

WHATEVER YOU SAY,

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio

PART A: THESIS

Acknowledgements

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There is a bridge that might bring us to what is weird and unknown and revelatory, but it is the structures in our brains that make it difficult for us to cross this bridge. These structures are moulds whereby we shape words into solid and fixed forms. It is exactly these moulds that need to be split open and scattered to the ground to be picked up again and reshuffled into new shapes. That is what it means to be a writer – to make mouldiness of the mould, to rot productively.

- Dr Paul Mason (Supervisor).

Religion`s never spoken here,` of course.

‘you know them by their eyes,’ and hold your tongue.

‘One side`s as bad as the other,` never worse.

Christ, it`s near time that some small leak was sprung

- Seamus Heaney from **Whatever You Say, Say Nothing**

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WHATEVER YOU SAY, SAY SOMETHING

Whatever you say, no, it's not that—it's not she went to bed one night with shadows hiding men outside waiting, not waiting in the shadows, with wind from Black Mountain howling through cracks in the putty, toes freezing. And woke the next day without—not without words, rather too many words silenced—

Shush, he says. She shushes.

Listen, he says. She listens.

Listens for what she still can hear: the river's white froth rushing. No rustle summer green leaves high in the sigh of a breeze. Birds not calling echoes one to another down the valley. Bees not buzzing in dusted purple heather, gorse yellow, busy soundless.

"Shush, listen," Dad says.

He means, no bombs, no blasts, Belfast, no ambulances' sirens shrieking. No Auntie Mary stood beside Mrs O' Sullivan with cigarettes perched on their lips, hands bashing bin lids on the clattering on Clondara Street. Mum not shouting, "For the love of God, will you shut that child up."

Shush. Summer, July, a family sitting by Bloody Bridge with warmth on the rock cliffs smoothed flat. Granite slopes of the Mourne etching in the distance a skyline, the edge of their world. Mum in the shade of the sycamores, dark, gold, light, flecks dappling grey leaf shadows and sunlight settles on her eyelids. Mum not frowning through a chink in the brown-winter curtains. Not checking the thick metal chain is fast held still across the door. Not looking at, for, Jesus. Not looking up, down, up, Clondara. Rosary beads not pushing hard beads through her fingers. Mum, resting... for now.

Dad's toes stretch themselves out in the dust, their thin, long, white creases puckered on to pink flesh escaped from the steel caps of his black boots.

"Maybe we'll get it right this time," he says as he always says.

Maybe they will.

They are forging out a channel. Building parallel walls. Creating a tributary to divert a small flow of water away from the Shimna into the dam they are making. All afternoon, here, now, it is Dad, Mum, Laura and Callum, just themselves. Alone. Putting pebble on to pebble, placing rock on to rock, rolling boulder beside boulder, pushing sand in between. Believing that once, maybe this time, the tributary will do as they hope.

As shadows stretch along the crest of Slieve Donard, they are at last ready. Dad gets out the trowel to scrape away the last of the grit. He places it in Callum's hand.

"But...Dad, last week you promised..."

"Laura, hush."

"Mum, it's not fair, it's my turn..."

“And, who said life would be fair?”

Dad looks at Mum. Looks away. And, Callum gets to hold the trowel, gets to scrape away the last of the grit so the water can flow. They wait. A thin trickle of water from the river flows over the grit scraped away, forms clouds swirled and turbulent brown mud in their tributary. Ripples gather into a slither of rainbow crystals on churned silver. The trickle pauses—go on then surprise them—flow on into the dam.

Same as all the other sames: the water seeps away into the earth, gone.

~*~

Two adults with their children, Mum, Dad, Laura and Callum walking along a road near Shaw’s Bridge on Saturday because it’s Saturday. Mum holding Dad’s hand and Dad holding Callum’s. Laura, last, always lingering, lagging, looking into fields, scenting the warmed oozing blackberries in the hedges, peering over the stone walls, wondering what’s over there and over there.

“For God’s sake, Laura, can’t you just try...?”

~*~

Words do not suddenly disappear. It is not that you slept one night in your bed, cold, winter, familiar, dreamt, nightmared and the next day woke with no words there—with words clogged, bogged down deep below your larynx...paralysed.

Paralysis: Greek to loosen, divide, tear apart.

~*~

“Ach Willie, no,” said Father Rooney. “That’s not Catholic enough and especially not with the Willie and Campbell part... For the love of God don’t you have enough on your plate already? No, it really won’t do at all. Why don’t you listen to your Elsie and call the wee *inion* something nice and plain like Mary?”

“Her name is Laura,” said Dad.

~*~

She is sitting on my lap turning page after page, looking through the Atlas. Pointing her finger at countries —Dad where`s this? Where`s this? As though I might know—Dad I want to go there and there and there racing a way from south, along the edge of the Indian Ocean, through Africa, to Spain, to France, to the small island, to the west of the small city on the small island to Black Mountain, to us sitting here by the fire in the small front room in the house.

“Hey, slow down,” I say. “Stay still you`ve got itchy feet.”

Itchy feet, on and on and on to where? I don`t know, never would. America, Australia, Africa aren`t far enough away from the dark winter-brown curtains drawn day, night, day, in the small front room. Not far enough away from the grey sky and long sunless seasons and rain leaking through broken putty in the window frames—I should get around to fixing it sometime—putty that freezes and cracks and freezes and cracks.

Laura, go, I want to say.

I don`t want to say, there`s only so far you can go. There`s only so far from the north to the south. From damp to dry. There`s only so far you can travel from a war before there is another. You think, this time, maybe, you are far enough away but streets will always narrow down. Curbstones will be shattered by tanks or buckled by bombs. And trees, sycamores, oak, elm trees, hundreds of years old, will be cut down, sawdust trampled into the ground, trees torn and blasted to stumps.

Atlas: Latin *Ātlās* to carry a heavy burden.

I tried to do it right. I knelt before the altar at St John`s and saw Elsie`s brown hair covered with white lace, communion wafer white in her hand, In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The smell of incense seeping. But, her Jesus, his smile insipid, hands pale, outstretched, his sly simpering, could not be mine.

~*~

Has to ruin it. Just can't stop herself.

We walked for over an hour along the towpath, along the Lagan, and only reached as far as Shaw's Bridge.

We know the route: every Saturday Dad drives the Morris Minor to Drumbeg. Winter, spring, summer, autumn, we scramble over red bricks fallen from the crumbling mill, we tread through muck, splash across brown puddles, clamber along hardened ruts of dried mud after a rare week without rain. We walk along the dirt track winding through tangled brambles, striding along the fences, and we pass by gardens, roses budding, flowering, decaying then pruned to start again.

Every Saturday, we walk the nine miles and back. If we slow down tired, Dad calls, "come on, if you don't hurry, we'll not get to see it." We always do get to see it. Panting up the hill we reach the ogham stone standing solitary in the long grass, a grey granite finger, lines, words, language lost scratched along its length.

We walked for over an hour and Laura lagged. Looking down at the path at the dust layering on the up, down, up, of her shoes. I slowed and waited for her. I pointed to a wooden bench almost hidden, weathered, gnarled, shadowed dark, light, light flakes flickering in a shade under the branches of an old oak.

We sat.

The river was slower, black, seeming not to flow, it already had passed the white rapids at the waterwheel. Reeds, flax, dry, browned, weaved down the banks towards dragonflies hovering their silver wings appearing still. Grass, cut by the farmers, was stacked into hay bales in the meadows. Across the river, a meadow stretched up a hill and from here we could see the ogham stone in the long grass, scratched with lines, words, its language lost—shush now—sit still—let's listen to the quiet of the river to the—just-let-it-be...

Callum, what do you think it's all about? she asked. Questions, hers, ruining everything.

~*~

The language of ogham stones is a subject of debate. It has been argued by some that the language is Old Norse, but others regard the language of the stones as Pictish in origin. However, due to lack of knowledge about the Picts, the inscriptions remain generally undeciphered, and the language is possibly or probably non-Indo-European. The Pictish inscriptions are particularly clear scholastic examples of unrecorded Old Norse. Perhaps. And are believed to have been inspired by the manuscript tradition brought into Ireland by Gaelic settlers who did not settle near Shaw's Bridge.

Words, hers, were forming, trying. Not yet perfected in their syntax. Not strong enough or experienced enough to join letter by letter to word to question—No, that's not right—She had enough words formed. Her syntax was perfect. Her questions were fully meaningful ... no, the problem was not with her, was not with her questions. The problem lay...

Mum, why are there no photos of your wedding?
Mum, why doesn't Dad go up for communion?
Mum, why doesn't Dad ever go to confession?
Why's my name Laura?
Why's Dad called Willie?
Why am I the only Campbell at school?
Why does Aunt Mary never come here anymore?
Why can't we go see Aunt Mary?
Why isn't Jesus hanging on Granny Campbell's wall?

Why why why why --until--Laura, for the love of sweet Jesus, hush.

Her face looking up at me with all her whys. Her eyes watching, searching, digging as though there might be a truth. A truth I could tell. It isn't that I don't want to answer. It's just that—it's never that simple.

Why aren't there any photos of a wedding, of me, a long, laced white dress, white veil, and Willie in a suit, stood beside me, smiling, happy?

Did you do it on purpose?

Darkness, sin, me confessing to Father Rooney: the baby coming with no gold ring on my finger.

Elsie, asked the priest, his voice behind the metal grille, did you mean to trap the lad? Get yourself pregnant for Willie to have to marry you?

No, I sinned again.

~*~

Confession: Latin *confiteri* to say.

Venial sins: sins that meet one or two of the conditions needed for a mortal sin but do not fulfill all three conditions at the same time. And especially if they are minor variations of the major sin which is fully mortal. Yet not immortal, merely mortal, under certain specified times and conditions.

Seamus Heaney, Guest of Honor, is speaking at St Kevin's Prize Giving. I sit in the front row waiting for him to give me a book of his poems for the English prize. His voice mumbles a haphazard lull, rouse, lull, into his eyebrows like two fat black caterpillars disappearing up into the frowns of his brow, the white of his hair.

What's he saying?

Don't know, maybe something about how he was once young just like us, confused, uncertain. Too scared to write cause they'd all laugh at him, tell him he's useless. He's maybe explaining to us about his penname, the one he'd chosen for himself.

Bits, soft, muffles, fragments of his words drift from the stage. I hear wrong and his *Incertus* becomes my *Icarus* and a leaving of it all behind, flying on wings of hardened wax and stuck-on feathers too close to the sun will burn you up, melt your wax, scatter, fry you, and serve you right for you should have known not to.

Dad later is saying, "there's another version of that Icarus story." In Dad's, the other version, Daedalus stood on the prison wall and stared along the length of the Belfast Lough stretching towards Ailsa Craig towards Scotland and beyond and said, "my daughter, you may not ever get to fly too high. But, if you don't at least try you will stay down here too close to the sea, too lulled by the sway of the tides, too long waiting and drown into the sucking of the bog."

Dad didn't say that.

~*~

A question arises: why say if no one is going to listen?

Incertus: Latin doubtful.

“Satan looks after his own,” said Mrs. O’ Sullivan standing beside Aunt Mary, their lipsticks all red and puckered around their smoldering clamped cigarettes. Mum said nothing. Walked past then into St John’s. Put her hand into the cold marble basin full of Holy Water. Blessed herself.

Mum, what does Mrs. O Sullivan mean?

Shush Laura, not now.

She stroked her fingers along St Anthony’s shining toes. Pushed us, me and Callum, before her into the aisle for mass.

But Mum, what did Satan ...?

For the love of sweet Jesus and his Blessed Mother, be quiet for once.

And what had Satan done?

It must be to do with our inside bath.

Over the last few weeks Dad gathered together mismatched spanners, small, thick, long, squat, screws, sawn up sheets of clear plastic—get out of the bloody way Laura or you’ll end up getting a nail in your head—and made a roof in our yard outside the kitchen door. And into that added-on, rickety sort off room, he heaved in a bath. Not a bath, a big red basin on a trestle wobbling table. Saturday night bath time.

Our inside red basin bath among the others’ outdoor baths.

Once a week those other’s outdoor baths got taken down from their hanging on flaking white-washed walls, were upturned their mouths opened into the freeze—feel the frecking freezing rain falling—squashed into the yards beside the outdoor toilets with the newspapers: The Irish News, the Andy Town News, Ian Paisley, Bernadette Devlin, PIRA, OIRA, shootings and the INLA, bombs, and the UVF, shootings and bombs — “Mum, what’s...? —shooting bombing all over the pages all smoothed out ready for the wiping of our arses—Willie tell that bloody child to shut the hell up... God give me patience—

Those others’ outdoor baths drew their stingy heat from water boiled slowly in blackened kettles on gas stoves. Or, drew their stingy heat from water boiled slowly in metal buckets struggling on turf fires in hearths. The others’ Mums trudged out water in kettles or in buckets to fill those outdoor baths that cooled down too quickly in the shade of Black Mountain in the west of Belfast in the frecking pouring freezing rain. Paraffin heaters simpered in the yards on iced children’s breaths, frosted on do-we-have-to?

We, us, ourselves, alone, had an indoor bath. Silver taps, blue and red buttons, and our hot water stringed a way along in a pipe across the wobbly ceiling and ran out all by itself.

—Satan had done this for us.

– Why?

O Sullivan: Anglicized form of Gaelic *suil* blind in one eye.

Satan: Hebrew שָׂטָן adversary, accuser.

Mrs. O Sullivan's husbands' cousin's son is a young man named Martin Mc Guinness: (to be read with a loud, broad Belfast accent), "Freedom can only be obtained at the point of an IRA rifle."

The gun was there. Waiting. Wrapped in a red cloth, in the grey box under Dad's socks in the drawer in the Tall Boy in the bedroom. A silver gun wrapped in a red cloth. And I called to Callum, come, look and Callum came and looked. And what's a gun for? —to point—to pull the trigger—Callum screaming—Mum screaming—Dad's black belt in Mum's hands whacking across the back of my legs, whacking so hard—her nails red sharp in my arm—she'll not be able to send me to school for a week—Now it's me with Mum here. Kneeling on the carpet, holes burnt by red coal falling from the fire in the hearth. Kneeling in front of Jesus, him hanging on the wall above our fireplace after Mum dragged me—Jesus hanging on the wall, his long, tapered finger pointing to his heart lying outside, beating. Not beating. Stilled. Scarred, scared, hushed, hush, shush, sshhhh, watching, waiting, always watching, always waiting. The heart clenches into a black thorn-crown, glows red in the light of the quivering of flames of the fire in the hearth burning below.

His eyes follow me even when I'm not in the room, when the door is closed, the curtains drawn, the light switched off in the darkest time of night. His eyes saw, knew, always see, always know. Telling on me to Mum.

Me saying I'm sorry to Jesus staring down at me when I'm not sorry at all. Kneeling on the carpet—if you lie to Jesus up there on the wall it is a mortal sin—me praying let me be a good girl. I don't want to be bad. And, why can't I just for once not be such a fucking buck eejit, stupid moron?

Jesus hangs in our house, in Mary's house on Clondara Street, off the Falls Road.
He doesn't hang in Granny Campbell's house. On the Shankill Road.

~*~

Another question arises: why speak if words are ammunition?

~*~

Eastern Orthodox Christians disapprove of devotion to the Sacred Heart as being a form of Naturalism and Nestorianism. However, despite this disapproval, the Feast of the Sacred Heart has been inserted in calendars of Eastern Rite Orthodoxy; perhaps it is best to cover all bases, just in case. Hedge one's bets, as it were. Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Haurietis aquas*, in response to criticisms, said that the Sacred Heart is venerated as belonging to the Divine Person of the Eternal Word and he said something else.

Soldiers on the TV, one behind another, on the streets, on Clondara. Mrs. O Sullivan and Aunt Mary giving them cups of tea and soda bread. The Brits are here to save us from the proddie, loyalist bastards. Clapping and cheering at the men marching to save us—Mrs. O Sullivan and Aunt Mary shouting, hands not handing out tea and warm soda bread. Hands bashing bin lids, bashing on the ground in Clondara, shouting Brits out of Ireland, but the Brits won't listen, won't go.

Green, khaki, brown, khaki camouflaged uniforms. Black steel-capped boots. Black berets. Guns held across their chests. One behind another. Patrols—for Christ's sake Laura, don't look at them—marching their boots past the gates of St Kevin's, looking down towards the ground at the ripped-up cracks in the curbstones, at their treading splashing through rain, puddles splattering—Fuck Off—

Saracens followed on behind the soldiers' boots. Tyres splashing water in holes in tar in ripped up curbstones filled with rain. Tyres through puddles. And rubber tyres scattering through oil patches fracturing the rainbows that stretched across the road. Soldiers. Saracens. Sodden sandbags piled up higher and higher layering up against the red bricks of the walls of the army barracks that used to be the bus station. Wire, silver, sharp, twisted out, in, out, barbed along the walls of the barracks, of St Kevin's, St John's and along the library. Silver wire, bent, twisted, circles, spirals, along the wall around Dad's garden with his roses, daffodils and tulips. Soldiers standing on Clondara look at the wire around our garden. Soldiers by the library door watching us drop off and collect books.

We copied Mum. Pulled the hoods of our black raincoats down over our faces. Stared across to the other side of the street, look anywhere but there at them the soldiers, rain running down their faces.

~*~

Saracen: Greek *sarakenos* heathen, non-believer.

Words too fragile for a young child: Laura in Mrs. Doherty's office sitting on a chair between Elsie and Willie. The teacher is showing the parents an essay the daughter has written:

Smoke from the window of the barracks escaped, tugged at the laces of his steel-capped boots, buttoned up his khaki overcoat, pulled further down his black beret, and wrenched the metal of his silver gun closer to his chest.

"This way, no, not here, there," Smoke crackled to Sparks in the embers left smoldering.

"No," whispered Ash draping a thin, almost transparent, layer of dust in the wake of Smoke, of Sparks.

Together they made a haphazard way to the house in Clondara Street. Smoke gorged through Dad's roses, daffodils, tulips, crocuses in the garden, pushed over the bin in the entry, burning piles on to piles of rubbish stinking, the apple tree bare and scorched. Sparks leapt into and out of leaks in the roof, destroyed rainbows stretched in oil spilt. And Ash, greyed and pale, settled briefly, hopefully unseen, on broken bits of bricks, on to spent-out bullets trampled under torn-off doors, seething through red stains on shattered windows.

"Come on now, keep together, keep moving, roared Smoke.

They reached through the brown curtain drawn in the front room away from the people in the street who were still shouting, crying, flinging petrol in bottles, lit orange, scarlet, purple, at the soldiers, at the Saracens waiting silent, straight in a row.

"No, not that way," hissed Smoke and turned up the stairs towards Laura's room. Sparks spat out a raze of flares. Ash sighed.

"She's in here," bawled Smoke thundering into charcoaled clouds gathering darkness around the girl in the bed, dragging her into the next.

"You would tell me if there was a problem with Laura at home?" asks Mrs. Doherty.

Willie looks at Elsie. Elsie looks at Willie.

Yes, they nod. But... they didn't.

How could they?

~*~

Go on ask—why? —Why on this earth would anyone keep a gun in a house when there's kids around? Just waiting to be found. Asking for trouble, begging for it, I know. I know.

I'd rather leave it at work locked in the safe. But Elsie and her nerves and the curtains drawn, and Mrs. O Sullivan and Mary might be telling the IRA. The men may be finding out and... Elsie wants a gun in the house; just in case. Wrap it up, she says. Hide it in the red cloth, put it in the grey box, in the sock drawer in the Tall Boy. Away from the sight of the children. Don't lock it—when we need it, it has to be there, waiting, ready.

I do put it in the red cloth.

The bullets I lock in the shoebox under our bed.

~*~

You don't suddenly wake today, this morning, now, and decide, no, from henceforth on, I won't speak.

~*~

A maybe voice is inside my head in pus thick, mucus flowing, no clearness of sound to be heard, no accent, no pause, no pulse, no lilt and no song, a clogging. Wet, deafness' trust, seeping.

There was a time when voices were loud enough for me to hear, were waters in a river rushing, were chirpy small brown sparrows flitting in branches of the apple tree's leaves rustling in spring. There was a time when I could hear the wind from Black Mountain clattering rattling through thin window frames to freeze the putty, to crack it, to freeze it again. To freeze to pain our toes in our beds.

There was a time when flames hissed and swirling lilacs, greens, oranges crackled in the red glow turf in the hearth. There were voices: Mum's—shush—Dad's Morris Minor filled with *Show me the way to go home* and *Silent Night* and *Jingle Bells*.

Pus and mucus — wiping snot on my sleeve—Christ Laura—then lips moving as a puzzling mumble. A record stumbling out a muffled song on the end of a thin, sharp needle.

Deafness crept as unnoticed as Jesus still there, always there, on the crucifix on top of St John's hid the blueness of winter skies above constant grey of drizzle rain falling.

Deaf: Old Norse *daufn* confusion, stupefaction, dizziness.

~*~

Aunt Mary's at our house drinking whiskey, gold in glass. She wears rings on each finger, on each thumb, and her bracelets swish soft maybe against the fine fair hair on her arms. She is singing loud enough for me to hear: between the sucking on her Woodbines, the drifting of the smoke, the slowing, fading tail of one song explodes against the next. Sometimes the Fields of Athenry become the lonely heart of the wild whipped Atlantic and four green fields slam against the barbed wire of Belfast city, soothe the girls who grieved for the leaving of Liverpool. The purple heather of the Hills of Donegal cry tears on tears for those who'd left for the far away shores and Molly Malone takes her wheelbarrow and cockles and mussels alive down Dublin way.

Aunt Mary drinks more, Mum pours the whiskey into her glass. She sings louder, *Gra mo chroi* falls on the floor, creeps up the walls and wants to seep out the brown winter curtains soak into the orange lights leaking rain falling on Clondara. And, where are the lads who stood with me while history was made? She longs to see the boys of the old brigade.

She sings most, over and over again, the song about our rivers only getting to run free, our land being ours, when apples grow in November.

“But, Aunt Mary,” I say, “apples won't ever grow here in November.”

She looks at Mum.

Mum looks at her.

A belt of their laughter whacks the smoke spiraling into the air.

I look at Dad—why? —He looks away, my question useless in the burning of flames flickering in the hearth.

I am right. Apples won't grow here in November. There's an apple tree in our garden, and I see blossoms sprinkle pink on the bare branches in May. In June, I watch the buds plump themselves into green, red apples. Mum gathers apples fallen on the ground and tries to make them sweet into apple cake. But, never sweet enough. In September apples pecked by crows, sparrows, thrushes, fall to the grass and rot well before Halloween until Dad mulches the bitterness into the soil around his roses. Apples will never bloom in November. Our rivers will never get to run free. Our land will be ours.

Aunt Mary is still singing, words get louder and even louder, smashing themselves against the flames, fueling the turf smoldering in the hearth, stoking the heat hot in the front room, smacking at the armored cars and tanks and guns who came to take away our sons. England's name is once more sordid, and Cromwell's men are here again.

"Hush now Mary, enough is enough," says Mum. Dad stops staring into the flames. Looks at Aunt Mary. Looks at Mum. Says...nothing...pulls open the front room door to the blast cold draft. Mum looks away from Mary. Mary looks away from Mum. The songs silenced behind the brown winter thick curtains are still drawn tightly across the windows.

~*~

Dr Lowry has found a name: 'Selective Mutism.' Selective implies, no, demands, a choice. There is no such thing as selective mutism; there are those who are told to shut the fuck up, or else. And there are those who survive by becoming unheard. Voiced, unvoiced, silent, mute.

Select: Latin *seligere* to separate, to cull.

~*~

Night: The front room in Clondara Street although there is only one. A fire in the hearth. Turf burning, heat butting the brown winter curtains tugged tightly. Flames flickering out rainbows on the walls.

Day: No fire burning. Turf turned black to grey to ash and flames buried. Heat whistling out through gaps in the windows putty frozen, unfrozen into broken gaps between the closed curtains, outside's frost glittering hard.

A child, a young girl maybe eight or nine. A small basin filled with water, a rag wringing in her cold hands. She wipes the hearth and grey ash, soot, grime gather to black in the water. Her mother enters, busy, Callum pulling at her arm, tears. Dad's already long gone to work and water on the stove to be boiled, tea to be made, toast to be toasted, bus to be caught for St Kevin's and already an hour too late on waking.

Laura, for the sweet love of Christ, what are you doing? Get up from that filth, get dressed. Don't I have enough...?

I wanted to keep the rainbows the child wants to say. Couldn't say and then never could.

~*~

“Did Adam really sin?” I asked Mrs. Doherty. “My Dad says it wasn’t really his fault.”

“Adam did sin for we must accept responsibility for our actions,” she replied. A morsel of courage swelled into the asking of another question, “Did Samson sin because he killed the Palestine?”

“Philistines not Palestine. Samson did not sin; he acted to kill God’s enemies.”

“Did Salome sin because she danced?”

Mrs. Doherty hesitated, “knowing about sinning can be difficult.”

“Did Abraham sin when he thought of sacrificing his poor, wee son Isaac?”

“Maybe he did. Maybe not, just focus on the sin-list I gave you.”

~*~

God give me strength...

Father Rooney is dragging her out of the confession box, her white dress all crumpled, her veil torn off her head and lying on the floor. Her screaming out - Mum Mum. Crying and crying and Father Rooney looking around the church for me. Like it’s my fault. Everyone looking at her, looking at me. The aisle stretches longer and longer away from the altar as I walk towards her—sweet Jesus, what’s that on her dress...

~*~

First Confessions are in St John’s in a long, thin box reaching from marble floor to church ceiling. Mrs. Doherty has told us Father Rooney will be sitting in the box and we are to go in, one at a time, pull the curtain closed and wait. Wait for when we hear the click of Father Rooney opening a metal grille separating us, me, from him and for when he says, “What are you sins?”

It is my turn. Go into the box. Pull the curtain closed.

A soft shaft of palest yellow crossing the back of my hand fades—has he opened the grille? Has he asked, “What are your sins?”—darkness. Soundless, no not soundless, whispers, rustles, creaks, sighs, sins.

My fingers grasp at my face across my cheeks—the silver gun in the red cloth, me pointing it at Callum, pulling the trigger—Dad’s belt in Mum’s hands on the back of my legs, red, swollen welts, sore—Mrs. O Sullivan and Aunt Mary bashing the bin lid on the street, Brits out, Fuck the proddies—my fingers shove themselves into my mouth to feel the hard ridges of my teeth pulse of their tips against the race of the beat in my neck trying to find... no walls...no floor...the ceiling endless, me with...without...

