

Writing Portfolio

This portfolio is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

by

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Abstract

This portfolio contains the coursework component of this degree, which consisted of weekly writing assignments in a variety of styles and genres. It also contains extracts from the daily journal kept for the duration of the course, which includes earlier versions of the poems in the main collection, and reflections on the process of writing and editing a collection of poetry.

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Part One: Portfolio

7 - 13 February
Reading Research
Teacher: Robert Berold

It's difficult to find fiction in the library, unless you know exactly what you are looking for. They should keep it all together, and sort it alphabetically, rather than using the Dewey system. I'm sure there's a reason for it - it is an academic library I suppose - but it's not designed for browsing. I found a couple of novels by Finaula Dowling, but none of her poetry. Actually I couldn't find any of the poets that I searched for - the new books are still in cataloguing.

Marcus Zusak - The Book Thief

Normally I would avoid books about Nazi Germany - I just find them too depressing - but I really like that this one is narrated by Death. It puts an unusual spin on the whole topic. I find the character of Death really interesting. He (I always think of Death as a He, although it isn't specified in this book) finds himself interested in the life of this girl almost in spite of his better judgement. The opening of the story really drew me in - Death talks about the colours of the three meetings he has with Liesel. The way he describes his experience of the world is almost like a description of synaesthesia - he talks about tasting all the different colours of the sky. It makes sense that Death would experience the world differently to human beings. He also seems to understand human beings even better than they do themselves. This passage about war really struck me:

A SMALL BUT NOTEWORTHY NOTE

I've seen so many young men
over the years who think they're
running at other young men.
They are not.
They're running at me.

The book is full of these little interjections - definitions, notes, descriptions. They're printed in bold, and centered on the page, like poems - some of them sound like poems to me - and it somehow makes the whole story more *there*. Sometimes they're sad, sometimes funny, but they could get lost if they were just part of the main text - this way they stand out. Another one that I really liked was this one:

A DEFINITION NOT FOUND IN THE DICTIONARY

Not-leaving: An act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.

Nothing more to it - just the definition - but it tells you everything you need to know about Liesel's papa.

Manuel Puig - Kiss of the Spiderwoman

I like the dialogue form - there's absolutely no description of the setting or of the speakers, so the reader has to learn everything about them from the dialogue. From the description on Monday I know it's about a gay man and a straight man in a prison cell together, and the back

of the cover describes them as a romantic and a cynic. I opened the book in the middle and they were having sex, so the author would have had to go through a whole lot of character development to get them to that point.

Julio Cortazar - Hopscotch

This one I picked purely because I like the concept. It's like a grown up version of a 'choose your own adventure' book. I'd love to be able to write a book that will make sense if you read in from cover to cover *and* if you read it by skipping around the chapters. That's a serious accomplishment (if it works). It seems like more of a lifetime's work though - not something that could be accomplished in a year. Still, it's a nice idea to play with.

Paul Auster - The Invention of Solitude

I read Auster's City of Glass trilogy in first year, and I loved it, even though I found it disturbing. Perhaps *because* I found it disturbing. The idea of language as the only thing that makes us human, and how a thing loses its identity when it is broken. The opening pages of this book are about the death of his father, and his attempts to gain access to his father's life. The way he describes his father reminds me of the character in the first story of the trilogy, who wanders around the streets picking up broken objects, and moving apparently at random, but when the man following him starts to keep a record of the streets he turns into he realises that the movement is forming a word - but because he didn't start from the beginning he doesn't know what the word is. I can't remember if he ever found out.

* * *

Poetry is easier to find online. There are lots of sites that archive poetry, and you can search by poet or title, and sometimes by theme. I just started by browsing. I've included some poems and excerpts, because just naming names doesn't show much.

I would like to write like Billy Collins. I haven't found one yet that I don't like. These lines in particular from *On Turning Ten* struck me:

...
It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

I've come across a few other poets that I like so far. I've read Pablo Neruda before, but it was a while ago. His work is very complex and I usually prefer simpler poems, but even though it is complex his work is full of simple moments. The one about the death of his dog (*A Dog Has Died*) was sort of heartbreaking - it's so matter of fact, and unsentimental, but it still conveys the sense of loss. I especially liked these lines:

...
Joyful, joyful, joyful,
as only dogs know how to be happy
with only the autonomy
of their shameless spirit.

I also liked this one by Robert Creeley. The rest of his poems (at least the ones I read) seemed unpolished to me, but this one packs a punch:

The Warning

For love - I would
split open your head and put
a candle in
behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us
if we forget
the virtues of an amulet
and quick surprise.

I came across Roy Campbell's *The Zebras* last year, so I wanted to read some more of his work. Most of them were too long and heavy handed, and the rhyme seemed forced and clumsy. But this one was just perfect:

The Theology of Bongwi, the Baboon

This is the wisdom of the Ape
who yelps beneath the Moon -
'Tis God who made me in His shape
He is a Great Baboon.
'Tis He who tilts the moon askew
and fans the forest trees,
the heavens which are broad and blue
provide him his trapeze:
He swings with tail divinely bent
around those azure bars
and munches to his Soul's content
the kernels of the stars;
and when I die, His loving care
will raise me from the sod
to learn the perfect Mischief there,
the Nimbleness of God.

