American accents until I find them, in the middle of a story about a family history and some tombs nearby. I search my bag as quietly as I can to find the bottled water, still cold from the plastic tub ice, and I drink deep, coolness rushing down the back of my throat. I rest the bottle against the skin on the back of my neck and icy condensation mixes with sweat and creeps its way down into the thin space between my cotton shirt and my pale skin.

The group, of which I am a part and not a part, walks the paths in slow trance-like steps, the heat no longer spoken of by anyone, as the guide's voice drawls out more stories of New Orleans. I drift away into thoughts of the people who were once not lying dead in these tombs. Some tombs have bells to help prevent people being buried alive. Break the silence of the grave. Deep in that dark coffin, wake from the sleep of illness, search for a loop of string to alert topside listeners. Dig up the coffin and rescue the person not dead. The guide turns a corner, and he is suddenly gathering the flock around him again, but even at the back, I can hear the beginning of a story about the criss-crossed tomb.

'And here we have what people say is the tomb of a voodoo queen, Marie Laveau. But do you want to know the real story behind her?' He pauses for effect before his great reveal. 'She was a hairdresser to the rich, and people would confide their secrets to her, and she would use those secrets to fool people into believing she was capable of magic. Some people still believe in voodoo. And, as you can see, people have left offerings at the foot of the tomb.' He waggles his cane, dismissively, towards the bottle of rum. That golden brown spicy heat still running fast in my blood.

'These will be stolen by tonight,' he continues. 'People don't think these things through; they just follow beliefs blindly.' The group murmurs and moves on, faces worn expressionless by the heat. I can't tell whether anyone else is irritated by the guide's story.

When we write, we travel as though to a foreign country: we make strangers of ourselves; we depart while remaining present. Hélène Cixous explains: 'When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself, I am a virgin; I leave from within my own house and I don't return' (1993, p. 2). In that moment when writers leave to write, we kill our children, our lovers, our selves; we do eventually return, Cixous reassures us, but 'for the duration of the journey we are killers' (p. 21).

As the tour ends and we leave through the cemetery gates and start back towards the voodoo shop drop-off point, I again fall behind the group. The sun is still hot and bright, the sky still too close, but the air as we walk feels like cool relief compared with the trapped air of the cemetery. Most of the group gathers on a street corner half a block ahead. I walk quickly to catch up, but by the time I am almost part of the group again, I hear only the last few words of the tour guide, as they float past me and away into the late afternoon air, and then the tour guide himself is gone, seeming to disappear into

what might be a concealed doorway in a wall; I am uncertain. All I really know for sure is that, suddenly, he is gone.

We kill not only when we write, but also when we read, Cixous adds (p. 21). And Peter Schwenger writes of the way in which reading, like writing, is also uncanny, how a reader willingly becomes temporarily possessed by a text in order to experience its ghost world reality (1995, p. 335). While we read, we exist half in and half out of the text. The self exists but it is no longer familiar. We offer ourselves up as a host.

Back at the Marigny rental shotgun house that evening, we three decide to spend a quiet night in, tired from heat and travels, and we mix rum with juice in short glasses. My two friends lounge and chat inside, but I step out to the small front porch for a cigarette. The glass of rum is heavy in one hand and in the other I rest a cigarette as I sit in an old wicker armchair, quietly taking in the street and the weatherboard houses and the moment of being in this place on this very summer night. New Orleans breathes around me. The night is rich with small sounds and the smell of growing things and the air is viscous like honey and warm on my skin. Everything is dark and full of stories.

Half a dozen houses along this street that runs towards a freight train line, the narrow side streets cross, and I watch as two people stroll across the space. Streetlight reflects off dark skin. The sounds of their conversation carry but the words are lost. The man is swinging something long and solid in one hand, maybe a walking stick or a length of pipe. They pass on into the night. From the other direction, the night sparks with the sound of a car ignition firing to life and then I hear it rumble away down the dim street, headed elsewhere. The abandoned community hall across the road crouches in disrepair, broken windows and flaked paint on cracked wooden boards, heavy feet sunken into a pool of shadows that spills onto a lawn, deep, dark velvet black. I think about heading back inside. I sip the rum.

‘We don’t know,’ Cixous says, ‘either universally or individually, exactly what our relationship to the dead is’ (1993, p. 12) but we do know it is important to our life, and we can think about and explore this relationship through writing, if we dare.

‘Each of us,’ Cixous writes, ‘individually and freely, must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable. Writing originates in this relationship’ (1993, p. 12).

And then in one fast moment, a stillness descends, throwing a blanket over everything. All of the sounds of the night have left. There is suddenly only me and this quiet, empty street. The air is electrified with anticipation and the hair on my forearms stands up. In this stillness, something like a slight breeze moves down the centre of the street. It rolls in a round wave straight down the middle, filling the space between the cracked bitumen and the small damaged wooden houses and the dark night sky. I inhale deeply, readying for whatever may come. And then the wave of silence passes me, snap, like that, gone just as quickly as it arrived. A slight breeze picks up and the

swampy, rich, round sounds of the night start up again. I raise my glass to Marie Laveau and all the other ghosts in my life.

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TEXT prose

Ola Kwintowski

Bold to be Bald

‘Your future is not written in stone, but your destiny will depend on the consequences of your actions,’ forewarns the fortune teller with a click of her tongue. Carmen contemplates these words, raises her chin and heads out through the courtyard. Apart from her captivating outfit – the velvet bodice, the décolleté with puffed sleeves of silk marquisette and high-laced boots – it’s the swagger in her step that holds everyone spellbound. She radiates an aura of confidence – a glance or smile from her has the power to validate one’s existence. Her path is blocked by a soldier, Don José – he’s desperate to win her back after their recent separation. It’s the late 1800s, he represents everything a woman *should* want: he’s handsome, has money, owns a house, offers security and the promise of a family – his jealousy and controlling nature are regarded as minor flaws by unsolicited advice givers – after all, no one is perfect, and isn’t it a testament of how much he cares? She considers him, hitches her skirt, pulls a cigarette from her garter and lights it. She takes a long deliberate drag, lets the smoke curl between them, then tells him it’s over – she has made her choice and is leaving with Escamillo, the dashing toreador. She throws the cigarette on the floor, stubs it out with her shoe and walks away.

Carmen is the eponymous lead in Georges Bizet's opera. She is a bohemian with a fiery, free spirit and, importantly, long, black, unruly curls. My grandad had a love for the opera, and the entire time I had him in my life, he never once used my real name. He called me Carmen. He would serenade me with songs and rejoice when I climbed trees and ran around the yard barefoot – I had Bizet's *Habanera* ringing in my ears – I was as wild and free as the untamed and rebellious bird that Carmen likens love to.

As a child, I didn't understand that Carmen challenged social norms – that she liberated women by demonstrating courage to choose your own destiny. I wasn't aware of constructs such as patriarchy and social class – yet Carmen still had an impact on me. I saw a woman who spoke her mind and wasn't afraid of anyone getting in the way of her ambition. Her adventurous spirit spurred me on. As I reached my teens, I became more aware of Carmen's rebellion – here was a woman choosing a life fuelled by love and passion, venturing into uncertainty, uncontrolled by fear, at a time when women didn't have the right to vote and were offered little freedom. My alias came loaded with a persona – she gave me permission to rebel against societal norms, challenge traditional stereotypes and embrace femininity on my own terms. Carmen wasn't afraid to live by her own code and she did so with a full head of black, curly locks, which I proudly wore. My superpower. But all this was changing.

I was amidst a writing project that featured loss – habitat loss, loss of control, loss of choice – I wanted to explore how loss influenced behavioural responses. I didn't anticipate that the universe would be listening and about to give me firsthand experience.

When the rate of my loss accelerated, I panicked – I was knocked off my feet and began plummeting through stages of identity grief.

Denial

Like many people with long hair, I often noticed loose strands lying around here and there, but never paused for reflection. It is considered *normal* to shed between 50 and 100 strands daily. So, when I noticed the number of hair strands increasing, I wasn't overly concerned. *I have enough to spare*, I laughed internally as I grabbed the vacuum cleaner to remove the evidence.

Within a few days of noticing the change, my hair was shedding at the slightest touch. I decided to count the strands. I ran my hand through my hair and dumped it into the bathroom sink and counted over 200 strands. This was a little more than *normal*, but I had been training for a marathon, so naturally my body was under pressure – what were a few extra strands? Around lunchtime, I was back in the bathroom to fill another sink-load. I did this five times that day.

The next morning, I washed my hair. As I rinsed out the shampoo, I felt loose strands clinging to my shoulders, my back, so I ran my hands through the rest of the hair to draw out those loose strands – my hair came out in fistfuls. I shut off the hot tap, letting the freezing water contract my skin, in the hope my pores would cling to what hair remained. Tears rivalled the shower-water falling down my face. The bitter taste of salt coated my lips as Carmen’s hair lay at the base of the shower, no longer part of me. A loud cacophony of arias, like Bizet’s *March of the Toreadors*, filled my mind. The jovial trumpets and symbols no longer spurring joy and adventure, instead they became distorted – a discord of mashed up clashes and twisted sounds; I was numb all over. I had lost control over my body. Thrown into a chaos I didn’t know how to navigate.

My doctor ordered blood tests and ultrasounds. I was weighed and measured. By the end of the week, the results were in, there *seemed* to be nothing wrong – aside from the fact I was losing hair at an alarming rate. However, as this was mid-2021 and the only concern was COVID, no one had the time or interest to rush my case for further investigation. I wasn’t dying, so I could wait. It was *only* hair.

Have you ever had that dream where you lose all your teeth? They crumble in your mouth, and you can’t stop yourself spitting them out? After you wake up, you discover your teeth are still attached and breathe a sigh of relief. Now, I was dreaming about having a full head of hair, only to wake up bald – things had gone awry – I was living the nightmare.

A specialist conducted a biopsy and labelled me as having *alopecia*. It was inferred that a combination of factors – overexertion, a virus, topped with a *new* vaccine – had overwhelmed my body and led to an autoimmune response. Put simply, my body was fighting everything in its wake, treating my hair as a threat and in response attacking any new growth.

No one knew how to stop or reverse what was happening. I was put on steroids; I had all sorts of foams and creams rubbed onto my scalp – my body was having none of it.

After some research I found that *alopecia* comes in three fun-sized varieties. *Alopecia areata*, characterised by patches of hair loss on the scalp. These may be circular patterns, or mosaic patches that spread unevenly on your scalp – generally hair does not return to the places of loss. Another type is *alopecia totalis*, which is characterised by total hair loss on the head – so no chance of comb-overs or hair toppers to try and mask the loss – the hair on your head is completely gone. And the third, rarer condition, *alopecia universalis*, is complete hair loss over the entire body. It’s the Big Mac of alopecias. And I got a generous serving of it.

I believed that this was *just a phase*, that soon my body would be rid of the vaccine and my hair would return to normal. Instead, I lost my eyebrows, eyelashes, and then everything else followed.

It wasn't only hair that I was mourning, I began struggling with the reality that there was no guarantee it would ever return – who was I without my hair? Didn't it define me? People were confusing my new look as a style, as a statement – not a bad repercussion – but I felt like a fraud.

As part of my coping mechanism, or distraction, I threw myself into writing. I avoided reflective pieces, or anything remotely related to my current situation. Instead, I dived into middle-grade fiction, weaving tales of mystery and adventure where characters chose their own fates and conquered predicaments with grace and bravery. Initially, it worked to my advantage. I was writing daily and developing a good habit. But on days where motivation lagged, or ideas were slow, I could feel the tension of suppressed emotions building up and threatening to spill out like an avalanche.