So dark, so soundless what if...What if...?

Buried here alone and deserving it, stupid moron, buck idiot never getting out of here kneeling here—piss down my legs, on my communion dress, on the floor

Mum Mum

There are questions and there are questions.

What—here, now, drifting black ink across white paper forming a question - what am I writing?

How—how does this keyboard link to cursor, link to black shape, vertical line, inching out letter after letter to word, link to me?

Why—there are the whys—

A young girl was sitting by a hearth, turf was glowing, flames danced orange, green and purple and threw a rainbow on to the wall. She did not know she lived in muffles, in murmurs, in mumbles and Mum knelt beside her whispering, whispering more. The girl nodded and smiled.

“Don’t be silly, she hears perfectly,” boomed Dad’s voice.

She didn’t hear perfectly, turf hissed, and flames spat into silences.

Mum, me in a black taxi travelling down the Falls Road to the Royal Hospital. I meet Dr Lowry who tells me he’s going to check my hearing. He looks straight at me and when he speaks his lips form snow-pattern-crystals ringing lattices on frozen windowpanes, sharp and clear and true.

I go into a long, thin box and he tells me not to be frightened. I am not frightened. This isn’t a confessional box, light shines enough for me to see black holes punctured in silver walls, reversed stars. I can see my hands, my feet, the door.

He places earphones across my ears. I will hear sounds in front, to the side and behind.

When I hear a noise, any noise, I will tap a pencil on the table, I will say yes.

I start to cry.

Oh dear, what’s the matter Laura. What’s these tears?

I want to ask, is this buzz from the earphones? A noise made inside my head? Is it a sound waiting to become heard? Is this whispering, rustling, murmuring, a should-be-heard-stupid child- moron- idiot? Is it Mum’s voice? Is she humming a lullaby to wee Callum? Is she sighing a worry behind the curtains, wondering why Dad is so late home from work? And, is she walking away from the TV not turned on, the radio in the kitchen switched off? Quiet in case she hears what she doesn’t want to hear?

What happens if I tap the pencil on the table and say yes when there is no noise?

What happens if I hear a noise and don’t tap? Don’t say yes, because Mum today took me from St Kevin’s, we travelled together in a black taxi to the hospital?

“Don’t fret. Hush now. Be still...all you can do is your best.” says Dr Lowry.

~*~

Mute: Greek myein to be shut.

Snipers, snippets, blurred words Dad to Mum, Mum to Dad. Words hushed into the brown winter curtains tugged closed. Mum's finger held against the pucker of her lips, be quiet Laura. Her rosary beads, tighter and tighter, passing through the weaves of fingers, passing, passing, night, day, night, praying for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Praying. Her, me, and Callum all kneeling on the carpet with the black burnt coal in front of Jesus on the wall. Except Dad not praying, sat staring into the flames in the hearth. Snippets, blurring, clogging, then questions not answered made into silence into lies. Aunt Mary not coming to our house anymore. Why? Us not going to Aunt Mary's house. Why? No more singing.

Silence: Me sitting by the window in the bedroom alone, always alone, looking out, watching the children run in Clondara.

Lies: Dad's a butcher on the Lisburn Road. He's a bookkeeper in Antrim. A fireman in Lurgan. A farmer, a storekeeper, a pilot all the way over there in England. In Mrs. Doherty's office—and what work does your Dad do, Laura?

Mum said that I'm not allowed to tell you anything about Dad.

Shush, Dad's a secret not to be whispered, leaked out into St Kevin's school ground would be heard by the `RA and black, hot tar would burn through his dark, thick hair. A secret told would be a bomb exploded under his Morris Minor. A bullet in the back of his skull—telling Mum what I said to Mrs. Doherty today at school and Mum saying, for the love of God Laura, can't you for once just shut the fuck up.

~*~

No, words, speech, language don't disappear overnight. They cling on, cling on, hoping that maybe this time...

Maybe they had not been singing.

Maybe the Christmas trees were not twinkling.

Maybe the snow was not falling.

Maybe they were not Campbells or something other than all the others, were not and maybe the bomb wasn't anything to do with them.

They are driving home in the Morris Minor, driving home because it is late on Saturday and that's how it is.

They are singing, even Mum, and Dad's voice is loudest, "Show me the way to go home, I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

Christmas trees, lights red, yellow, green, blue are twinkling in the warm in the windows of the houses along the roadside. The car heater heats their breath, the car windows cool it to white fog. Inside on the fog condensed on the window, she writes her name, all their names. And, outside the orange glow of streetlights dances haphazard in flakes of snow.

They cross the bridge over the Lagan into Anne Street. Nobody else is out on this winter evening, just them, Saturday, themselves alone, driving home, every Saturday the same.

There must have been sound. A shattering shards of a windscreen. A blast. A smash of tiles torn, rubble, concrete crumple from the overhead buildings, the roof of their car swollen, sagging under. There must have been sound, a screech of rubber of tyres stopped, a blue jagged wailing of sirens, a whip crack of questions: Why them?

Blood trickling off the red splintered edges of the window, blurring their names she traced into the white fog, is silent.

~*~

The formation of a question is dependent on what scaffold is available for it to lean on.

Bomb: Latin *bombus* a low humming noise just below audible.

Look here, says the father.

A man, a young girl and boy are walking along a path winding a way here and there through the Falls Park. Oak trees line the path, spread their ancient roots pushed under the tar. The trees, older than a hundred years, sway leaves, cast shadows among autumn crunching breezes. Light, dark, light, shift of gold, black, gold, shafts, speckles across their faces. Leaves on the path crinkle their shoes amber, scarlet and curled-edged brown. Acorns, creamed caps on dark bodies scatter here we are among the leaves.

Look here, says the father. His finger traces pale lines etched into the trees' black barks—know what these are?

The girl, the boy, shake their heads, no.

Scratches made by the antlers of a Great Irish Elk, long before you, long before me, long before ...this, long before, long gone, the man says. The girl believes him, everything he tells her, not knowing not to.

~*~

Catholic: Latin *catholic* universally accepted except where it is not.

Protestant: Latin *protestari* protesting.

What's the difference between Catholics and Protestants?

Mrs. Doherty says it had to do with us Catholics knowing about transubstantiation, the Eucharist in Father Rooney's hands raised, do this in memory of me.

Sorry, Miss...what?

Well, it's to do with when the priest lifts up the Host at Mass then Jesus is there in the church with us in his flesh and blood.

But, isn't Jesus here with us all the time anyway?

Transubstantiation: Latin *trans substantiationem* when one thing is made to become another. Maybe questions become ...

Men are yelling, "No-Go-Area, torch the proddies, kill the UDR bastards, fuck the English, death to touts —women, Auntie Mary, Mrs. O Sullivan, in Clondara Street, are shouting, "Up the 'RA, Brits out, Ireland for the Irish." Bin lids in their hands bash, bash...

Men are in the Falls Park, chainsaws in their hands. Chainsaws' teeth slice into the black bark of trees, were once before this day, this moment, hundreds of years old. Paths drip wet from the sawn down trees lying, sawdust crush, tree's pale flesh, circle inside circle inside circles smaller, smaller, smaller, closer, narrower until lines fuse together, indistinguishable. Trunks, branches, twigs, wet, dripping. Leaves squelched into white pulped muck and acorns split open. The men are dragging the felled trees along with ropes, at least twenty men dragging them through the park, down the Falls, piling them one on top of the other. Making a barricade at the top of Clondara, sap leaked trees cloaked with green, white and gold tri-colours: *tridhathach na hÉirean*.

The brown curtains in the front room are closed. Door locked, the thick metal chain tight still in place.

Soldiers are marching in their green, kaki, brown, camouflage uniforms, black berets pulled down over their faces, guns silver. They walk beside the Saracen, its tyres thick, pushing over the barricade of chopped down trees, squashing branches, flattening barks. The Saracen passes by our house, the soldiers walking one behind the other. Building, breaking, building barricades, barricades until only stumps of stumps of oaks lived for hundreds of years are left in the Falls Park.

Camouflage: French *camouflet* to veil, cloak, disguise. Or Italian *camuffare* to muffle the head.

What is the meaning of why? A question concerning the linkage of a cause to an effect. For example, ancient trees are cut down because—why? —it assumes that a troublesome situation will have a reason and consequence.

We stare at Mum.

Her cheeks are red, and her eyes are wet. She wraps tight her tartan, green shawl across her shoulders. She stands up right in the middle of Father Rooney's homily. She pushes past all the knees poking out and she walks down the aisle. We look at each other, open our eyes wide, pick up our prayer books, gather together our rosary beads and follow.

Mass had been the same; our fingers dipped into the cold, holy water, stroking St Anthony's shining feet, lighting the candle and, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." We did all the standing and all the sitting and all the kneeling and confessing to Almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters.

Mass had been the same until Father Rooney was giving his homily. He was in the pulpit telling us about a prison called the Maze and telling us about when the Protestants from Scotland came across the Irish Sea and stole the land away from the Irish. He told us that Irish men in prisons in the Maze aren't criminals at all. They are Freedom Fighters, heroes. Have to wear grey, thin prisoners' uniforms instead of their own clothes. And, the men who are fighting in the name of Mother Ireland haven't done anything wrong and are getting freezing cold and won't eat their food.

He asked us to pray that the Protestants would all go back and give Northern Ireland back. That's when Mum stood up in the middle of the homily. Father Rooney from his pulpit talking, telling us of Ireland for the Irish, saw her stand. Went quiet. Stared. Everybody stared, Aunt Mary, Mrs. O Sullivan, the whole lot of them. Everybody stared, everybody quiet, everybody watching us following Mum, walking up the aisle. Forgetting to bless ourselves on the way out.

On the street me asking, Mum why did you leave Mass?
Because I could.

Mass: Old English *mæsse* and Old French *messe*, both from Latin *mittō* to dismiss.

Homily: Latin *miles* soldier. A troop of soldiers is *homiliary*.

The first child killed in the Troubles was Patrick Rooney: shot by a British bullet through the back of his head—at home in the Divis Flats with his family—nine years old—murdered—his uncle maybe a priest, maybe not.

~*~

Going to a Christmas party at Dad's work and we are —except Mum who stayed at home—in the Morris Minor driving along streets I don't know. Dad's work is far from our house and we haven't been to it before.

In front of his work are long, silver, shining metal sheets with ruts. On top are spikes, barbed wire twisted. Dad takes out his wallet and shows a card to a man at the gate in the silver wall. The man looks at Dad. Looks at us. Opens the gate and we get to drive in.

Inside, in a big, warm room, Dad changes out of his clothes. He stands in his string vest, in his string underpants until he puts on a shirt, khaki, green, brown, camouflage. He then puts on a kilt and his white, skinny knees touch the hem of the skirt. Me and Callum stare at each other. Laugh, and he tells us to shut the fuck up or we would all go straight back home with our bums black and blue without presents. We shut up. He puts on a black beret and on the beret is a tiny golden angel leaning back on a harp with a crown on top. He pulls the beret down over his face.

We go into a hall filled with men dressed like Dad, and women and kids running all over the place. Me and Callum sit beside Dad—be quiet, he says, and we are. Red, white and blue Union Jacks are hanging from the walls. Dad gets up and goes to a stage in the hall and stands with a row of men. They all pick up bagpipes—we never knew—Dad—they put the reeds to their mouths, blow, puff up tartan, and God Save the Queen comes out. Everybody, except me and Callum, stand up.

Santa comes in through the gate and he's sitting on the bonnet of a Saracen covered in red streamers and gold and silver tinsel. The Saracen ringing a bell like reindeers with a sleigh. I never knew Santa was them.

~*~

The Union Jack flag combines aspects of three older flags: the red cross of St George for the Kingdom of England, the white saltire of St Andrew for the Kingdom of Scotland and the red saltire of St Patrick to represent the island of Ireland. Notably Wales is not represented. Neither is Northern Ireland (otherwise termed Ulster) represented. In summary, a country that maybe should be represented (unless you are a Welsh nationalist-*Plaid Cymru*) is not. A country that should not be represented (unless you are an Ulster Unionist) is —Ulster is an ancient Irish province made up of nine counties, three of which are now in the Republic of Ireland (Cavan, Monaghan, Donegal) and six of which are in Northern Ireland (Antrim, Down, Armagh, Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone). Calling these six counties "Ulster" is really a piece of political deception and/or perhaps a historical error. On the other hand, the term Northern Ireland is not strictly accurate either, since the northern part of the island of Ireland is Donegal, in the Irish Republic.

The flag of the Republic of Ireland is a green, white and gold (orange) tri-colour (*tridhathach na hÉireann*). The white in the center signifies a lasting truce between Orange (Protestants) and Green (Catholics). And we trust that beneath the folds of the flag, the hands of Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood.

I am by the Shimna. River rushing water running to flow into a tributary to maybe reach the dam we have made. Every Sunday the sand, the pebbles, the rocks, the grit. Ripples and water forming clouds brown mud turbulent and churned into rainbowed crystals on a slither of silver. Every Sunday I waited and hoped and wondered if it would be, this time, different. If the water would go to where I wanted. Every Sunday, it didn't. Like words...

We climb to the top of Slieve Donard, Dad, me and Callum. Dad pointing out the two Bears, the Belt and the Plough. Stars so far away, formed so very long ago, why and why and still shining.

WHATEVER YOU SAY, SAY NOTHING

We`ve moved away from Clondara. Now it`s Norfolk Street. No Fuck. Fuck No.

~*~

“Hey, Pisspot, Deafo,” she said pulling at my arm, “why`s your stupid name Campbell?”

~*~

I help you into the Morris Minor. Wrap a thick blanket across your shoulders and rain, always raining, falls down the windscreen. I`m driving you back to where your people came from, to search for ghosts, to pray to the graves that have lost their names, for you to get to say goodbye.

We travel over the new bridge across the Lagan. They have left the three arches of the old Shaw`s Bridge to one side and the stones are crumbled green with moss.

“Elsie,” I ask, “do you know where we are?”

You say, you`re not too sure, the river seems so much narrower than when you used to walk along the towpath as a wee girl following the barge.

You say the roundabout at Carryduff is bigger, busier, and you remember there were once only fields filled with grass and meadow flowers in spring and cows grazing in summer and oak leaf-fall in autumn, now there are white houses.

I can`t find the road to the drumlins outside Ballynahinch, the little track that ran along their base, through the valleys between, has gone. We don`t see Strangford Lough shimmering over there towards Ailsa Craig towards Scotland and beyond.

I stop and ask directions from a shopkeeper in a Spar in Dramore, he surely must remember the village, but, no, he never heard of it. I get back into the car, drive further, we must be close by. Stop at a crossroads, at another, and where have the signposts gone?

After driving for over an hour, I turn the car and head back home. The ghosts are to remain hidden, the graves to stay without prayers, unnamed, you are not to get to say goodbye.

~*~

Dad says he can`t settle, especially not to read, he would rather walk. I see that. I see the breeze on Black Mountain would stroke familiar a hand across the reddened lattice of his cheeks. I see the oaks, sycamores, elms, in the woods around the base of the Mourne would green to copper to rust to scarlet curled. Primroses, bluebells, crocuses, daffodils and his roses drown in the rains, freeze in the snows ready for next. I see him walking his feet fast faster further to try to escape his thoughts. Fast but not fast enough. Far but never far enough. Walking along paths that wind up hills of granite to the top of Slieve Donard his thoughts in pursuit. I see him stare where he always stares but doesn`t see the silver waters of the Shimna—Laura, please don`t write the Troubles, he asks.

Trouble: Old French *turbler* to make cloudy.

Hearing aids, both ears, keep them clean, says Dr Lowry...Wear them for ten minutes, then an hour, then all the time, get used to them.

The girl went outside, and cars through raindrops wailed thudding splashes into puddles.

Children with shrieks running in the street. Her own voice echoing from far too far a distance.

~*~

Dad picks up another book from the pile on the table where he left them beside the clock.

It should not have ended up like this. He married, had his children. He worried all his life about being alone. And it never was about being alone. Lonely is different. Lonely is the small clock tutting, the pile of books he`s staring at, staring at words staring at him, pages not turning.

~*~

“Whatever You Say, Say Nothing, what did you make of that one?” asks Mr. Heaney.

“I`m sorry, I`m not too good with poetry,” I say.

“Is anyone?” laughs Mr. Heaney. Miss Armstrong frowns.

“What did it mean to you?” he persists.

“Well, I think it is about the Irish thing, the North, the Troubles,” I offer.

“Go on.”

“He`s maybe scared?”

“Scared?”

“*Christ, it`s near time that some small leak was sprung...?*”

“Why would he be scared?”

“Sorry, I...”

“No idea at all? What about, *the tight gag of place And times?*”

“Em...”

“*Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks...?*”

“I`m sorry,” I say again. I don`t say it`s about the maybe telling of what should not be told. Miss Armstrong is still frowning.

Scared: Old Norse *skirra* to frighten.

Laura won`t wear the hearing aids. She`s good at quiet, not drawing attention. She watches lips move, shoulders shrug, a hand drawn across a sigh. She smiles or frowns, says sorry not knowing why.

~*~

Words impose a story as this and or that—what do we say when we say nothing?

Silence: Latin *desinere* to cause to stop.

I am to write an essay about the Northern Ireland problem. I should write that the Catholics are subjugated and oppressed and repressed and that Northern Ireland should be given back to the Irish—fucking British soldiers fuck away back to England. I should write, the UDR are touts, are traitors. Proddies are all a shower of bastards who should rot in hell on their side of the Peace Wall—no, shouldn't even have a place on the other side of the Peace Wall—should be burnt out—bombs in their letter boxes and serve them right—King William, Willie of Orange, was a proddie bastard who started all the shit down in the Boyne all those years ago.

I should at least try to keep Miss Armstrong and Bronagh O Sullivan happy. This is what I write:

Why does the Northern Ireland problem have to be about the Troubles, the divided, the absolute other, the irreconcilable radicalized, them or us? — And, what would happen if I don't mention the bordered Ireland? North or South? Don't sing the praises of good ol' Emerald Isle, Sweet Mother Eire, *Erin go bragh* and all that—don't revere the tragic mire of her feuds. Don't worship at the altar of her mindless sacrifices—what would happen if I said something completely different, unexpected?

The Northern Ireland problem has to do with the Southern Ireland problem has to do with the Ireland problem: rain, too much of it, all the time dragging down dark spitting. Rain in its thrumming. It's always raining, isn't it? Ach, sure isn't it a grand soft showering day we're having, thank the Lord. Begorra, it's only spitting a wee bit, barely wetting the ground. It's pissing, belting down stair-rods. Bucketing. Hooring. Pelting. Lashing. Hammering. Pissing Pisspot. Rain dripping away at the basalt of her Causeway. Lashing into holes in the green, grey veined marble of Cuilcagh. Pouring into the purple shadows on the granite of the Mourne. The rain, the raining, on headstones running down and more rain. Yes, I will say, the Northern Ireland problem has to do with raining, it is, it was. And...

Miss Armstrong picked up her pen. Stood in front of the class. Her hair grey, hung in strands to her shoulders, her scalp pink showed through. Her lips were red puckered around tight line staleness, cigarette decay. She wrote an **F** in a red huge letter glaring on the top of the essay and held it up for all to see.

I go to the library to try to make some sense of the Troubles. An old RTÉ News clip shows a presenter in a dark suit bidding farewell to the half penny and farthing: “a hundred new pennies in a pound,” decimalization in Northern Ireland. It's not raining and riots are in Belfast, women bashing bin lids on the ground and shouting to the camera: *Armored cars and tanks and guns came to take away our sons*. Red buses burning outside the Dole on the Falls. Petrol bombs burning up the other library on the Shankill. *Exercise Armageddon*, the B Specials hand over their batons and guns to the newly formed UDR battalion. Samuel Beckett wins his Nobel Prize: a master of the bleak and the tragicomic.

We are to write an essay about Seamus Heaney's poem: *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*.

I write:

The title, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," originates with the secret activities of Northern Ireland's rebel paramilitary, the IRA. They admonish members with this demand. Its purpose was to advise members to be extremely careful with what they say. They should make their talk so small it would reveal nothing about their activity. Words are dangerous.

Miss Armstrong gives me a C-

~*~

God is confused, or maybe he's not. Maybe he's giving me what I deserve.
He sends their Cross. Their Cross is not mine, is not silver is bared, emptied of Jesus's body hanging from nails in gaping red, black wounds on his feet, his hands.

The door opens and snowflakes swirl in on orange lamps reflecting on the dark brown of the wood of the other's Cross. Flakes fall on the floor as the others carry in their emptied Cross along the corridor. The others, who are not me, sing, "I will cling to the old rugged Cross and exchange it some day for a crown."

"Repent your sins," they say in unison gathered around my bed. Liquid drips from a syringe into a tube into a needle into a dry patch of skin on my chest.

"Fuck away off and leave her be," Willie should say.

He sits silent beside my bed with its bars steeled raised against the tangle of the sheets. Rosary beads feel cold in my fingers. A candle flickers orange.

A doctor comes, his white coat buttoned, his clipboard clipped and a nurse following behind.

"And, doctor, how is she today?" asks Willie.

"You do know she's dying, don't you?"

Until the reign of James 1 of England crucifixes were commonly used in both Catholic and Protestant worship. James, a Protestant, preferred a simple, unadorned cross (without a symbolic representation of the body of Christ) and banned the crucifix. However, crucifixes made a brief reappearance in Protestantism in the early 1620s when James' heir was seeking a Spanish Catholic marriage. When the upcoming marriage failed crucifixes were again banned.

My dreams woke sweating in the night screaming, my teeth fell out, one then another, then another, leaving red, gaping holes.

Bronagh O Sullivan has written an essay and Miss Armstrong reads it aloud in English class:

Mr. Seamus Heaney wrote a poem called, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. It's about the IRA men not talking too much or some tout will hear and go and tell the pigs. A tout told the pigs about my Uncle Sean and the UDR pigs came in a Saracen to his house. They were wearing kaki green and brown coats and black berets. On the berets were stupid gold angels leaning on stupid harps with crowns on top.

They took Uncle Sean away locked him up and now every Sunday Ma and me get on the bus all the way out to the Maze. The pigs search us on the way in, rub their hands over us, empty out our bags, our stuff lying for all to see all over the wet ground. And they make us wait in the rain or snow, outside for hours until they let us in through the gates to the H Block part.

It's always freezing inside Uncle Sean's cell and my uncle lies on the bed wrapped only in a filthy grey blanket. The place smells of shit, he smears his shit all over the walls.

Last Sunday when Ma and me went, he couldn't even say hello, he hadn't eaten in two weeks. He's going to be blind soon. Then he's going to die. Ma cried and cried and told him to be strong, to keep going, all for a good cause and she would pray for him. Mr. Heaney is right, we should say nothing because look at what happened to my Uncle Sean.

Miss Armstrong hugs Bronagh and gives her a big, fat, bright red **A⁺** for the essay.

Bronagh: Gaelic sorrow.

Miss Armstrong is a bitch, you think. Evil, bigoted spinster who can't see beyond herself. And, isn't Laura so clever but so misunderstood. And, Bronagh such a clod walloper, pockle arse, *culchie*, stupid. And, the education system is so biased and reductive and indoctrinating. Or, maybe you could think, hey, this is all so manipulated, woe-is-me-Laura, stereotyped. What's this really all about?

(Manipulate: Latin manus hand and pleō to fill: a handful of what?).

You could read about the Troubles. Ian Paisley saying, (to be read in a loud, broad Belfast accent), "Those Catholics breeding like rabbits and multiplying like vermin... Catholics' homes on fire because they are all loaded to their rotten ceilings with petrol bombs... don't come crying to me if your homes are attacked, you reap what you sow, never, never, never, never...no Surrender."

You could read about the Troubles: Charles Armstrong, a Catholic, made to ‘disappear’ by the IRA—Why? —who knows? His sister a teacher of English at St Louise’s School, maybe.

~*~

I think she knows she is dying, strangers with their empty cross asking her to repent, a doctor standing with his clipboard already marked, her asking for Mary, for Father Rooney and them not coming—staring at spasms on the walls. Dad saying nothing, saying nothing, and it’s already too late.

Or maybe she doesn’t know she is dying. Maybe she thinks Jesus will leave the wall in the front room with the brown curtains drawn and come to here with Mary, with Father Rooney to be with her.

And maybe if I could only pray hard enough, long enough, she might yet get to live.

~*~

“You do know she’s dying, don’t you?” says the young doctor in the white coat, clipboard in his hand and the nurse standing behind him. Willie is saying nothing. A candle flickers orange.

I close my eyes—where’s Dr Lowry? Where’s Mary? Father Rooney—

Elsie, did you do it on purpose? Father Rooney is asking me behind the grille into confessional darkness.

Confession box, confessing about the baby coming.

Did you mean to trap the lad? Did you get yourself pregnant for Willie to have to marry you?

I should have said, yes, I did.

~*~

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t mind leaving the house on Clondara to get Elsie away from her staring out of the gap between the curtains. A house is just that: a small, square front room, a kitchen, the rickety sheets of plastic I hacked together making a drooping, leaking roof in the yard over the bath, putty cracked. Yes, a house is a house.

I only wish maybe I had one last chance to walk quietly through the gate, along the path I’d cobbled-together, open the door and see the turf glowing and flicking out flames scattering a rainbow on the wall. Rush again for tea for wheaten bread in the morning before work, before Elsie shouting up the stairs that the kids would be late for St Kevin’s. But they never were.

I want to stand and watch and wait and remember Elsie before she was stuck sick in the bed. I want to remember a time when she didn't have the curtains pulled tight and when Mary came to our house to sing. I only wish I could look out the bedroom window to see the apple tree, pink flowers and small green, bitter apples tumbling to rot on the wet grass... I want to tell her I would have married her, pregnant or not.

I want to write of a Morris Minor being made to stop, soldiers in khaki coats and black berets inspecting it and one towering above us, blinding us with his torchlight and bending his face towards the window. We were all in that car, on that night of the 6th January. All layered up. And the soldier stood out from the darkness as we turned from the Grosvenor into the Falls. The 6th January, the car, the soldier inspects it, bends his face towards our window, his torch blinding. I can't tell him to leave us alone, I can't say we are beyond worrying about the Troubles, we are on our way home. I can't say, we have left Mum's body all alone under the sheet at hospice. I can't say, Dad is one if you.