That's just beautiful. Especially 'with tail divinely bent', and 'the Nimbleness of God'. The whole thing flows so easily, and it feels so light, just like a god swinging around between the stars would feel. But it's also hinting at something quite serious underneath the lightness. I suppose it could be taken as a satire - and it was probably meant like that if the rest of Campbell's poems are anything to go by - but I think it's also a lovely description of faith

14 - 20 February
Poetry
Teacher: Robert Berold

The Day the Snow Came (Version 1)

That day we woke to winter white
- a world we three had never known -
and gazed round with a child's delight,
forgetting we were fully grown.

We burst outdoors in scavenged gloves,
and scarves and hats, and brilliant smiles
to scatter birdseed for the doves
along the shadowed garden aisles.

We tossed the snow to see it fall
and gathered handfuls up, to build
a snowman, one just knee-high tall;
another childhood dream fulfilled,

and laughing, watched our footsteps run
in circles through the crackling snow,
and shafts of early morning sun
lay diamonds on the grass below.

The Day the Snow Came (Version 2)

The day the snow came, we awoke, the three of us,
to a world unfamiliar with winter white,
coating the dark green of the ivy in the garden,
lining the ridges of the roof, where the pigeons sat, waiting,
for the world to unfreeze and the seed to be scattered - the seed
that my mother always scatters, though she says
the birds make a mess of the roof. That day
she was not there to protest, and we doubled the usual handfuls,
tripled them - the birds must be hungrier, we felt,
when the cold coalesced from the air into this strangeness
on the ground - the ground that held our childhood
in familiar footsteps, tracing patterns in connect the dots,
there the tree that held our homemade swing, until a storm
claimed its branches, here the sandpit, covered over now
and sheltering spiders, there the rusting jungle gym,
the jagged slide, and here the trampoline, now a perfect circle,
white on white. The snow fell geometrically, a circle here,
triangles in the wheelbarrow frame, straight lines on the roof,
hearts on the leaves of the ivy - and in us too, rediscovering
the shapes of those things, and of each other, and the world,
and of the snowman that we scraped from the ground,
quickly, racing the early morning sun,
that scattered diamonds across the whiteness
to light our faces.

[Untitled]

On the edge of the cliff comes the longing for flight,
to step out into the empty air, to float, to dive,
to follow the curves of the earth, to wheel
from the treetops into the clouds, to breathe in the blueness.

My eye splits light into laddered rings, receding, climbing.
I lose myself in that space, melt, dissolve, disappear.
It sings peace through me, this silence,
it deafens, it breathes, it fills me with dreaming.

I shed words like scales, strip my armour,
lay down my spear. Lie back in the grass
and let it grow through me, fill my lungs with tangles,
bare my ribs to the earth below.

21 - 27 February
Fiction
Teacher: Paul Mason

The Captain's Mother - Story Outline

Jimmy is a Cadet at a military academy on Calliope, in his third year of study there. He's a good student, but he tends to rely too heavily on the rules, which means that he doesn't always do as well as he should in practical exercises, because he's afraid to improvise. One of his teachers, Captain Miles Cameron, a war hero who took early retirement and a teaching post after being injured in the Saturnine border wars, takes an interest in Jimmy. He sees potential in Jimmy, but wants to teach him to think of his feet. He gives him an assignment - to escort the Captain's mother to the academy for a visit - know that she will refuse to come directly, and Jimmy will have to find a way to convince her.

Jimmy, unaware of this, spends his time on board the shuttle to Earth (where Mrs Cameron lives) imagining what she will be like, and picturing the matriarch of a military family. When he arrives he discovers that she is nothing like what he thought she would be, and that she has no intention of returning to Calliope with him. Instead, she intends to visit some of her old friends for a highly illegal poker game. Jimmy, unable to convince her to accompany him, ends up going with her.

Once they reach the place where the game will be played, Jimmy meets a friend of Mrs Cameron's who offers him some advice. If he wants her to come with him to Calliope, he's going to have to make a bet with her, and win it. (BIG GAP HERE STILL - WHAT IS THE BET?) Eventually he decides to go through with it, and wins the bet, so she agrees to return with him.

When they get back to Calliope, Jimmy discovers that the Captain knew all along what would happen, and wanted to see how he would handle it.