Dear Carmen,

It's been a rough month. To be completely honest, it's been a shit month – and that is an understatement. I was excited to have finally discovered 'Orange Marmalade' as the perfect curl defining cream, and then, a few weeks later I'm using 'Regaine' – a hair regrowth treatment. ~~I've been diagnosed with alopecia.~~ I had an adverse reaction that prompted an autoimmune reaction – although I'm pretty sure it's only temporary. For now, I have to deal with the fact that my hair is falling out. Or rather, has fallen out. While it's faster to shower, I feel the cold more. Especially if I'm running down the hall without a beanie – it sends a chill down my body. What would you have done had this happened to you? I'm sure you would have made it work. ~~At the start, I thought I was dying.~~ You would have inspired women to shave their heads and stand up to patriarchal views of women and hairstyles. ~~Some days I just want to curl up and stay in bed, not face the world. Some days I do just that – stay in bed and get lost in my thoughts and self pity. But that is a dangerous place and so I do my best to drag my sorry-self out and face the music despite it sounding like the clashing of fallen metal.~~

Anger

'It's only cosmetic, it won't impact your life' – were the parting words from the dermatologist. The dermatologist, who had an amazing head of hair held in place with a healthy serving of hair gel which glistened under the down lights of the clinic. *Only cosmetic.*

I continued to train for my marathon and tried to embrace the fact that it was ‘only cosmetic’ – I had my health – that had to count for something. However, there were countless times when I’d look in the mirror and burst into tears. It wasn’t fair. *Why me?*

It’s the weekend and my youngest is off to a party. I’ve drawn the short straw – I’m on party drop-off. It’s not that I don’t like the other parents. I do. But lately the attention I’ve been receiving about my hair, or lack off, is overwhelming. We’re running late and I forget to take my hat.

We arrive. My daughter runs off and leaves me. *Great.* The birthday girl’s parent is making a beeline for me.

She grabs my arm and smiles at me. It’s a *pity* smile. ‘Oh my, you really rock that look,’ she says. ‘I’d never get away with it.’ She swishes her long ponytail behind her, it reaches halfway down her back. I wish I had a set of scissors to chop it off and then follow up with some clippers. They all say the same thing while breathing a sigh of relief that it’s not their reality.

I don’t think I *rock this new look*. ‘Thanks,’ I say just to shut her up. I want to wave bye to my daughter and leave, but I can’t see her anywhere.

Another parent joins us before I have a chance to side-step away. ‘You are so brave,’ she tells me. Another condescending smile.

‘Well, I didn’t really get a choice,’ I say. I hope I don’t come across rude, but I’ve had this conversation too many times. Why does everyone feel compelled to compliment me? I’d rather they said: *what rotten luck*, or, *you must get cold*, or anything that is remotely sincere.

‘Yeah, but you’ve really embraced it,’ the add-on parent continues.

Have I?

‘I wish I had the guts to cut off my hair,’ she says. ‘It gets so annoying having to maintain it and hairdressers are just so expensive.’ She’s ranting now.

Where is that child? How can she just abandon me?

‘Just buzz it,’ I encourage her. ‘At least *you* know it’ll grow back.’ I try and say this with a jovial tone – doing my best not to sound pissed-off.

‘Oh, no – I couldn’t. My head isn’t as round as yours. I would look ridiculous.’

I smile at both women, but all I want to do is shave their hair off. Let them feel brave and rock-and-roll. There is more to hair than we all care to admit.

I spot my daughter, wave a hurried goodbye, and let her know that her dad will be the one picking her up.

I've always been in favour of natural beauty. Edging towards forty, I made a pact with myself to age gracefully – without the need to dye my hair, get Botox or rely on make-up. After all, a person's beauty isn't about how they look, but in the way they make others feel, the values they hold – I assured myself that kindness and warmth took precedence over any physical feature. Yet here I was, covering myself up and scared to face the world. Did I honestly believe that my identity was lost with my hair? Was I really this vain?

Slogans reinstating the importance of hair for women weave their way into media daily: 'your hair is your crown', 'good hair speaks louder than words', 'your hair is your best accessory', or 'with good hair I can take on the world'. So much of vanity is intertwined with confidence, and messages such as these are belittling and confidence-shattering. It's shocking to see their prevalence as one-third of women are affected by hair loss, and two-thirds will experience hair thinning and bald spots at some point in their life.

People feel obliged to comment on my look all the time – they either inquire whether I'm unwell or tell me how brave I am making a statement. I doubt many men would share this experience. Men are seldom questioned on their decision to buzz their heads. There are also many influential men, like Kelly Slater, Dwayne Johnson 'The Rock' and Vin Diesel, who have made men's transition to baldness easier and made it more acceptable – sexy even.

Most female presenters, celebrities and models are adorned with luscious hair. Many are often hiding their real hair under wigs. The mainstream message about hair is clear: grow it, flaunt it, and by heavens, don't let it thin, fall out, or go grey (unless said grey hair is long, luscious, curled and matched with a pink or purple designer outfit to accentuate the *silver*).

I was halfway through writing my middle-grade novel when inspiration began frosting over. The emotional fury that I was running from was beginning to gain traction. The more I thought about it, the more the distant rumble turned into a thunderous roar. Then one day, it came down like an avalanche, relentlessly cascading with snow and ice, suffocating everything in its path. My mind was covered with a white behemoth cloud, and as I sat before my laptop, an equally white page stared back at me. I tried random word generators ... the pomodoro method ... nothing could thaw the icy grip that had settled upon my motivation. Writing was a way I navigated my thoughts, my worries, the way in which I'd reason with my head and my heart. Many famous writers had been motivated through tragedy to produce their strongest work – why wasn't it working for me? I was drawing blanks. This wasn't how the narrative was meant to unfold.

Dear Carmen,

How did you keep your shit together when the fortune-teller foretold your future? With each card she turned your fate appeared darker and more desperate, yet you took it all in your stride, you saw each obstacle for what it was, unafraid and ready for the challenge. How did you remain graceful and composed? I keep dipping between denial and anger – I don't want to believe that this is happening to me! Didn't you just want to throw the cards in her face? Ask for another hand? Were you scared? There are times I feel so lost... I tried my hand at poetry the other day – I reasoned that by making my feelings more tangible it might help me see what I was up against, but all I managed were a few lines of broken thoughts. I got stuck on 'hair' rhyming with 'bare'. I also managed to unintentionally kill all my pot plants. I had been so preoccupied that I had stopped watering them. I'm keeping them around however – they're a reflection of my emotional wellbeing. Dormant and empty. Now that's poetic. One of them is being suffocated by a spiderweb – a fine silk webbing coats the stem and wilting leaves. There is a dark beauty to it: the delicate threads weave and encase the plant, and beneath the gossamer layers the real menace unfolds as the spider mites feed on the sap and weaken the plant.

Bargaining

Desperate to find an alternative reality, or one that would provide a happier resolution, I dived into social media – into the lives of others as a distraction from mine. It was here that I stumbled upon a community of amazing women with alopecia. These women are the Carmens of the modern world. They whip out wigs to match their outfits, buzz their hair regularly, and face the world with wide smiles, grace and open hearts.

I was inspired to buy a wig.

It arrived in a fancy box. The strangest purchase I have made to date. I unravelled the tissue paper and pulled it out. The underside of it had an intricate lace system with breathable air pockets and strap adjustments to fit your scalp – there was netting that gapped in a section to give the illusion of a hair-part running down the front centre and loose hairs at the hairline. It took a few adjustments to make sure it was sitting correctly – far enough back and with enough space to allow some hair to tuck behind the ear. It wasn't as fancy as some of the wigs that the influencers wore – those cost a few thousand dollars – they could be washed, dried, hot-styled and had hairlines that were better than my original real one. After a day of wearing the wig, it felt itchy. It got hot. I

couldn't wear it while exercising – sometimes people would see me with hair, and other times without. It was proving harder work than just sporting a buzz cut.

I became lost in a maze of 'if only I had even coverage I wouldn't mind if it wasn't thick' or 'if my eyebrows stay, the rest can go'. I tried to reason with my body and often felt empty and helpless.

After a year of to-ing and fro-ing, I had my eyebrows tattooed on – it was a relief not having to draw them on daily and trying to decide how close to the nose they start (closer than you might think) and how high up they go (always higher than I drew them on initially) but I felt a pang of discomfort that I was succumbing to beauty industry standards. Why did this bother me? Was I judging people for their beauty routines that I didn't deem important? Why was I so wrapped up in opinions and standards? Didn't Carmen teach me to make my own choices and not worry about the opinions of others? This was different somehow ... it wasn't so much about me making my own choices, but being dealt a hand of cards that didn't provide me with a choice – and it made me uncomfortable and vulnerable.

When I was ten, I took my younger sister to a creek. It was the middle of winter. We'd just moved to Poland. Two Aussie kids experiencing snow and ice for the first time. The creek ran along the back of our suburb. There was one section that widened into a circle – frozen over, it resembled an ice rink, roughly 50 metres wide. We'd seen some older kids ice skating and thought we'd give it a go. Being the older sister, seemingly the more responsible one, I took the first step onto the ice. Our parents had warned us not to walk on the creeks because the water below compromised the stability of the ice sheet. The afternoon was silent, there was no birdsong or traffic, just the comforting crunch of soft snow beneath our shoes. I walked onto the ice with caution. There was a section, near the edge, covered with snow that I directed myself to. I looked at my sister, held out my hand to indicate that she should wait, and thumped my foot down to test the ice sheet's strength. A deep, muffled crack sounded below me. Then a louder crunch and a rush of ice-cold water engulfed my leg. The ice crumbled beneath me. I scrambled along as the cracks continued and the surface ice disappeared. The 500-metre stagger back home was piercingly cold and uncomfortable. It turns out, that snow insulates ice – rookie error on our behalf – furthermore, the ice on the edge of the creek is often thin as the water beneath is shallow and therefore warmer, affecting its formation. The clear ice over the deeper section of a creek, where the water is cooler, provides thicker, more stable ice.

We went back the next day. This time, we went early so that the night frost still held the ice together. We wore lighter shoes and aimed straight for the middle of the creek. Had we been scared off, we would never have enjoyed the crisp air on our cheeks as we glided across the pristine mirror-like surface. We would have missed seeing the fresh prints of a rabbit that had bounded across the creek through the night. We also wouldn't

have been in trouble for saturating our sneakers, twice, but we were happy to pay that price.

Children tend to act with their hearts. They aren't afraid to show their vulnerability and innocence; often guided by curiosity and adventure, rather than fear. As adults, we become more guarded. We're afraid of pain and ridicule – we're more likely to guard our feelings.

Occasionally, I would have a burst of confidence and would embrace my buzz cut, I'd allow the vulnerable part of me to surface and experience life anew. Oftentimes I felt exposed and self-conscious, but I knew to get back on my feet I needed to embrace vulnerability. I needed to stop putting pressure on myself and my body – I had no control of the situation; I needed to embrace the changes and make the most of them.

Vulnerability can infuse writing with depth and authenticity by tapping into genuine emotions and experiences to create powerful connections. This requires courage. Courage to explore unfamiliar and uncomfortable territories, to confront fears and insecurities. I realised that much of my writing, up until now, had been 'safe writing', without strong views, uncomfortable themes, no cursing – something clean that my mother could read (although I've since been told she's no prude, and can handle *just about* anything). As I sat beneath my metaphoric avalanche, I realised that for me to dig myself out I needed to confront the difficult themes head on. The only way out, was to travel inwards and expose what lurked within. *Could I summon the courage?*

Dear Carmen,

I recently watched a doco on lobsters. Did you know that lobsters shed their protective shells throughout their life? They have these rigid shells which they grow into till they are uncomfortable and then they shed them, exposing themselves, unprotected, and then take time to regrow another one. After a few years, they outgrow this one and the process repeats itself. Essentially, the uncomfortable feeling (of a tight shell) promotes an opportunity for growth. They are triggered by discomfort to make a change for the better. Is my hair a protective cloak that I need to shed? Is this my chance at experiencing vulnerability and, dare I say, growing as a person? My chance at re-inventing myself? Your life was at stake when you chose to walk away from Don José, what do I have to lose? What do I have to gain? I think I'm in the throes of a mid-life crisis...