Mum gone and Dad staring into space, into space. Callum not here, never here anymore, coming home drunk, vomiting in the toilet. Dad picking up a book, not reading, staring into space, into space. Mum gone. Dad looking into the fire. Callum vomiting upstairs into the toilet. What am I supposed to say?

Bronagh O Sullivan pulls me by my arm, "Hey, Pisspot, Deafo, why's your stupid name Campbell? Why's your Da's name Willie?"

Mum's gone and Dad's staring into space, into space. Callum drunk. Bronagh O Sullivan pulling my arm, asking and asking about Campbell, about Willie.

-a knock on the door. Knock knock open and there's no one there

Bobby Sands on the TV, on the radio day by day, dying. His picture painted top to bottom of walls of houses on the Falls, in Beechmount: *Tiocfaidh ár lá. Sinn Féin.*

Selective Memory: Phenomenon by which a person deliberately chooses to remember what she wants to remember.

Maggie Thatcher: Mr. Sands is a convicted criminal. He is choosing to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to any of its victims.

Selective Amnesia: phenomenon by which a person deliberately chooses what she wants to forget.

Father Daly, Bloody Sunday, the Bogside Massacre: A priest sobbing, waving a hankie red stained with the blood of a dying fifteen-year old boy—hold your fire—don't shoot—the boy was running away, shot in the back—British soldiers shot twenty-eight unarmed civilians. All were Catholics. Fourteen died.

I wish I could reach the suitcase, pull it down from the top shelf. Dust would fall from its worn seams of green, fusty mold. The newspaper, yellow lining, would smell of dampness of long years passed, stale news, disasters that were predicted that did and didn't happen.

A frost stiffens the air and tight wreaths of daffodils are bunched on white glinting quartz on her grave, flowers dying, dead as whys unanswered on the freshly turned sods.

I wish I could reach the suitcase; tug open its rusty lock and fold in my regrets, my silences, questions never answered, deafness, layer on layer, getting ready to leave. I wish I could push it all to flatten it to forgotten, click closed the lock and take the case by its worn leather handle to leave myself behind.

When I think back to that hospice, there was a window running long and narrow from the ceiling to the floor. If Elsie turned her head in her bed with the starched sheets, she could see the winter whitecaps of waves rippling across Belfast Lough. Beyond the lough she could see the Mourne and she could recall Sundays and the Shimna and the water flowing. She could remember springs and summers, autumns and winter walking along the towpath along Shaw's Bridge, roses, daffodils, crocuses, bluebells and tulips. She could see the weaving of the path along the riverbank, walking for hours with me, Laura and wee Callum, to the ogham stone.

But, when she turned her head in that hospice bed, that wasn't her view.

The young doctor says, recheck the sodium-base balance, double the adrenaline dose, add Herceptin to the third-line regime—don't you know she is dying? —She stares at the wall, says nothing.

I call for Dr Lowry. He comes and they move Elsie from the ward to a solitary room. No stethoscope records her breathing. No cardiac machine monitors her heartbeats. No further red chemical drips more diluted hope into the calluses of her veins. Dr Lowry has been, and comfort should seep its way into the silver needle slid into the dry parched skin of her chest, just above her heart. Yet she clings on: "Willie," she cries, "Laura, Callum, what will they do without me? Where's Mary? Mary? Where's Father Rooney? Where's..."

Dr Lowry...

Please, call me John.
John...she's suffering...
I know...I know...
And, can't you? Can't you just...inject...who would ever know?
Willie, it's not that simple...

~*~

My dreams are my teeth are falling out. Or I am running away from St Louise's', out the door, up the street, to catch a plane, in a taxi, the traffic lights are red, the traffic stuck, tyre flat, people shouting, the road signs are marked wrong, the watch is telling me I am late and the plane will leave without me and I will never make it to the airport, to the plane, to away. Or I am falling into a dark, deep hole. Pisspot pissing down her knickers. Deafo, why is your stupid name Campbell. Why's your Dad's name Willie?

Selective Memory: Maggie Thatcher, "My Government will overcome the hunger strikes by a show of resolute determination not to be bullied by terrorists."

Selective Amnesia: Bloody Sunday, the Bogside Massacre—The Widgery Tribunal cleared soldiers of wrongdoing—"the soldiers' shooting was perhaps bordering on the reckless but the soldiers shot only in self-defense at gunmen and bomb-throwers."

Bully: Originally from 15th century Dutch *boel* lover or brother. The word acquired negative connotation during the 17th century. Firstly, it represented a noisy, blustering fellow then altered to depict a person who is cruel to others. Possibly influenced by *bull* male cattle.

Terrorist: Latin *terror* fear. The word was originally applied to supporters of the Jacobins in the French Revolution, who advocated repression and violence in pursuit of the principles of democracy and equality.

- a knock on the door Knock knock open and there's no one there there's a man there hiding in the shadow up the street

You are not in the solitary room in that hospice without windows, staring silent at the wall, your hands are not thin with valleys deep between your knuckles, skin stretched to translucent. A doctor is not standing in a white coat with a clipboard in his hand telling Dad, telling you, death is waiting.

You are at home with us so you can see Jesus on the wall. We've opened the curtains and you can see Dad's pruned rose bushes in the garden. It is January and it looks like there is not much to see. Clouds grey stroke the emptied branches of the trees, of the hedges, ice-flakes lace the path. We are sitting around your bed, Mary singing softly *Óró mo bháidín*

*Crochfaidh mé seólta 'gus bogfaidh mé siar
Óró mo bháidín
'S go hoíche Fhéile Eoin ní thicofaidh mé aniar
Óró mo bháidín*

Father Rooney holding your hand in his. You tell him what you need to tell him: confess. Dr Lowry places a small silver needle beneath your skin, on your chest, just above your heart. A liquid flows in the needle, into your skin...shush now, all you can do is your best...your eyes close...

~*~

In History class it's the Ulster plantations: King James from England sending Scottish Protestants across the Irish Sea to the north—men on horses with pistols, waving Union Jacks—crops trampled—women in black shawls holding the hands of children walking away from burning cottages—land stolen from Catholics given to the invaders—Thieves: Cameron, O'Donald, Crawford, Campbell—

Callum has crashed Dad's car into a wall at the bottom of the street. Blood running, going with him to Dr Lowry's for lines of black stitches put into the white of his face.

-there's a man no there's men there look in that shadow where the light is broken Look Callum look

Bronagh O Sullivan's Uncle Sean is dead—Mum staring at the wall in hospice asking for Mary—Father Rooney—not here.

Rooney: Gaelic O` Ruanaidh descendent of the Champion of Ulster (who the champion was is lost deep and forgotten in the annals—sorry annals—of history).

Dad staring into space—Callum's black eyes and black stitches on his white face—why is my stupid Pisspot, Deafo name Campbell - a knock on the door. Knock, knock, open and there's no one there but they're coming—

Thirteen policemen, thirteen soldiers, five UDR men, five protestants and a catholic tout are killed.

-another knock on our door and a man running away I pull the curtains closed Callum they're out there again Callum, Callum....Call—Ca—

Dr Lowry:

Laura has not spoken, not one word, for a week. And, I could say it has to do with her Mum in hospice waiting and waiting for Mary for Father Rooney and not letting herself die. I could say it has to do with Willie and his asking me to do what I can't do. His staring and walking and walking more—not able to open a book to settle to read—walking and walking and walking with the rain on his head, drips down his jacket, seeping, soaked, sodden, sunken. And, I could say it is to do with Callum crashing the car.

But, it's what I can't say that matters most...

Laura:

shush hush be quiet shut up for Christ's sake shut the fuck up so I'm finally shut up...

Willie:

...what do you want me to say, to not say?

Callum:

Nothing. Laura's saying nothing. She's slumped down in a chair, silent, staring.

Dr Lowry is telling me she's sick. No, not sick, he says, she's sort of stuck, stuck to the inside of herself. Why's she like this?

Why? `Cause it's all only ever all about her. Her, her, her.

Why? We fought, no, that's not right, I fought. I shouted, shook her.

Why? "They're out there again on the street," she said in that eerie voice.

You're mad, I shouted and dragged her away from her looking out of the gap in the curtains. Shouted at her, where the fuck is your sense? Shook her. I've had enough of this with Mum—and I pushed her down into a chair, her hair greasy in strands over her eyes. Her clothes filthy, her nails bitten with red fingertips raw. Smelling mustier, fustier, more than the smell of not washed, a stale sweat smell of sweat on sweat on fear.

And there were no men on the street. It was just the rain dripping like it always drips: stay away, stay away. Just the wind howling down from Black Mountain swirling at the newspapers: let us be, let us be.

When Dr Lowry visited Laura in the Royal, he suggested she draw a picture of a horse and gave her a paper pad and pencil.

"What type of horse would it be?" he asked. Where would it be? Would it be black, shining sweating, running through the sands of deserts? Or would it stand silent waiting, drinking cool water in a shaded oasis? Or would it travel slowly along a winding road, searching, plodding?

"Show me the horse you've drawn."

There is no horse.

"A horse is important," said the doctor concerned at the blank space on the white paper. "It represents your voice, regrets, hopes, dreams. It's depiction is the window to your hidden heart. If there is no horse, there is no you."

"I hate horses," she said her voice rusted red with creaking unuse.

Horse: Old English *hors* to run.

~*~

We could meet Laura first, as a young girl lying in the dark night, with the curtains pulled tight across the window of the house in Clondara Street. Bashing bin lids bashed. Saracens' tyres ripped up the curbstones... Shush, say nothing.

We could meet that girl dreaming she'd been born into the wrong family and dreaming that one day she could join a right family in a cottage on the Lagan past the ogham stone at Shaw's Bridge. Maybe, she could live in a cottage with thick walls, and long windows, thatched roof with a fire, always the scent of burning turf, glowing in the hearth. And the cottage, sometime else, somewhere else, would nestle among rows of cottages facing others at the foot of the Mourne. Neighbours would speak to each other, aunts could sing songs of fields green and rivers free.

Mums could answer their children's questions and curtains would be open into gardens into parks and leaves, scarlet, amber, brown, yellow, oak leaves tumbling a way down along the paths. Fathers could go together, spades in hand, to cut turf and she could know her father to be a turf-cutter like all the other children's fathers.

Or, we could meet Laura later as an older teenager, neck stiff, head sore, cold, staring at a windowpane, not dreaming, lying in a hospital bed with medicines tricking into her veins trying to find a voice to speak to say nothing. Dr Lowry with her in the Royal with Dad with Callum and them together telling the doctor, telling him everything. Him not telling her to shush to hush but listening and holding her whys. Talking and answering until she's, they've, finished all the telling and no further questions needed.

Or, we could meet her later waving goodbye to Dad, to Callum. Dad in his garden tending his roses, daffodils, tulips, bunching them to take to the grave, to Mum. Callum at St Mary's to learn to be a teacher. Her travelling on the ferry from Ireland to catch the train at Stranraer, to Glasgow to Aberdeen to study to be a doctor.

Or later, much later, as she traces her finger across the map in her room, following the countries away from Ireland, down France, Spain and all the way down Africa.

~*~

When Mum dies Dad's work gives him a small, fake gold clock that tuts tuts on our mantelpiece. All these years, day in and day out, my life given to my work, Dad says. All this and this is how they repay me. A measly, pathetic clock.

~*~

Dad?

Yes, Laura.

Dad...why?

Why what?

Why did you...?

He turns his head away from the flames flickering in the peat in the hearth and looks at her. She looks at the heaviness of the shadows below his eyes. His shrunken cheeks, skin sucked inwards, tight, taut. Why tightropes on the space between them—

Dad... why did...?

Go on; ask what you have to ask.

Why...why did you name me Laura?

Because I could.

Laura: feminized form of *laurus*, Latin word for ‘bay laurel plant.’ In Greco-Roman era the plant was used as a sign of victory

William: Old High German *Willehelm*, a compound name composed from the elements *willeo* will, determination and *helm* protection, helmet. That is, one who protects.

Elsie: derived from the Old English masculine name *Ælfsige*, in turn derived from *ælf* self and *sige* victory.

Callum: Latin *colomba* dove (peacemaker).

Mary: Hebrew *mr* bitter or *myr* rebellious.

Campbell: Scottish Gaelic *cam* crooked and *beul* mouth—that is crooked mouth. Can also be translated as forked tongue, liar.

WHATEVER I SAY, SAY SOMETHING

Stephen is wrong.

We are lying on a blanket on our backs looking at night into the stars of Africa. They are beautiful, lights on lights on lights swirling silver into black. More than I have ever seen. Brightness. Glitters. Sparkles on blackness. Dark matter, spaces, unknowable, more than I have ever known. Stretching, antecedent, back, away. Beyond whys and the interminable dragging of causes behind effects. Beyond voices not speaking because someone may hear. Beyond silences that demand filling...Stars...

“Once you see them you`ll never want to leave,” says Stephen.

I am not sitting on the slope of Slieve Donard with Dad and Callum. Dad not pointing out the two Bears, the Belt and the Plough. Stars so far away, so very long ago, still shining. Stephen is wrong, I do want to leave. Wrong...until now...

~*~

“It might be a bit upsetting,” he said.

We walked along a track, through the sun parched forest, morsel of a river, to a hut with dust in the garden, with dried stalked withered sallow mealies growing, no roses lush dew on petals here.

We bent our heads under the low eave, and it was cooler, dark inside, one small window, no glass. Pots and pans, plates and cups lined across a few shelves, wooden planks balancing on paint-cans. A small basin on a wooden wobbling table, waiting for Saturday for water to boil in the black bucket set on to the flames of the fire. No turf burning, but desiccated twigs, thin snapped branches gathered up from the forest floor. Books, an atlas, layered up, one on another, in piles.

“It`s my home,” said Stephen.

I wasn`t upset.

Stephen: Greek Στέφανος Stéphanos to encircle.

A young mother in the hospital goes suddenly blind. We hold a doctors' meeting under the Flat Crown Tree. What could have caused this?

Three children have died this week from Chicken Pox.

A rash, purple nodules, appears on a man's arm: Kaposi Sarcoma, but...

Shingles should not be spreading all over her body.

Why isn't the pneumonia clearing?

I've never seen Thrush like this before.

Why aren't they putting on weight?

Why ...?

This land is summer different, dry and dusty. No yellowed daffodils to pollen orange my nose, no crocuses, snowdrops, primroses or even a thorn of a rose. Just dust in summers. Dust too spent to swirl. Rain too wary to fall. Sun to brittle to self-shade. Stephen says, if I stay here for long enough, I will learn. I will see this dry, this dust, is different but beautiful...if only...

Let's start with now, today, this version. In this version Laura hasn't yet left medicine. She is still working as a doctor. Scientists know of viruses and HIV and AIDS and ARVs.

Laura is sitting at a round table in the committee room. Around her are three nurses, a psychologist, a social worker and five volunteers, five, all in uniform even though they don't need to be. The room is without a window, white-walled and flowers, ocher, orange, scarlet, straight-stemmed, are standing in vases. Laura wonders again, again, about this room, all the rooms here. Who had thought it to be like this? What thought had made the whiteness, the cleanness, the sterility, and the straight? Patients in rooms, no windows, one bed, shush. A reversed, inverted, panopticon where guards see no one and no one sees guards—shush, if we sterilize it enough, whiten it, silence it, straighten, it may all do as we bid—dying—death—dead—shushed.

A picture of Thabo Mbeki is framed on the wall—no such thing as a virus, says Mbeki. ARVs are poison made by the foreign, capitalists, bogeymen—People and people and people are dying, they who should not have to die.

A nurse, the Sister-In-Charge-Of-Operating-Standards, opens a large folder and begins to read aloud. She tells of diagnosis, prognosis and summarizes a plan for each patient, this is a hospice, and the team are caring for the dying. Plans: words, sentences, black, white, keep between lines paralleled on her paper.

The Sister-In-Charge, the folder opened before her, reading. She tells of Mr. Philip Buthelezi.

Here's what the nurse is saying, "We visited him in his home on Friday. And his home is a caravan, in the middle of the KwaDuku Forest, by the river and he's been living there, like that for years. And sometimes he won't open the door, won't answer our knock and we've gone all that way, made all that effort to see him. Fuck away off, he shouts. Excuse my language, I'm just telling you what I'm having to deal with." All nod, except me.

"He is refusing to obey the principles of palliative care," says the Sister-In-Charge.

"Obey...?" asks Laura—obedience simpers a smile, points a pale, tapered finger and taps the finger on to your forehead—you are not doing as bidden—

"And," the nurse continues, "he refuses to take his morphine like instructed, by the clock, by the dose. He takes it willy-nilly and too much, big gulps straight from the bottle. And, he is mixing morphine with dagga and God only knows what else. Just doing his own thing, it's like maybe..."

"Like maybe what...?"

"Like he wants to...you know...kill himself."

A why and why not, furrowed questions on Laura's forehead.

Obedient: Latin *oboedientem* compliant.

After the hospice meeting Laura gets into her car, drives up the R102, bumps over the potholes, swerves round the bends, travels on past Camperdown, through Cato Ridge towards the river, the KwaDuku Forest on the hill. Stephen has been teaching her the names of trees: Yellowwood, Stinkwood, Ironwood, trees in the forest taller than any oak, light dappled, leaves shifting shadows between lights in the slightness of a breeze.

She reaches the home of Mr. Buthelezi—refusing to obey the principles of palliative care, doing his own thing, dying—maybe wanting to die today, in his own time, in his own place, disobeying—She wants to tell him not to be frightened, she's ordinary, just like him. No, she's not ordinary.

They said she should wear a blue skirt and white coat. Put on a name-badge. Place a stethoscope in her pocket. Give this dose of morphine, by the dose, by the clock, tick, tock, no more, no less, no more. People tell her she's an angel. They all are angels those working with the dying. But she knows. She has learnt, angels are only angels when they do exactly what you want.

She knocks on the caravan door. She's dressed in sandals, dusted red by the path leading from her car through the trees. No uniform and her car is just a car, not a truck shouting, Hospice—Cancer/ HIV/AIDS—bring-forth-your-dying—He opens the door. His hands are troughs, deep valleys between his knuckles, skin pale, stretched, purple veined, translucent. He looks at her standing there on his doorstep.

“How would you like to be told how to die?” he asks. “How not to die?”

She says nothing.

“Will you help...?” he asks.

She shakes her head slightly, no. Nods her head slightly, yes...says nothing...

Palliative: Latin *pallium* a cloak. The intention perhaps is to offer a cloak to those who are cold, wet, suffering, to keep them warm, dry, comforted. Why do I have a cloak and you don't?

Cloaks also hide, they conceal. *Pallium* is also a bell. “A false ring of the night bell once answered it can never be made right,” said Kafka.

Dad writes to ask, how am I getting on? I don't want to tell him of the hospice getting fuller and fuller and people not recovering and Thabo Mbeki and bogeymen. People and people dying because we can't get ARVs. Dying when they could live. I don't want to tell him that I pray and don't know what to pray for. I don't want to tell him I had a nightmare and the beds in the hospice were filled with people in white beds with steel bars raised, sheets tangled in white-walled rooms without windows.

I meet a lady who travels through Africa advocating for palliative care and she asks—what's my problem? What's my fight? Why does it bother me? It's not that I don't believe in palliative care, I say. It's just that if it is such a good thing why are we offering it only to the dying? And what did people do, how did they die in Africa, before? Who are we to tell others what to do, how to die? —how not to die?

Dying is complicated, Africa is a big place, she says.

She is right, dying is complicated and Africa is a big place. We, from over there, are coming to here to give our palliative care to them—white, clean, windowless silences, hush—Have they nothing to give to us?

Is Africa a photo faded to sepia? A child's tiny body curved into a skeletal C, bent down on desert cracks, ribs, rags, hair rust, belly taut. Vulture waiting—Africa a starving hand outstretched?

When does anger become denial become bargaining become acceptance? When does dying become principles? Why do ways of dying, ordered by a stranger, have to be obeyed?

The African Handbook of Palliative Care lies open on her desk. She sits and reads the chapter on resilience and it tells that resilience is about the ability to thrive in the face of adversity and stress, that strengths exist in everyone, and even people facing the end of their lives can be resilient. Resilience allows for psychological, social and spiritual development ... and onward *ad nauseam* words thrusting wisdoms from the Handbook on her desk. From a distance and from elsewhere she sees herself reading of this resilience, this thriving in the face of dying, and she wants to open her mouth to say, to die is such a small verb to be thrashed by resilience.

Resilience: Latin *resilire* to rebound or recoil.

The earliest instructions on dying are found in Latin *Ars Moriendi*. This text provided protocols and procedures for the art of good dying. There is a shorter and a longer version.

Stephen asks why did I become a doctor? I answer something about wanting to care. A vague memory starts to scratch: flowers, maybe daffodils, yellow trumpeted with golden edged on long green stems. A hand, deep furrows, thin, pale, translucent, blue spider web veins, fragile. A doctor injecting a liquid into a needle into skin of a dry, parched chest.

Is this a real memory? Is it a hoped-for memory? A repressed memory? A selective memory?

Mum once asked, who said that life would be fair? What child ever thinks their mother has a valid point?

Memory: Ancient Greek μέριμνα *merimna*, careful thought.

Valid: Latin *valere* to be strong.

Jim the Manager of hospice came to visit. He talked about his work and his having raised enough money over twenty years to open this hospice and fully equip it and employ doctors and nurses. Provide care. Carry out research. Teach. Make it a center of African excellence. And he's raised well over a million through his own fundraising efforts and he comes in here every day, first to arrive, last to leave, every weekend, works for hours and hours. He has recently taught a gardener how to create a garden of remembrance.

He showed us photos. He's standing beside Dame Cecily Saunders. Shaking hands with Dr Elizabeth Kubler Ross. Praying beside Mother Theresa. Receiving a Rotarian-of-the-Year award. Kneeling before the Queen. The clock ticked away the seconds, the minutes, the hour, on the wall.

Dad got a clock. A small, fake gold clock that tut tut on our mantelpiece. Years, day in and day out, my life given to my work, Dad said. Long years and this is how they repay me. A measly, pathetic clock.

Jim was still talking and showing photos and I was wondering whether I should try to whisper, be careful.

Careful: Old English *cearful* mournful, full of woe, anxious (that is filled with cares).

~*~

Stephen asks, “so, Laura, how do you think Mr. Buthelezi should die? —such a small question wrenching such a wound open gaping—I say nothing.

The dying needs palliative care.

What’s palliative care?

Physical, psychological, spiritual care.

What’s physical and psychological and spiritual care?

Palliative care.

Maybe we could rather use poetry to write ourselves out of our traps.

Stephen asks, “what are the principles of palliative care?

I answer, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.

Autonomy? That’s to do with doctors respecting a patient’s wishes, isn’t it?

I say nothing.

The Doctrine of Double Effect says that if doing something morally good has a morally bad side-effect it is ethically alright to do it providing the bad side-effect wasn't intended. This is true even if you foresaw that the bad effect would probably happen.

Let me try to explain: a patient has severe pain and there is nothing I can do except to administer more and more morphine in a needle into a patch of skin just above the heart. The morphine may cause death; relieving pain is morally a good thing.

Morphine may cause death—a life that is no longer a life—sleep deep, deep, dreamless sleep, never to again wake. This is a bad thing.

A question therefore arises and cowers silent at the foot of the bed of the patient who wishes to die today in his own home, in his own time, with his family close, saying their final farewell with the closing of his eyes...

A further question arises but I am saying nothing.

Autonomy: Greek *autonomia* living by one’s own set of laws.

There is nothing here.

Nothing Mr. Buthelezi would recognize. It's flowers from a different place straightened out into tall glass vases. It's not his bible opened with not his prayers on the spotless table beside the spotless bed, its rails, steel, raised, its sheets, pillows, starched stiff. It's their drugs trickling red hopelessness into his rigid vein. Their silence in this hospice. Their candle maybe wanting to flicker orange but there is no breeze.

How would he die if he were at home in his caravan in the forest? How would it be with sunlight shifting across the leaves and with branches swaying? Songs of his grandchildren sat around his bed? Women, his women, humming their wordless welcome to his dying? Where are the sangomas, the inyangas, the dried bones cast down to the earth, the flames, purple, scarlet, orange, dancing, leading the living towards the dead? Where are those voices he can hear calling? How would it be for him to die there at home, today, say goodbye and close his eyes because that is what he chooses?

Or how would it be for him, Mr. Buthelezi, to die out there alone, covered with his own filth in the caravan in the forest in pain because there is no one there to care, no drugs to help his pain?

Whether you know it or not, all stories yearn to make you feel what I feel. In my heart of hearts, I want to sneak poems between the white sheets, while injecting or maybe not morphine under skin.

The hospice psychologist gives me a questionnaire to complete and I find I am a Strategic Thinker. This means I see patterns when others see only disparate parts. I often appear frustrated, angry and aggressive. I'm not frustrated, angry, never angry, not aggressive, just sad and unfortunately mostly right. It's like having an unwanted crystal ball and me telling you what will happen and you never wanting to know. I want to ask the psychologist, why should you help me? Maybe I should take responsibility for once for my own crap.

*Crap: Dutch *krappen* pluck or cut off.*

Dr Campbell?

Dr Campbell....will you help me... when my time comes?

I am learning about palliative care, the principles. An actress is sitting across the desk from me acting as a patient. Her name, the fake notes tell me, is Andrea. She is about my age. Her false notes tell me she has an inoperable tumour which has spread to her lungs, liver and bones. Radiation has not worked. Chemotherapy has not worked. There is nothing can be done, there is no cure, she is dying with a month to live.

She wears rings on each finger, on each thumb, and bracelets swish soft against the fine fair hair on her arms.

“Dr Campbell?” Andrea repeats.

“Well,” I say, “I have your latest results, your platelets are stable. Your white cell number, as you know, is low and your red cells are just below the normal level for your age and your condition. The MRI shows progression into the long bones and your pelvic area shows spots. The CAT scan indicates a pathological fracture at the level of C5 and C6 and... Your markers...”

I hesitate and look down at the lies, fan them out on the table. I look up and she is looking at me. I know I should say no. I am so sorry, but I can't help you die. I know I should...