Timeline

- Story opens as Jimmy knocks on Mrs Cameron's door - we learn about Jimmy's expectations, meet Mrs Cameron, and learn that she doesn't intend to go to Calliope
- Jimmy and Mrs Cameron get on the train, and she refuses to tell him where they are going
- Flashback to Captain Cameron giving Jimmy the assignment - after Jimmy leaves the Captain has a conversation with someone else about it, and we learn that he doesn't expect his mother to do what Jimmy asks
- Forward to Jimmy and Mrs Cameron arriving at their destination - Jimmy thinks it looks very dubious - and meeting some of her friends - Jimmy learns from their

conversation that they are intending to play a poker game, which is illegal - he worries that he will get thrown out of the academy

- Flashback to Jimmy's first day at the academy - he applied to the military school so that he could get out of the group home where he was living, but he didn't expect to like it - discovers that he does like it, and determines to do everything right
- Forward again to see Jimmy trying again to convince Mrs Cameron to come with him, and giving up in despair. One of her friends advises him to make a bet with her.
- AGAIN - BIG GAP HERE - WHAT IS THE BET?
- Jimmy and Mrs Cameron finally return to Calliope, three weeks late. Jimmy expects to be in big trouble, but instead the Captain congratulates him on succeeding so quickly.

The Captain's Mother - Dialogue/story excerpt

Jimmy readjusted his grip on the suitcase, and hurried to catch up with Mrs Cameron. She was surprisingly fast for an old lady. The parrot turned around on her shoulder to eye Jimmy as he panted up behind her, and gave a screech like badly oiled brakes. "Hurry up, slowcoach!" it shouted.

"Mrs Cameron, ma'am, please will you tell me where we're going?"

"To the station of course, Sonny," she said.

Jimmy heaved a sigh of relief. "Then we are going to Calliope after all?"

"Of course not," she answered, stopping his newfound optimism in its tracks, "we've got to catch a train for the shuttleport."

"But Captain Cameron distinctly told me that I was to escort you directly to Calliope."

"That's as may be, Sonny, but I ain't going to Calliope, so if you plan on escorting me you'll have to escort me where I'm going."

"But Captain Cameron ..."

"Stop fussing, there's a good lad. And do hurry up."

"Hurry up, slowcoach!" shouted the parrot again. Jimmy glared at it.

When they reached the station, Mrs Cameron left the parrot with Jimmy while she went to buy their tickets. It explored the bench outside the waiting room before perching on the suitcase, and attempting to take a bite out of the wooden handle. Jimmy waved his hand at it to get it to stop. It barked at him.

"Here we go, Sonny." Mrs Cameron was back, brandishing two tickets. "Quick now, we're just in time."

She scooped up the parrot, and led the way across the station, away from the newer shuttle dock, to where an old fashioned electric train was pulled up next to the platform.

"Mrs Cameron, please, we really should be taking the shuttle ..."

"Now don't start that again, Sonny," she interrupted him, pulling herself up the single step onto the train. He handed her the suitcase, but then hesitated. Perhaps he should return to Calliope and explain to the Captain what had happened. But then he pictured himself telling the Captain that he had left Mrs Cameron alone on a train headed for who knew where, and shuddered.

"Are you coming?" she asked. "Better make a decision quick. We're moving."

* * *

Jimmy stood at attention just inside the carriage door. The parrot was perched on the luggage rack, eyeing him as if he had mortally offended it. Occasionally it would mutter "tea and biscuits" as him, as if it was his fault that there weren't any.

"Do sit down, Sonny," said Mrs Cameron suddenly, making him jump. "It's a long ride, and you're making my legs ache, standing there like that."

Jimmy sat down stiffly on the seat opposite her. That put him directly underneath the parrot, which didn't help his state of mind at all. The train was gathering speed, and every minute that passed meant that he was getting further and further away from the possibility of completing this assignment. He sighed.

"Please will you tell me where we're going, Mrs Cameron?"

"You'll see when we get there, Sonny," she answered, picking up a newsfold from the seat beside her, "No point in spoiling the surprise."

"Tea and biscuits!" shouted the parrot, and Jimmy wondered if there was anywhere to get some on the train, and then wondered if that would actually shut it up. Then he caught himself. He was *not* about to start fetching and carrying for a damn bird.

The Captain's Mother - Flash Fiction (300 words)

The Captain's mother was not what Jimmy had expected. He had pictured her as tall and commanding, like her son, with the same cold blue eyes that gave authority to his every command. So the little, bent old woman who answered the door wearing a pair of faded pink Wellington boots and a set of curlers in her hair came as something of a surprise.

"Mrs Cameron?"

"That I am, Sonny. What's it to you?"

Jimmy saluted. "Cadet James Hunter, ma'am, at your service. I'm here to escort you to Calliope."

She gave him an odd smile. "Are you now?"

* * *

Jimmy was in big trouble. This was his first real assignment, and he was failing spectacularly. Not only were they on a local train instead of the shuttle returning to Calliope, but he was now wearing an ancient tweed jacket over his academy uniform, which was definitely not allowed, and Mrs Cameron had insisted on bringing her parrot along, which was eyeing Jimmy from the luggage rack as if he had mortally offended it.

"Mrs Cameron, please will you tell me where we are going?"

"Do sit down, Sonny. I'll let you know when we get there."

* * *

"Cadet Hunter."

"Yes Sir."

"You're late."

"Yes Sir."

"Three weeks late, to be precise."

"Yes Sir."

"I'm impressed."

"Yes Si ... Sir?" Jimmy stuttered as his brain caught up with his mouth.