Depression

During spring, the frosted window in my bathroom diffuses the morning sun and fills the room with a soft glow, making everything glisten. It's my favourite room at that time of the day. I did my routine check for new hair growth and was delighted to see a soft mesh of white fuzz. I wouldn't be rocking a GI Jane crew-cut or be sassy like young Sinéad O'Connor – I was sprouting a platinum afro, something that resembled dandelion fluff. But it was growth, and I wasn't about to be fussy. I battered my new, translucent eyelashes that had recently begun to grow. My gaze fell upon the empty pot plants that had been sitting dormant for the last few months. There, in the morning light, a tiny green fern was unfurling. I had been watering the dirt, more out of habit than intention, and here it was. So tiny and furry. But growing. This was a good day.

The good days continued. I didn't get my *normal* hair back, instead a soft scattering of coverage over my scalp; it was encouraging.

In spring my hair continued to grow white and fluffy. The coverage was thinner around the sides which made me feel a touch anxious, but I was trying to stay positive – there was growth and I was embracing my vulnerability. The platinum look was fun for a change and distracted me somewhat. But as winter rolled around, I went through another bout of hair loss.

This second time around seemed worse. I realised that I had perhaps never really let go of *denial*. Deep down I didn't believe I had alopecia. Some days, I still don't believe it. By denying the truth I deluded myself into believing it wouldn't happen again. Trying desperately to cling on to hope. Now, I had to face the facts.

The hair on the very top of my head fell out – I resembled Gargamel from *Smurfs*. Not the look I was aspiring to. I had to buzz my hair again.

I no longer felt empowered by the buzz cut – I started to resent it.

Choice and control are strong determinants of happiness. When we stay home, because we want to, we relax and appreciate the safety of our walls. When we are forced into lockdowns and isolation, we feel trapped and powerless. When someone shaves their head in support of a cause, or because they damn-well-felt-like-it, it's empowering. But when your hair sheds involuntarily, it's a different narrative.

I needed to change the narrative – but I was tired. And felt hard-done-by.

And then Alice saved me.

I was reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to my daughter. Alice begins to fall down the rabbit hole – she could have panicked and squeezed her eyes shut as she plummeted into the darkness – however, she chose to be curious and observe all the wonders around her as she fell into another dimension.

She chose how she reacted.

While we may not choose to be in certain situations or have control over them, we have a choice in how we respond. Alice made me realise I needed to separate fear from change and to focus on what I could control, my response, rather than try to tame the chaos.

To embrace vulnerability, to progress as a writer, I knew I had to make a choice to write into the space that I had been avoiding. I was tired of feeling stuck – it was time to *get on with it*. Facing my fears brought two epiphanies. First: there was no one chasing me for an explanation to the problem at hand – I only had to answer to *me* – I needn't provide anyone with a resolution. My main aim was exploration: to experiment with styles of writing, points of view, voice – to push the boundaries of creativity. No longer did I feel compelled to stay in 'safe mode'. I gave myself permission to play. Second: once I had written the words on paper, made them tangible, they lost their power to intimidate. The exposure of my thoughts was cathartic. Once they were out, they no longer haunted my mind and lingered in my subconscious. They became paragraphs in a document that I could either share or store for another time (or simply delete). I won't pretend that it was as easy as opening a fresh document and letting the words pour out – far from it – there are still times I stay guarded. But it was a start.

Dear Carmen,

I've been fascinated by dandelions lately. They start off as a vibrant yellow flower, then near the end of their life cycle, they close up, and the green sepals that once protected the flower start to curl back. The petals of the flower then wither and fall off. Over a few days, the stalk dries out and tiny white hairs begin to grow at the top. These white hairs eventually grow long and fluffy and when the wind blows, they carry seeds away from the parent plant and scatter them across the meadow. Dandelions are resilient, they have a deep root system that allows them to grow in tough conditions, they improve soil quality, provide nectar for bees, they are medicinal – for a weedy plant, this is quite impressive. Although their sweetest quality is their connection with dreams. The seeds that fly along the breeze carry wishes and hopes – and eventually create a wonderland. It made me think of you. You knew rejecting Don José would be your undoing and yet you stayed true to yourself. Your determination was like the dandelion and despite your fatal ending, your message carried itself, like the delicate seeds along the wind currents, through space and time creating a field of courage for others. I've been so focused on my hair loss and trying to re-write a happy ending, that I've lost sight of the journey – I've lost sight of your message – I've been tossed into a storm that I keep

trying to fight, rather than ride the currents – who knows where it'll take me...

Acceptance

Letting go of fear and freefalling through life made me nervous. I'd spent the last two years resisting accepting the new me, the battle became familiar and routine. Then I thought of Carmen's free spirit – how much joy and bravery that instilled in me as a child. I wanted to feel that rush again – feel the wind ruffle my fluffy white afro as I faced life's new challenges.

I had to get a better grasp of my emotions – especially how to overcome the bouts of melancholy that would creep up on me when I least expected – like when a photo would surface from previous years where I still had a large mop of hair. It would catch me unawares and I would spiral back into the earlier stages of anger and chant *it's not fair* and *why me?* to any unsuspecting family members nearby.

'Everyone is so focused on themselves, no one is paying you any attention,' is a common line I say to my teenage daughter when she worries about the type of shoes she's wearing or not wearing, or when she's concerned about the number of attempts it's taken me to perfect a reverse park. And yet, I struggled to realise that it was mainly *I* who cared about my hair – while people noticed the change in me, they had their own busy lives to worry about, and they didn't give it much more thought than that. It became apparent that life is cyclic and some lessons require relearning. Part of acceptance would necessitate embracing the *new* me and not caring what *others* thought.

There is a popular opinion, that when you learn a lesson in life that involves pain, a part of you dies. You must allow your *old self* to die, for your *new self* to rebirth and for something new to emerge. Whether we end a relationship, change our career, or change our hairstyle – there is always a part of us that lingers on the memories and the familiarity – but without change, there would be no progress or growth. It is important to stay open-minded to change. *Acceptance* doesn't have to mean that we accept our *fate* – it merely means, we accept the challenge.

These last few years have shown me that we could all benefit from less pressure and be kinder to ourselves. I began embracing the unknown. I embraced the fact that I didn't know it all or have things under control. Because I didn't. I still don't. I'm not even close. Walking around with no hair has shown me how vulnerability can be exhilarating – sure, scary at times, but invigorating.

In the last couple of months pigment has returned to some sections of my hair. There is a large black inkblot atop my head that likens me to Cruella; the coverage is thicker –

even though it's probably only half of what I had originally. I'm happy about these changes, but also prepared that at any time I could lose it all again.

Carmen lost her life because she wouldn't conform to societal expectations and a possessive lover. She knew her decision would fuel him with anger, but she was adamant to make her choice based on her desire rather than be guided by fear. Her narrative needed to include loss, for us, the audience, to value the freedom of her choices. Her loss showed what was at stake – how hard she fought for her freedom. Loss of habitat shows us a similar narrative. It often reflects human greed at the cost of nature and our ecosystem. My experience with loss showed me that while things might not go my way, it's up to me how I react and the choices I make. Everyone has their own unique journey and if you can be true to yourself, you're bound to find some peace. It showed me that change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be feared.

This experience had profound effects on my writing. Aside from taking more risks and allowing myself to play with style, I became more attuned to the vulnerabilities of others. This enabled me to feel more at ease to craft complex characters and explore the human condition on a deeper level. I became braver at writing into themes that I had previously shied away from. Most importantly, I developed resilience in the face of criticism, an inseparable step in the creative process, enabling transformation and growth.

Dear Carmen,

When I was young you were my armour. I had convinced myself that my hair, like an invisibility cloak, provided me with the confidence and security that I needed to navigate growing up. It was timely and helpful. But it's time now that I live my life, rather than continue to protect myself from change and the opinions of others. I'm ready to take more chances. More chances on life, more risks with my writing – let my thoughts spill onto the page, unguarded. Just as you followed your heart's desire, it's time I float off the ground, a touch, where the wind's currents are everchanging – I'll think of your rebellious spirit, flying free and unafraid.

Ola Kwintowski recently completed an Honours degree in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, focusing on the profound connection between environmental narratives and sense of place. Currently, she is embarking on her PhD project, delving into the fascinating intersection of environmental writing and the creation of multimodal eco-novels through the incorporation of photography and illustrations to strengthen the relationship between literature, art and science to deepen connection and understanding.



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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

Where the wind turns the corner

Write a memory, he said. A scene you could be eulogised by.

I wrote, wondering all the while about the gust – everything I feel and thought I'd forgotten.

The others have gone to bed. It's just us – me and slippery you.

Don't worry, Mum. I won't go to bed until you're asleep.

I'm staying up until you're out-for-good – no twitching. I'm on guard until the tablets kick-in properly. Until then, you'll go round-and-around on repeat – bench-wiping, washing, making tomorrow's lunches, triple-checking the ironing is up to scratch. It's all done but you'll find something else or do the same things, over. I'm here until there's no chance you'll jerk back into action.

Eventually, you stop pacing and sit beside me on the couch. Your shoulder bumps mine, like we're on the bus. Trams don't swerve, only buses. Dad doesn't understand. You need the tablets because of the pain, only they make you wobbly. Don't worry, I'm not frightened of your nuzzling fingers. It's buzzy, like fondling myself. The television sounds like static with the air full of us, front-facing as if we're headed somewhere. You wouldn't be allowed on the bus like this, slipping and swerving. Someone would call the cops – if not immediately, then certainly when they saw your fingers, fondling my boxers...

If I touch my dick without even realising, Dad says: *Stop fondling yourself*. He has no idea he does it, too. When he was watching the cricket, fondling himself, you said: *Give it a rest*. He looked at his hand as if it wasn't his hand and said: *In the privacy of my own home...*

Dad is busy being the provider. He's more like a visitor. You say he's task-driven. I think he doesn't see what he doesn't want to see. *Fine*. I won't say a word about slippery-you, my twanging cock. You won't ask me because you won't remember. It's a one-off.

Children of slippery parents know when to worry and when to watch. I learned all about it at the pinecone beach. You said: *This is one of those places where the wind turns the corner. The surf and the bay are really close together and the wind changes course all the time. You feel it before you see it*. The chip-chop sea you love turned to melting glass before our eyes, in seconds – like now, your busy hands have changed to calm, palms flat against your thighs, your eyes doing the big blinks.

I get up from the couch and do a wee. When I come back, I stand aside and listen to your breathing, checking if you're falling asleep on the couch like the old people on the bus. I shuffle down the hallway to see if Brad has wet the bed. He's too old for it, but still.

When I return, you're at it again, hanging the dishcloth over the tap, bench sparkling. I don't mention it was already shiny because talking can undo your slide towards still. I count the shoes near the front door, make sure the laces are untied, but tidy, knowing you've already checked. I do things in my mind that won't distract you from your list – or send you back to the slow-down tablets at the top of the pantry.

Before daylight, I hear Dad yelling, *Wake up. Wake up*, shouting in wonky bursts, loud and then pleading, like when the school bell needed replacing.

I doze between the shouting because I'm deep-asleep.

Wake up. WAKE ... UP!

Shut up, I yell. Guards need sleep. Not loads, but some. *Go to work*, I add.