I say, "Andrea, there's a professor visiting next week from the States. Let him talk to you. They're working in genes over there, doing things we couldn't dream of here. Your own genes could recognize the tumour cells, your own immune response activate to destroy the... Yes, they can do wonders now..." My voice fades to a whisper of lies, shush, lies, shush. I try one more desperate approach, anything other than...truth... "I've read reports..."

“Maybe it would help if doctors studied drama,” she said.

Drama: Greek δράω (*dráō*) to take action, to achieve.

“Dr Campbell when my time arrives, when it is futile, will you help...?”

I am learning palliative care and it is my turn to act as a patient—the shoe is on the other foot—I am acting as a patient requesting euthanasia. Instructions: listen, act, react, as I see fit, as I would if it were real, in response to the doctor sitting across the desk from me.

My name, the fake notes tell me, is Andrea. I have an inoperable tumour which has spread to my lungs, liver and bones. Radiation has not worked. Chemotherapy has not worked. There is nothing can be done, there is no cure, I am dying with a month to live.

The doctor across the table looks at her set of fake notes. Looks out the window that isn't there. Looks at her pen.

“Dr Campbell? I repeat.

“Well,” she says, “I have your latest results, your platelets are stable. Your white cell number, as you know, is low and your red cells are just below the normal level for your age and condition. The MRI shows progression into the long bones and your pelvic area shows spots. The CAT scan indicates a pathological fracture at the level of C5 and C6 and... Your markers...”

Dr Campbell? I repeat.

Her words into words of more yet more jagged jargon and her lies and lies of me not dying. Lies of hope. Me, a patient, her a doctor—rage’s pulse beats my throat, anger blackens purple into my nails sharp in my hands clutched by my sides, breath holding itself against—

Dr Campbell, I ask for the fourth time, please, will you help me die?

No.

Futile: Latin *futilis* leaky.

Hope: Possibly Latin *vapor* vapor, smoke or Indo-European *kwēp* to boil.

Dr Campbell will you help me when my time is up?

I am sitting for a palliative care exam. An actress is slumped in a chair across the desk from me. She is acting a patient and she is much older than me. Her notes tell me she has an inoperable tumour which has spread to her lungs, liver and bones. Radiation has not worked. Chemotherapy has not worked. There is nothing can be done, there is no cure, she is dying with a month to live.

Her hair is grey and hanging in strands to her shoulders, her scalp pink showing through. Her lips are red puckered around tight staleness, cigarette decay.

“Dr Campbell?” she repeats.

What do I say?

Nothing I can say and fail the exam.

Examination: Latin *exigere* demand, enforce, also to finish.

~*~

“Dr Campbell?”

“I am so sorry, I can’t do that.”

“Dr, please don’t...don’t tell him.”

“But he has a right to know the principles, the why and why nots, what to expect.”

“Please, don’t...”

“What is it? Why don’t you want me to tell him?”

“Well, if you tell him you can’t do it, then who...?”

“Dr Campbell?”

“I am so sorry, but I can’t help you die in your own time, in your own place with...”

“Dr, please don’t...”

“But...it’s my job, I’m supposed to inform you that I can’t you so you can ...”

“Laura, hush now. Look there, don’t talk of dying, of death, of this or that, this not that, look at the sky, look at all the colours changing from pink to purple.”

If I had my life to live again, I would have paused, sat on the low chair beside his bed and not spoken one word. I would have rather listened and looked with him at the sky visible outside the long window, the sky layered with all the colours he could see. I would have moved my pen across my paper trying to gather up the beauty of his words.

Late last night, as is the wont, in that space between asleep and awake, in the half-filled emptiness of dream, an answer finally began to tinge at an edge. Because the language of dying is bereft, whispered an answer into that half-dreaming.

Laura rose from bed, opened her notebook and with the black tip of her pen resting on white paper, she probed carefully at the drowsy shade of an answer, touched its words not-yet-written gently as not to unsettle and waited kindly not to terrorize. And the answer unfolded from her dreaming, to her consciousness, to her being and reiterated itself into an echo: Because the language of dying is bereft.

Late last night, lying under the slow sweep of the fan, between Tuesday and Wednesday, in the house by the Indian Ocean, by the beach in Durban, suddenly she understood that her life had perhaps not always been questions asked and unanswered, perhaps she could make a difference... And perhaps language was not all false—lies.

I remember my younger self all those years ago learning about palliative care and today’s me wants to sit beside that young woman, weave my aged, brown-spotted fingers into hers and say, “Don’t fret. Hush now. Be still...all you can do is your best.”

Language: Latin *lingua* tongue.

False: Old English *fals* mistaken.

Lie: Proto-Indo-European *lewǵ* to bemoan.

“Dr Campbell?”

I am studying palliative care and am in a room with other students: doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, a priest, nun, rabbi. We are practicing telling people about palliative care and euthanasia and about the difference.

There are actors pretending to be patients.

The actor before me is a child, a boy, maybe eight or nine. The tutor has brought in a mock-bed and the boy is lying on the bed. His Mum sitting on a chair, still, staring at the wall.

I have learnt about the boy's mock history: leukemia and his bone marrow is depleted, his platelets are spent, his white cells unresponsive, red cells hemorrhaging, and transplant has been rejected. Someone has painted purple under his eyes and his face is white, his body thin. His hair is cut short, his eyes are blue. His name is Joe.

"Dr Campbell?" the Mum asks.

I look at the actor, at the child, at the young boy in the fake bed in the fake ward with the fake disease to teach us how to simulate the real. How real does fake have to be?

Fake: Old German *fegen* sweep away, thrash.

S.P.I.K.E.S. - The Six-Step Protocol for discussing dying through palliative care (not Euthanasia)

STEP 1: SETTING UP the Interview

STEP 2: Assessing the Patient's PERCEPTION

STEP 3: Obtaining the Patient's INVITATION to discuss

STEP 4: Giving KNOWLEDGE and Information to the Patient

STEP 5: Addressing the Patient's EMOTIONS with empathic responses

STEP 6: Strategy and SUMMARY

Where is the step saying the doctor does, doesn't, can't ...?

For Mum

Laura decided to study for a PhD: What does palliative care mean in Africa?
She interviewed African nurses who said:

You white people must look after your dying as it is how you do it. But we must be available for whoever needs us – that is how we do it ... White people have got their own ways to comfort their ill. White people have got words that they use to tell a person they are dying. We don't have a word that means to care for the dying ... In Zulu you take care of the living ones as well ... We use a word Ukumakekela which means to care for all the ill.

I still remember that there is a patient who died at hospice and these African people they wanted to go and slaughter the chicken there. They wanted to call the ancestors and the hospice staff said that they were not allowed to do this ... It is a difficult situation. Traditionally in our culture if you talk about death it means that you have come to predict death, that death will come soon to this family. I remember my first family I went to introduce myself and I felt I was not accepted. I was chased away as one family member said to me, "You have come to predict that someone in this family is going to die. So please, we are not interested. We are no longer interested in listening to your stories. Now go away."

It does make me angry that I am helpless because there is nothing I can do about it. I mean no one is listening to this. For example, they say "OK palliative care. You have been taught to palliative care. You have been taught to do 1, 2 and 3" ... They say, "there is a pile of wood there now go and chop it." They don't give you an axe.

"See," said Laura to her study supervisor, "I am right. I knew I would be. Dying is all about language: palliative care or not palliative care, euthanasia-compassion, euthanasia-murder, doctor or patient. Black or white. Dying or not dying. Obedience or disobedience. Our way or no way. There's not enough words for the spaces in-between. Not enough words for one to overlap and seep into another. It's all about not being able to say what I really want to say."

Those who argue against euthanasia speak of a 'slippery slope': kill one kill them all, including the deaf and the mute. None means all they say, and few say all they mean, for words are slippery.

She was dying. Tomorrow she will lose consciousness, never again waken. She whispers. I lean forward to hear. Look after Callum, she says. Inside I cry, am still crying, who will look after me?

Even before we take a first breath, we are programmed for dying. Stem cells will divide, replicate, terminate. Neurotransmitters will release, rush, and decay. We are born and slowly, slowly, dying is a long way away, dying is a future tense.

Or a poet on the other side of the world, when her day is our night, lamented the loss of parrots in the rich, green foliage of the forests of the Amazon. Grieved for the hushing of their cawing. Cried of the loss of the most luminous that a green can hold, her words traced the scarlets fading to sepia above a disappearing canopy. The poet, the parrots, waned almost to silence, wore out to almost colourless. And the poet, the parrots, became part of a dying world, dying is a past tense.

Or a doctor tells a patient what we never want to hear and dying becomes a now, if not now then next year, next month, next week and tomorrow is today, dying is a present tense.

“See, I am right,” I said to Niná, my supervisor. “Language is never enough.”

“Beware the vicious circle of your own virtuosity,” warned Niná.

“But Niná look,” said Laura, “I am right, I know I am. Palliative care is all about power and about white people coming here telling black people how they should die, not die. Why don’t black people stand up for themselves and say, ‘This is enough?’”

In the gloom, in a corner, a shadow lurked silently. A shadow lingered unnoticed behind the persona of a woman, a doctor who is, was right, always right, virtuous, bombastic blasting, always power filled. Hidden in the shadow cowered a young girl trying to find a morsel of a voice to say, “This is enough.”

Enough: Ancient Greek ἐνεγκεῖν *enenkeîn* to carry.

“Please Laura, relook at your data,” said Niná. I relooked and the nurses said:

What I’ve experienced when you go and see the patient who needs far more than just me to show my face: I wish I had food just to give this woman. I wish I can have a place where I can take this patient to be looked after. I just find the mother there lying there very dehydrated in the hot weather and the shack can fall at any time.

They are poor. The house they are staying in is full of water on the ground. I don’t know how the water gets there but there is water running inside the house. There are holes in the walls. Look at the mattress outside. It is outside because inside is full of water.

Look at this photograph, this is not something uncommon. It is something that is common to most of the nurses that work here. You find that at times they don't even want the woman to be inside their house, they keep the woman in a shack outside the main house because they fear that she's going to infect them.

This family they haven't even got a garden, a vegetable garden, just to put a few rows of spinach, a few rows of carrots, they depend on the neighbour for food. We give the women the food parcel but it's not enough, it's very little but because they are on treatment you've got to give them whatever you've got.

“So, it's all about feminism,” said Laura. “Women are taken advantage of because they care, because they are women and that's what women do.”

Niná sighed and said again, “beware the virtuous circle of your own virtuosity. It's the data you don't like that interests me.”

Laura relooked at her data—dying not dying, palliative care, not palliative care, black, white, woman, man, patient's autonomy, no autonomy, lies to make us, not you, feel better—Simone de Beauvoir argued the language of patriarchy created binary opposites: subject/object, spirit/flesh, objective/subjective. Later, Helene Cixous agreed that language operates through masculine power creating dualisms, binaries, this or that. However, when we look at the language of dying, is it patriarchy building a binary, word by word? Or is the language of dying a binary because it is you who are dying, not me. Is it all about fear? All about you not becoming me, me being me and never you?

Binary: Latin binarius, from bini two intertwined together.

“Laura, you seem obsessed with the dying,” said Niná. A strong word, obsession. I google it and it's from *obsessionem* ‘a siege, a blockade.’ I wonder if she's right, am I besieged, blocked? I wonder why she is so concerned. I wonder why the dying. I wonder....

“I certainly was obsessed about my PhD,” she continues. “Completely obsessed about knowing and not knowing and wishing I'd never known in the first place.”

“Known, not known what?”

“Well, mostly I wished I'd never known about my friend's secret, about her wanting to run away to marry a Muslim, and about me telling her family, and her being beaten senseless to a pulp, and her never speaking to me again.”

Niná said I would only really know what my PhD was about many years later, many years after it had been finished, printed, examined, filed away on a shelf in a library.

Niná: Zulu you who are not us; second-person plural absolute pronoun.

Laura finished her PhD study and thought it was about language and lies and knowing and not knowing why we made words up to suit ourselves. She thought it was about power and about Africa and women and men being oppressed and oppressing, disobedience versus obedience, palliative care versus euthanasia. She thought it was about how can you come here, after all that has been, and start telling me what to do, again? What is this about doctors— and instructing the dying—not helping the dying die because—where were you when Mum needed you? — Where were you when I needed you— In Laura's PhD study were nurses telling others what to do, patients were grateful and pain free. Patients begging to live - do whatever it takes. Patients begging to die-do whatever it takes. Was not this, was not that. Maybe the study was about trust. Maybe it wasn't.

She titled her study: *Certain the Curriculum, Uncertain the Practice: Palliative Care in Context*. She dedicated it to her Mum.

Trust: Old Norse *traustr* strong.

At the graduation party, a friend of Stephen's asks me to list things to be found on a patients' bedside table. A lamp, I reply. And a glass of water, a Get-Well card, a prayer book, a candle, rosary beads, a bottle of pills. The friend turns to Stephen and asks him the same question. A dry paintbrush, Stephen replies. A candle flickered out with no matches to relight it, a single orchid pink in a pot, no maybe white, not quite dead yet, but slowly dying, from no watering and too much water will surely kill it, a seeding maybe ready to grow into a Yellowwood, a cat, no a turtle, no, make it a long-toed sloth, all asleep and not having to stay awake for too long, and a sunbeam that can't find a crack in the curtains and a notebook, empty, waiting to be filled, maps and countries to be visited and springs, summers past and futures.

All these years later, she realizes no. The PhD was not about those others who were the dying. It was about her. All about her. Parts of her, the compassion, the caring, the words, questions wanting to be asked, dying within her. A tiny fraction lost, dying, dead, day by day, with no one noticing.

Where are the silver prisms of the Shimna? Where are the slopes of the purple blue Mournes?
Where is the fall of my foot on the crackling leaf of the great oak? Why am I waiting while the words won't come?
What comes first-writing and then peace?
Or peace and then writing?
It perhaps gets easier.

Can poetry become a language for the dying?

Poet, from *poetes*, means maker. A poet creates something from that which has not been, looks in the gaps, incompletes the punctuation, decapitalizes the capitals, ignores full stops, sways past commas trying to fracture lines. Poetry pares down, spaces are important, between now and next, panacea between the words. Or equally maybe, the spaces are not important. Perhaps poetry invites two opposites to leak into each other around a broken edge. To leak, dilute, soak one into the other. So black-white is mayhap grey. Palliative care, euthanasia are possibly...at the very least certainly uncertain.

It's Never That Simple

A doctor and a patient's daughter are sitting in a hospice by the bedside of a dying mother. A candle flickers a soft glow on the locker and the curtains are drawn tight to keep out the chill of the winter snow. Rosary beads, glass of a pale light blue, are lying on the tangled white sheet beside the mother.

The daughter whispers, "It's now her time."

The doctor sits up straighter on his chair, glances towards the mother's hands and says, "she's comfortable. The morphine's dose is right. It's just a matter of time."

The daughter repeats, "It's her time now. She wouldn't want to be here all these days, nights, like this."

"I'm sorry but you can't make that decision," says the doctor.

"But—"

"—with death there are no buts."

"For her sake, for my sake, please let her go."

"It's never that simple."

Associate Professor Alex Broom spent six months embedded in a hospice interviewing doctors, nurses and patients... He reported that he found among the patients virtually unanimous support for assisted dying, but the hospice was totally opposed. A desire for a hastened death was seen as a call for help; the patients just need more time to adjust. The assessment was that it 'was not his time to go.'

Professor Michael Cousin (2010) said that 10% of cancer pain was so difficult to treat at the end of life that some patients were given drugs to sedate them to unconsciousness, culminating in death over several days to a week. Breathlessness, cachexia (wasting, weakness, immobility, dependence), anorexia, nausea and vomiting, incontinence, ulceration, discharge and odour are common and far more difficult to palliate, and all impact on dignity... some suffering is only relieved by death.

A doctor and a patient's daughter are sitting in a hospice by the bedside of a dying mother. A candle flickers a soft glow on the locker and the curtains are drawn tight to keep out the chill of the winter snow. Rosary beads, glass of a pale light blue, are lying on the white sheet beside the mother.

The doctor whispers, "It's now her time."

The daughter sits up straighter in her chair and stares at the doctor. "Are you telling me you are giving up? You can't do that, you haven't offered immunotherapy, there's a chance it would work. It's expensive, but this is my Mum. She is a fighter, I can't sit here and let you give up."

"I'm sorry but she is dying."

"But—"

"—with death there are no buts."

"Please, for her sake, for my sake, don't give up, there's more, always more you can do."

"It's never that simple."

But: Old English *be-ūtan* outside without.

Others have raised concerns about an authoritarian streak, or a form of hard paternalism, in the philosophy and practice of hospice. Those concerns denote a perception that some in the hospice movement maintain a rigid and monolithic view of death: one size fits all; it's the hospice way or the highway...

Does Laura know that during the time she spent alone as a young girl, feeling so sad, so isolated, she was learning to notice, deeply notice, and learning to choose to react or not to react? Does she know she was gaining strength slowly, slowly, strength to say, enough and no more? Or enough is not enough and more?

Some people listening to me may think I am violently opposed to palliative care.

Not so...I do not accept the rigid imposition of a particular model of care, and a limited choice at the end of life which condemns some people to die in a way that is anathema to them, in order to satisfy the moral view of the doctor.

(Palliative Care: The Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality, Rodney Syme, 2015)

An entire mythology has grown up around the process of dying. Like most mythologies, it is based on the inborn psychological need that all humankind shares. The mythologies of death are meant to combat fear on one hand and its opposite—wishes—on the other. They are meant to serve us by disarming our terror about what the reality might be. While so many of us hope for a swift death during sleep “so I won’t suffer,” we at the same time cling to an image of our final moments that combine grace with a sense of closure; we need to believe in a clear-minded process in which the summation of life takes place—either that or a perfect lapse into agony-free consciousness.

- Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*.

We are Graeae, two ancient or maybe we are three, white-haired witches, maybe once were women, who’d recall?

We have only one eye between us. That eye is covered with a thickening white web and our vision tunnels down day by day. We see mere shadows fleeing across the beds of patients where the maximum number of visitors per bed is two. The maximum time per bed is fifteen minutes. Be careful in touching the patient’s hand, the pulse oximeter may become dislodged. Pull closed the curtain, the sunlight may fade the flowers in the vases.

We have three ears but they’re filled with wax and ash and too late to hear, to notice that we don’t hear. Shush, it’s time for the patients to sleep, stop that singing. What are you saying? Sorry the tube makes it hard for me to hear.

We Graeae have one loose ragged tooth between us, it slurs our words so none can understand what we thought we wanted to say.

Maybe once we had two eyes and were not too blinded to notice the cause of shadows.

Maybe we once heard ourselves and heard you. Maybe once we had strength of teeth left in our mouth to bite and snap and say, enough is enough, no more. We can’t remember for Perseus stole our one eye, blocked our ears and tugged out our last ragged tooth.

Dying can need doctors, just not all the time in all the places. The absence of the doctor can give the doctor space to reflect: do I really need to be here?

Empathy Lost

The old man, the patient, hunched in the chair beside my desk thinks I am a doctor. Thinks I am a woman wearing a clean white blouse, listening and capable of caring. He can't see I am no longer human. I am an animal, a cat, a lion, waiting, lurking. Staring unblinking from the black slits of Laura's yellowed eyes. I am dragging a sharpened claw along her desk. I am running my tongue along the spikes of her incisors. Snarling, "Why are you bloody people continually coming with your incessant whining, and why are you always disappointed, never satisfied by me, by doctors? Don't you know your infernal, eternal, expecting, demanding a cure for death will always lead to disappointment." Serves you right to be disappointed, slithering to here, squirming in your chair, sighing, wanting me to make it all better for you."

"Laura don't be so bloody stupid. You can't write this shit..." screamed her conscience. "...about being unhuman, being an animal pissed off at patients and wishing the fuck they'd all disappear and leave you alone. Don't you dare put this angst down on to paper."

"I'm sorry you are upset with me, but I don't have a choice," whispered her subconscious.

"Don't be so ridiculous, you don't have to write any such thing. And what is with this crap you're writing anyway? Is it supposed to be some sort of memoir, blah, blah, blah and who would want to read anything about you? It isn't even a proper memoir."

"I hear what you are saying, understand your concerns," her unconscious whispered. "But there's nothing that can be done. Words are here despite you. Letters are scraping themselves, one by one, from the keyboard, grinding their way across the screen."

"Crap, crap and utter bollocks crap. Why are you writing this shit?"

"I only wish I knew."

Empathy: Ancient Greek ἐμπάθεια *empátheia* passion. The modern word in Greek ἐμπάθεια *empátheia* has an opposite meaning denoting strong negative feelings and prejudice against someone.

Empathy is a subjective sensation of imagining how another person feels.

Empathy is a subjective sensation of not imagining how I feel.

I placed a tourniquet around the thinness, paleness, blueness of her arm. I tightened the tourniquet waiting for her blood to swell in veins that should have latticed visible on the back of her hand. Nothing.

Empathy is mediated by the supra marginal gyrus situated in the anterior quadrant of the pre-frontal cortex (Journal of Neuroscience, doi: 10.1523/NEUROSCI, 1488-13, 2013). Empathy is a predominantly cognitive—as opposed to affective or emotional—attribute that involves an understanding—as opposed to a feeling—of patients’ concerns, combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding and an intention to help by preventing or alleviating suffering.

I further tightened the tourniquet. I needed a sample of blood to test for results to present to the consultant holding the ward round in the morning asking me.

Empathy is useful as it improves the doctor-patient relationship--physicians engender more trust with their patients, promoting patients to provide more information and be more willing to follow the physician’s advice ... (Lola, B. Making Empathy Count. Physician Leadership Journal v6, issue 1, p22-29, 2019)

I knew her lungs were failed. I knew her bronchi, trachea, alveoli were drowned in pneumonia, tissues stretching, gasping for air that could not reach. I knew her mucosa swelled, forcing cells against membranes, stretched and pain. I knew her T Cells, her CD4 lymphocytes were decaying, her immune system defeated.

...an abundance of emotion could be detrimental to patient care but empathy—an understanding of the patients’ problem – can never interfere, could never be detrimental, always is beneficial. The more understanding the better.” (Lola, B. Making Empathy Count. Physician Leadership Journal v6, issue 1, p22-29, 2019).

I lifted her hand again and bashed against it with the slap of my fingers. No blood, bash, no blood, bash. “You`re hurting me,” she said.

Put your money where your mouth is blabbing away...

I am on the AIDS ward surrounded by medical students, teaching them about empathy. Starched into our white coats, standing around a patient's bed. The patient: female, aged 47, Kaposi's Sarcoma, Pneumocystis Carinii, responding poorly to Bactrim, scores her pain 7/10.

I had asked the students to imagine what it must feel like to be her, the patient lying in the too big, faded grey, blue striped hospital-pajamas. Gasping for each breath. Pain.

"Put your money where your mouth is," she says.

She points to an empty bed.

"Will you lie there in hospital pajamas?" she asks. "Will you be too ill to leave the bed? Wait for a nurse to bring water when you are thirsty, a bedpan when you need it? Morphine when pain chokes your lungs, wait, waiting for the doctor?"

What can I do? Surrounded by these medical students, empathy staring at me, waiting? What can I do except nod? Yes, I will put my cheap meaningless words into her shoes.

I lie in a bed next to her. Stare at the ceiling. An hour...

"I need to urinate," I call to a nurse. She nods. Walks away. Not to return, my bladder...

I ring a bell by the bedside. No one answers. My bladder...

And you who are reading this, do you lie in this bed with me?

"It seems to me..." I say to the woman in the bed beside mine.

"Yea, life has no meaning, is full of suffering, no one ever listens, answers," she replies.

My bladder... .. urine leaks out and seeps along the sheet, under my bum, sodden, stinking. Pisspot—If I were you, I would walk in the garden, smell at the roses, notice the way the clouds gather then disperse and then disappear across the sky. When you come back, I will still be lying in this bed.

Hours pass. A nurse comes with a cloth, I wipe myself as best I can—you can put this down, read no more, go to your own bed. Sleep well, awaken refreshed and coffee or tea and shower and run along the beach to watch the surf and maybe a pod of dolphins dancing in the curve of the wave. You pick this up to read on, read more, hope maybe that something has shifted, a surprise awaits—I am still in the bed.

“Do you really want to know how it feels to be me?” she asks.

I am on the AIDS ward surrounded by medical students, teaching them about empathy. Starched into white coats, standing around a patient’s bed. The patient: female, aged 47, Kaposi’s Sarcoma, Pneumocystis Carinii, responding poorly to Bactrim, scores her pain 7/10.

Imagine what it must feel like to be her—the woman lying in the too big, faded grey, blue striped hospital-pajamas, gasping for each breath. Pain.

“Go on, put your money where your mouth is,” she says.

She points to an empty bed, one nearby. I am to lie there in hospital pajamas. I am to be too ill to leave the bed. I am to wait for a nurse to bring water when I am thirsty, a bedpan when I need it. Morphine when pain chokes my lungs.

What can I do, surrounded by these medical students staring at me, empathy waiting?

“No,” I say.

Empathy: how would it be to be you? What path do you walk? What do you see? Hear? Feel? Empathy, reaching out, in, towards, to join with you and become you. I lie in your bed staring at the ceiling, waiting for nurses to inject morphine into unimaginable imagined agony. Paralyzed I need to be to become you.

Paradox: A seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true. For example, the Raven Paradox -- (1) I am me (2) If I am me then I cannot be you. Paradoxically, *paradox* does have an opposite: false and seemingly logical, true...maybe there again...not.

Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, v24 n2 p119-127 April 2019: Deaf participants showed difficulties in emotion recognition tasks compared to the typical hearing participants...Deaf participants also revealed inferior levels of cognitive empathy. Compared with normally hearing children, children with hearing loss tend to be less proficient at recognizing facial expressions, they miss many cues in interpreting the thoughts and feelings of others.

My desk is big enough, wide enough for you to sit way down there and me to sit way up here. I used to sit behind a desk, me behind, you in front. A tutor told me that was wrong. The desk could represent a physical barrier, he said. There should be nothing between me and you—nothing conversations—nothing dialogue—caring nothing—

I want to write something about desks and doctors behind and patients in front or vice versa. Mostly I want to write that doctors assume they can and should help everyone, instead of saying, take responsibility for once in your life for your own crap...

...Ellipsis comes from the Latin word omission. I omit. Or there again perhaps I don't. Perhaps I place these three dots purposively, not as omission, rather to signal opportunity for pausing, picking up, slowing down, breathing in, out, stopping before running out of this room as far and as quickly as I can.