"The last time I sent someone to escort my mother somewhere he showed up six months later and promptly quit his post. Nice work, Cadet."

The Captain gave Jimmy a brief smile, and turned back to his data screen. Jimmy stared at him for a few seconds before recognising the dismissal and turning to leave.

"Oh, and Hunter?"

"Yes Sir?"

"Lose the jacket."

"Yes Sir."

The Captain's Mother [Story still incomplete]

- Megan van der Nest

The Captain's mother was not what Jimmy had expected. Not that he'd ever given it much thought before. In fact, up until the day he had been called out of class at the Academy and handed this assignment, he would have said that Captain Cameron had been born in his thirties, complete with scarred face, gun callouses and all. Jimmy knew the stories as well as anybody, and it was difficult to imagine the hero of the Saturnine border wars having anything so ordinary as a mother. But the hours of enforced idleness aboard the shuttle had given him plenty of time to think about it, and he imagined that she would be tall and commanding, and dark haired, like her son, with the same cold blue eyes that gave added authority to his every command. So the little, bent old woman who answered the door wearing a pair of faded pink Wellington boots and a set of curlers in her white hair came as something of a surprise.

Wondering if he had got the wrong house – there were certainly enough twists and turns in the lanes around the place that it was possible – Jimmy hesitated on the doorstep, mouth open around a half formed greeting.

'Well?' she demanded, in a clear, piping voice. 'What's the matter, sonny? Cat got your tongue?'

'Oh ... I beg your pardon,' said Jimmy, in a rush, 'are you Mrs Cameron?'

'That I am, sonny, but it seems as if you ought to know that, seeing as it's my door you've come knocking at. What is it you want?'

'Er ... Cadet James Hunter, at your service, ma'am. I'm here to escort you to Calliope.'

'Are you now?' she asked, regarding him with an amused look in her eyes – which were blue, he noticed, which was some consolation – and pushing the door open to reveal a cluttered hallway behind her. 'In that case, I suppose you'd better come in.'

At that, she disappeared, leaving Jimmy to remove his cap and follow. The hallway was only dimly lit, and he narrowly avoided tripping over a half-opened umbrella and a walking stick that stood propped against the near wall.

The living room was the busiest room Jimmy had ever seen, even in the image files of Earth that he'd accessed before leaving the Academy. The barracks on Calliope had the typical military Spartan feel, and most of the homes he'd spent time in as a child had taken the standard minimalist approach to décor. Even the home on Ganymede, which had seemed strangely crowded with its brightly coloured floor coverings and the three pictures on the walls of the living room, did not come close to this place. The long couch and two comfortable-looking armchairs were covered in what looked like patchwork quilts, which clashed crazily with the flowered wallpaper and the golden-brown window shades with a red dragon painted on each one. Two walls were almost entirely covered with shelves, and scattered among the books were a myriad of small sculptures, various framed photographs, several candles, something that looked disturbingly like a human skull, and what he was certain were souvenirs from one of the early Lunar colonies. A small glass table in the middle of the room held more books, an old-fashioned model of Earth's solar system and a

teapot painted in a delicate blue-and-white pattern. A flutter of movement drew his eye to the corner nearest the fireplace, where a brightly coloured bird - a parrot, he thought, dimly recalling a picture from an old zoology file - sat on a wooden perch. It eyed him with an eerily intelligent air, and cracked its beak.

'In here, sonny,' called Mrs Cameron, making him jump. Hastily he crossed the room to the door opposite and stepped into what turned out to be the kitchen.

'Sit,' she said, indicating a chair at the wooden table. She set a cup of tea in front of him and sat down opposite him, regarding him with the same look of amusement she had given him at the front door.

'Don't suppose you've got anything other than that to wear, sonny?' she asked abruptly, over the rim of her teacup.

Surprised, Jimmy shook his head. 'No, ma'am.'

She sighed, giving him the impression he had failed a test of some kind, although he couldn't imagine what that would be.

'Well, no matter. We'll get you fixed up with something on the way. Can't have you wandering around looking like that.'

Jimmy glanced down at himself, wondering if he'd somehow managed to put on the wrong uniform, or forget his trousers, or something equally embarrassing. Finding nothing wrong, he looked up again to see her smiling at him.

'Beg your pardon, ma'am, but why would I need something else?' he asked in polite confusion. 'Cadets are required to wear full uniform on board official shuttles. Speaking of which, ma'am, if you don't mind, the next shuttle for Calliope leaves in just a few hours, so we really ought to get going.'

'Whatever for?' she asked, still smiling. 'We're not going to Calliope.'

* * *

Jimmy readjusted his grip on the suitcase, and hurried to catch up with Mrs Cameron. She was surprisingly fast for an old lady. The parrot turned around on her shoulder to eye Jimmy as he panted up behind her, and gave a screech like badly oiled brakes. "Hurry up, slowcoach!" it shouted.

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"Of course not," she answered, stopping his newfound optimism in its tracks, "we've got to catch a train for the shuttleport."

"But Captain Cameron distinctly told me that I was to escort you directly to Calliope."