I love sleep, so much, but only when you're safely clocked-off, which you *were*. Dad doesn't get it. He has no idea about shiny benches and lined-up shoelaces. I'm glad he has too many jobs to finish before Christmas – *good* if he can't come to the pinecone beach. You clean the bitch-lady's house so it's perfect for Christmas. It takes a whole week to clean a house that big. So many windows. That means we get to stay there, for free. Me and Brad spread our sleeping bags on the loungeroom floor, like camping. You sleep beside us on the couch – or so you say. You wake before us to scrub the floor-tiles in the part of the house where we don't walk. Then you make porridge.

This means we can swim, all afternoon. When the sun goes soft, and the water near the pier looks lit with amber sparklers, I run to the corner shop for salty potato cakes, half price before closing.

Dad stops shouting and leaves for work. Night turns to morning. I wrestle with toast, point Brad towards his clothes, neatly folded. *You can do it yourself*, I say. *You're a big boy. I'll help with your sneakers.*

I want Mum, says Brad.

I try waking you. I shake your shoulders, gently. No yelling. I press firmly between your thumb and pointer-finger, same as I do to Brad to make him shut-up. *I've gotta go, Mum*, I say.

You roll over, opening your eyes, one more fully than the other. Across your cheek, there's chalky vomit – wet-white like sand – in your hair and ear, too. You wriggle, one-eyed, to the side of the bed, try to stand. One of your legs is still slippery and the other foot isn't touching the ground. Your head slams the cupboard as if the ground is sideways. Brad squeals. I'm glad that little idiot was out-for-the-count, last night.

As I help you back into bed, you stomp hard on the bridge of my foot. It feels like a greenstick fracture – the same stabbing pain as when I dropped the mallet at Dad's worksite, only then I had boots on. This time I don't make a sound.

You look uncomfortable in bed, like a question mark, but I can't shift you – your legs heavy as the gnarled tree trunks in Dad's trailer.

I need to leave for school. Mrs Markham said: *Too many days absent*. Your skin is cold like a big, ugly plastic doll. Dad's not answering his phone and I'm not going next door because you said Anne Anderson is a total-fucking-busy-body.

I call the ambulance. It doesn't feel like my idea but how can I leave Brad if you won't wake up?

Later, you're sitting up in bed like home is a hospital. Your bedroom window is open and the see-through curtains flutter in the breeze like your nighties on the clothesline. The wind is gusty as if the shoreline is just there, not the road. Who cares about my sore foot if the beach is soon?

Know this! I'll always stay awake with you. Next time, if you're plastic-cold asleep, I'll stay home from school. Mrs Markham should worry more about the kids who can't spell and add up.

I didn't know you took too much from the top of the pantry. I thought you might be dying. Dad needs to answer his fucking mobile once in a while.

We look at each other and then turn to the curtains. I know you feel it, too. Don't worry, I'm not even one-bit tired.

Julia Prendergast lives in Melbourne, Australia, on unceded Wurundjeri land. Her novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat (2018) was longlisted for the Indie Book Awards (debut fiction). Her short story collection, Bloodrust and Other Stories, was published in 2022. Julia is a practice-led researcher – an enthusiastic supporter of transdisciplinary, collaborative research practices, with a particular interest in neuro|psychoanalytic approaches to writing and creativity. Julia is President|Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing (Australasia). She is Associate Professor and Discipline Leader (Creative Writing and Publishing) at Swinburne University, Melbourne.



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TEXT prose

Gayelene Carbis

Theory

All was going along well. I was studying literature. I was immersed in text/s. I was closely reading. I was analysing and interpreting. I was writing essays. I was happy in that world of my texts and my tutors and lecturers and literature. All was good. (Aside from my struggles to get essays done by due dates, but that's another story that has to do with my background, my psyche, my psychology, my character. Let's not leave out my family, for they were always at my shoulder as I sat there at that desk writing those words. Long story, sad story, old story: mother threatened by me moving beyond her; father not a fighter, not a problem-solver, passive. Mother telling me to leave school and get a job at Safeway. All of that on my shoulders, flowing in my blood and leaking into ink). And then came Honours. Course work and a thesis, so that I could go from Honours to Masters to PhD, become an academic (and a writer, of course – no need to say it). I was innocent. I didn't know what was in store for me. I thought I'd continue going merrily along. But into Honours came not only the Thesis but something called *Literary Theory*. I didn't get it. Didn't get the point of it. Didn't see why I had to apply it to – anything. Everything. I didn't see why my beautiful texts needed anything extra. I couldn't comprehend Literary Theory's purpose. It seemed insidious. Artificial. Why should I incorporate literary theory into what I had to say about texts,

unless of course the literary theory had something to say that enhanced what I was saying. Why did I need theory to back me up, to substantiate anything? I didn't like Derrida, or deconstruction. I didn't know what it was. It felt like I'd missed Derrida 101 and Deconstruction Zero. It felt like there was something everybody else understood, all my lovely lecturers and tutors, they were in on the secret. And they were academics so did this mean I wasn't academic? But what about my High Distinctions and Distinctions? Didn't they count for something? Did I need to throw in Derrida to continue? So I carried around my Literary Theory Reader. I read it. I despaired. And then somewhere along the line, I read things like "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous. I read a little of Kristeva. And more of Cixous, and then Irigaray. I read Freud. I read "The Anxiety of Influence" – the first thing in the Literary Theory Reader that made any sense to me. My thesis supervisor recommended Bakhtin on heteroglossia, and suddenly, some of it made sense. But it still felt artificial. It still felt like I was incorporating it into my essays, my thesis, because I had to. I had no other choice. Or not one that I could see or understand. But it began creeping in, into my consciousness. And then I came across *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, an analysis of literary texts by women writers from a feminist perspective, and I've never been the same since.

Gayelene Carbis is an award-winning Australian-Irish-Chinese-Cornish writer of poetry, prose, plays and short film. Her first poetry book, Anecdotal Evidence, was awarded Finalist, International Book Awards, 2019. Her second book, I Have Decided to Remain Vertical (Puncher and Wattmann, 2022) is currently longlisted for the International Poetry Book Awards 2023, U.K. (Wales). Gayelene teaches Creative Writing and works as a writing mentor.



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TEXT prose

Megan Anning

I've been thinking about buying a typewriter

They come in baby blue and bright orange too. I found some on Fb Marketplace. Not sure I'll find one to match my new décor though: it's 'Normal Style': it's everywhere but cheapest at Kmart. I try to avoid thinking about why or how.

I've needed to calm myself in the afternoons, during the nights, in the mornings, at midday. Beige is good for calm. Sandy hues and indoor plants are good for making me feel I'm alive and really living. Rattan baskets and throw blankets, a Siamese fighter fish swirling in a bowl on the coffee table. It's Scandinavian, very, very normal.

If I got a typewriter, the tapping might be a pain. A shock to the pineal gland, those plonking old keys in the middle of an oasis. I'm not drinking nearly as much these days. Nevertheless, it's comforting to know I have a real mouth, and a hand to really feel things, pick them up and throw stuff about. I've got two hands in fact. That's something more than nothing at least. I've got a heart too, for the time being and by the way, do you? I suppose it depends on the time of day, the circumstantial considerations curtailing the ability to commune with our own species. It is for me, dooby doo, dooby dee. We hee, shooby [Add to Dictionary] foo [some words are similar but are used differently – but I don't want to write 'food' thank you very much]!

I knew it was wrong to gratuitously kill other creatures. I knew there was something uncanny about the murder of ants, even at the end of a broom. Something arbitrary and too normal. What if the intelligence chooses ants for implantation? What then?

And where would I buy the tape anyway? Is it tape they use? Everything is vanishing. Strange there are still typewriters come to think of it. Officeworks probably won't stock it, or it would be modernized, computerized, transmogrified into buzzing blips zipping along invisible lines of circuitry – architecture it's called – neural tunnels. Something to do with transformers.

I don't sleep much. It's a blessing/curse: more time to learn about things: things learning more time about me. Microsoft. Google. I use DuckDuckGo, but you can never be sure about anything. Everything's gone 'tele'. 'She thought of her phone and its "never-sleeping ear", how it's spying on her night and day'.

A lady wanted to know about it today when I came across her on playground duty. She wanted to turn her phone's ears off. When I said, 'You can't! You can't!' it was sad to see her face recognize the truth of what I was telling her, tellingher, tellingher, tele tele telegram telephone teletelelepathy, tele me tele you teletext/you/all/itty.

Can you tell it's me? Can you copy 'tree'? Can you 'humanity'? [Ignore All/Ignore Once/Ignore the ignorance all-at-wunts/Ignore the prompts/Ignore the rules/Write a human dikshunary/Ignore the squiggly lines underneath].

The end.

App Tracking Protection blocked 175 tracking attempts in two apps in the past hour. TripleVerify. How many buses are in the squares. Tick the box to show you're not a robot. 12 attempts to collect your data. Robots are known to harvest:

City

Fingerprint

Timezone

Country

Gender

First Name

Cookies (not chocolate chip)

Email Address

Headphone Status

Total Memory Recall (some scenes are lost in black holes)

GPS Coordinates

Neural Pathway Trajectories

Internal Ear Vibrations

Rhythm of Heartbeat

Speed of Blood Flow

Dreams and Fears and Desires

Patterns and Habits and Swipes

Interjections, Utterances and Retorts

Levels of Unconsciousness

Preferred Biases and Persecutions

He wondered: if they do still sell whatever a typewriter needs to create words on a page, something akin to tape for instance, very likely those necessities will be programmed to have a short life span, meaning I'll have to keep buying new rolls. It will be a bother, and algorithmic, the deoxyribonucleic acid embedded in silicon chips; it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Is any of it?

For whom is she writing these sentences? For in the future [and the present] there is not death but annihilation. The absence of free thought. She thinks about the little boxes on the criteria at work, about the students and the grey matter already turned off; she and they will never catch up to the machines now, scurrying on a hamster wheel that shows no sign of slowing, and no sign of winning, no sweet reprieve, no dripping reward to satiate our thirst for the Real.

I sigh aloud now when I catch myself saying things that are obsolete, yet still in common practice: it was absurd to tell the students that they needed to stop talking with their friends and focus on the novel study, because they weren't going to have their friends to help them in the exam. It was absurd of me to use my 'teacher voice' to try to motivate them because 'it's already too late,' is something I've heard recently.

Inimitable aspects of humanity are being wasted, crushed, pulverized and shaped to fit into little boxes stuffed with tiny dots that must be ticked. Mechanistic aspects of humanity are these words spilling out in order, a thinking text, a program that is writing us all, a machine that I want to jam into the next galaxy. Suddenly I have an urge to learn how to make jam.

Instead, I decided to get a new diary. I'm not in a patient enough space to tarry with the foibles and pitfalls of an ancient typewriter. Tarry. What a gem, an old, unused word I rarely think of. Yesterday I bought a diary from a two-dollar shop, and when I was there among the gaudy plastic home décor, plastic feathers and quaint figurines, I imagined it was the old junk shop, although Mr Charrington had changed into a woman with coffee skin who peered curiously at me when I handed her the five dollars at the counter. Perhaps she'd caught the surreptitious quality of my glance, a whiff of my desire to commit word crime.

But I read that she'd said that they can't do that: 'It's the one thing they can't do ... they can't get inside you'. She should be marking papers despite the disappearing paper, the boxes going extinct, the ticks being ticked with decomposing hands; she should be running so the wheel keeps turning. Yet she remembers reading that 'If you can feel that staying human is worthwhile, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them [and she does and so can you too, while I'm at it, just because justbecause (no reference information)].