The important thing is that someone can imagine what it would be like to be you. I imagine me being you and lying in your bed blinking. Blinking. Only blinking. And my blinking, the twitch of an eyelid, moving a slow staccato cursor across the flat face of a computer screen. And the cursor spelling—enough.

I run out of things to write so I read. I read a book by an Irish writer who tells of Irish winters, long, deep, menacing and dark. I haven't forgotten that winters are long in Belfast and the orange glow of streetlights doesn't illuminate much except a swirling of snow or drizzling of rain. The woman in the story remembers why she can't write about herself.

I was saddened: I had become someone I did not like. The colon should buffer and soothe one sentence adjoining another.

Just before you came into my room another, older patient sat on the chair at the end of my desk and folded her hands over her chest. Told me she had an illness, a cancer, for many years. Not a usual cancer, she explained. Not an ordinary cancer waiting for an X Ray to quickly find it in her lungs. Not a typical lymph-node cancer ready, waiting to slip into a silver needle for immediate diagnosis.

No, she had a strange, difficult to diagnose cancer. One-of-a-kind. Hers and hers alone, well, almost, because only five cases have been recorded in the entire world. And it took years upon years to find the cancer and when they eventually found it, the consultants, the specialists, the Big Doctors in the Big Hospital, asked her to be a mock patient for examinations. She had to lie in a bed, tell her history to medical students, answer questions, determine if students could progress along their careers, or not.

Did I know her cancer? Would I be good enough, qualified enough, experienced enough, to understand the complex instructions regarding its treatment? Over those long years, before a diagnosis, doctor after doctor after doctor disappointed her, let her down, told her she was neurotic. Anorexic. A control freak. A frustrated spinster.

I listened and nodded and sort of wanted to say, I still can care.

Why can't empathy drift up from graves like haze's innocuous promise of sun on the lake? Or drift down, a fog, a mist clearing to show me the crucifixes on tips of the steeples of the churches? I want to say sorry. I want to recall a time, just once, so I'll remember myself as a woman who was once younger, once kinder.

I gaze at you. Nod my head. Poise my pen above the blank paper ready to capture the tumbling out of your secrets. I shift closer, lean towards you to better hear you whisper of all that is so sad, furious, despondent, fractured and brittle.

I hold my breath, I wait, I watch for the truth that leaks from the softness of your sigh, from the crease of your frown.

You look at me. I nod, go on. I try to silently tell you that you're safe with me. I am the one you've been looking for. The one you can trust. I look into your eyes. But you see what I'm trying so hard, so long, to hide. Your glance leaves my eyes, casts down towards your shoes.

Your shoulders shrug, your fingers clench into your palms. You can clearly see what I don't want to show. Your lips mumble.

You look up again at my face. You look for a long time at my eyes and under your gaze I wilt and stare down at my pen in my hand.

You say, "Don't worry, all is okay with my marriage. My daughter is fine, everything is fine, thanks for asking Dr." Your thoughts remain tight coiled in your own bed, in your own rooms, in your own home, in your own life's-making.

Maybe if I could try harder, your sleeve may roll slightly upward, oh so slightly, to reveal the bruises on your arm. Maybe if I could try harder my phone might ring tomorrow, and it would be you to tell about your child pissing in the confessional box in church. If I tried harder, you may lean forward in your chair and whisper so your bruises, your daughter's bruises, become words become heard become shared. I wish I could still care, but you see the animal, the cat, the lion, with the yellow eyes staring at you, unblinking.

Today I waited for his seventeen-year-old chest to cease to move, his heart to cease to beat, his breath to rasp to still.

I put my stethoscope into my bag, pulled on my coat and walked to town to meet you for a drink.

You're late again and flustered and only got time for one quick drink and hectic beyond hectic Prof Jones didn't turn up and you'd to deliver her lectures as well as your own three hours on your feet and your voice is now gone and all sore and the bloody students are talking all the time never listening and smoking in the corridors and the stinking rotten Dean is never out of his office his door always locked closed the curriculum is being changed for no good reason that you can see must be something to do with decolonization you suppose and now you're having to research it all over again rewrite what for will they ever forget the past it's been twenty years since apartheid ended it's time to get over themselves to move on Oh sweet Jesus look at the time sorry darling must rush

When I care for the dying, I invite you to sit beside me in and out of the shadow. I do not want you to die there, in the white room, in the white bed with the steel railing around the bed and the window too high to see the apple tree bud, blossom, loose, discard, regrow green, crackled scarlet, amber.

The room was busy: a young child in a bed, the mother, father, senior doctor, junior doctor, nurses, social worker, thermometer, pulsometer, sphygmomanometer, oxygen, blood dripping, tubes implanted, bleach, a bible, a candle, a box of matches.

The door opened into a corridor and other doors opened along the length of the corridor into other rooms. At the end of the corridor was a blue door that opened on to a small garden, on to the city, on to a corner where two roads crossed, and buildings swept up towards the sky. It was along the road to the park the doctor walked this morning. The park was narrow running along the banks of a river winding and bridges now and again spanned across its width. Roses bloomed, bees hovered, doves cooed. Leaves fallen from tall, ancient trees, curled, crisped, crackled and crunched with foot falling. The doctor walked slowly noticing these sights, sounds, scents, the river shimmering subliminal in the heat, the roses, the bees, the doves, leaves fallen, and she wondered again why—why not.

Stephen said, "Tell me about your childhood."

She learnt slowly that there are those who can feel the spirits. Or there are others who glance and pass them by as though they were just another word, a beautiful paragraph, an exquisite story told by another; the same as all the others. She felt the spirits gently pushing, placing a finger in the center of her forehead. Look, look, look and see. See the waters shimmering over there and the question answered reflected in the lake. See want`s beyond and beyond and within and within.

You`ve got itchy feet her father used to say. But her feet never did itch.

Itching leads to scratching which has traditionally been regarded as annoying. However, there are hedonic aspects to itching and resultant scratching. Irretraceable, incessant itching/scratching may become highly pleasurable.

I`ve been thinking about Laura for a long time. She doesn`t make sense. She stands apart, always apart. When I ask her to join us, come have a drink, she sighs. Maybe next time Stephen she says. And next time I ask her again. She still sighs. She stands alone staring out of windows even when there were no windows to stare from. She bites her nails, she`s changed jobs every year since she left Ireland, left Scotland, travelled the world, been here in Durban. Maybe the world is too small for her. She says she doesn`t know what to do, what to think.

She says when her Mum was still alive, she found a star shaped white stone on the riverbank. She looked around at the river water rushing down towards Bloody Bridge and noticed the clouds waiting at the top of Slieve Donard. She placed the stone in her pocket and forgot it. Today she found it again, after all these years, just where she`d left it.

I am in bed asleep and walking once more, after all these years, along Clondara Street.

Time has passed with no backward glance of guilt. The mist is thick, the day is almost done. I look into the mist swirl and there are no trees ancient roots twisted here in this place, on this street. Trees that should be oaks, hundreds of years old with pale circles inside circles inside fading to nothing, wet resin leaking, are absent. There are no birds here, not singing but silenced, dissonance, is a vulture on dry desert sand looming with plucked out feathers, more than one vulture, silently circling and circling and waiting for time to never return.

As twilight thieves the last remnants of a sky blue, I see in the murk, soldiers' boots are lying among the broken curb stones; boots decayed, disavowed, a stitch unstitched, a patch unpatched and soles flapping with tiny drops of fog clinging. The men who once marched are echoes of echoes of feet falling.

The moon is not visible, is not yet full and may be faded from lunar to never new, to quarter, to crescent, to waxing, to waning, to white, to grey, to black. As the moon rises, I see an eye blink just once on the shadows of its face. I am suddenly cold, iced tentacles reach around my arms, my legs, and I am forced upwards, swirling up and up through the asshole of the earth, through a gaping hole that is the moon.

I am now on the outside of the shit of the earth, on the other side of the moon, maybe the dark side where the moon gods do not live, where God's eye has blinked but only once.

Strange, I think, for he is God and he is blind. Grey spat clouds cover his eyes. Cataracts develop so slowly, so insidiously that God, in some morsel of his defense, may not know he is sightless. His paintbrushes lie discarded and dry in a broken vase for he no longer can hold the memory of colour. His clay, putty, is cracked and useless, his fingers too sore to unsculpt the mess.

In God's dingy room covered with cobwebs and grime, are many ancient moons, on moons, on moons, beautiful perhaps once but not now. So many moons, so many universes and only one God and him so blind, so old, so spent, so moon sick and sucked dry by the thankless sucking, seething, swelling, slimes of lives he has created. So many universes to be gazed at, investigated, recorded as though God hopes that for once something may possibly be different way down there. Go on then, surprise me.

I know she is dying. A patient has a breast tumour, spread to her lungs and pelvic bones and to her liver. I know this disease.

The pressure of her swollen liver pulsates on nerves surrounding her abdomen. This pain of nerves is called neuropathic pain and is agonizing and difficult to control with medication.

The World Health Organization has developed a ladder for pain control: step by step to obedience. Step 1: weak analgesia. Step 2, if pain is not controlled then move to stronger (moderate analgesia). And finally step up, step up, to, morphine (strong).

I visit this patient. Her blood pressure soars. Her pulse racks erratic. Sweat leaks intolerability. Rigid, her body on the bed, guards against slashing. Silent: too in pain to call out, too exhausted to sleep. I start with morphine...some more...more...

I am called into the office of the hospital' CEO.

“You didn't follow the ladder,” he notes.

He is right. I return to the ward. Her eyes are closed...

Ladder: Proto-Indo-European *kley* to lean.

I'm standing by Mum's grave. The Mournes with Slieve Donard shadow purple the horizon to the west. Daffodils are drooping at the marble headstone. Dad is saying that Mum prayed for me every night to be a good doctor. I am wondering what Mum would pray for now.

If empathy were to become a verb it may equate to “embering”: a particular type of glowing that can't yet decide if it is to die or to rekindle.

I am in a room without windows and I wait until he settles on to the narrow chair positioned at the edge of the desk.

“How can I help you today, Sir?”

“Where's the doctor?” he asks looking around the room.

I smile.

“Oh...but... you're not a man.”

I wait further with that same stuck smile on my face.

What do you get to say when you say nothing?

In the room without windows the door opens, she enters, takes off her jacket and hangs it on the hook. She places her bag on the floor. She sits on the patient's chair positioned at the edge of my desk.

"How can I help you today?"

"Well," she says, "I've just moved here. Will you be my GP?"

She thinks you are a doctor, but you are a complaisant old mutt with teeth lost and hair molted away from withered up, leathery-dry skin. You are a dog only fit for the long length of the long needle. She doesn't know you are a dog and still she tugs at the chain tight around your drooping, flabby neck.

"You're mine now," she says. "Walk when I say walk. Eat when I say eat."

You wave the doctored stump of your tail at her and nod your head on the silly spring that shakes when shaken.

I am asked to leave the room without windows to visit a patient in her home. She's missing her brother someone warns me and says I'll find an old lady sitting alone in a terrace of a house in a street of other terraces of other houses. The old lady has been overheard to say, the only way you'll get me out of here is stiff in a box.

"How old was the brother?" I ask the someone.

"Eighty-four, the brother was before he died."

"So, what did the old lady sitting in the terrace of a house waiting so she could get stiff enough to be carried out in a box, expect?" I ask the someone. The brother wasn't sixty-two, or fifty-one or twenty or even three. The brother was eighty-four long lived years.

Empathy could become a verb like tug. That is, to tug takes two.

I wanted to tell the nurses something about how death is not a failure. I wanted to tell them about self-compassion, but self-compassion is best to be seen, not to be heard. So, I gave them small disposable cameras. To take photographs, not of patients of course for patients' confidentiality is paramount. To take photographs of how they felt about themselves, their work. I developed the photographs and chatted with the nurses.

"This photo of a leg of a cot?"

"Well," said the nurse, "that child cried so hard every time her dressing was changed."

"This photo of medication on a table?"

"That patient just wanted to go home."

"This photo of a candle not lit on a locker?"

"I didn't believe you," said that nurse, "I am a failure."

The CEO of the hospital called me to his office.

"Those photos you're making the nurses take," he said.

I nodded.

"Well, don't."

Stephen asked, "I wonder why the CEO would be concerned at the photos?"

Maybe, thought Laura, the photos were a problem, patient confidentiality, privacy breached. But there were no people in the photos, only a door and some medication and a candle on a locker, unlit and Thabo Mbeki framed in a picture on a white wall.

Maybe the problem lay in the nurses saying that they are driving past houses where children were hungry. Maybe the problem was with caring for this one and not that one, because we can only care for those who are dying. Maybe it was about Thabo Mbeki and not being able to give out ARVs. Maybe Niná was right in her PhD: it's better to never know.

Laura is in the room without the windows. She is sitting on a chair, high backed, padded seat, steel-arms. A patient enters, sits on a chair that has no high back, no padding, no arms.

“How can I help you today Sir?”

“My hand, doctor,” he says.

His hand has never held a hammer. His hand is smooth and has never plunged the slice of a spade into muck. His hand has never had to wash off grease from plates piled high in Wimpy after midnight. His hand, what?

And Laura wants to take the money paid to her by the government for seeing this man.

And pile it up, rand on rand, in the corner of the windowless room.

And tug down her knickers.

And piss on the money.

And open the door and see the fucking sun shining out there.

I open my book, blank without lines, and thumb down the top of my pen, and wait. I wait for empathy, and pills in bottles with lids that adults are supposed to be able to pry open are stacked on shelves from A is for Aspirin to Z is for Zopiclone. I wait for the shelves to collapse, the alphabet to sing out the scent of Dad's roses that bloomed in the garden every spring for me and me alone, and I wait for bottles to crack, and pills to scatter warm crumbs of Mum's freshly baked soda bread.

I wait for my empathy to find a way back and sparkle down the electric lengths of pasts to presents, to shake loose glistening pearls in raindrops on oil on roads transformed into madness and mayhem and miracles to be wondered at. Empathy to break open and fairy dust to magic my words never yet spoken in understanding in such a beautiful way.

I wait and nothing ever happens.

If empathy were to become a question, it could be what is it you want me to feel?

Empathy hovers—I read of empathy and still I wait.

Before entering my medical career, empathy was felt by me. Empathy has become a past, and passive voice used to apportion regret.

There is supposed to be a distinction between other medical disciplines and palliative care. The distinction perhaps lies in language. For example, in disciplines other than palliative care, language, literature, discourse, is intellectual, objective, logical, resting securely on a hard rock of clinically-based-evidence. In palliative care, language is subjective, emotional, poetry or maybe a singing-out-of-prose, of praise, and a congruent dialogue emerges between the dying patient and her physician. This congruence of language between patient and her physician could come to mean something unique. Not words tethered to a hardness of rock. Rather fluidity in waters in rivers flowing to not to silence, to questions, then on to questions answered.

In summary, palliative care, like poetry, could become a space among the sways, the swerves, the sweeps, the sighs of the rivers, drifting inexorably towards the oceans so none become trapped in eddies circling and circling in churnings whipped up by fear.

And maybe palliative care can be another language. A language of the animals, the cats, the lions, sitting together and not gazing from black slits in eyes, not dragging claws to hurt, not snarling nor sneering with secure smugness.

Rather it could be a language of doctors talking together and me saying, "I once could feel the pain of another. I hate the sniggering cynic I have become. I hate that all goodness in me is dying, dead."

Text (mine) "Coffee next week?"

Sub-text (mine) I've been writing all last week about my past and dragging up memories. I don't know if I want anyone to read it. I'm upset at remembering how bad I felt about not caring about the patients and it would be lovely to sit opposite you because you are a writer, you know what it is like...you know how to say..."

Text (hers) "Hey, some of us have to work, I can't do coffee, I'm busy, hectic beyond belief."

Sub-text (hers) I couldn't give two flying figs for you and your angst.

Empathy becomes a Danger Zone. I nod at patients and have no wish to know what is going on inside their lives. I avoid the minefield of their emotions by zig-zagging zips' teeth, my lips to silences' safety. No, not silent, rather emptied:

"How's the weather outside today?" I ask.

"Fine, I suppose," they reply.

"How's your Mum keeping?"

"Doctor, you signed her death certificate two years ago."

I tried to tell in words I knew. I wrote papers for scientific journals and cracked their codes of “hence the evidence proposes,” and “the thesis therefore illustrates.”

1.0 ABSTRACTS in journals were never abstract.

2.0 INTRODUCTION I could never say hello, I am me. Who are you?

3.0 METHODS tied my hands.

4.0 RESULTS didn't show where please help me lay.

This writing happened for years, me trying to tell in the words I knew, and I didn't ever get to say a single thing. Maybe I need to make myself become ill.

You've opened the door. Moved hesitantly into my doctor's room. It is quiet except for a computer buzzing in a corner. A robin or maybe it's a blackbird, a lorikeet, calling a song outside the long window that opens a view into a small garden. In the garden are oaks, sycamores, elms. A stream, and icicles waiting for unscathed spring and peace at long last. In the garden the grass is brown, scorched, another El Nino they say and the farmers up in the Midlands are praying for rain and praying not to be killed. A bed, narrow, white sheets, white pillows stretches along the far wall of my room. The floor is tiled, white. A vase on my small desk is filled with daffodils, leaf-loosing-tulips, dropped-headed agapanthus, a cactus. You wait, noticing that I am an unreliable narrator and you hopefully never need to be here with me.

Reliable: Latin *religare* to bind together.

Unreliable: Opposite of reliable (to bind together)—to set free

A mother, a son. The son will not recover from the virus that infected his blood, caused widespread hemorrhages in his cerebral cortices, pons and brain stem. A machine is controlling his breathing

The physician looks at the mother and asks, “what...? will...? em...? do you...should we...?”

In the room to face an answer to the physician's questions are the team: Primary Physician, hepatologist, nephrologist, neurologist, interpreter, nurse-in-charge of Intensive Care, palliative care physician, palliative care nurse, social worker, Grief Therapist. The room crowded until there is no space left for the answer a mother should never have to give.

The team are wearing paper gowns of green, with green hats and green boots. We stand in the corridor and scrub our hands with pink disinfectant dispensed from a plastic container on the wall outside a patient's room. We enter the room, the entire team.

A young girl is asleep on a chair in the room, a baby wrapped in white lies in a cot. It is the silence I notice most.

"Evie, the baby, is anacephalic," whispers a nurse.

The young girl awakes in the room with the baby lying silent in the cot. She looks towards the team.

"Well?" she asks looking towards the Primary Physician. He shakes his head. We leave.

"What did the Mum want?" I whisper to the nurse.

"To take Evie home to..."

"And?"

"Transport said they weren't insured."

Team: Proto-Germanic *taumaz* that which tugs.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the collated data on physician-patient communication indicates that the average time taken for a physician to interrupt a patient is 46.97 seconds--

Oh, hello Mrs. Jones. What can I do to help you this fine morning?

Well, Doc, that gynaecologist you sent me to see last week. All the way to Durban. And the bus was late. Do you know how far it is to walk from the bus station up the length of that hill to that St James' up their own ass hospital? Up the hill. And my God, I won't even tell you about the queue to even get a patient file for the gyn doctor to write his stuff on. The queue all sniffing and snorting and if I wasn't sick before I went there, well...and by the way, the big doctor said that your referral letter had a few errors. Not to worry, the big doctor said, he would see it was all OK for me. But I haven't got that far yet. I'm getting to the hospital, getting up the hill, and you remember my asthma and the inhaler, the brown one, the preventive one, well, the less I say about that one, the better. And I'm panting and puffing, so much for that inhaler, I think, and the other doctor usually gives me the blue one, not the brown, but hey, I'm not a doctor, am I? What would I know? And, then I get to the queue for a patient file and the queue's already down the hall and it's not even moving and there's no chairs, what sort of place is that, I ask you, but I suppose you don't go there, it's only for the specialists, isn't it? And you're a GP, not.... And I'm in the queue, it's not moving and it's nearly lunch and I'm not even at the door of the big doctor's office yet...and then...

46.97 seconds is a long time.

When I started to study medicine, I noticed a daughter's sad flutter of a smile. I saw the dry tears of a son. Time passed and a daughter who offered a sad smile became leukemia. A son who didn't shed tears became retinoblastoma.

We have mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. We have patients in beds, in cots. We have differing thresholds of neuronal excitation. We have some who score their pain as 2/10 and some who score as 10/10. We have experiences and opinions and hopes and dreams and regrets. We have guilt and shame and children who can't find words to say how much it hurts when their bandage is soaked away from their tumour. We have people who say euthanasia is compassion. We have people who say euthanasia is murder. What we have most in those beds, in those cots, in those questions, in those answers, in those questions not answered, are exceptions.

Exception: Latin *excipere* to take out.

Patient Centered Care (PCC): "Good morning, Sir. How can I help you today?"

He replies, "You tell me, you're supposed to be the doctor."

For Aristotle the distress of the patient is bound to evoke the physician's emotions and vulnerability and result in the most ethical expression of the compassionate application of the physician's wish to hope to help.

I argue, bullshit.

Emotion: French *émouvoir* to stir up.

Vulnerable: Latin *vulnerare* to wound.

Empathy, like love, or sorrow, or joy, isn't a word. It is a feeling. And I suppose feelings, by definition, must be tactile. How does empathy feel? Tears covering my cornea so I can know if my words can, cannot, be said?

Or maybe empathy can only be felt if one is willing to rip apart one's jugular vein. I am worried about two primary things: a) the vampires, (cleverly disguised) in the Waiting Room, may suck my blood and simply drift away to seek another sucker to write out their Sick Notes, b) if I were to cut open my jugular, I would die. A third thing suddenly arises as important: if I were to cut open my jugular and bleed all over the sterilized white tiles of the practice floor, who would notice?

Laura Campbell wrote a book called *Empathy Lost*. Someone read the book and remembered a time when they were younger and kinder...

A hospice nurse published a book about dying peoples' conversations. Most said they had regrets. They regretted not being able to say what they really wanted to say.

Whatever I say, Say Something

I don't trust. Stephen is talking about the false self and the true self. I tell him I don't trust dichotomies or binaries. It is like me, that girl from the Falls Road in Belfast, plus me, the doctor in South Africa addles and/or adds up. No, I don't buy into dualism. My breath goes in, my breath comes out.

Dichotomy: Greek: διχοτομία *dichotomía* dividing irreparably into two.

When people ask, why did I become a doctor, I say it's because I tried to care.

"No, you're wrong, it was definitely roses," said Callum.

We were remembering Clondara Street all those years ago; Dad at the bottom of the garden in the flower bed, shears in his hand, shaking slowly at the velvet heads. He pruned Angel Faces, Shepherdesses, Dark Ladies and Icebergs. Their thorns rarely piercing his fingers in his leather gloves. Scents sweet, warm in summer, bees buzzing.

"No, he didn't have roses. It was rhododendrons," I said.

Dad at the bottom of the garden in the flower bed, his boots trampling a path through the thicket, intertwined branches reaching taller than his head, him stretching up with the shears, cutting off a small sea of stems for Mum to put the red flowers, stems messed one interwoven haphazard, into the big green vase on the table in the hall beside the old, black phone.

"I'm sure they were hydrangea," said Callum.

Dad at the bottom of the garden, his boots squelching in the mud, nodding his head at the drenched clusters of flowers, burying tin cans in the soil among their roots. Rust flowing out in rivulets. Red stains on snow in winter and acid to alkaline and Dad changing the flowers' colour: purple, pink, peach, lilac, lavender, blue, the colour of our eyes, he said.

"No, he had daffodils, remember the daff-a-down-dillies."

We sighed, Callum fetched the album from the cupboard under the stairs, and we flicked back through the pages, through the photos, their colour sepia, back to Clondara Street, back to the garden, back to the flowers, to Dad.

Dad at the bottom of the garden, a carpet of faded flowers circling his boots: maybe they were bluebells, primroses, foxgloves, Sweet William, pansies, snowdrops, crocuses or tulips.

I read about what another woman had written about the Troubles. The woman who wasn't me said that she had to gain some distance from Ireland before she could write about the Troubles. I think, I wonder—maybe hope, maybe not—I am now and here far enough way.

Laura Campbell became the Academic Leader for Teaching and Learning at the Medical School. The Dean told her that this was an important position which called for strong leadership. I've never even dragged a water deprived tongue parched horse to water, thought Laura. She e-mailed a friend who ran a leadership school in Johannesburg who give her the details of a lady who could coach leadership. And, paid for a twelve-week course.

After two weeks the coach said, I am sensing you don't really want to be a leader, Laura. The door blew open. A wild wind whipped into the room and whisked up the papers and the papers ignited to sparks that sang the freedom of the stars and the stars nodded their shining heads and spun a cloak of silver of springtime in sun-streams rivers rushing into northern seas and the strong threads of the cloak lifted away the weight of the whys.

Who could I blame? I designed my office at home, but the desk is wider, darker stained mahogany. Taking up more space, messier than I expected. The bookcase is haphazard, overfilled with the textbooks I thought I might someday need. The window that guaranteed constant airflow is clamped to deter the criminals lurking in the city. Humidity that should only come next month is early. Sweat is already condemning, the walls oozing disapproval, critical droplets drip, drip, drip down my scalp, seeping to blur my eyes. Disappointment, failure droop black ink to smudge Q to W on my keyboard.

Fusty is a word not used here and fusty mildew spreads fusty spores are creeping from the outdated hopes, useless aspirations and redundant regrets that once may have held some truth but not now.

There's a murmur, always a murmur. Stephen says it's the traffic. I know it's not. It's my stethoscope, it's the thermometer, the sphygmomanometer, the white coat I don't wear. My carping textbooks slammed silent. Journals pages yellowed. Me not being in the hospice, helping people, helping to die.

The low, constant noise is never quite audible—yet—I hear my chair creaking, berating me for sitting for so long, for staring at the water futile on the walls.

Yesterday, I collected my latest certificate, a Master of Medical Research. I had it framed in plastic fake-wood like the others and asked Stephen to hang it on the wall. He did and it's skew. The wall is covered with my certificates.

I stare at the water dripping. Wait. For the answer to arrive.

Time passes, a month, another month...

I enroll for yet another course, another certificate, creative writing this time. Maybe its words, answers, I need, my own.

Saying What I want To Say

Thus, having left medical practice I'm working with creative writing. Not as a place to ask questions but to contain what's left of questions unanswered. Or rather to...