"That's as may be, Sonny, but I ain't going to Calliope, so if you plan on escorting me you'll have to escort me where I'm going."

"But Captain Cameron ..."

"Stop fussing, there's a good lad. And do hurry up."

"Hurry up, slowcoach!" shouted the parrot again. Jimmy glared at it.

When they reached the station, Mrs Cameron left the parrot with Jimmy while she went to buy their tickets. It explored the bench outside the waiting room before perching on the suitcase, and attempting to take a bite out of the wooden handle. Jimmy waved his hand at it to get it to stop. It barked at him. Retreating, Jimmy shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. He was now wearing an ancient tweed jacket over his academy uniform, which was definitely not allowed, but Mrs Cameron had insisted. It had belonged to her late husband, she said, and it would help him to blend in. He wondered how long it had been since she had left her house, because he was not blending in, at all. Everyone else on the platform was wearing normal sleek, monotone clothing, and his strange attire was getting some curious stares. Or perhaps it was the parrot they were looking at. That didn't make him feel much better.

"Here we go, Sonny." Mrs Cameron was back, brandishing two tickets. "Quick now, we're just in time."

She scooped up the parrot, and led the way across the station, away from the newer shuttle dock, to where an old fashioned electric train was pulled up next to the platform.

"Mrs Cameron, please, we really should be taking the shuttle ..."

"Now don't start that again, Sonny," she interrupted him, pulling herself up the single step onto the train. He handed her the suitcase, but then hesitated. Perhaps he should return to Calliope and explain to the Captain what had happened. But then he pictured himself telling the Captain that he had left Mrs Cameron alone on a train headed for who knew where, and shuddered.

"Are you coming?" she asked. "Better make a decision quick. We're moving."

* * *

Jimmy really, really wished that the Captain's mother was more like he had expected. It hadn't been on his original list, but if he had thought about it he was sure he would have added the ability to *obey* orders as well as giving them. Or at the very least to respect that other people had to obey orders - especially when those orders came from Captain Cameron himself. Then again, Jimmy mused, that was the problem. She had no reason to obey orders given by her son.

And she was not obeying them with a vengeance. Not only were they not aboard the shuttle returning to Calliope, but they were on a train headed for the commercial shuttleport, and all signs indicated that they were not going to stop when they got there. The parrot was currently perched on top of the luggage rack, eyeing Jimmy as he stood to attention just inside the door, looking as if he had mortally offended it. Occasionally, it would mutter, 'tea and biscuits' at him, as if it was his fault that there weren't any.

'Do sit down, Sonny,' said Mrs Cameron suddenly, making him jump. 'It's a long ride, and you're making my legs ache, standing there like that.'

Jimmy sat down stiffly on the seat opposite her. That put him directly underneath the parrot, which didn't help his state of mind at all. He was in big trouble. He first real assignment outside of the Academy, and he was failing spectacularly. When the others found out that he couldn't even manage to escort one old lady onto a shuttle, he would never live it down. But anyone who thought that this assignment should be an easy one had never met Mrs Cameron.

* * *

Jimmy looked up from his work as the door opened. One of the younger students handed a note to his instructor.

'Cadet Hunter.'

Jimmy stood. 'Yes Sir?'

'Captain Cameron wishes to see you.'

Jimmy saluted, and followed the messenger out of the classroom. She gave him a nervous smile before turning to leave. He made his way to the Captain's office, wondering what he was wanted for. He couldn't recall doing anything wrong recently. There had been the incident with the paint in the Officer's Commissary, but he hadn't technically been involved in that. And the thing with the flight simulator was an accident and he had told Marcus not to remove the covers from the ... Jimmy gave himself a mental shake, and knocked on the Captain's door.

* * *

Captain Miles Cameron answered the knock on his door with a curt 'Enter', and turned to look at the Cadet who stood nervously in front of his desk. He could never get over how damn young they always looked. Surely he had not been that young at nineteen? Hunter fidgeted under his gaze, but then caught himself and made an obvious effort to remain still.

'At ease, Cadet.'

The boy adopted the more casual posture, but it didn't seem to help much. Miles stifled a grin. He remembered moments like these, standing in front of an officer and wondering if he was in trouble, and if so, which one of his many exploits had landed him in hot water this time.

'I've been watching you, Hunter,' he said, and watched the consternation grow. He almost drew it out a little longer, but the anxiety on the boy's face suddenly made him feel like he was tormenting a puppy.

'You're doing extremely well in your studies, and you show great promise as a pilot.'

He watched that register on the Cadet's face, and made a mental note that the boy would need to learn to hide his emotions better.

'Thank you, Sir.'

The response was quiet, but Miles noticed the hint of relief in the tone.

'I have an assignment for you,' he said, picking up the folder containing directions, some credits, and a single shuttle ticket. 'My mother has indicated that she would like to visit me. She prefers not to travel alone, so you will collect her from her home on Earth and escort her back here. Any questions?'

The Cadet reached out and took the folder. 'Your mother, Sir?'

'Yes, Cadet. My mother.'