Megan Anning is a writer and teacher whose stories and poetry have appeared in Sudo Journal, Burningwood Literary Journal, Text Journal, The West End Magazine, October Hill Magazine, The Citron Review, and The Closed Eye Open among others. She has a keen interest in Bohemianism, a term described as a literary phenomenon that originated in Paris in the 1800s with the publication of Henry Murger's humorous semi-autobiographical sketches set in the Latin Quarter which crystalised the glamorous myth of the 'starving artist'. In April this year, Megan submitted her Creative Writing PhD thesis for examination at Griffith University.



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TEXT prose

Nadia Mead

Fight, Flight, Knit

The knitting machine was a timely arrival. An innocuous mix of mauve and white plastic, it looked more like a child's toy than something that should be taking pride of place on her grown-up table. Nevertheless, it was a thing of beauty and wonder with its cylindrical base rotated by a cranking handle at the side. She was reminded of French Knitting from her youth, of endlessly feeding the gathered pins around the top of a tube, and the satisfaction of pulling a thickened rope down through the centre. And now, the thrill of making more than just rope, of creating pieces of significance, and making a difference – all of this awaited her. As a dedicated knitter, the idea of creating yarn pieces without the lengthy labour of two needles was deliciously decadent. Almost cheating.

For years, she'd used knitting and crochet as tools for thinking through writing projects. An accidental discovery during her PhD showed her how the repetitive motion of knitting helped to unravel tricky writing knots. In the years since, she'd used knitting and crochet as strategies to overcome writer's block, and to navigate the cognitive load of switching back and forth between creative and scholarly writing. Instead of wasting time staring at a screen when the words wouldn't come, she picked up her craft project and waited. Once the yarn started flowing through her fingers, the words crept back, tired of their childish game of hide and seek.

However, with the acquisition of a knitting machine, she wondered if it would still be a useful tool for writing, worried it wouldn't create the same effect as two needles or a crochet hook methodically working their way through stitch after stitch after stitch.

For its maiden voyage, she practised rotating the circular base, turning the handle and watching each hook-shaped tooth move up and down, ready to grab the yarn and create looping chains out of sight. She learnt how to cast on and off, how to change colours, experimenting with tension and different weights of yarn.

Much like her writing, there were false starts and dropped stitches. The slightest tension in the wrong direction could lead to several stitches loosening, drooping from the teeth, and the potential loss of the entire project. Frequently, she had to admit defeat and unravel a project to start again. At other times, she fed her rejects to a box of salvageable mishaps, ready to be re-worked later.

But something happened once she mastered the basics. When the project was safely on its way, her brain settled sufficiently, tuning in to the rhythm of satisfying mechanical clicks as the plastic teeth rotated, spurred on by her determined cranking of the handle. The plastic fangs surged upwards to snatch the yarn before sinking out of sight like a shark with its prey. A black row marker started as a focal point before transforming into a smudged blur as she succumbed to the hypnotic sights and sounds of multicoloured yarn spinning and weaving and growing. Jumbled writing responsibilities settled into neat rows, soothing themselves into achievable goals and ordered structures like the vibrant v-shaped stitches sitting neatly alongside one another.

One afternoon, feeling anxious about a particular paper, she had a sudden urge to create something on the knitting machine. Driving home, she planned her project, eager to start. She wondered if she was procrastinating, avoiding the writing, but needn't have worried. Once the knitting project was set up, the repetitive clacking and mesmerizing blur of yarn weaving itself through white plastic teeth cleared away the detritus of her earlier thoughts. Soothed and calmed, she was able to think more productively – and the writing, both desire and content, sashayed back to her, checking its fingernails and feigning surprise it had ever caused any alarm by its absence.

Dr Nadia Mead is a creativity professional whose research interests include autoethnography, creative writing, teacher wellbeing, and how storytelling can influence professional practice and wellbeing. Nadia lectures in Education at CQUniversity, Australia.



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TEXT prose

**Amy Lilwall and Rupert Loydell
with an introduction by Eoin Murray**

Appetite for Sky

Interactive Fiction: Experiencing the Flow

Narrative, themes, and overall interpretations of an interactive text are heavily dependent on the journey the reader goes through and the choices they make. To aid in understanding how we, as humans, can take the most joy and satisfaction from interactive pieces of fiction, this introduction discusses the concept of choice, the states of immersion, engagement, and flow, the pleasures of possible worlds, and the safety of surrogate narratives impacting the satisfactory power of reader agency. It is my hope that, with the benefit of this critical framework, the evocative experience of interactive fiction will be further enhanced for all readers enabling deeper and more personal readings of texts.

Non-interactive (or static) prose and poetry, offers humans the ability to tell stories about the most cost aspects of living, aging and learning (Dutton, 2009); through fulfilling this instinctual desire we, as a species, experience both pleasure in the telling and growth in the learning. This growth has at its core an evolutionary benefit to our success as humans (ibid), but we are now far evolved past this most basic need for narrative. And yet, narrative remains the strongest method through which we understand the way we live (Taylor, 1992) when interacting with the world around us.

Therefore, we are constantly making hundreds of minute decisions one after another, after another – how shall we dress, where do we work, what can we say, etc., and with these decisions come consequences; some good, others bad and, most concerningly, those unknown. A person may decide to wear a new red shirt to work one day only for their new boss to loathe the colour and thus make a negative first impression. Was that presented as an instance in the dresser's mind first thing? Almost certainly not. But, being so schooled in managing our own lives, we often give automatic thought over to these decisions based on our evolving schemata of life (Rumelhart, 1980). Choice, then, is an intrinsic part of our lives; narrative too forms the most common lens through which we grasp the world around us. Bringing choice and narrative together seems like a natural combination and such stories offers readers a new form of surrogate experience through which they are presented with a world of infinite possibilities. The surrogate aspect is key though; while a person may never risk a decision such as 'screaming into a bin in public' (Lilwall & Loydell, 2023) when moving through their day-to-day life for fear of reproach, in the realm of narrative, of fiction the choice offers no such consequence.

This is not to say interactive fiction provides no consequence for the reader. Fiction presents humans with 'a world of actuality surrounded by possibility' (Boyd, 2010: 177) yet a written, finished artefact can only present a finite number of choices. It is up to the author (or authors in this case) to offer their reader possibilities that seem endless but are in fact easily quantifiable. 'Appetite for Sky' presents at first a rather everyday scenario: being out watching a swan; this is likely an experience almost all readers can identify with – if not with a swan then with any bird. The reading experience is immersive, meaning almost at once the reader can become absorbed within the comforting confines of a familiar situation (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000). However, as the short passage draws to a close the reader is now presented with an, at first glimpse, simple choice to make: sit and watch, or go and get coffee. If a person were experiencing this situation, they could make the choice with little to no thought based on their current condition. Within the fictional premise they have embarked upon, the magic circle (Huizinga, 1938) they have stepped into, all at once the decision goes beyond the commonplace event. To sit and watch could mean the swan transforms to a grand phoenix, to go for coffee means to fall through an interdimensional portal and fly through space. Equally, the choices could be just that, to linger with the swan or enjoy a fresh drink, but the mental journey the reader takes before even engaging with the new step of their journey is already elevated through the joy of the surrogate – there is no negative consequence to this adventure. 'Appetite for Sky' presents the satiation of experience for a reader in both the passages they experience, and the potential left in the ones they do not.

Lingering in a state of uncertainty as they move through the passages, being blind as to what comes next, places the reader on the other side of an affective experience – that of engagement. To be engaged is to at once hold enough understanding to be comfortable

yet be unsure where the narrative will progress (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000). In a more static narrative, devoid of reader choice, engagement can be a somewhat more difficult state to reach. As a society we have honed our formulas for storytelling and following repeated exposure can often predict such points long before they happen – the death of the mentor, the failing of the hero, the happy ending. When a reader is offered a choice, the responsibility moves to them, the consequences lie with them (Rouse III, 2009) and suddenly, all things seem possible. As a reader moves through the cavalcade of differing experiences ‘Appetite for Sky’ gives them, they constantly shift their placement along the spectrum of immersed and engaged. This shifting of position aims to culminate in that most pleasurable of states – flow. When a reader is experiencing flow, they are at once immersed and engaged simultaneously (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000); the joy they feel knowing they are free to make their exploratory choices meshes with the excitement and curiosity they feel wishing to know just where their journey will take them next. The sea, the sky, the bottle, a bin, all options are at once open and accessible to them and yet closed off and left behind. So, the reader is not met with one possible telling, one incarnation of ‘Appetite for Sky’ but the possibility for multiple versions, each unique in its retelling. Each rereading presents as a new ‘construct of the imagination, a new object of aesthetic contemplation’ (Ryan, 2019: 62) the reader may move through differently.

The method by which the reader will move through ‘Appetite for Sky’ is at once very simple yet cognitively complex. As has been discussed, unlike the more static prose and poetry designed to be read in a linear fashion from beginning to end, the reader must choose from options offered to create the order of passages they will read. Each and every time a decision is made the reader is enacting something known as agency. A key term within fields of interactive fiction and ludological studies, agency is briefly defined as ‘the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices’ (Murray, 1997: 126). In agency do we find the ultimate pay-off for immersing and engaging with interactive works – from entirely prose based pieces such as ‘Appetite for Sky’ to complex ludological experiences such as the latest *Call of Duty* (Treyarch, 2010): satisfaction in making a choice. We have established making choices comes naturally to us as humans through our evolved schemata but now comes understanding of the pleasure making those choices can offer. The joy of participation within a safe, fictional space that offers all the possibilities in the world is an experience only narrative media such as ‘Appetite for Sky’ can provide. Through careful, thought-provoking choice text, a reader can have a different journey through the piece time and time again knowing each read through was *their* experience, was their journey. The decisions made were never hollow, as each helped construct a reader’s understanding of the piece, but they were always safe, and within a world as chaotic as this, safety can provide comfort and satisfaction as much as the beautiful imagery Lilwall & Loydell evoke throughout the work. The reader crafts their own ‘Appetite for Sky’ through the tools and content the authors have given them alongside their meaningful decisions.

To conclude, having discussed the differing narrative and cognitive functions a reader can experience engaging with an interactive piece of writing, the reader can move through ‘Appetite for Sky’ knowing they are crafting their own adventure. The experience is theirs to savour, theirs to indulge in and, should they wish, theirs to repeat as many times as they continually find meaning. They have the choice to see how each passage builds on the ones selected before and revel in the satisfaction of their journey. And, perhaps most importantly, they may make whichever choices their heart leans to; in this experience they are safe and creative.

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Appetite for Sky

1am

The swan on the Brayford has puffed up its wings. I have never seen that before, but the shape is often captured in porcelain and on white wedding cakes. It swims alone but should be part of a pair. I'd like to think that it is creating more surface area to absorb the sun. There are picnic tables by the water, and it would be nice to see the swan swim off somewhere. Although, it is rather cold.