Laura realizes she doesn't use adverbs, or a passive voice. It was thought this was perhaps startlingly insightful with no adverbs creeping along creepingly. She doesn't use a hotness of angry adjectives or a mixture of metaphors either, that would be solecism, stabbing squelchy sentimentality into the cliché of the pyrrhic victory of you not answering my questions deserving of an answer.

“Why are you drinking so much?” Stephen asked.

She searched for a word, an answer: fear, isolation, fraud, failure? But the answer she, he needed, wanted, wasn't there.

She paused. Searched harder, going deeper into cortex, into grey, white matter, sulcus twisting. Her synapses fired. Fires in hearths, candles burning, curtains drawn. She reached deeper. Further. Down into her amygdala. Synapses connected, did not connect to walls white and flaking whitewash in cold winter evenings. Her neurons cascaded to the furthest part, the darkest, quietest area of cerebellum. A thought flinched. Started to rise reluctant from her subconscious. The thought, not yet fully formed, drifted up, layer by layer, neuron by neuron, synapse by synapse, into cortex, into conscious, and wanted to form itself into an answer: mistrust?

“Why are you drinking so much?” Stephen asked.

She couldn't find a word to answer.

It becomes the same as the last same, same as all the other before sames. We gather up the words he speaks to her, bundle them along our parietal lobe, carry them along our neuronal axis, squeeze them through our synapses. We bury his words deep in our amygdala so maybe she will forget failure, fraud.

He leaves her.

She cries same as all the other sames.

We do our best: we pick up other words and flash them across her retina, heighten their sounds vibrating across her ears: happy, serene, gentle, kind, independent. But she pokes those words away.

Another one arrives. He stays for a while longer than the ones before. Until he also stands up—bunches his fingers into his palms—flings his fists beside his sides—walks away. Walks out and the door to her heart that had just been pried to open, clangs closed in the draft of his ice.

His name, the one who has just left, is Stephen.

We notice her voice is not used much, little creaks of silence appear on the surface of her tongue and her throat is dry, sore. We notice her teeth biting into her fingers and ripping off her nails, crescents, spitting nails on to the grime of the carpet. Her nailbeds bleed ache and red. Her hair greasy strands falling into her eyes. Her smell, sweat, sweat, sweat. We notice but she does not.

Another man arrives. He smiles and she makes her lips smile into the mirror of his. He doesn't last long.

Sometimes we hear a voice at her door calling. Sometimes she will not answer the phone ringing and we do not get to know who it is who wants to speak, who it is, who it is not.

The one we miss the most is Stephen. What do we miss?

Coffee from beans he ground himself and put into the machine he brought into her kitchen and the scent of coffee in the cup every morning.

Flowers, roses, in the glass vase even when it wasn't her birthday.

Taking her hand in his, stroking his fingers along her arm under the table when no one else could see.

A note folded into the paper of sandwiches in her lunchbox: Roses are red, violets are blue, I love you because I do.

Her sighs rise through the webs and dust and dust falls on to more dust and webs become thicker, more. We try count the number of dust motes drifting from each sigh, calculate the strands of webs growing and recall how many days since he left. We cannot.

Letters arrive and fall white flat on the dirt in the hall carpet. We want her to use her fingers to tear open those envelopes, to let his words soothe her eyes, to rattle out the reams of his remorse. She places the unopened letters on to flames in the hearth and does nothing but watch his words furl to brown to ash and rainbows flickering on the wall disappear. She watches the flames become embers and tries to remember the names of trees, out in the forest. She wakens at night and runs her tongue along the jagged crack in her teeth where there is nothing left but holes.

We try to make her notice us. We flutter a muscle in her left cheek, beat out an uneven murmur of her heart, ring a clanging in her ears. Dart a tremor along her feet lying in bed all weekend. She ignores us.

Our brain, us, becomes a strange stuck space. There should be youthful memories strolling in warm swathes of Shimna sunlight. There should be a future with gaps of not yet enough still wanting to be filled and places that can be new.

Stephen returns. Cooks supper. Lights candles and plays music soft.

“What’s in your head?” he asks.

We want to make her smile and do.

Number of days Stephen has been here: 136.

When her eyes open his are already open.

Number of days he has been here: 278.

His fingers know that hers are curled tight, pressing sharp nails against her palms, even when they are not.

Number of days: 373.

She and he are squeezed together in the bath and water rises over their warm bodies, drips over the rim, drains down the edges of restlessness and seeps along the floor of mistrust. We know what is coming next—This bath is far too small for two, she says. The floor is creeping stale mildew. The walls are jaded pale listless blue green fungus. I have to go, and go alone, she says.

I will wait for you, Stephen says.

Number of days Stephen has been here: 9861

Cartesian Dual? Cartesian Duel?

Blackout poetry works better if you can find a text full of things you agree with, believe in, are comfortable with as the art of destruction will then become especially painful but also insightful.

You don't need to know why. You don't need to know where to start. It is best to have no goal. From this crucible, this melting pot, this sacrifice, you may witness the birth of something unexpected.

The prompt for today's blackout poetry is Live and Let Die.

Select a page at random.

Look for the words Live and Let and Die

Cut out the words or blank them out with a red pen.

Look at what's left.

No, really look at what's left.

I read my work and worry. I don't want to upset anyone. I also don't want to perpetuate binaries equal dualisms equal exclusiveness equal fundamentalism equal you or me, compassion or murder. I delete words that may upset and/or both neither alienate:

~~Either Or Black White Catholic Protestant young old man woman night day boy girl doctor patient nurse doctor question answer silent vocal cross crucifix heavy light poetry prose deaf hearing student teacher yes no Falls Shankill morning evening empathy callous Africa Not-Africa palliative not-palliative euthanasia compassion murder spring summer fear brave resilient weak rain not rain science literature dark light remember forget full hungry warm cold morphine pain AIDS ARV leader follower right wrong help hinder care not-care same opposite for against feminist not-feminist obey not-obey include isolate soldier civilian strange familiar empty full thriving decaying walls no walls sleep awake good bad first not-first reader author fatigue energy sea land ladder not-ladder control not-control floor ceiling indoor outdoor dream nightmare stages no-stages strong weak start finish Ireland not-Ireland new old fight peace lie truth best worst country city lengthened shortened late early fast slow never always colonize decolonize hopeful hopeless childhood adulthood far close me you us them me alone not-alone sun moon blank full stand up sit down why why-not thin fat vein artery visible invisible lift drop blackout whiteout examined unexamined worth worthless busy quiet senior junior honest dishonest fold unfold line circle home away show conceal solitary occupied waiting rushing curious restless love hate attack defend enemy friend search find thought word crowded alone deep shallow fire ashes sharp blunt conscious subconscious quiet noisy bad good old young before after past future reveal conceal beautiful ugly rain drought particle wave victim bully oppressed oppressor here there him her euthanasia palliation warm cold bored not-bored there here go come passive active head heart measure not-measure standardize random full empty give take whisper shout afraid not-afraid, stage 1 stage 2 stage 3 stage 4 acceptance denial bargaining anger death~~

She returned from her travels and sat at her desk tearful with the constant cycle of her thoughts trapped not here. Not there. But, in spaces—wildly younger and desperately older and alone, not alone—growing and not yet fully grown—questions asked, still unanswered—and lives still to lead. In one life, the one that might be over there, the sun managed to shine nostalgia now and again, weakly. The people praised the efforts of the sun and climbed the mountains above the village to try reach the warmth of the sun to shine on their faces. However, none ever could for the mists and soft rains fell and always would. In the other life, the one here, the sun shone daily, and the mountains were high and beautiful but lay far to the west and the people didn't notice the shining of the sun warming their faces. Stayed on the flat below the slopes, didn't need to climb the mountains.

She sat by her desk wanting to find a way out of the cycle that wasn't here, wasn't there for she never really had two lives to live.

In the passive tense, the subject of the sentence is acted upon by some other agent and the English language allows a passivity which is not possible in many other languages. For example, English includes promotion of an indirect object to subject (Laura was told of the necessity of resilience when dying) and promotion of the complement of a preposition (Laura's resilience was found to be lacking), leaving a stranded preposition.

“Passed by euthanasia?”

“No, not passed by...PASSIVE...P-A-S-S-I-V-E. Laura, for Christ's sake, wear your bloody hearing aids or you'll end up killing a patient.”

No turf burning in any hearth, the turf lands are long since emptied. Hearing aids are smaller, more finely tuned, calibrated to exactly compensate for what is lost. They should cause no problems nowadays.

She puts them in. Sees lips move. Sound coming from where? Who is speaking? Who is not speaking? What's that noise? What does it mean—passed by euthanasia—passive euthanasia—euthanasia?

Passive: Latin *passivus* suffer.

Euthanasia: Latin *eu* well and *thanatos* death.

“Why don’t you wear your hearing aids?”

“They make my ears all dry and itchy.”

“Your ears look fine.”

“They make too much wax.”

“There’s no wax. It’s important for elderly people to hear. Do you want to lose out on conversations, end up staying alone at home someday all lonely?”

“They make everything too noisy, people chattering and clattering and clamoring, complaining, complaining and clanging.”

“That’s what it is supposed to sound like.”

But it doesn’t have to.

I take a quiz online—Which Creative Type are you?

Start Test--

Q When traveling, you always need a Destination/Direction

A Direction

Q Your brain spends more time -- In the Zone/Zoning out

A Zoning out

Q You tend to see life through the lens of Systems/Stories

A Stories

Q Are you a Ruler/Scribble

A Ruler

Q You’d rather be in a Cocoon/Beehive

A Cocoon

Q You tend to dip your toes/dive in headfirst

A Dive

Q Your door is wide open/usually closed

A Usually closed

Q Updates are ready to install - Restart now/Remind me tomorrow

A Remind me tomorrow

Q Your first question is always - Why/How

A Why

- Q Your secret weapon- Curiosity/Endurance
A Curiosity
- Q You`d rather talk to someone you`ve just met/yourself
A Myself
- Q Everything is connected - true/false
A True
- Q Are you a fortune cookie/birthday cake
A Fortune cookie
- Q Your creativity is more- Method/Madness
A Method
- Q You tend to - go over the top/under the radar
A Under the radar

The quiz tells me I am a “Dreamer.”

The world is a place of beauty and magic in the eyes of the DREAMER. Where others see facts and figures you see symbols and metaphors and hidden meanings. You are deeply emotional and deeply intuitive. The inner world is where you`ve felt most at home. You`re happy to roam your mental landscape of thoughts, emotions and fantasies for hours on end. Your greatest gift is your depth of sensitivity and empathy, which allows you to give voice to universal emotions in a way that touches people on a profound level. Your greatest challenge is learning to balance dreaming with disciplined action. Seek out opportunities to collaborate with innovator types.

I thought you`d stopped with all that stereotyping bullshit, said Stephen.

Stephen is right—Stephen is wrong—stereotyping means there is someone out there like me.

[I am walking along the Camino, the path from France to Spain. Just ahead, pebbles crunch at the foot fall of a husband whose wife has died. Behind, grasses sway closed at the passing by of a woman not knowing what to do next in life.

I walk the track silent, alone: let me be. I am not interested anymore in your lives lived; in the way you make your choices. Go on scatter lives on grey blankets, starving in cold cells. Let a life be trampled into the imprints of the steel capped boots of another. Or gather a life waiting into the rhythm, tap, tap, of a yellow beech-wood walking stick. Second after second, mile after mile.

A man comes to walk beside me. His English accent grips at my judgement and sharpens my nails of preconception. I nod only meagerly, curtly, at his conversation, look elsewhere, slow, quicken, but he matches my pace.

He was once a soldier in Northern Ireland, he tells me.

We are alone here on this plain. Poppies, red, grow along the edges of the path and snow on the summits of distant mountains cools the air.

He tells me he used to march in line, one behind another, up the Falls, don't look left, don't look right, don't engage. Whatever you say, say nothing. He marched past St John's, St Kevin's, St Louise's.

I tell him about Dad. About Mum.

He tells me about him, about his Dad leaving so long ago, about his Mum not coping and him in Homes. In Homes that were not homes, and not knowing the names of the other children. Having to shout, always to shout to find a voice, any voice, and travelling his life, here on this path beside me both looking for a place to belong.

A hill on the summit of a hill is not a hill: Cruz Ferro. Pebbles piled on pebbles, stones on to stones, rocks rolled on to rocks, sand. Shoes, a solitary shoe, a pair, a frond of brown dried seaweed, shells of differing colours, differing types, a photograph of a white cottage with the sea blue at the end of the garden, a prayer to St Joseph printed on paper wrapped in plastic, the words fading, a small lighthouse, a ribbon. Words on the pebbles: hope, dream, remember, forget, forgive, sorry.

I am at the foot of the hill of left behinds on the summit of a hill, at the place of all those farewells.

The soldier who has walked beside me—the one who is one of them not one of us—with them therefore not with us—sits down in the dust, on the track worn down from all those footsteps. He pulls off his rucksack. Reaches into a pocket: a jersey, woolen, pale yellow, small for a newborn baby. He kneels. Places the jersey on to the pebbles, on the stones. He runs his hand along its body. Smooths it. Pulls at the ribbed cuffs. He places one sleeve to cross over the other.

We kneel together for a while looking at the tiny jersey. Then we move around among the circles and circles of things left by others. We pick up a fragment of mirror shining in the sun, a bracelet with leather flowers, a red crayon, a small empty wooden box, a cup, a hairbrush, a map of where we do not know, an almost star-shaped pebble.

He looks down at the small mound we have gathered and places the things left by others, one by one, around the edge of the pale-yellow jersey. Not to obscure it, just to leave it there behind so less alone.

~*~

I could be angry with myself. I could weep at me leaving him and his love always there. A tree has fallen and I'm trapped. The electricity is off, the pumps are stilled, and water will become sludge with dirt, so I won't be able to drink for days to come in the after-cyclone humidity. What can I eat? What will I do tonight, tomorrow, for I don't know how long, in the darkness waiting for dawn? When will the airport reopen?

I could wail at the swirling of my mind, racing around this place in this cyclone asking why, what for? It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The grass isn't always greener. It's swamped and I'm stuck in a steep-sided valley and the rain is torrential and brown water is rapidly running under the door. The grass isn't greener, its sodden, squashed under fallen leaves, trampled beneath the cracked branches. The grass is drowning and drowned, and the cyclone shows no signs of abating.

He will be at home this morning, walking with the dogs along a path winding through the forest where the grass is green after the soft summer rain, where the breeze merely rustles the leaves and he will again wonder what he has done that is so wrong. Why have I left again?

On this island, in the middle of the ocean, I could think to myself, no I'm not going to be angry. No, I will not sob at the terror of this cyclone. I am going to get out. I am going to be with him. Once home, I will take a breath. I will notice the grass, the breeze, the forest. And I will show Stephen this that I am writing now.

A lie: "Last night I dreamed of smelly socks," I told the psychologist.

"Tell me more," she said.

The clock ticked a tutting on the wall behind me.

"I don't know what more to say," I said.

"Well, we know that your dreams represent the deeper most and hidden part of your inner psyche," she smiled.

"Aren't you tired of this?" I asked.

"Tired?"

"Well, I am. I'm tired of being here, of listening to the sound of my own voice going on about socks smelling in dreams. I know what's wrong...what is wrong is me being here, again and again..."

The psychologist sat forward on her chair and nodded.

"...and everything I do and don't...I don't know what I want, I do know what I don't want and what I don't want is to be telling lies about smelly socks dreams."

"It is your money. It is your time," she answered.

She said a lot more, but the clock ticked a tutting frowning behind me on the wall. Behind me ticking tutting tick tut tut a way to the end of the hour.

Same time, same place next week? I asked.

A Truth: “Last night I dreamt I was on a riverbank. The river in flood, rushing, frothing, angry. I had to get to the other side and couldn’t,” I tell the psychologist.

She nods, go on.

I go on, “I think my unconscious is trying to tell my...”

The tuts of the clock on the wall behind me are silent. Shush. Listen. Listen to what is trying to be said...

Psychology: Ancient Greek ψυχή *psyche* spirit, soul and λογία *logia* study of.

~*~

It’s special, he said.

On the eve of our wedding Stephen presented me with a gift. A rectangular, flat box, a gift wrapped in brown paper. A red ribbon—too big for a diamond bracelet embedded in gold. A negligee of satin, sleek and soft? Bottles of bubbles bursting with passion into hot baths? Scents of honey and jasmine on my arms wrapped around his waist? —I tore at the paper, opened the lid—pulled at hard—grey—stethoscope.

It’s a special one for people like you, he smiled.

I looked at the stethoscope lying folded back and in and on its hissing self.

Its tubing’s thicker than usual. Its diaphragm larger. The sounds will be more magnified, he said.

Is this what I am to him? A dullness of doctoring? An ear hard of hearing? A straining to hear if fluid is filling a lung? A potential error—is blood turbulent flowing clogged in an artery? Or not? Not a precious light-filled nymph to be adorned in bracelets of gold, draped in satins of softness, bathed in rainbowed bubbled stroked with honey of love.

He took the stethoscope from the box and placed it on his chest. I listened. I listened carefully. And for the first time, the sounds of trust were clear— for now...

The doctor who is me—why pretend I do not enjoy being revered—tells her I have left medicine and I am writing now.

Shame, she says. We really need doctors.

We? I want to ask but don’t. I know the answer. We are me are her. We are white, we are wealthy, and we are middle aged. Our bodies are not what they once were, and our minds are wondering if perhaps there is more and more out there in the world and what are we missing? And, or perhaps or, we are us needing someone to be like us living in the same house, in the same street in the same city—on our side of the Peace Wall—Ireland for the Irish—Brits Out—Burn the shower of bastards proddies—we? We are not so different, are not so alone.

Shame you are writing, we really need doctors, she says. I wonder if I should feel bad.

I am a writer, I repeat quietly.

I miss them, Mum and Dad, I said from the head table at my wedding. Stephen and Callum looked up. I told about Mum and Dad and about how Stephen had written a letter to Dad a few months ago saying he wanted to marry me. I told them about Dad telling Stephen he was a lucky man and I told them about Dad's garden and the flowers.

I told them that Stephen was like him and I told about Dad writing to me to say he wanted to be here with me on this day and about him dying suddenly last month. I spoke for twenty minutes, there was so much, and I couldn't get to say it all.

I gather up a textbook, a journal, a report, a proposal, a recommendation. I take them to your home in the caravan, in the forest, by the edge of the city, by the stream that hangs green moss over silver stream droplets. You underline the words doctor, nurse, social worker, morphine, bed, should, palliative care, euthanasia, compassion, murder, in red ink and the red runs to brown to stained to faded to indecipherable. You ask, can you now see what I mean?

For Dad

Peace has broken out both in Ulster and in Northern Ireland (although essentially the same they are both historically and politically profoundly differently, indifferent, différence—French, to differ and to deter, différance—made up word that means whatever you want it to).

Peace: Latin *pangō* to fasten, to fix (to make a pact).

Difference: Latin *dis* apart and *ferō* to carry, to bear.

Deter: Latin *de* away and *terrere* to frighten.

Selective Amnesia—Ian Paisley, First Minister: “I have never made an inflammatory statement in my life. You can't build a bridge of trust with a scaffolding of lies.”—

Martin Mc Guinness, Deputy First Minister: “Let everyone leave all the guns - British and Irish guns - outside the door.”—

Paisley and Mc Guinness on the TV shaking hands, laughing: The Chuckle Brothers.

Paisley: Gaelic noun countable and uncountable.

Mc Guinness: Gaelic *óen* one and *gus* forceful.

An investigation into Charles Armstrong concluded he was abducted and killed by the Provisional IRA, a Catholic victim of what, why? His sister, previously a teacher of English, said the Armstrong Family wanted recognition of the hurt the families of the Disappeared have endured for decades.

Bronagh O Sullivan is working for the *Commission for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles*—The Commission says: a victim is someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident...and on and on and on for three pages—am a victim, or not. If I were a victim, who could I tell?

Victim: Latin *victima* sacrificial animal.

I visit Dr Lowry in an old age home. What is the difference between amnesia and dementia? He has no memory when he would wish to have one. I have a memory that I wish I could forget; him sitting there, drooling, blabbering, fighting, shouting, pissing, shitting, day in, day out, in that place...

Lowry: Gaelic *labhradha* a spokesman for the chief.

Dad is in the Royal Hospital. In ICU, in the third bed on the right from the nurses' station. Mechanized air is moving in, out, trachea, bronchi, bronchioles, alveoli, lungs. Plastic tubes delivering liquids into his veins. His heart follows a green luminous wavering line across the screen of a monitor, bleeping, warning, and bleeping.

A nurse, her hands Hibitane-scrubbed red, hot, unfolds a green towel, sterilized. She dries the drips running from each finger base to each fingernail, thumbs, finally her wrists and drapes her hands into plastic gloves. She reaches for a silver, sharp needle. Connects it to a syringe. Presses the needle's steeled, precision-tip into the dead-center of a glass vial; white label, black ink, Morphine 2.50mgs/ml; checked and rechecked.

At her touch, an isolated droplet travels from glass-hard vial through needle-bore to barrel of syringe. She pauses. She pulls again and another droplet suction along the length of the needle against the measurements marching. After thirty seconds ticked on the clock on the wall, she lifts the syringe with needle and vial, turns them upwards towards the glare of the florescent light—stares at the liquid drawn—the liquid left—flicks a finger against the wall of the syringe—stares again to check the meniscus has stuck concave at exactly one milliliter.

She shifts her gaze to Dad in the bed. His hands are clutching at empty air, his legs tangled in sheets.

The nurse looks, looks at Dad, at me, at Callum, at Stephen.

Dad is dying. I know. She knows and ...she doesn't draw up another droplet of Morphine or another or another...And, mechanized air moves in, out. Plastic tubes deliver and his heart is tugged behind a green line wavering a luminous question across a monitor—why?

Dad is at home. Laura, Stephen, Callum sit on low chairs around his bed. They are playing music softly: *Óró mo bháidín*

*Crochfaidh mé seólta 'gus bogfaidh mé siar
Óró mo bháidín
'S go hoíche Fhéile Eoin ní thicofaidh mé aniar
Óró mo bháidín*

The curtains are open and Dad, if he were able, would see into his garden. It is January and his roses are pruned, ready, waiting. Clouds are grey and a rain falls down the window. Laura reaches for a needle. Places it's silver tip just beneath a layer of skin on his dry, parched chest, just above his heart. She connects a syringe: Morphine 2.50mg/ml. Laura has already checked and rechecked and already doubled the strength.

She draws up another droplet of Morphine and more...some more—Callum nods—Stephen nods—Laura nods—Dad's eyes cloud, close...collude...

Collude: Latin *collusionem* a secret agreement...shush, shh.

Secret: Latin *secretus* to separate, to set apart.

Dad is in hospice. In the third room to the right past the nurses' station...Curtains, bright patterned, are opened to frame for him a winter afternoon sun. A nurse has placed flowers, roses, in a vase on the table beside his bed. She smiles at him as she rubs his hand soft in her own.

Music plays.

"How much longer?" I ask.

The nurse smiles—how could, would she know, not know, say, not say?

"Tell him," says the nurse.

"Dad," whispers Laura, "it's alright, we're alright. You can..."

And he does.

Why did I give up medicine?

Because I could.

But, there again...

We are at Mum's and Dad's grave. Aunt Mary's grave. Mrs. O Sullivan's grave. Father Rooney's grave. All are black granite headstones with gold lettering, rain grey dirt streaks, white quartz stones, moss green growing.

"Laura, nothing here has really changed. Please don't write the Troubles," asks Callum.

Change: Proto-Celtic *kambos* twisted, crooked.

“Write what you need to write,” says Stephen. “No one will ever read it anyway.”

Etymology: the history of a linguistic form (such as a word) shown by tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into its component parts, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates to a common ancestral form in an ancestral language—

Stephen calls to me—come see the stars. He is right—The stars in the African night sky have not changed. They are beautiful, lights on lights on lights swirling into black, more than I have ever seen, brightness glitters, sparkles on blackness more than I’ve ever known. Stretching back, away, beyond. Becoming. Different. Stars so far away, so very long ago, watching and waiting. Starry fires and flames binding the dark together, drifting apart, and sinking into deep gaps between. Stephen was wrong, he was right, I want to leave, I want to stay. I will leave. I will stay. Whatever I say, say nothing, say something...

whatever you say,

~***~

PART B: PORTFOLIO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Laura Campbell

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INTRODUCTION TO PORTFOLIO

The Masters of Art -Creative Writing (MACW) at Rhodes University comprised two primary tasks. A first was to produce a unique, creative piece of writing termed the “thesis.” The second was to produce this portfolio.

My thesis developed as a draft and then a final.

I titled my draft thesis, “Whatever I Say, Say Nothing.” The title was modified from Seamus Heaney’s poem *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* which is associated with conversations in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and warns people to be careful what they say for words can be dangerous. This draft thesis emerged very reluctantly as a hybrid, fragmentary memoir around growing up during the Troubles, and around being a doctor in South Africa. I say reluctantly because I thought I hated reading memoir and certainly did not intend or want to write one. I rather wanted to write a novel with a subject of euthanasia and theme around trust.

At the start of the MACW my emphasis was on a potential reader. I hoped my writing could unsettle my reader and invite them to consider compassionate, convoluted and incredibly complex, changeable viewpoints around caring for dying people. I wanted the reader to not to fully trust what they thought they believed.

I submitted this draft thesis in August 2019 and received a report from a Reader. This Report enriched my thinking. As a result my draft morphed into a final thesis which thankfully was not a memoir (well, sort of not a memoir) and was about euthanasia (well, sort of about euthanasia).

The second task of the MACW was to produce this “portfolio” which comprises four parts: 1) Review of Writing Journey, 2) Book Review, 3) Report on Teaching in the Community and 4) Narrativity Essay).

In Part 1, Review of Writing Journey, I specifically want to explore the consecutive phases of my emerging thesis. In Part 2, Book Review, I give a brief overview of five books and explore how these books juxtaposed with my Writing Journey. Part 3 describes a Report on teaching creative writing in a community. I describe the process and highlight how I gained confidence around my writing and its purpose. Finally, in Part 4, Narrativity Essay, I expand on my initial theme around trust.

I conclude this portfolio by acknowledging that the underpinning theme turned out to be about me. Then expanded beyond me to...maybe mistrust of language?