Miles watched the thoughts parade across the boy's face. Hunter opened his mouth, but then shut it again. 'Yes, Sir.'

'Very well. Dismissed.'

As the boy shut the door behind him, another opened off to the side. Miles turned to his XO, who shook her head at him.

'You're sending him to escort your mother here?'

He nodded, suppressing a laugh.

'That's just cruel.'

'He needs tactical experience. He never wins the war games, even though he's got top marks in the theory. The kid's afraid to improvise.'

'Well, he's going to have to learn fast. You do remember what happened the last time your mother asked for an escort?'

Miles laughed outright at that. 'I have higher hopes for this one. He's got talent. All he needs is confidence.'

She grinned. 'And a whole lot of luck, if he's going to survive your mother.'

He grinned back.

** * **

Jimmy stared incredulously at the man guarding the door. If it was a man. It bore a distinct resemblance to a mountain. Although mountains didn't usually wear suits.

Mrs Cameron poked him with her umbrella.

"Go on, lad."

Trying to look unconcerned, and heroically resisting the temptation to shut his eyes as he did it, Jimmy stepped forward and tapped the mountain on the shoulder.

It turned to face him. 'Yes?'

28 February - 6 March
Monologue/Dialogue
Teacher: Anton Krueger

Monologue - Mrs Cameron (The Captain's Mother)

There's not many a mother who can remember the exact day that her son became a man. Miles was just sixteen when it happened, that day when he came home all shell shocked and shaking, and told me they'd hanged her in the square with the rest of them. He was never a child again after that. It just broke his heart, and the next thing I know he's off to the Academy without so much as a by-your-leave, or a 'goodbye Mother'. I gave him a good clip over the ear when he came home for his first vacation, I can tell you. He was properly sorry by that time though, looking all woebegone and telling me he's starving for real cooking, and could he have one of my gooseberry tarts with his tea, but all the time I was seeing that poor girl behind his eyes and I just couldn't scold anymore.

He was always going to be a soldier anyway, Miles was. Right from when he was just knee high to a grasshopper he was running around with his hat on straight as can be, saluting anything that moved. He was going to travel the universe he said, and have big adventures, just like his daddy. He never did remember that it was being a soldier got his daddy killed. I always said to him, 'Miles, my son, if it's travel and adventure you're after, you'd be better off joining a circus.' There was a time when he might have listened to me, if it hadn't been for what happened with those travelling performers, and that poor girl. Such a pretty little thing, only seventeen, and hanged for her part in it all.

Miles watched for her everywhere he went. Spent all his earnings on tickets to see the show, just so he could sit on the end of the front row and watch her twist herself up in those ribbons they hung from the ceiling. Never did see the point of that myself, all that twisting, just to hang there in mid-air in positions no sensible person would ever want to be in. But Miles thought she was just perfect. Sat and watched her every night, with that little smile of his on his face. I knew what it meant. A mother knows these things. He came home happy every night, singing away to himself when he thought I wasn't listening.

That was how he should have got to be a man, in gradual steps, taking a pretty girl out for dinner and a first kiss, not all at once, perched halfway up a tree to watch her led to the gallows in the courthouse grounds. I still wish he hadn't seen that. Because now I know when he thinks of her it isn't of her twisting herself up in her ribbons, all beautiful and sparkling in the lights. He sees her twisting on the rope instead, all the sparkle gone out of her. I see that in his eyes still, all these years later.

Dialogue Assignment – Written with Songeziwe

[Door opens]

Yolanda: Yes?

Jane: Hi. I'm from down the hall. Could you please turn the music?

Yolanda: Say what?

Jane: The music is too loud. Could you turn it down?

Yolanda: What for? It's still early.

Jane: Not that early. I'm trying to go to sleep.

Yolanda: What are you? Retired? It's too early to go to sleep.

Jane: What are you? A teenager? All I asked was for you to turn the music down. It's not that big of a deal.

Yolanda: It is a big deal. I'm sick of people like you, standing there in your robe like somebody's mother, telling me to keep quiet.

Jane: Look, I've had a really rough day. I just want to go to sleep.

Yolanda: Lady, you need to chill out.

Jane: No, what I need to do is go to sleep, which I can't do, because your music is too loud.

Yolanda: Lady, you need to get a life. Go get yourself laid.

[Jane starts crying]

Yolanda: Whoa! Calm down. I didn't mean to make you cry. What's wrong?

Jane: Nothing. Nothing's wrong.

Yolanda: Something's wrong. Tell you what, come inside and have a drink. You'll feel better.

Jane: I don't know. I'm not really in a party mood.

Yolanda: Oh come on.

[Pulls her inside and pours her a drink. Goes over to the stereo and turns down the music.]

Yolanda: Sorry guys, just turning it down a bit.

Jane: *[Takes a drink and looks around the room]* Oh my god, is that weed?

Yolanda: Yes, honey. Do you want some?

Jane: What? Of course not!

Yolanda: What? Are you too good to smoke with us?

Jane: No, no, it's not that. It's just that I don't smoke. Plus it's illegal. What if we get caught?