I'll get a coffee (go to **3am**)

I'll sit and watch (go to **4am**)

2am

The nearby coffee shop, housed in a shed painted to look like a beach hut, is closed despite a sign saying OPEN FOR FRESH DRINKS AND SNACKS on the pavement nearby. By the time I wander back to the river there are four swans and a group of ducks, attracted by a group of children noisily throwing bread to them. I decide to walk on and leave them to it, but should I

stroll further along the riverbank (go to **4am**)

walk to the coffee shop in town (go to **7am**)

3am

Guadeloupe is green and swaying. Coffee is served with a sturdy square of chocolate under the roof of a wall-less barn. I warm my nose over the cup and watch a black and yellow caterpillar's slow concertina towards a stone path. When the sky clears, I will wander up to the vanilla flowers. There is only one day during the year that each one can be pollinated. I might find one today. Should I

pollinate the vanilla flowers (go to **8am**)

go to the beach (go to **11am**)

4am

Here, the river is quieter, wider, slower. The swans look elegant compared to the ridiculous pedalos chained up on the towpath now it is out of season. Their wooden heads and wings are awkward, the black and white paint peeling, their beaks a faded lipstick red. I turn my back and watch the water, ducks diving for whatever ducks dive for, and the single canoeist trying to stay in the sun and avoid the wildlife. A single heron stands on one leg in the mud on the opposite bank, but flies off as shutters clatter behind me. The owner of Guadeloupe has decided to open late and attempt to cash in on the cold sunshine. I might

get a drink and something to eat (go to **3am**)

leave her be and stroll back home (go to **9am**)

5am

They sell rabbit in the supermarket here. It makes sense, but I don't like the way the meat tapers into hot-pink edges. That and the dirty tiles underfoot, the aluminium trays, the blood smell. Bottles of oil stand dusty on a counter above piled up till rolls. A man wipes his hands, finger by finger, on an old tea towel. I will not eat the rabbit, but I would like

to do something different today. So I buy it. Only when the cold polythene is lumped into my hand do I feel sad. I need a breath of air. I'll either

watch the swan on the Brayford (go to **1am**)

or walk to the pet shop (go to **noon**)

6am

This morning there is a large broken branch in the corner of our garden, blown down by last night's wind. Next door, however, are dealing with a half-ton branch which has broken their side gate and is blocking the alley to the next close. She says she will phone her father, who has a chainsaw, soon. Our apples are still clinging on to the tree where I cannot reach them, small rosy suns against the darkening green as autumn does its gradual damage. The wind has dropped and the sun come out, the cat is sprawled on the damp patio table, content with everything. Maybe I'll

make myself a cup of coffee in the kitchen (go to **10am**)

or take a walk to the pet shop to buy her more food (go to **noon**)

7am

The barriers come down at the level crossing just as I approach. I decide to keep walking until I am on an East Yorkshire cliff, bracing myself against the North Sea wind. I never learned to swim, and that's not why I'm here. I retreat from the coast and step through the town, keeping my footsteps inside the edges of each cobble. The best brews are served up north, specifically in this coffee shop with the striped awning and the large, blue macaw that sits by the window. It is not in a cage. I like that. I admire the feathers pouring down its back like brushstrokes. I would like to

be somewhere warmer than here (go to **3am**)

walk to the pet shop (go to **noon**)

8am

There are handy little brushes hanging next to the vanilla plants to encourage you to help pollinate the plants. The insects here are sunburnt, hot and exhausted; need all the assistance they can get. They prefer to laze with iced cups of nectar while we celebrate Pollination Day. Tonight there will be singing and dancing for all, in the summer there will be buds and flowers, new leaves and growth, along with much scratching and killing of insects which bite rather than perform their duty. I look forward to the party, but while I wait I will

see what is happening back home (go to **9am**)

relax on the beach (go to **11am**)

9am

Home is dark after half-four. The low sun is caught behind the chimney of the house opposite. The last wedge of gold dies in the corner of a top floor window. She arrives, whispering through the house like a shudder. Then she is gone. I sit in the dark and ask her to stay longer, but of course, she can't hear me. The cat comes to my reading chair, tipping his face upwards. I drag my hand from its neck to its tail. He tolerates me; he knows this is the only service he can provide. She will come again tomorrow, I say. Don't worry. And I will have some pancakes ready. For now, I should

go to the kitchen (go to **10am**)

follow her (go to **1pm**)

10am

In the kitchen I find myself already making coffee. I do not seem surprised to see me, although I am disconcerted by this apparition of my doppelgänger. 'Want a cup?' I ask.

‘Yes please,’ I reply. I hand myself a mug of coffee made just the way I like it: strong enough to stand a spoon up in, bitter enough to cut through anything that might challenge its caffeine content. ‘Which way did you come?’ I ask. ‘Oh, just from the garden,’ I say. ‘You?’ ‘I’ve been home all along.’ ‘Best be getting on.’ ‘Me too.’ But I don’t know whether to

escape to the pub (go to **2pm**)

risk bad dreams again (go to **5pm**)

11am

Darkness is lit from below by the moon’s reflection. There are holes in the sand where the razor clams burrow and the sea is hemmed with starfish. A woman is selling silver from a tray that she holds on her hip. I wish she wasn’t here. We were fine, the moon, the clams the starfish and me. I wonder if there is a place in the sky where you can bottle its colour. Very high up, perhaps. I would fill my vessel with dark blue and one, small star. I think she would agree, the woman with the tray, that daylight is too full of cloud. Do I

get something to eat (go to **5am**)

bottle the night sky (go to **3pm**)

Noon

The pet shop has that smell of non-specific animal, and is full of non-buying customers poking their fingers through the cage sides at gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits and a litter of kittens. I sometimes wish they would let children stroke the poisonous spiders and cuddle the snakes, but instead I fight my way through to the counter and ask for a large bag of dried food, pay by card, and escape out onto the pavement. I stop to take a breath, wondering

if the pub will mind me taking a bag of pet food in (go to **2pm**)

what it's like to be a kitten (go to **4pm**)

1pm

She sits in the elbow of a low willow branch, right at the end of the garden. Her toes don't quite reach the floor and her tights are muddy. Firelight makes her feel nervous, she told me once. Perhaps that's why she's always outside. Had I known she sat here all day and all night, I would have brought her a blanket. Now, her head is bent over a creature in her hands. How it got that near to her, I don't know. I close my eyes to the thought and when I open them again, she is looking at me. Before I speak, she disappears, leaving a black and white kitten mewling on the branch. Well, now I want to

know what it's like to be a kitten (go to **4pm**)

scream into a bin (go to **8pm**)

2pm

A man goes into a bar, somewhat breathless from carrying a large sack of pet food. The barman apologises that his favourite bitter is out of stock until tomorrow's delivery; they have no crisps or nuts either. I don't care, settle for expensive lager and a bar of chocolate, and then repeat. A man sits in a bar until it gets dark outside and he thinks about going home to eat. I stand, take my empty glass to the bar and drift along the street, gently inebriated, enjoying the long way home. I might

go into the supermarket and treat myself to something nice for tea (go to **5am**)

have to scream loudly because I have left the pet food in the pub (go to **8pm**)

3pm

The lid to my bottle is rough with teeth marks. Bits of label stick to the plastic. If I were the night sky, I would not want to be kept like this. Still, the oak tree up on the yellow hill has a branch that grows horizontally like a long arm. I perch on it and hold my bottle out into the air, as far as I can reach. The sky creeps closer, then pulls away a drop of itself and slips inside. Then more follows, oozing through the neck and piling up the sides. It could be night-blue custard. My bottle overflows and I tell the sky to step back. It does. It is more curious than I had imagined; it enjoyed this new thing. It watches me as I twist on the lid and climb back down from the branch. Do I

hope it will cure my bad dreams (go to **4pm**)

drink it (go to **11pm**)

4pm

Do cats dream of being a kitten, snug and warm, leaning against or feeding from their mother, or have nightmares about a fox in the garden, or wonder why they can never see, let alone catch, the owl who calls each moonlit night? I don't even know if cats dream at all, although they snore: whenever a bad dream wakes me up the cat is curled up or laid out contentedly, making a noise. No comfort for me, especially on nights like tonight, with another storm blown in, threatening damage. Whether I sleep or not, dream or not, the morning will eventually arrive and I must get out of bed. I wonder

what the storm damage is this time? (go to **6pm**)

why time is so slow this time of year? (go to **10pm**)

5pm

I am a rat, in a smooth, clean pipe, and my teeth are growing at a rate of four centimetres per year. The tips of the incisors drag between my paws. My eyes see, but there is nothing

here. I can't eat, yet I do not die. I wait for the day when these great, growing tusks push my head up to the roof of the pipe and I am stuck. Or worse. But for now, I scamper on, and try to shout at me – sleeping me – that this is a bad dream. I won't listen, of course, but at some point I will wake up. The first thing I'll do is go out, anywhere as long as it's outside. Maybe I'll...

check out the ducks (go to **2am**)

paint the skirting boards (go to **6pm**)

6pm

I hate bloody D.I.Y. That's what builders are for, that's what moving house is for. Sand and prepare, prime and undercoat, top coat and repeat. Keep your fingers away from it, don't get paint on the carpet or the floor. Are you sure that's the same colour? I am. Are you sure you don't mind doing this? Yes I do. I said we should never have painted it magnolia, I told you woodchip was passé. I told you not to tell me any more. Are you sure you aren't getting stressed and overwrought? Maybe.

Are you sure I can't go

and hide in the garden? (go to **6am**)

to the pub? (go to **9pm**)

7pm

Imagine a pile of wet leaves in darkness. Underneath it, there is a hole. There is no ladder, no drip-drip, no sleeping bear. It is empty. What is more, the pathway that leads to it doesn't exist. If it did, it would be stony with the odd puddle to reflect the moonlight. But it doesn't. There are no footprints outside, no bike leaning against the silver birch. No silver birch. The rabbit that stops to twitch its nostrils at the air is not there. A fox doesn't wander past at night. Nothing leads to the hole, yet the hole is here. As are you. You'd like to move on now; I'm not at all surprised. Do you

go for a reviving snack? (go to **2am**)

stick around and decorate the place (go to **6pm**)

8pm

Aaaagh! The sound reverberates and echoes as I lift my head from the dustbin. I breathe deep and let rip again: Aaaagh! As though we're in an old-fashioned film, someone opens a window and tells me to 'Shut the fuck up', before slamming the window shut again. I contemplate a third exhalation and decide against it; the someone sounded bigger than me. I feel better anyway, stride off down the alley, relaxed and purposeful, though

I am tempted by the pub on the corner of the next street (go to **9pm**)

I almost slip in the wet leaves, which makes me pause a moment to consider the nature of the world we live in (go to **11pm**)

9pm

There is a footprint on the table I see. Dusty with an intricate tread. This is a micro-pub. The size of a double bedroom in a semi-detached house. Or a garage for one car. Or an underground bunker. There are no windows. Just a barperson with a knotted headscarf, pushing a cloth around a bar stool seat. A DJ has taken one of the tables to set up his decks. That leaves two. The footprint one and another, occupied by two lost walkers (I can tell by their shoes) with crisps that they push staringly into their mouths. Dirty tables make me wince, perhaps I should leave. The barperson hurries over and wipes away the mark. 'I was pinning the bell to the ceiling,' she says. I look up at the tilted, foil bell, pinned by a bit of string into the artex. Decorations. In November. I slide onto the bench behind the table. Now, all I have to do is

make myself small enough to escape through a pipe (go to **5pm**)

wonder why time is so slow (go to **10pm**)

10pm

It's all a blur to be honest. I don't know if I'm not paying attention, I'm distracted or what, but everything moves at a snail's pace at the moment. Sometimes I wonder if the scientists have got it wrong about time. They talk about experiential time, and how gravity and planetary orbits affect it all, how all of time exists at once, but I'm not convinced. I mean, I remember the time before they decided all this, I remember growing up and things being different. Surely, science is just one form of explanation, a well-meaning but tentative deduction from the current information to hand? If I was sure of everything, I'd give up and

go and watch the swans (go to **1am**)

spend more time with my ex-partner (go to **1pm**)

11pm

The bottle changes depending on the weather. Today it is raining; droplets fly into its sides like birds into glass doors. My piece of sky is curdled grey and white, just like its mother outside, so that when I hold the bottle up to the window, I can barely see its outline. Why I would choose to drink rainy sky is beyond me. Sometimes it is Smartie blue, sometimes it is pink gold; I have learned that one's appetite for sky does not depend on the colour, but on the mood. My hands untwist the lid as if they are working independently from my body. Before it can ooze out and upwards, I tilt the contents into my mouth. It tastes like rainwater from a metal bucket. I must either drink it all, or screw the cap back on, but the bottle is empty before I have made up my mind. I don't know what it will do to me. Someone told me once that

nothing will happen until midnight (go to **midnight**)

I will immediately shrink to the size of a bee (go to **8am**)

Midnight

Time is the continued sequence of existence and events that occurs in an apparently irreversible succession from the past, through the present. Your clock is 2 hours, 25 minutes and 15.4 seconds behind. Accuracy of synchronization was ± 0.005 seconds. Be careful or you'll miss the chimes and kisses from strangers, last orders or the bus back home. You can never have enough blue sky, because otherwise it's dark or grey, like your mood. There must be other ways to tell the time besides asking strangers? There must be another way to live apart from being a stranger. It's strange the way you drink the air, the rain, the whole experience of everything you do, where you are, what you see, how you feel. You leave me feeling underwhelmed, as though I'm missing out, although I was alright before we met. My friends think

I should take a holiday (go to **7am**)

bottle my own night sky (go to **3pm**)

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Jessica Faulkner

The Performance

Cast of Characters

The Writer: Herself

Medea: Leader of the Chorus

Chorus: Six women wearing clothing from different time periods

The Knife: Chekhov's Gun

Audience: The Reader

The Writer sits at a desk in the centre of the stage. It is an old stage. Large and grand and stolen straight from her childhood. The walls are red and they have all the grandeur of a womb. The Writer, herself, is one part of a whole that she carves out and turns over and over in her hands, like a precious stone, or a tumour. Will she ever tell which it is? The Writer is an illusion, and yet, this is she.