PART 1: REVIEW OF WRITING JOURNEY

Introduction

I am Irish so I will begin at the end of it all.

When I finished my draft thesis (August 2019), I realized my writing journey had progressed along three phases which I loosely based on the work of the psychologist Carl Jung. Why Carl Jung? Jung was interested in creativity and felt creativity was essential for holistic well-being. He theorized that creativity arises from a 'union' of conscious and unconscious parts of the self. Within every person, consciousness and unconsciousness parts are continually "dialoguing" with each other to try achieve integration (Jung terms this process *individuation*). He describes the process by which individuation is achieved as, "Transcendent Function." I saw my thesis as a Transcendent Function uniting my conscious and unconscious self towards individuation.

The three phases of my draft thesis were thus a) conscious, b) unconscious and c) creative writing as a Transcendent Function.

When I received my Readers' Report around the draft, I felt my thesis had become hyper-individualized (that is all about me and only me). The Reader encouraged me to expand beyond profound introspection. To do so I added characters, dialogue and a 'plot' to the draft thesis. I therefore 'fictionalized' it so it became not a memoir and perhaps more universal. I termed this phase as a Post-Transcendent Function.

Hence my writing journey was a four phase process.

Now I have reached the end, let me return to the beginning.

At the start of the MACW course, Paul Wessels asked what is driving us as writers. What is guiding us? Flowing through us? He asked that we allow ourselves to be possessed by a question- What is it we want to say?

This will be easy, I thought. I knew the answer. I was driven, guided, possessed to produce a novel (a traditional format with a three-phase plot and character- arcs). A subject and theme were entrenched in my mind: the subject was to euthanasia and the theme was to be about trust.

I wanted to gently unsettle my reader to think, hey, euthanasia, killing people, assisting people to kill themselves, is complicated. I wanted my reader to think Laura has a point: there is no right, there is no wrong; there is the human world of being a doctor caring for patient who is suffering and dying. I wanted to make a muddled ground to show that gaps exist between logic and absurdity, between knowing and not knowing, certainty and uncertainty, between living and dying. To create a liminal space, a place of tenderness where the reader might shift a viewpoint from intolerance, judgment, terror to understanding, compassion and flexibility. To blur the dichotomous discourse between proponents of palliative care and proponents of euthanasia (proponents of palliative care say **no, never** to euthanasia and proponents of euthanasia say, you are not respecting my choice about my living and dying). Above all I wanted my reader to feel what I felt.

At the start of the MACW course I knew exactly what I wanted to write. The question for me was- how can I write what I want to write? I thought the MACW would focus on techniques of writing: voice, plot, characterization, motivation, creating tension and so on. I therefore wanted to write entirely from an intellectual viewpoint, from a cerebral part of my mind. I wanted to write from what I term a “Conscious Phase.”

A “Conscious Phase”

In the conscious phase of my writing I was trying to control my writing and my conscious/ logical/ cerebral mind thought this was possible. This conscious phase of my writing lasted for most of the two-year MACW course and unveiled itself in many ways. For example, an early assignment involved reading the works of Samuel Beckett. I read on a completely clinical level and saw his words as symptoms of a profound, pervasive, untreated clinical depression. I wrote in my Reflective Journal (RJ), it was tragic that modern medications were not available to treat him. Looking back, I realize I was operating at a completely objective conscious level and did not yet have the ability to let his words soak into me and rest there as beautiful concepts without needing medicalization and cure.

As another example of my intellectualization, I choose Nalo Hopkinson to read aloud (*The Glass Bottom Trick*, 2008). I chose this because I understood its theme, its imagery and metaphors. See me I wanted to say to my group. Look at how clever I am. Another member of the group then read aloud Laurie Foos, *The Blue Girl* (2015) which had no intellectual basis, no logical theme or metaphorical meanings.

And, I loved it. It didn't matter whether the story made sense to me or not, what mattered was the beauty of the words and the work touched me somehow on an emotional level. I felt sadness, guilt, sorrow and futility. How did Laurie Foos achieve such emotional connection with me? Was this emotion-evoking an important part of writing?

I began noticing emotions, what people said about them, how they conveyed them, how did I feel? As an example, in the beautiful *Book of Disquiet* Fernando Pessoa was able to convey emotion (2010):

Now, as many times before, I am troubled by my own experiences of my feelings, by my anguish simply to be feeling something, my disquiet at simply being here, my nostalgia for something never known, the setting of the sun on all emotions, this fading light in my external consciousness of myself from grey to yellow sadness.

My emotions were stirred by the beauty of his words. I wanted to read slowly, I did not care what happened or didn't happen. I wanted to stop time and loose the clutter, the clatter, the clanging around me. I wanted to lose my disquiet and submerge into Pessoa's peace.

I googled- how to create emotion through writing- and discovered an Emotional Thesaurus (Acker & Puglisi, 2010):

All successful novels, no matter what genre, have one thing in common: emotion. It lies at the core of every character's decision, action and word, all of which drive the story. Without emotion the characters' personal journeys are pointless, stakes cease to exist. The plot line becomes a dry riverbed of meaningless events that no reader will take the time to read. Because above all else, readers pick up a book to have an emotional experience. They read to connect with a character who provides entertainment and whose trials may add something to their own life journeys.

A way forward for my writing became around evoking an emotional response in my reader. I knew I had to. I didn't know how to.

MACW course facilitators, Nathan and Ronelda, spoke eloquently of the emotional journey they undertook while trying to establish themselves as writers. Paul Mason, commenting on my assignment round Samuel Beckett, suggested "I delve deeper into sorrow."

I then read about the neurophysiology of emotion and discovered "mirror neurons" which are programmed subconsciously to respond to the emotions of another. That is, when I read the work of another writer my own mirror neurons become fired by the writers' emotions. By logical inference, for me to be able to evoke emotions in my reader I had to be able to recognize and put my own emotions on to paper. A further step in my growth as a writer became around me noticing and expressing my own emotions.

For another assignment, I wanted to write about being a child during the Troubles in Belfast. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself at age 8, the physical sensation, recall what I had heard, smelt, and felt. A colleague said this of my work:

It's like this has been written a long time ago and kept as a dark secret, or more likely, something that has been simmering in a pot of memory for a long length of time. As a reader I sense the writer wears these memories of those times like a second skin. But, to my mind the most significant and powerful part of this piece is the voice of the child whose confusion at the real horrors of the Troubles is starkly apparent throughout.

Another colleague said, "we can write with our feelings, we don't always have to write with our heads."

I was writing about myself and was managing to evoke an emotion in my reader, but I grew increasingly concerned- where was my novel on euthanasia?

I tried to claw my way back to writing a novel about euthanasia. I read a list of texts on How-To-Write including Stephen King's *On Writing* (2010). I then focused on reading and read widely from the MACW list.

In an RJ, I wrote:

The people I have allowed in, the voices I read are those that soothe and reassure me that what I believe in is right. But there are voices different to mine that might interest me. I need to be made uncomfortable. Thus far I have sought the familiar. How do I find a way to open my heart to reading, learning, writing to difference?

To my great surprise, I enjoyed reading memoir. Regarding Lidia Yuknavitch *The Chronology of Water* (2011), I wrote:

Her writing has made me wonder and think and read again. I felt she was writing only for me. This raw, rough, rejected person is me. I want to tell my children how misfitted I am. How strange and different and odd and in-between I am.

I read another memoir, Claudine Rankine *Citizen* (2014) and wrote:

I fortuitously found the book *Citizen* by Claudine Rankine. It is mainly about black people being invisible. Her writing really stirred me, and I could put myself (partially) into the lives of subjugated, oppressed, invisible people.

I found (again to my complete surprise) I enjoyed the short stories of Lydia Davis (*Cant and Wont*, 2014) and discovered the genre of Flash Fiction and in particular enjoyed novella-in-flash: *My Very Own End of the Universe*, 2009. Tiff Holland in her novella-in-flash *Betty Superman* wrote about minimizing language and described how she actively removes unnecessary pronouns, resists the allure of adjectives and adverbs. She lets actions, thoughts, dialogue or descriptions stand on their own. The more I read, the more this form of writing appealed to me. I wrote:

In novella-in-flash there are no big stories, there are no big emotions. There are no big revelations. There are people. I want beautiful, unique, minimalistic writing. I want to capture this writing style. I want separate fragments to stand strong and alone.

When not avidly reading, I plodded on trying to write a first chapter of my novel on euthanasia. However, I just could not wedge myself into my protagonist's shoes and my writing was clinical and stifled. In RJs, I described feeling shallow, superficial and detached from my own writing. I felt tentative, wishy-washy, unsure, dithering and stuck in perpetual uncertainty.

I wrote:

I don't know...really...I just keep on writing about euthanasia. I don't want to write now about euthanasia. I'm over it. I'm stuck in it and want to move on to something else...the sound of my own thoughts in my head are boring into me...imagine what it must be like for someone else to read the whining I am putting on to paper.

Commenting on my RJ (Weeks 16-17) Paul Wessels wrote that perhaps I was over intellectualizing my reading/ writing process including over intellectualizing my RJs. I responded to his concerns in a follow up RJ:

His (Paul's) concerns are valid. I write academically and my obsessive ordering of sentences and my pernicky linking of paragraphs will not go away without a struggle. I know I intellectualize. To grow as a writer, I must continually remind myself to shift away from causation and consequences and shift from my continual analyzing for meaning. How can I write next time to be less intellectualized? Who can I allow to cross my borders, to enter my world? How can I move forward with angels and muses to find my great *duende*? I need to trust my contradictions, convolutions and ambiguities. Be real. Be authentic. Don't try to put on a voice that isn't mine. Keep my characters truthful, readers will know if I am lying. Keep it simple, keep it honest. Do I find the writing or does the writing find me?

Through my childhood I had been trained to maintain borders, to keep company with the familiar. To go into another community would be dangerous. I described my writing as, "metaphors of empty landscapes, burnt out fires and dried seeds."

In an RJ I wrote, “Maybe I am not destined to write a novel. Maybe I could stop looking for clues. Maybe I could relearn to reopen my imagination.”

After I wrote this RJ, that night, I had a dream about a young, blond, feisty girl. Her hair was tangled, her clothes old-fashioned. In the dream the girl was the daughter of a highly organized, successful woman. I looked after the young girl and made sure the gate to a busy road was locked. I played with her pushing her up and down on a swing until her mother suddenly shouted at me and I awoke.

When I reflected on the dream, I thought that the young girl was my writing and my writing was once blond and tangled and feisty and it once had someone to protect it. The dream was my unconscious part telling me not to bully my writing and force it to untangle its hair. The feisty young girl was still there. I felt that in the next phase of my writing journey I should write from a more unconscious place of my mind.

An “Unconscious Phase”

In my RJ Weeks 38-39 I wrote:

So, I must trust the writing process. I trust I can't always know exactly where I am going. I will spend hours going in tangents, around in circles and along dead ends. I will write into a vacuum. I will write when there is no inspiration, no task, and no instruction. I trust that I just have to write and rewrite and rewrite. Don't panic. Get out of the molasses, the moroseness and move on...I must trust automatism. I need my brain to be freed up to become creative, inventive and make connections that surprise even me.

I found a quote by Margaret H Freeman (2018):

Writers loose time cycling through models of writing they have previously learned e.g. formulaic writing patterns, while often the solution (writing poetry) is already there waiting for a chance to make it through that left-brain noise and be discovered.

It seemed I had to forget what I knew about writing. I read Tina May Hall, *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* (2010). She wrote of holes appearing in village and things falling into holes: her story did not make sense and that was the point of it.

In my RJ, I wrote:

I felt the passion of Tina May Hall guiding a way through a right-sided, stagnant part of my brain. She writes in a way I enjoy and is unique. The creative, rusted part of my brain has become engaged... To reach into a deeper part of my psyche both the logical and creative parts of my brain must be engaged. It doesn't matter if the reader understands me or not. I am taking a holiday from myself. I don't want to plan this part of my writing holiday. I want to get completely lost.

I wrote a piece as part of an assignment set by Paul Mason, and titled it, *Go on then surprise me*. No one was more surprised than I. The work had no theme, no logic. The meaning was known only to me (around Nazi Germany). I had discarded a potential reader, weeded out a predetermined theme and erased a subject from my writing equation. I decided that my most important reader was me.

In an RJ, I wrote:

I found the assignment liberating because I did not have to think of a character or a plot. Liberating because the work was all the more meaningful because of its absolute weirdness, strangeness.

Soon after completing this assignment and receiving feedback, I woke one morning and quickly wrote three short pieces around hating being a doctor, hating sitting in a white windowless room day after day, hating having people depending on me. I let my shameful emotions and hidden prejudices flow out. I released misery and rage. I wrote a mismatch of words that told of an angry, frustrated doctor hating herself, hating her patients.

Whereas I had hoped to write something soft and gentle, compassionate, tender, I produced “fucks” and “knickers” and “bashing fists into peoples’ faces.” Where did that disgusting callous stuff come from?

In Grahamstown I met with Alan Ziegler¹ who was visiting from America and he said, my platform as a writer could be founded on my experiences as a doctor, my loss of identity in South Africa and the price this cost me. He felt that a theme around, “humanizing a doctor,” would be fresh and authentic.

I tried to humanize myself as a doctor and yet felt my writing to be overly raw and self indulgently emotional. In my RJs I described my work as discordant, potentially grating and random. I didn’t censure a thing and felt ashamed at what I had put down for all to see. To my complete chagrin I was writing a reluctant, fragmented mismatch of a memoir. In an RJ I wrote:

Words are dangerous. My words, my thesis, could potentially damage my family still living in Belfast.

I gathered a morsel of courage and presented the three short pieces at the MACW Contact Week in Grahamstown and was delighted at the response. People said the writing was raw and had energy. Paul Wessels asked what violence do we have to do to ourselves in our writing? I was shocked and delighted when both Paul Mason and Stacy Harding commented that my work was a form of poetry. Me? Poetry?

Paul Mason also suggested my work was about a fractured identity. This resonated with Alan Ziegler’s comment. Me? Fractured? Stacy said that before she felt she was only allowed to see a glimpse into my world through a small window, now she was able to see more into a bigger room. Paul Wessels advised I keep on writing my short stories until they were exhausted. I took his advice and wrote and wrote.

¹ Alan Ziegler is professor of writing and director of pedagogy at Columbia University’s School of the Arts, where he was chair of the Writing Program from 2001 to 2006 and won the Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching. His books include *The Swan Song of Vaudeville*, *The Green Grass of Flatbush*, *So Much to Do*, *The Writing Workshop*, volumes 1 and 2, and *The Writing Workshop Note Book*. Ziegler is at work on *Based on a True Life: A Memoir in Pieces* and lives in New York City with his wife, Erin Langston.

In my RJ, I later wrote:

Looking at fractured identity is painful as it exposes me, warts and all, to the world. I recall times of confusion, loss, death, murder and anger. This phase of my work is overly angst-ridden.

I explained to Paul Mason, my supervisor, that I felt emotionally drained after reading my work aloud. I worried about what other people would think. I worried about my family in Belfast. I worried about lifting the cloak of all that hurt and frightened me. I wrote:

I find myself cast adrift from my history, but this casting adrift was intentional. I left my family. I left Ireland. I left medicine. Now I have unspoken longings. I now want to tell. I wait and nothing happens. I want to write of my worry that I will be left with no one and nothing, lonely and alone. I want softness. I want connection with others.

Despite my wishes about softness and connectivity I found I was writing a harsh, critical memoir, writing what I didn't want to write.

On the morning of the 24th May 2019, I finished my thesis. For a month I sat back and then reread it and slept and woke up in the middle of the night and said, no, no, that's not all there is, that's not fair. In my RJ I wrote:

My voice was oppositional, it was demeaning of people who care unselfishly and dedicate their lives to the good of others. I am authoritarian, harsh, and bossy.

I wrote that I was yearning, empty and invisible. Part of me, an important part, was missing. This brought me to what I term the "Transcendent Function Phase."

A “Transcendent Function Phase”²

Transcendent function is a Jungian term that signifies a dialogue resulting in a union between the conscious and unconscious (individuation). Jung encourages us to delve into our unconscious and ask, what is my unconscious saying to my conscious? This enhances our capacity for creativity.

Through my draft thesis, I recognized my unconscious part to be angry, relentless, ruthless acerbic, judgmental, and my conscious part asked, where is the kindness and tenderness? Differing aspects of my Self seemed to be in conflict. I wrote:

My thesis did not emerge from logic, from conscious for those would have told me to shush, say nothing. Rather words forced themselves from my unconscious, scraped along my keyboard, ground on to my page and dragged out something I could not make sense off. I did not want those words.... What comes out is utter rage and dread... I recall alienation and fear; fear of being so different I feel there is nothing left of who I have been. Writing releases demons so I could explode. I could melt away and no one would notice. I am melting away.... It seems like I am trying to force a quiet, loyal companion (my writing) into places where it does not really want to go. I find myself having to remember why I write. It helps me notice the patterns in my life, the stories I tell myself over and over again.

²The transcendent function is essentially an aspect of the self-regulation of the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche. It typically manifests symbolically and is experienced as a new attitude toward oneself. It forms the raw material for a process not of dissolution but of construction, creativity, in which thesis and antithesis both play their part. In this way it becomes a new content that governs the whole attitude, putting an end to the division and forcing the energy of the opposites into a common channel. The standstill is overcome and life can flow on with renewed power towards new goals. (Sharp Daryl *Jung Lexicon*).

I reread my draft thesis and wrote:

I wrote my thesis over the last two years and thought a recurrent theme was around trust and I honed in on language: words are dangerous. Words make walls, set up binaries, intimidate young children, terrify the deaf and cause wars. I thought my fight was to do with fundamentalism, sectarianism, racism, feminism and positivism. But my theme was not about trust or finding in-between spaces. My theme was about my own self's non-integration. My theme was about my unconscious part forcing its way on to the paper to be heard...Why did my unconscious drag out, kicking and screaming, a fragmented memoir?

I set myself a task of searching out judgments and callousness in my thesis and wrote from a directly opposite point of view. For example, I had written a piece about a daughter requesting a doctor to euthanize her mother. I then wrote another opposing piece in which the doctor wishes to euthanize the dying mother but the daughter refuses. It was the same story with opposing opinions. I forced myself to, "see each situation through an opposite worldview, through the eyes of my enemy." I no longer wanted to bully my reader. I needed to show both aspects of any situation. I needed to show the miseries that binaries cause. I wanted to evoke my own humanity and humility by continually contradicting myself.

I believed that this telling one story and then an opposite point acted to soften the thesis. I hoped it made it seem less obsessed and less angry. I hoped it gave my reader (me) something to mull over, just when you think in one way you are invited to think in another. Creative writing reconciled two differing sides of my Self.

A question arose- could I have done this alone, unsupported, without the MACW. The answer was resoundingly, No. I could not have written my thesis unsupported as I needed to dialogue within myself (conscious and unconscious) and outside myself. It was a Johari Window: I needed others so I could see my Self. The tools for externalization, seeing beyond my inner Self, came from many sources: assignments, reading groups, contact weeks, reflective journaling and reading the works of others. A key component to my growth was feedback from colleagues on the MAWC course and facilitators. Essentially, my draft thesis facilitated an inner and outer dialogue towards individuation, a Transcendent Function.

In a RJ, I wrote:

I could be ashamed at my blemishes, shame, anger, exacting, critical, angst, obvious animus-possession sprawled out and my disgusting dirty linen is laid bare for all to witness. And/ Or I could think, there is courage here. There is growth in these words. There is a changing and striving for individuation. There is an emerging kind and generous voice that tries to see both sides. I want to be more contented, more at peace with myself and with the world...I suppose my ultimate goal was to show that nothing can ever be said in earnest because there is always another point of view. So, Whatever I Say, Say Nothing.

In my draft thesis, I did not end up saying nothing. I ended up saying something. That something perplexed me. Why did I write a reluctant, fragmented mismatched memoir? Maybe, because I had to.

In August 2019, I submitted this draft thesis and received a Reader's Report. The report was positive about my work: *The manuscript is a beautifully lyrical, intuitive meditation on questions of violence, language, death, and empathy. The writer has a talent for poetic description, and a fine eye for detail, pathos, and setting that makes it evocative and moving.*

I was greatly encouraged by this. The Reader suggested that the thesis would be strengthened by, "...more tightening and discipline applied to the images and sentences in the more lyrical and introspective sections." I felt I had placed excessive emphasis on introversion, and on the unconscious and conscious parts of my Self dialoging towards union. I felt the draft thesis was hyper-individualized. The Reader concluded the Report with: "...by fleshing out the powerful, vivid moments of connection, action, and dialogue, the lyrical beauty of the work will be allowed to truly shine."

So, it became about moments of connection, action and dialogue. Connection, action and dialogue would only be possible if my writing moved from a place of deep introspection and connected with others. This brought me to a fourth phase of my writing journey, which I term the Post-Transcendent Function.

A “Post-Transcendent Function Phase”

In this last phase of my writing journey, I needed my writing to take me outside my Self towards connectivity with others: writing as a Post-Transcendent Function.

Jung, while focusing on the growth of the Self also discussed an important part of the psyche which he termed, the collective unconscious. According to his teachings, the collective unconscious is a part of the psyche common to all human beings. It is responsible for a number of shared deep-seated beliefs and instincts, such as spirituality and life and death instincts. The collective unconscious operates through means of ‘archetypes’ such as the innocent child, mother-figures, magicians and sages.

I wanted to add characters to my thesis as archetypes to foster connectivity through collective unconsciousness.

However, it wasn’t that straightforward. I couldn’t do it! I couldn’t keep to the archetype formula. As my characters appeared, I continually subverted their archetypes. For example, the innocent child became manipulating for self-gain. The mother-figure was both caring and uncaring. The magician was not permitted to practice her magic. The sage was biased and bigoted. This ‘subversion’ of archetypes was in keeping with how I see the world.

Introducing characters was useful as it facilitated me to develop a ‘plot’: why is this character acting in this way—why are they frightened? Why is she mute? Why is the mother not answering a daughter’s questions? As a plot unfolded, scenes and dialogue followed on.

In my final thesis, I returned to the beginning—I was doing what I set out to do. I was writing a fiction/ novel (not a memoir). A theme of euthanasia grew as a natural weave between characters and their situations. I also renewed my interest in trust. Who could you trust, who could you not trust? I found myself going deeper into trust and became fixated with the meanings of words. It became obvious that language is untrustworthy and I could and did manipulate words to become whatever I wanted them to become. My final thesis became about the instability of language. I titled my final thesis, ‘Whatever you say,’
A clarion call for what? I am not sure.

Summary

In summary, my writing journey took me deeply inside my own psyche. I operated at a conscious and then unconscious level. Writing a draft thesis acted as a Transcendent Function facilitating my growth towards individuation.

The Reader's Report guided me to move beyond my Self and my introversion and connect more with others—a Post-Transcendent Function. On completing my final thesis, I feel more creative and connected.

My convoluted journey thus took me a full circle. When I began the MACW, I wanted a plot, characters and dialogue. I wanted fiction not memoir. I wanted themes of euthanasia and trust. This is what I got.

However, my convoluted journey carried on beyond the confines of a circle. It took me to places I did not anticipate. It took me deep into the meanings of words and language and gave me a means to show instability. Yet, within instability there is flexibility and opportunity. My thesis has given me a voice to say, euthanasia is not right, euthanasia is not wrong. Nothing is really ever really right or wrong and that is how it could be.

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PART TWO: BOOK REVIEW

Introduction

A second part of this portfolio involves reviewing books and I reviewed five books. I did not want to review these into a vacuum and have attempted to juxtapose my Book Review with my Writing Journey. The books I selected to review are important as I would have not read them outside the MACW, and each gave me a glimpse into who I was.

THE BOOK OF DISQUIET by Fernando Pessoa

About halfway through the MACW I felt I needed a holiday from stressing about creating a novel on euthanasia. I was rushing and obsessed with plot-making and character-creating. I looked at the list of books recommended on the MACW list and discovered *The Book of Disquiet*. Each quietly, non-disquiet word on every page was a vacation, lullaby to hush me away from the busyness and meaning-creating obsession of me. There was no plot, no character arc, no character's motives. And that did not matter.

There was a quiet, sensitive, unassuming man who looked out at the world of the gentle and the still. Through his writing I could see how words made beauty in themselves, clouds had never been as truly beautiful. Autumn had never shed her leaves so sadly. A song, heard by chance on an ordinary street, had never reached so deeply into the common thread that binds me to all. I stood on that street beside Pessoa in Portugal, among the crowd, silenced and awestruck.

Reading this book placed me in a new, soft, meditative place. I started copying out his phrases as treasures filling my notebook and filled yet another notebook.

I knew that it was a book that would improve my writing for as Eckart Tolle says, "*All artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness.*" As W.B. Yeats says, "*We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.*"

The book offered me a quiet space for reading, pausing, imagining, rereading and realizing I did not have to have to rush. I did not need a meaning. I wished, as with all good holidays, it was not yet finished.

THE VOICE by Gabriel Okara

This book helped me realize that poetry can exist in prose. I wondered, if this book were to be rereleased would it become a bestseller? It is one of those strange, striking books you sometimes have the good fortune to find hidden at the back of the bookshelf in the dusty second-hand shop. It is written by an African poet and African poetry it indeed is. It sings, sighs, stamps: “*The drums beat faster still and they danced faster, for their insides had come down to their feet and they were like a rope about to break under a great tension.*”

Okara’s poetic novel seemed to bridge a gap between my mind between prose and poetry. His work asked me questions- what was it like living in Nigeria at that time? It became a shakeup- I never thought of Africa like that before. It became a map for a potential new way of my thinking about writing- there can be poetry in writing about colonization and its aftermath.

An educated, young man returns to the rural village of his youth and in a vein of seeking self-knowledge and scholarship, he wishes to question dictatorship.

The young man is met with bullying, ignorance, suspicion, alienation, threats and banishment. Yet, he finds tender understanding and support in unexpected places.

His unspoken questions, long after the book is finished, still resonate tragically unanswered. The questions are universal and poignantly relevant today.

Yet, the book concludes with hope: there are some who came understood the essence of his questioning and those people in turn will ask and ask the same question until an answer is found. This book gave me poetry.

THE PHYSICS OF IMAGINERY OBJECTS by Tina May Hall

“Even blackholes, so strong they absorb light, seem like figments of our imaginations. And yet, some scientists spend their entire lives studying these far away things they will never be able to touch or taste.”