Yolanda: Who's going to catch us?

Jane: Paul would completely freak out if he saw this.

Yolanda: Who's Paul?

Jane: My boyfriend ... my ex-boyfriend.

Yolanda: Ha! A boyfriend. Now I see what's wrong.

Jane: He left me. He just left me. *[Starts crying again.]*

Yolanda: No, no, honey. Don't cry. Have another drink. So what did he do?

Jane: What does it matter? He's gone.

Yolanda: I bet he cheated. That's what they always do.

Jane: Yes. He just took off and left while I was at work. I keep expecting to come home and trip over his shoes, but they're not there anymore.

Yolanda: Bastard. Well, don't worry about it, honey. Plenty more fish in the sea. Plenty more here in this room.

Jane: *[Looks around the room]* I think I need another drink.

Yolanda: Exactly. Another drink!

[Later. Both are drunk.]

Jane: I'm done with men.

Yolanda: Me too. Men are assholes.

Jane: Poof! Gone with the wind!

Yolanda: Last guy I was with moved in and ate all my food and drank all my booze ...

Jane: Two years of putting up with all his bullshit, and for what?

Yolanda: ... and all the time he was sleeping with some slut from downstairs ...

Jane: Dead. He's dead to me. That's what he is. I should have killed him myself before he left ...

Yolanda: ... Number 2D. Blonde slut with big teeth ...

Jane: ... I should kill all men who cheat on their girlfriends. I could be a superhero. Jane the Avenger!

Yolanda: ... never did understand how he could like those teeth. Made her look like a rabbit ...

Jane: ... Yes! Jane the Avenger! I could get a cape, and a mask ...

Yolanda: ... big rabbit teeth ...

Jane: ... a mask with big rabbit teeth ... wait, what?

Yolanda: What? What are you talking about?

7 - 13 March
Poetry
Teacher: Mzi Mahola

Three Poems

I

This classroom inspires
nothing, the whiteboard
stained with years of lessons,
ceiling panels sagging with mould,
broken desks, and cracked chairs
splintering, all must sit carefully,
and now the floor strewn with glass
from the broken windowpanes,
all must tread carefully, avoid the rocks
that broke them, avoid the anger,
all must speak carefully,

but in the long silence,
white moths camouflage themselves
against the walls, wings edged
in delicate tracings of brown,
and a songoloko curves across the floor
flowing smoothly over shards of glass.

II

The old man in the shop,
his hair whiter than the white
in his houndstooth cap,
takes one hand from the pocket
of his button down jersey,
lays his wooden walking stick
on the counter
and slides a laptop case
from his shoulder.

'I cannot go to the internet,' he says,
unzipping the case, his hands
gnarled and slow with age.
'I need a new virus protection.'

He watches, hands folded,
waits patiently for a solution.
'Ah, here we go,' says the technician,
'your Norton is fine,
but you need Spyware as well.
You can download it
from Microsoft.'

The old man nods, sagely.
'Thank you,' he says,
and with careful movements
takes up the case
and the walking stick again.
'So many tricks these days,' he smiles,
'so many tricks.'

III

All week I have searched
for three poems
watching wherever I go,
like looking for seashells,
pearly white and unbroken
in the sand.

I found one in a classroom in Alice,
and one in a shop on High Street,
and there's one here somewhere tonight,
circling on white wings,
hesitating, drifting
to alight on the page,
tracing its edges
on the whiteness,
floating, in the sound of the raindrops
on the trees outside,
and the frosty red taste
of a summer watermelon,
and the shelf of books,
neatly displayed,
in the cool breeze
after the heat of the day
and my bed, turned down,
and softly waiting.

14 - 20 March
Poetry
Teacher: Brian Walter

Cat's Cradle

Halved and twisted and halved again
into diamond patterns between our fingertips,

my sister and I wove fragile webs
out of twine scavenged and carefully knotted,

the rough string pulled just tight enough
to show the pattern

passing from my hands to hers;
strands of light in the space between us.

Now the space fills with a pattern of days,
opening and closing in the strands of light;

threads of memory in the twisting diamonds,
and the careful dance of hands.

Story for My Grandchildren

Once upon a time
in the long dawn of the Serengeti,
Wildebeest, the humpbacked dancer,
beat out the first steps
of the great journey
that circled the lifeblood of the land.
In that time, the ground thundered
with the dance of the herds,
and the dust gold of the sky
throbbed with their passing;
dark figures in the dusk
stamping out the heartbeat of the world.
That was before the barrier, the road;
the great wound
that cut its concrete course across the land
and stilled the heartbeat;
choked the lifeblood and the dancers
and ended the journey.

21 - 27 March
Poetry
Teacher: Joan Metelerkamp

[Untitled]

A contented silence falls around the fire,
the evening moving in about us.
A nightjar calls in the soft air,
counterpoint to the melody
Alex tinkers from his guitar.

In the dark edges of the firelight,
a praying mantis, just a centimetre long,
picks a careful edge around the fireplace,
its fragile silhouette outlined against the light.
It slows there, as if to enjoy the warmth.