Medea: You're wasting words¹. Arm yourself, my heart².

¹ Euripides 326

² Euripides 1240

The Writer has studied the void. It is where her words go, where they fall and echo the moment she writes them.

Chorus: This is a stage. Perform.

And so, The Writer begins her monologue.

The Writer: When I was a child, I thought this place was another home. I was a ballet dancer. I performed here many times, and not once did I open my mouth to speak. There is a photo of me, facing this empty audience, arms raised in line with my head. I am wearing a black leotard, so it must have been taken during rehearsal.

I remember the lead-up to the Christmas concert each year, waiting to hear which role was mine, how I was supposed to define myself over the coming months. When I was six years old, I opened the concert. My ballet teacher was pregnant, so it was the only year we had no roles, no story, only ourselves, dancing. I was supposed to dance under a spotlight, but, on the night of the performance, the lighting remained dark, and the audience could hardly see me, nor could I see them. In truth, I don't remember it. Although, I wonder if it is how I became a writer. By learning to dance in the darkness.

Chorus: We heard her voice.

The Writer: But I feel like I'm only ever *trying* to be a writer, and I doubt the feeling will pass. Last year, I completed my undergraduate degree, and, in the final semester, I took two classes in which I had to write about myself. It soon became clear that I couldn't. At the time, I felt nothing for myself, nothing but a sense of unspooling; I was a black thread unseen in the dark.

Chorus (aside): She's doing it again. Metaphor in place of a truth she thinks is too rotten to carve out.

The Writer: As I was unspooling, I discovered a type of writing called 'auto/biography'. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson coin the term in their work on interpreting life narratives. Essentially, it's the act of writing about yourself through someone else (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 256) and, last year, this was what I needed. I let Catherine of Aragon and Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* carry the parts of me that I could not. *Parts that are already rotting*, I wrote, *parts that are already dead*.

The Writer comes to stand at the front of the stage. The spotlight upon her flickers, but every member of the Chorus holds a candle and a match.

The Writer: Everyone has their Greek tragedy and I want to confront mine, tonight, here in this theatre, to fly off at the end of the performance atop a winged dragon, as if I always knew that to be the ending.

But The Writer knows that, unlike Medea, her father is no sun-god, and if this story is set in the present, then his role has ended before it began.

The Writer: I imagine that I will have to sacrifice something, likely a part of myself, as I do whenever I write, to the belief that, “creative writing, when it begins with the exploring of self ...[must show]... genuine emotion which lives in The Writer,” (Hogrefe, 1940, p. 156). And so, I will ask, *Is this enough?* as I hold up the sacrifice for you all to see, wriggling and squirming like a child, as I raise my knife (do I have a knife?) and bring it down into the flesh.

Medea: Oh, my heart, don't, don't do it!³.

And so, The Writer is still an illusion, but the illusion gathers flesh as it nears the whole.

The Writer: Come now, let me examine myself. Which part would you like to see? I think writing is as much an act of omission as it is an act of creation. So is the self. There is another version of me, right now, pulling all my black puppet threads, sitting at a desk as I stand here. This is what she has removed: the recount of a doctor's appointment, after which I changed GP [*It's too messy, she says, and your personal boundaries should exist even within performance, so stop trying to break them*]; a list of all my achievements that I feel were only ever a performance [*Stop trying to prove yourself, you're going to make everyone despise you and you already do that so well yourself*]; and, then there's the rest of this very section [*This sentence is far too long now*].

The Writer walks back to her desk and opens a fresh page.

The Writer: When I was fifteen, I quit ballet to focus on school and since then, I have found myself perpetually defined by this new role. It is an everlasting concert. I have learned that each time I finish a performance, I walk from one stage onto another. Perhaps that's why I love writing so much. Reading, too. I spend so much time running through the wings, changing costumes and jumping from stage to stage, I often lose sight of who I am. When I write, I realise the best way to find myself is through someone else.

Even so, I admire people who can properly dissect themselves, who can slice their minds and bodies neatly into pieces, as if dividing a chocolate tart; the crumbs that break away are tiny, insignificant, easily mopped up and discarded. In this sense, I feel more like Cixous: “I, too, overflow” (Cixous, 1976, p. 876). For years, I stood on this very stage and, “I didn't open my mouth” (Cixous, 1976, p. 876). I want to reclaim that. I won't only take her words; I will be them. I want to be *stormy* and *precocious* and *uncensored*, to “break out of the snare of silence” (Cixous, 1976, p. 881) and walk away from it, as from a carcass that has started to rot. For Cixous, desire is an apt replacement for this silence, and I see the beauty in this. I like the idea that we can return to our bodies as if returning to our homes, as if they are buildings made of brick

³ Euripides 1057

or islands overflowing with green. If only the passage were as simple as climbing aboard a ship.

But, for me, I do not think I can achieve this. I am sorry, Cixous, but my body does not want things, aside from that which it needs to survive: food, water, air. I have never been attracted to anyone. Perhaps this will happen someday, but here my imagination fails. My body is a body of text. I can analyse it, dissect it, drape it in something beautiful, but it does not want. My mind does the wanting and it wants, most of all, for words. Cixous is someone whom I admire and respect, so I hope I am not betraying her when I say that I prefer it this way. I want to fill the silence with words, with my voice, with power. Writing is how I come to understand myself, disembodied, anaesthetised. And this, for me, is enough. This, for me, is too much. I will always go back to the page. The body of text.

The Writer has spilled her ink. It happened while she was speaking, although she did not notice. It stains her right hand, the hand with which she writes, and now the skin there is dripping with it. Whenever she moves, she leaves a mark, a smudge, and blurs all that she touches. The ink seeps into the facets of her skin and fills her fingerprints with darkness. When The Writer sees what has happened, she wipes her hand on a sheet of paper. The paper takes her thumbprint. Soon, it will find her guilty.

*Medea: I welcome what you have done*⁴.

The Writer: When I was sixteen, I submitted a piece of creative writing for an English assignment. I spent a great deal of time researching the nineteenth-century serial killer, H.H. Holmes.

Chorus (aside): Please forgive her true crime phase.

The Writer: When my teacher handed back my piece, he placed a hand on my shoulder, and I watched as the largest man I ever knew found his smallest voice. “Are you okay?” he asked. I had no idea what he was talking about, until he held up the assignment. “Because this is some dark stuff.” I grinned.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “but I thought it was *interesting*.” *Stormy. Precocious. Uncensored.*

The Writer has run out of ink. It dribbles over the side of the desk. Too much spillage. And so, The Writer takes out her knife (she has a knife?) and neatly slices her forearm. The cut is not deep, it only breaches the surface, and The Writer has to squeeze her own flesh as she milks it for inkblood. Soon, the inkpot will be refilled and everything she writes will be red.

The Writer: Donna Tartt says that “beauty is terror” (Tartt, 1992, p. 42). She says this through the mouth of her character, Julian Morrow, a classics teacher worshipped by

⁴ Euripides 883-884

his students as if he is one of the great, ancient deities they study. I can never quite decide whether I agree with her, but I think that I do – at least in part. I love writing that is messy and visceral and *stormy* and *uncensored*, and I’ve learned that catharsis has its place. Words should sometimes be left oozing; “genuine emotion” (Hogrefe, 1940, p. 156) is messy and scar tissue is far more interesting than a body, than my body of text, when it is left unscathed – although I also want to push against it. We’ve become so fascinated by the darkness, we’ve learnt to expect it, especially from artists. Everyone has their Greek tragedy, I say, but does everyone need to share it?

*Medea: It’s not even audacity; it’s a disease*⁵.

The Writer: When I arrived in my writing classes last semester (classes I came to love very much) the expectation of trauma was outlined from the beginning. Even now, it’s something I notice within most of my coursework – in the readings and the classes and the moments of silence; trauma is always there, tugging on your arm like a child. And so, I’ve spent a lot of time trying to deconstruct the notions of cathartic writing that I’d previously been taught. All throughout high school I was told that *there are some pieces that you put in your creative writing folio and others that you put in a shoebox under your bed*. So, last semester when I handed in my final pieces, both of which discussed (through allegory and indirection) my father’s emotional violence, I felt liberated. I felt as though I had evolved, as though I had outgrown the shoebox and its hiding place under my bed. But I also wonder what I would have written if I hadn’t had that expectation. I remember sitting at my computer, trying to start those pieces, combing over my body, my body of text, looking for traumas, the same way an owner checks their dog for fleas. Beauty may be terror, but is terror always beautiful?

The Writer pauses to catch her breath. The spotlight on her flickers, like a camera in a golden-age film. It tries to make her beautiful. But –

*Medea: She is a frightening woman*⁶.

The Writer holds her left forearm up to the light. Her flesh is almost translucent; her blue veins thread and tie together, like jellyfish bobbing beneath the surface. Her skin is as thin and pale as the page. And on this paper, this flesh, she writes: *Stormy. Precocious. Uncensored*. It is a prophecy, she hopes, or a memory. They are the same. Her body is a body of text, written in her own blood.

The Writer: Annie Dillard says that “you can’t put together a memoir without cannibalising your own life for parts” (Dillard, 1988, p. 171). I understand this to be figurative; Dillard is talking about memory, about the risk of using every moment since you were born as though they are knives waiting to be sharpened. I imagine trying to

⁵ Euripides 505

⁶ Euripides 48-49

tear through the memories I cherish, trying to sculpt something nuanced or complex or challenging from what I treasure most, for it is these memories that are my precious stones and I do not want to lose them. But the ugly ones, the difficult ones, the tumours that are ripe for writing, are already unspooling themselves. I do not care if I lose them, if they change, and rot, and build some sort of Frankenstein's monster, another body of text. And yet, just as I am preparing to reject Dillard's warning, to claim that now I only dance in the darkness, I find I can see all my past selves, my baby, child, woman's bodies lined up and sleeping before me (I fear I have a knife). I will reach down and brush my hand over their soft, soft hair and wonder *how long until I –*

*Medea: Murder the babes of your body!*⁷

The Writer stands. Her chair makes that harsh, scraping sound that always feels like a call to arms. She looks over at Medea, who leans on the golden arch that frames the stage. Here, every performance feels like a portrait, and so The Writer knows every portrait is only a performance.

Chorus: Oh, calm down. This part's all made up, anyway. It's not like you actually have a morgue for all your past selves.

No, The Writer thinks, only everything I've ever written.