Tina May Hall’s book transported me to a faraway place I could never be able to touch or taste or fully understand, but understanding did not matter. I felt. I imagined. I entered an inverted blackhole where the time and space of the outside, in the ordinary world, ceased to nothingness.

Inside the black hole I was surrounded by myriads of swirling colourful words, and I fully absorbed the strangeness and reveled in unexpected images.

These were not a series of stories to be read quickly to see what happens next. There is a hole growing in the center of a town and it grows and grows to consume a bakery, so the earth smells of fresh baking. The things that we have lost, forgotten, once loved, are absorbed into that hole. Anyone who tries to sift through it and rationalize it, the reporter and camera man, are swallowed up. A hole is not just a hole, *“a hole is something given to someone you love.”*

Two young daughters wait in a house in a forest, wait for what? A meteorologist controls the weather. Mundane experiences, such as a toothache, are lathered with sorrow and hope.

Sometimes there is a plot to be found; a young orphan is adopted by an elderly couple who live in a graveyard. Sometimes, there is no plot; a girl with a broken heart notices a flower bloom outside her window.

This book transcends a traditional structured narrative and guided me blind, yet trusting, into uniqueness of blackholes.

This book is different, brilliantly different. It gave me courage.

THE CITY AND THE CITY by China Miéville

The City and the City made me ask questions for it is on one level a murder-mystery story. Who committed the crime? Why? The author does not spoon feed us with clues scattered along the pages, he rather leaves spaces wide opened for us to fill with our own imaginations. The story is so much more than a murder-mystery.

There are pearls around language structures and semiotics.

There are gems in the uniqueness of the setting: two geographically separate yet strangely intertwined cities whose citizens are forced to ignore, “unsee” each other. Within these two cities are clear societal boundaries, demarcations and rules. Why? How?

The book got me thinking about oppression and totalitarianism. Before reading it, I disagreed with a notion of totalitarianism as I thought that when we are manipulated, forced to be stuck inside our own worldviews, we cannot see another’s worldview. We are cemented into- I am right and therefore you are or wrong. However, *The City and the City compelled me to ask-*

Would it not be better to be a bit manipulated and controlled? Would it be better to be forced to “unsee” each other if we cannot get along together and insist on maiming and murdering people who are different to us?

Preventing people reaching out of their boxes towards each other became ironically stabilizing. Totalitarianism or not totalitarianism that is a question I never expected to ask when I opened a murder-mystery novel.

THINGS I NEVER TOLD ANYBODY: TEACHING POETRY WRITING TO OLD PEOPLE by Kenneth Koch

Old people: blind, sitting all day in wheelchairs, paralyzed, speechless, unable to hold a pen. Old people in a nursing home: bored, useless, resigned and waiting for death. Old people who were once young people and cleaners, repairmen, housewives, cooks, seamstresses. Old people who had never written anything. Old people able to learn and to write poetry?

Yes, they learnt. Yes, they wrote.

Koch introduces us to the setting and to a background of why he wished to work with the elderly who were confined to a nursing home. He wanted to share a gift of poetry, *“still it is a pleasure to say such things, and such a special kind of pleasure to say them as poetry.”*

He described how he encouraged the fledgling poets and through his words, any fledgling poet (such as myself) can be encouraged and can show vulnerability and grow. He showed ordinary people using ordinary words and showed how to notice and describe and transform the seemingly mundane details of their lives and memories into poetry.

The book gives examples of the rawness of “before” poems and transformed “after” poems. Koch describes how he brought music, the sea, the beach, the moon, the seasons into the nursing home.

The newfound, elderly poets loved the adventure, *“I’d like to write the book of my life. I’ve started it already.”*

Koch encouraged his students to mine for gold in their memories and to sift out their own unique memories. Nuggets of gold were uncovered when he asked them to write about: things I never told anybody, lies, quiet, colours, I, the Ocean, talking to the moon.

What struck me most was the way those who are old, blind, paralysed, forgotten, voiceless, grasped at the chance to tell what they never told anybody. What they told gave them a new zest for living. Now, that is the power of poetry.

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PART THREE: WRITING IN THE COMMUNITY

Introduction

This report provides a summary of a workshop-Flash Memoir- I facilitated as part of Writing in the Community. In this report, I provide logistical details of the workshop, date, participants' details and format including why I selected to read *Betty Superman* by Tiff Holland.³ Then I describe why I selected a piece of my own writing to read, how it was to read aloud, how did respondents react? I want to highlight what I learnt: I learnt that my words affect others in ways I could not predict. I learnt that others gained solace through my writing. I learnt to trust my writing.

³ Holland, T. *Betty Superman in My Very Own End of the Universe*, Rose-Metal Press, 2011.

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Logistics

The Flash Memoir workshop was held in two parts at Simbithi Estate, Ballito, North of Durban. The first part was held on 23rd October 2018 and ran from 1030 to 1230. The second part was held on 27th November from 0900 to 1100 am. Participants were eight people who had previously participated in a Write 2 Right course I co-created and co-facilitated with a theologian/ artist, Bernice Stott. Details of the Write 2 Right course are available on the website write2right.co.za

By October 2018 a total of fifteen people had participated in the Write 2 Right course and in September 2018 I sent an e mail inviting prior participants to attend a Flash Memoir workshop. I explained that the workshop formed part of a MACW at Rhodes University and would involve my reading aloud a sample of my work. I also explained that I would value their feedback on my writing.

Who were the participants?

The participants were self-selected and were 6 females and 2 males and were all white. This could potentially be considered a “problem” as white people represent a minority of communities in South Africa. However, I did not view it as problematic. It is my belief that any writer, at least initially, writes primarily for herself and I am white, I speak English and no other South African language.

Participants’ ages ranged from 51 to 75 and most were aged between 60-70 years. I invited them to describe themselves and they said: dilly, creative, compassionate, artistic, analytical, psychological thinker, friendly, procrastinator, retired academic still writing, mother and widow and aspiring grandmother, retired priest, servant, collaborative learner, teacher, ex-wife, ex-mother, ex -teacher, ex-farmer, new woman, retired school principal, friend and mentor. I also asked them to describe their writing dreams. They replied: non-fiction, inspirational, to extend myself to be creative and experience quality writing, to write for primary schools, to finish what I started, to publish a book that makes a difference, to put my imagination into fine written words, to turn my ‘grief-work’ from years ago when my husband died into a book which is inspiring for others and for myself.

Format of the workshop

I opened the first workshop (Part One on 23rd October 2018) with an introduction to Flash Memoir and we read (each person reading a paragraph) an excerpt from Tiff Holland's work-*Betty Superman*. Tiff Holland (in her introductory essay) describes *Betty Superman* as "partly-true" and reflective of her memory of her mother.

I selected this piece because although it superficially seems free-flowing and disjointed, a story did eventually unfold in an unconventional way. The piece to me showed the power of fragmentation, of sub-text and of creating spaces which the reader could fill in her own details. There appeared to be no "strong" authorial (authoritarian) narrator's voice and facts were presented without explanation or judgement- this is how it is- take it or leave it.

After reading the excerpt from *Betty Superman* and receiving feedback on the piece, I again explained that a purpose the Flash Memoir workshop was for us to grow as writers. I distributed a feedback form pertaining to my own work and explained I wanted feedback to be organic. The form asked simply: what do you see as my strengths as a writer? What is my underlying theme? What are my blind spots? What do I want to contribute, why? What areas do I need to work on? What is a potential way ahead? Any other comments/ insights/ views/ opinions? My co-facilitator in the Write 2 Right course, Bernice Stott, agreed to facilitate the feedback session and make notes on what people said. The feedback was therefore a combination of written and verbal.

I read an excerpt of my writing and worried about participants being shocked at a doctor cursing and not behaving in the way a doctor "should." I worried most about them hating my writing, being embarrassed by it, cringing. It was difficult for me to read as I could not anticipate a response.

After the reading I dedicated 10 minutes for participants to write their thoughts down on the feedback form and then invited everyone to speak if they so wished.

Lessons Learnt

In the weeks leading up to this Flash Memoir workshop I had lost a sense of confidence in my writing. I wondered whether I was being defiant just for the sake of it. I felt that I had a personal vendetta against palliative medicine and this was driving my writing-themes. I felt like a bully trying to force people to see the world as I see it. Why can't I just move on? Do I have to keep going back and back to the same topic of dying?

Through this Flash Memoir workshop I revived a sense of confidence in my writing. Feedback was generally positive and lasted for over an hour. The genre of Flash Memoir (my version of it) seemed to appeal to the participants.

People laughed aloud at sections which surprised and delighted me. It is great to make people laugh.

No one commented that there was no plot, characterization, nor traditional novel structure.

It may be that participants were trying to please me by giving positive feedback however, I did strongly feel that a few participants deeply resonated with what I was trying to convey and my "greatest" lessons around my writing came from three participants. Interestingly two are retired priests and the other is a student of Religious Studies.

The student of Religious Studies has just completed a Masters and her topic was on Buddhism as Therapy. Her feedback made me feel affirmed:

Laura, what is your deepest grief? What is the deepest sadness you could label? What is the thorn in your heart?

I felt your frustration, your sadness. You are making people question our moral values and we all engaged with your questions. The frustration is around you having to deal with societies' attitudes to death. People just don't get it...why can't they just accept death as a part of life? Dying as a part of living? Dying and death for you are social constructs. You question the medical worldview as socially constructed about living and dying.

It is NOT that you are not compassionate about death and those who experience it grieve.

It is more being aghast (that is a strong word, there is a more sensitive word but I can't think of it now) - but it is more like a profound acceptance of death. Why are we surprised by death? Perhaps you see death as so much part of life that we should perhaps be more accepting of death. Maybe death is not the emergency we make it out to be, especially as it is your job as a doctor to prevent the inevitable. You don't have a problem with death Perhaps being in the sun, perhaps being more free to do your passion would bring you more healing than being a doctor.

The other participant who added to my self-learning is a retired priest, aged 71. He said this:

I wish you hadn't given us a list of questions regarding feedback- I wish you'd just ask- how did the writing make you feel? I find that I can't actually answer the questions you set. You left me deeply, oddly moved and in a quiet space. This was interesting as I could imagine the sentences could leave me in a confused state- whereas I was at peace.

The third participant who is also a retired priest, aged 68, said this:

We are not human beings having spiritual experiences but spiritual beings striving to become wholly human. Why are you human? Because you care. You have a story- what about the room with no windows? Thank you for your honesty. Naked and now dealing with death with irony and paradox.

I feel as though you are a kindred spirit. I personally have been moved by your stories- dealing with deafness, the medical vocation, the Troubles (your father's employment and crossing the sectarian lines) and conflict resolution.

In Part Two of the workshop (November 27th 2018) participants read aloud their own work which they had selected to prepare at home. Their pieces were powerful and centered on difficult emotional topics. One lady described falling into a dam at age 5 and having to find her way out of the dark, cold water by grasping on to the dam wall. When she arrived home, her mother laughed. Another lady described her husband telling her that their marriage had finished. She was in New Zealand with her young daughter and had to find a way back to South Africa.

Another participant read of the loss of her African housekeeper and attending her funeral in a deep rural area. A participant told of attending her sister's funeral in a temple. Another participant told of being left homeless in Spain, all possessions destroyed.

There were many tears shed and I felt that this Flash Memoir technique gave people a unique opportunity to "air their voice." Some told for the first time of very sad and harrowing experiences. It was interesting that they all choose to recount painful experiences.

Perhaps they felt that the brevity of the writing technique allowed them a contained space to say what they yearned to say- no more and no less. They may have felt less intimidated when they did not have to find a character, a motive, an arc, a storyline and use a traditional way of telling a story.

I was deeply moved by their willingness to share and felt privileged to be part of this sharing. Participants felt they would like to continue writing and presented other topics for their ongoing writing journey. I don't know if they will ever use these pieces, but I was impressed at their authenticity, their honesty and their courage.

Conclusion

This Flash Memoir workshop grew my confidence in my writing. Their feedback entrenched my belief that I must write primarily for myself. I must trust the process.

I was delighted that participants took an opportunity to write at home and seemed to gain confidence in writing about very personal and emotive topics. I am confident that Flash Memoir is an interesting, fresh and universal way to tell what we want to tell.

PART FOUR: NARRATIVITY ESSAY

Introduction

Words are dangerous.

Through memoir, my words could potentially damage my family still living in Belfast; perhaps the Troubles there have not really ended, and someone will read and react to my words about Catholics/ Protestants, read about Dad, the army... Perhaps my words may upset my family's *status quo* and reveal fragile secrets. I should take responsibility for what I write.

Yet, Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author* says that the writer cannot take responsibility for her writings. His *intentional fallacy*⁴ supposes a futility for the author to take responsibility because meaning-making lies solely with the reader. The author's predictions do not secure meaning nor initiate cause-and-effect, for the author is dead.

I am an author, I not dead and I believe my words are important.

So, let me discuss narrativity and predictability because predictability matters.

In my discussion, I use texts from the Masters of Art (Creative Writing) anthology provided by the facilitator Paul Wessels.

Firstly, I open the discussion with the works of writers who I believe hope that their work will have a specific predicted effect (Predicting). This predicted effect is around increasing awareness of issues such as race, violence, social justice and such a view may be considered modernistic.

Secondly, I discuss writers who view their role not primarily as increasing awareness (although this is important), but rather as initiating imbalance, instability and hence unpredictability; a postmodern concept (Not Predicting).

Finally, I look at when unpredictability becomes predictable and does it matter? (Predicting the Unpredictable)

⁴ Wimsatt, W. K.; Beardsley, M. C. (1946). "[The Intentional Fallacy](#)". *The Sewanee Review*. **54**(3): 468–488.

Predictability

Firstly, in a modernistic vein I review the writer who predicts a reaction her narrative or poetry will have on her reader. Tamiko Beyer⁵ appears to believe that her readers' reactions to her poems are predictable, in that her readers will reconsider ideas around race. She writes, "Poetry exists to name or to at least invoke/evoke-and give access to what is otherwise unnamable/hidden/ silenced/ disappeared...poets must be a place/space to attempt to approach race and racism...It was important to me when I first started writing poetry to create poems that explicitly dealt with my mixed-race experiences. Where and when I can, I attempt to name and dismantle systems of racism and oppression."

Beyer explicitly wants to tell the reader about race and appears predict her reader will interpret her poems as such.

Similarly, Bettina Judd seems to predict that writing around race will increase awareness of race⁶, "I write about race in order to make sense of my place in this thing called race...Finally, as a larger project I write about race because it seems like some of the most responsible work I can do as a U.S. citizen in order to begin to engage in larger discussions in the world."

Does her writing about race predict that others will engage with discussions about race?

Ann Lauterbach⁷ also appears to have an opinion that her writing will have a predictable outcome and discusses the purpose of her art as increasing awareness of social injustices. She recalls her early schooling experiences and explains that Dewey's pragmatic pedagogy instilled a view that art held a specific intent around improving society. She writes, "...cultural products, especially works of art, were viewed as essential and necessary; aesthetic experience was linked to a vocabulary of social accountability, response and change."

Can she predict whether art, culture or writing lead to social change?

⁵ Tamiko B. *A Slanty Kind of Racial(ized) Narrativity*. In *The Racial Imaginary Fence Books*, 2015.

⁶ Judd B. *Writing About Race*. In *The Racial Imaginary Fence Books*, 2015.

⁷ Lauterbach, A. "Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental" from *The Night Sky: Writings on the Narrativity of Experience*: Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA), Inc, 2003.

In an oppositional viewpoint to the above writers, I content that narratives written with a specific intention towards a predictable outcome can perhaps become a form of false consciousness, a way of thinking that entrenches ideas rather than challenging. Shamma, 1991, is concerned that a writer who predicts her works will highlight a political agenda may simply act, “to confirm without necessarily offering a challenge.”⁸ A problem with writing about race or social justice may be that the writing becomes stuck in the very space it seeks to escape. Amina Cain⁹ writes, “This has been my problem with literature that very consciously establishes itself as political above all else and asks everyone to write from that space too: it feels fixed.” Reginald Dwayne Betts¹⁰ asks, “But is the question of writing race simply about reveling in and revealing racial trauma and triumph?”

This brings me to my second point: unpredictability.

Unpredictability

In a postmodern vein, the writer may wish to produce a predicted reaction however they may also consider unpredictability as a useful tool for unsettling their reader. For example, Brian Evenson’s¹¹ focuses on increasing awareness of the social problem of violence, however he also aims to destabilize his reader. He writes, “...and the work that I want to do is work that destabilizes the reader gradually but profoundly in a way that he or she can neither prepare for in advance nor recuperate from afterward.”¹²

His destabilization is itself a form of violence hence the reader through destabilization becomes more aware of violence. I wonder does Evenson become “*The Crazy Party Guy*”¹²? The crazy act may differ from party to party but the crazy guy predictably wants to cause a scene.

⁸ Shamma A. From *Critical Reflections*. Bay Press, 1991.

⁹ Cain A. *Slowness*.

¹⁰ Betts RD. *An Unabridged Version (I Love Rumors About Black Men) In The Racial Imaginary*. Fence Books, 2015. (p. 236)

¹¹ Everson B. *Afterward in Altman’s Tongue: Stories and a Novella*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

¹² Everson B. *The Crazy Party Guy, or, A disruption of Smooth Surfaces*.

Similar to Evenson, in a postmodern thrust, Kathy Acker¹³ sees narrativity as destabilizing and writes, “He or she is maneuvering between order and disorder, between meaning and meaningless, and so is making literature.”

Why would narrativity become concerned with unpredictability? Kathy Acker describes that literature has focused on unpredictability because, “Things we have we have taken for granted in the past, systems of laws, principles, cause and effect relations, well-defined philosophies, that lovely world order- that governing harmoniously by all these principles-we all know is now over.”¹⁴

Camille Roy¹⁴ writes, “Narrative provides context so that the rupturing identity is recognizable...I take it as a given that the well-modulated distance of mainstream fiction is a system that contains and represses social conflict, and that one purpose of experimental work is to break open this system.”

Similarly, Craig Santos Perez¹⁵ deals with disruption. He begins his work by constructing an image of a world of oppression as experienced through limited **access** to geographical spaces, language and a cultural past. He then invites his readers to experience a deconstructed access to his writing. He writes, “I write poems that have multiple points of access and, in turn walls of inaccessibility. Sometimes I translate and sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I footnote/endnote references and sometimes I don’t.”

I understand that narrativity may have to shift away from a position “brow-beating” a reader to think the same way as the writer. A postmodernist view would shift narrativity towards disrupting the social constructs of race, violence, social justice, to become multi-faceted, complex, confusing and wholly unpredictable.

After having presented a view of the writer as either having intention towards predictability or towards unpredictability, I realize I am continuing to think in my own predictable dualisms of either/or. It became interesting to note that writers do not remain predictable and she changes as she continues reading, writing and as time passes. Consider for

¹³ Acker K. *The Killers* from *Biting the Error: Writers explore Narrative*: Eds. Mary Burger, Robert Gluck, Camille Roy, Gail Scott: Coach House Books, 1993.

¹⁴ Camille R: “Experimentalism” from *Biting the Error: Writers explore Narrative*: Eds. Mary Burger, Robert Gluck, Camille R, Scott: G. Coach House Books, 2004.

¹⁵ Santos Perez, C. *From Unincorporated Writer Territories*.

example Ann Lauterbach⁶ who when young believed that art/culture had a predictable intention around alleviating social injustices.

The unexpected death of a sister swayed this prior belief in a, “logic of cause and effect, an assumed relation between subject and object.” She then began to write with an intention to show a gap, a problematic relation between cause and effect and says that, “context and syntax- that is, the structures of linguistic meaning- are as malleable as they are unpredictable.”

In a similar way, Tamiko Beyer⁵ may have begun with an intention to show the reader how it is to be a child of mixed-race. Later in her life she asked, “If language and racism are so intertwined, can we ever write to disrupt racial oppression?”

bell hooks⁸ may have initially intended to be a voice for her oppressed people, however she warns against, “...literature emerging from marginalized groups that is only a chronicle of pain can easily act to keep in place the existing structures of domination.”

To summarize, some writers focus on hegemonic constructs such as race, identity, access, violence and predict, I suppose, that their reader will see what they see. But in doing so, the writer may inadvertently limit their and their readers’ visions. Other writers show us contradictions and raise questions. They predict, I suppose, the reader will become uncomfortable and shaken from a secure prior worldview.

Predicting the Unpredictable

I come to my final point, does unpredictability become predictable and does matter?

I believe that an unwitting paradox of unpredictability has arisen: the reader can predict that they will face the unpredicted. My concern is thus that unpredictability has become passé.

However, another concern is what could happen if there was a complete loss of predictability? Everything becomes so destabilized that everything becomes meaningless. Are some writers like barbarians pulling everything apart so the world ends with a whimpering? Is narrativity like a child ripping apart the wrapping of a present and finding inside only an empty promise? Paradoxically unpredictability in an attempt to find a path out of the tangled wilderness could end up getting us all completely lost in a gap between a promise and a fact.

Yes, predictability can matter.

If I demand that the reader understands what I think they must understand, I may become a bully and be boxed in with what I have dished up as myself. I am tired with the backwash of myself.

I want to feel more and more skeptical about myself. I want to fall of my little ledge. I want to continually question my intentions otherwise (paraphrasing Kathy Acker ¹⁵) my aim becomes just “miserable and reductive.” Without growth and reflection, it becomes my truth which I am trying to force on you. Lara Glenum¹⁶ writes, “Writing has nothing to do with truth. If you want the truth, inquire at your local dictator, who will certainly have a version to sell you.”

I contend that any writer who predicts a readers’ reaction may be trying to exert control. Why? Because attempts at predictability must, by nature, be linked to realism (because we cannot predict that which is not real).

Kathy Acker¹⁵ says this of realism, “Realism doesn’t want to negotiate, open into, even know, chaos or the body or death, because those who practice realism want to limit their readers’ perceptions.”

Another problem of realism is that it essentializes, it predicts that we are all the same; Acker writes, “The central story of realistic fiction: we are born, we are misshaped by biological inheritance, economic forces beyond our control and cultural biases beyond our recognition, and finally we die with our failed dreams on our dry lips.”¹⁵

We are not the same. Camille Roy¹⁷ eloquently writes, “I believe it is possible to have one identity in your thumb and another in your neck.” Similarly, she says that, “We are impossible human beings, ruthlessly evading scrutiny.”

Is there a way out of my trap of my own predictability? Could a potential escape lie, for example in playing? Ann Lautherbach⁶ writes, “Between promise and fact, between new and unapproachable, known and unknown, the experiment is always between, like a hinge... The risk, the peril involved is that you may not make it across the suspension; the experiment may fail, but a willingness to risk failure, to make mistakes, seems essential to turning promises into facts. To risk failure one needs a sense of unfettered play.”

¹⁶ Glenum L. *Language is the Site of Our Collective Infection*.

Kathy Acker¹⁵ also writes about playing, “The desire to play, to make literary structure that play into and in unknown or unknowable realms, those of chance and death and lack of language, is to desire a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then, both in structure and in content, is to desire to live in wonder.”

Glenum²⁴ advises “Get mulish and outlandish. Cling belligerently to your unsightly protuberances and excesses. Take things too far. Shock yourself out of your normative language.”

Maybe I should give up on trying to write with any potential predictability and focus on playing and excesses.

Santos Perez¹⁸ writes, “Stories are not told whole. Stories live and breathe and change with each telling.” In a similar vein, Njabulo Ndebele writes, “The manner in which the story is told reflects its own intentions.” It is only when the writing is finished that it can become a demonstration of its own intentions (paraphrasing Njabulo Ndebele)¹⁷ I am giving myself too much power: it is the story which will do the work despite the writer.

Basil Bunting¹⁸ writes that, “Writing is seeking to make not meaning, but beauty; or if you insist on misusing words, its ‘meaning’ is of another kind, and lies in relating to one another of the lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and challenging, which the hearer feels rather than understands, lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose.”

Narrativity becomes about writing a story, setting a scene. It becomes about writing collectively. About beauty.

And it becomes about getting drunk, “You must get drunk. That is your sole imperative... And sometimes, while on the steps of a palace, or on the green grass beside a marsh, in the morning solitude of your room, you snap out of it, your drunkenness has worn off entirely, then ask the wind, ask an ocean wave, a star, a bird, a clock, every evanescent thing, everything that flies, that groans, that rolls, that sings, that speaks, ask them what time it is, and the wind, the wave, the star, the clock will tell you, it’s time to get drunk.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ndebele N. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006.

¹⁸ Bunting B. *The Writers’ Point of View*. 1977.

¹⁹ Baudelaire C (1821-1867)

I can get gloriously drunk and also perhaps jump into an unknown: “Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer’s task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it. La Gama’s walk into the night becomes a jump into the unknown.”²⁰

“Writing becomes an adventure. The most beautiful human adventure.”⁶

Narrativity becomes, “...an entire experience: all the women loved, all the desires experienced, all the dreams dreamed, all the images received or grasped, all the weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experience. All the possibility.”²¹

Narrativity then becomes something that I can’t foresee. But that comes not to matter. I must write because my writing matters. I must write because I am trying to find out. Meaning is made by being made.²²

Charles Olsen²³ says this about a writer, “the moment he puts himself in the open he can go by no track other than the one the poem underhand declares, for itself...get on with it, keep moving, keep in...”

Narrativity is about jumping into the unknown, an adventure, possibility, the story, the poem is about writing itself. It is about being open, receptive, organic and random and waiting for answers from waves and winds and stars. It is about being drunk and still and creating empty moments so the reader can rest.⁹ It is waiting for the poem to find me.²⁴ It is a field of action.²⁵ It is writing slant.⁴ It is contradiction and delight, an ever-moving finishing line.²⁵

Conclusion

Let me conclude there can be no conclusion.

²⁰ Marechera D. *Beneath Fantasy there is Always Reality: The Writer’s Experience of European Literature/*.

²¹ Césaire A. *Writers and Knowledge*.

²² Berry RM. *Introduction: Writing in the Present In Forms at War FC2 1999-2009*.

²³ Olsen C. *Projective Verse* from <https://www.writterryfoundation.org/articles/> 69406

²⁴ Wan-Li W. From *The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters*. Shambhala, 1996.

²⁵ Williams WC. *The Poem as a Field of Action* In *Selected essays of William Carlos William*. New Directions, 2009.