The Writer: When I was child, being on this stage was so much simpler. Dancing is always a performance. There are rehearsals, yes, but the moment you begin working everyone knows that the movement is something else, something more, that you are behaving in a way that is not completely natural, that is posed and considered and choreographed in every moment. I think there is something freeing in that, in its overtness. There is no expectation to be yourself. To reveal anything. To *be* anything, aside from your assigned role or step. But in writing, our artform "requires The Writer to expose herself to others" (DePra, 2013, p. 63). There is a sense of intimacy, even in fiction; an understanding that The Writer always exists within the body of text. And, as much as I am drawn to the idea of exposure, to peeling the skin back and dissecting what is underneath, I cannot help but wonder why we hide these pieces of ourselves in the first place. It is a choice, surely, or an instinct. Until we write, our Greek tragedies only exist in the darkness.

I do not think that writing and dancing are as different as they may seem. In any piece of literature, every word should be considered and purposeful, as is every step in a dance. That first act of writing may be spontaneous, which, I think, is what sparks this sense of intimacy, but the piece itself is almost never; we go back, again and again, comb over the words, until they are just as much a performance. They are *art* and *style* and *effect*, I think, before they can be vulnerable. To be clear, I do not necessarily believe this is always a bad thing, especially in fiction. I love learning about literary

⁷ Euripides 1279

technique and feel it is integral to any interesting piece. But I also wonder what this performativity means for our Greek tragedies, for the work in which we expose our bodies of text. So often we judge writing by its “realism,” and yet, in life, there is never a rehearsal. We cannot go back and comb over the scenes of our everyday life, extracting what is unnecessary or dull or un compelling. We may be told that “beauty is terror” (Tartt, 1992, p. 42) and encouraged to write about the parts of our lives that are complex and frightening, traumatic, even, but I wonder what impact this has on us, not only as writers, but as human beings. We keep pouring back over that which haunts us, the moments so often ensnared in silence (Cixous, 1976, p. 881), trying to perfect them, to make them aesthetically pleasing, to ensure that the complexities of our own lives are palatable to others, even when we cannot stomach them ourselves. This, I think, is the violence; Greek tragedies are meant to be performed.

The Writer returns to her desk and dips her quill in the inkblood. She readies herself to write and yet, no words come. Her eyes will not leave Medea; she thinks of her as a mother, a villain, a symbol. A Greek tragedy.

*Medea: Wrap my dead body for burial*⁸.

The Writer wonders why she loves Medea (*It is love, she thinks, it is*). Medea is vile and cruel and, in so many ways, the antithesis of everything for which The Writer stands (or, at least, the woman beneath The Writer, the human being, and these are two very different people). The Writer has read Medea’s play many times. Six, she counts in her mind. She has highlighted her favourite lines and scribbled throughout the margins, as if this could be an artwork. The body of text does not change, although The Writer sees it anew each time, like a lover. And so, she turns to Medea.

The Writer: In your Greek tragedy, your husband, Jason, took a new wife and her father, the king, banished you, so you killed your children.

*Medea: To deal Jason the deepest wound*⁹.

The Writer: I know. It was your revenge. I don’t agree with what you did, but I think I can understand it. That’s what makes Euripides, your writer, so brilliant. But I would feel differently if you were real. So, I am glad that you are not. You saw all those awful things that were done to you, and you took control; you turned them into a performance, a Greek tragedy. Perhaps you are no different from a writer.

*Medea: My courage is all gone*¹⁰.

The Writer walks over to Medea and brushes her hand over her soft, soft hair, as if she is version of herself. A drop of blood falls from The Writer’s

⁸ Euripides 1033-1034

⁹ Euripides 827

¹⁰ Euripides 1042

flesh onto Medea's. Neither of them notice. It is as natural as the pulsing of a heart.

The Writer: It is said that the word 'tragedy' "suggest[s] suffering and trauma but also grandeur and endurance and nobility" (Foley & Howard, 2014, p. 617). You embody this, Medea. But I'm not sure that I do. You are fearless and fiery and, yes, you are from mythology, but you exist within a story that has been tailored to you, *for* you. And because you scare me, because I love you, I know that, in fiction, "beauty is terror" (Tartt, 1992, p. 42).

Medea: *You and I share many memories of love*¹¹.

But The Writer is not fictional (the illusion is now made flesh). She walks away from Medea, back to her desk, as if returning to her home, as if it is a building made of bricks or an island overflowing with green.

The Writer: My traumas have no *grandeur* or *endurance* or *nobility* (Foley & Howard, 2014, p. 617). In truth, I do not know any real person whose traumas possess these qualities. And yet, we seem to find them whenever we write about ourselves. I would like to know where they come from. Generally speaking, I do not think that writers try to fictionalise their life writing, at least not consciously, or without making the reader aware of this. It would be unethical. I keep thinking back to Annie Dillard's idea that, in life writing, we take to our own lives and cannibalise them for parts (Dillard, 1988, p. 171). I object to the word 'cannibalise'; we are not feeding. We do not try to choke down our own regurgitated memories. Rather, we present them on a plate for others and they learn how to swallow our ghosts, like pills that keep you alive. I wonder how Dillard's theory changes when we write about ourselves through someone else. Even now, the version of me holding all my puppet strings looks through Euripides' Medea and butchers her. She hangs the carcass, Medea's body of text, on a hook behind her desk and carves out what is *stormy* and *precocious* and *uncensored* [*Be honest, she says, I carve out what I want, no more, no less*].

Medea: *The loveliest things to be found anywhere on earth*¹².

The Writer pauses to think for a moment. The audience can now see the knife she holds in her hand. It is small, silver, and it glistens like a crown.

The Writer: But I still go back to that word, 'cannibalise'. I wonder if we do not cannibalise the parts of ourselves we choose to write about, the parts we present to others, but rather everything else we've ever known, every person, every character, every book or song or film, which shapes the way we are. It is the backstage while we are the performance. We feed on all this instead, and it nourishes us, with bread or with poison. We grow and shrink according to its whims. It is the first dead animal I ever

¹¹ Euripides 871-872

¹² Euripides 956

saw, skinned, offloaded from a truck and carried inside by the butcher. It is my childhood bedroom, covered in the Shirley Barber posters my mother gave me to make it feel like fairyland. It is the day we left, the winter solstice, and the coldest day I'd ever known. In my body of text, my glories and traumas brush up against one another. They lie awake in the same bed at night, and I recall them, again and again, to feed on them like a monster or a vampire or a spirit who dances in the darkness. Perhaps this is how I compose myself, how I write my body of text. And this body is no Medea; it is another Frankenstein's monster.

Maybe Dillard was right. Maybe, I am being too sentimental. Maybe, in our writing, we do cannibalise our lives. But I still do not think I can fully accept this. Or rather, I do not *want* to accept this. To me, 'cannibalise' implies intention, violence. Our work may deal with trauma, with all the complexities of "genuine emotion" (Hogrefe, 1940, p. 156), but we cannot forget that the act of writing, itself, is one of tenderness. At least, it is for me. Our world is not a binary one; the light can exist alongside the darkness, and beauty can be terror. As such, I can see Dillard's idea as both applicable, and not. For me, it captures one part of a whole, like an illusion that is yet to gather flesh.

Chorus: Must we tell you to calm down again? You *love* being a writer, don't turn it into an existential crisis.

The Writer turns to the Chorus and shakes her head.

The Writer: But what is writing if not an expression of the self, and what is the self, if not a performance? Perhaps this is why I have brought you here, to this stage. Perhaps, I am only a performance.

The Writer has tested other metaphors: a statue, an actor, an exhibit at a museum [*I killed each before they were born, she says, I am the one who holds the knife*].

*Medea: Possessor of our body*¹³.

Chorus: Our bodies of text.

The Writer: I think I might be an unlikable narrator. Perhaps this is why I love Medea, or is it narcissistic to see myself in that which I love? It implies that I, too, am loveable, and this is dangerous, like fireworks in the hands of a child. It speaks to "the possibility of the subject transforming the self in writing" (Galea, 2014, p. 145). I wonder, now, whether I have "transformed" myself, if I have made the complexities of my own life palatable to you, even when I cannot stomach them myself. I promised you, earlier, that I would carve out a part of myself and hold it up for sacrifice. I said that we would watch it, wriggling and squirming like a child, as I raise my knife (I know I have a knife) and bring it down into the flesh. Do you think I have done this? Will you toss a

¹³ Euripides 232

coin into my hat as I bow and curtsy and prepare to leave the stage (I will never leave the stage)? Or have I not done enough? And by this, you will mean that *I* am not enough.

The Writer examines her body, her body of text, looking for traumas, the same way an owner checks their dog for fleas. If “emotion is the feeling of bodily change” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 5), then The Writer wants to know where to insert the blade, where to edit her body of text, so the audience will rise to their feet and hold back tears.

Chorus: Don’t be so literal. Besides, you never let them answer the question.

And so, The Writer waits, listens for an answer from the audience, whether they deem her to be *enough*. But the theatre is dark, and the audience makes no sound, so she cannot tell if anyone is watching. She cannot tell if anyone is there.

The Writer begins walking back to the centre of the stage but, before she reaches her desk, all the lights go out. The stage is as dark as the audience. She is left standing there, listening to the sound of her own breath, reaching out for pen and paper. Can she remember how to dance in the darkness? This is where Medea is supposed to summon her dragons, to ride in and breathe fire all over the stage, to take The Writer with her when she leaves for somewhere better, somewhere mythical. But Medea does not move. The Writer can see her eyes, unblinking in the darkness. Neither of them is an illusion, anymore.

Medea: Are you sane or raving mad?¹⁴.

There is no need for an answer. Medea smiles and keeps her eyes open, bright white spotlights on The Writer, on –

Medea: The woman I will kill¹⁵.

The Writer does not react, nor is she surprised. She knows now that Medea loves her like her own child. She knows now why she holds the knife; small and silver, and, even in the darkness, it glistens like a crown. She knows now what it means to fly off in a chariot of dragons, what it has meant all along. Medea’s traumas have no *grandeur* or *endurance* or *nobility* (Foley & Howard, 2014, p. 617); she would never give her children a fate worse than her own. They would make the journey together.

The Writer: I told you that was what I wanted, only I didn’t know it then. But what is more terrifying, more beautiful, than to join you in your chariot at the end of my Greek

¹⁴ Euripides 1130

¹⁵ Euripides 1316

tragedy? When I carved up your body of text, I saw it anew again, and I realised that you never had any dragons, unless ‘dragon’ is a word for ‘ghost’. And so, I am ready, Medea. Let us fly into the sun. [*She is lying*, the puppet-master says, *she is terrified. But she knows that “beauty is terror”* (Tartt, 1992, p. 42)].

The Writer holds out her knife, but Medea cannot take it. It falls through her hands like an apparition. If this is to be the ending of her performance, then The Writer must do it herself. *This*, she thinks, *is the violence; Greek tragedies are meant to be performed.*

The theatre is still dark and so the audience, if they are there, cannot see The Writer. They do not know what she has done, how she has chosen to end her Greek tragedy. If, perchance, they are scared, then the audience will take this moment to remind themselves that this is only a performance. The Writer will be back tomorrow, and she will do all of this again. She is *not really* going to sacrifice herself. And who would do that for a piece of art?

Just as the audience (is there an audience?) prepare to leave, the stage is bathed in light. There is a great chariot drawn by dragons, who are cut out of cardboard and painted for the performance, laboriously, by someone unseen. The Writer sits inside with Medea, and the wings of the dragons, the wings of the stage, open. The chariot disappears into the belly of the theatre. The audience starts applauding, and so The Writer knows she will be back. She will perform again and again, comb over her body of text, inspecting all her traumas and holding them up for sacrifice.

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