Hubby Bubbly

Sharli goes about the familiar ritual,
preparing the evening's smoke.
First, the selection of tobacco,
tonight a mix of coffee and cherry,
then the careful tearing of the foil,
the neat wrapping, to cover the bowl.
The coal lies ready for lighting,
the pipe uncoiled and waiting.
Now the final touch,
she pulls her long dark braid aside
and removes an earring
to make the tiny holes for the air.
Her preparations complete,
she lights the coal,
its sparks reflected at her ears.

The Tortoise in the Road

I drove over it, in my car,
and caught a glimpse in the rearview mirror,
of it spinning to a halt in the road,
red glistening through a hole in its shell,
the top sliced off like a hardboiled egg.
I should have gone back, to help it,
or to finish it off, but I was afraid
that I would not be able to do either.
I left it stranded, exposed and bloody
in the hot sunshine.

26 March
Project Proposal Freewrite
Teacher: Robert Berold

For my project I intend to write a book of poems. They will be mostly lyric poems, and they will be about my life. There will be themes of memory, and time, and light.

This seems inadequate. You should say more. What is a poem?

A poem is a moment caught in words. A picture. An experience. An understanding.

An understanding? Of what?

Of what it is to be alive. A poem is an understanding of that. And it shares that understanding.

Is that important? The sharing? Is that why you want to put them in a book?

The sharing isn't everything, but it is a joyful thing. The book is just one way to do that. A poem isn't really the same thing at all, when it is stuck in a book.

Stuck in a book? But where else could it be?

Why, flying around in the air of course. A poem flits through a person's thoughts, dancing there, and sometimes they stick, and can be transferred to paper. But is that the poem? The words on the page? Or is the poem in the dancing, the flying, the moment?

What about the lyric? What is a lyric?

A lyric is a song. A poem like a song.

Aren't all poems like songs?

Perhaps they are in the beginning. But not trapped on the page. That's not a song. A song lies in the singing of it. The music of the words as they're spoken, as they form.

Why write them down then?

It's difficult to say. I could say to preserve them, or even to share them. But it's mostly because I must. Once they're stuck, they must come out of my mouth. But because no one will listen, I must be silent, and they must flow out of my hands instead, onto the page.

And why your life? Why should we care?

I'm not saying you should. Except, why should anyone care about the life of another? Why should we look for connections between ourselves and the world? Because living is in those connections. True, it's my living, and not yours, but are we not much the same?

Are we the same? Will I find myself in your pages?

Yes. I think so. And no. I think not. You'll find only me on the pages, and not all of me at that. But the poems won't stay on the page. If they're good poems, they still have some flight in them, despite being pinned to the paper. They'll take flight in your head, and shake things around there. Perhaps they will shake something loose. Then, perhaps, you will find yourself in them.

Shake something loose? Do I want to be shaken? That sounds dangerous to me.

Of course it is dangerous. But of course you want to be shaken. To be shaken is to be alive. To feel yourself extend in the world, and touch what surrounds you.

What is it that surrounds me?

What surrounds you is poetry, if you know how to look for it. Poetry everywhere. Songs, waiting for the singing. It is in the light we see by.

28 March - 3 April
Poetry & Story Summary
Teacher: Paul Wessels

Star

In the dark gardens, we shiver around the coals
of a fire that died before it could warm us,
huddled in blankets wet with dew.

The Milky Way spreads its broad length in a moonless sky,
the four corners of the bright Southern kite
a familiar marker in the brilliance.

I lie back in the grass to see the whole of the world,
edged with frost tipped trees in the clear night,
and breathe in the silver air.

A falling star flares in the darkness,
once, twice, and then it is gone,
a ghost left in my eyelids.

Journey

Singular, lonely, I break away
to begin the long tangent
that will bring an end.

I pass the purple-green halo of a new cluster,
their union sparking tingling
tempting, but I rush by.

A youngling still clinging to an edge of origin
sends a flare of farewell
to speed me on.

At last, weary, I skim the surface of a planet,
dipping into the warmth,
and shed the stone of the void.

How beautiful, to blaze in the darkness,
to leave the long cold of the journey,
and end in a glory of burning.

Philip Jose Farmer - Sail On! Sail On!

This is a story set in an alternate universe. The reader is given the first clue to this in the first line, with the mention of a "realiser", the nature and purpose of which is explained later on, but the first understanding of the setting comes when Friar Sparks mentions the theory of "worlds of parallel time tracks". Each of these parallel worlds is different from the next, together allowing for every possibility to become an actuality in at least one world. Very soon thereafter the reader comes to understand that this story is in fact taking place in one such parallel world, different to our own in several key details. Unlike our own world, in which Queen Isabella of Spain rejected Columbus's initial proposal to reach the Indies by sailing west, Columbus has been granted permission, and this is the story of that expedition. Once that is made clear, other differences are readily apparent, not least of which is the "realiser", the equivalent of a wireless telegraph machine, which of course was only invented in our reality several hundred years after Columbus's voyage. This particular version of the machine works not by radio signals, but through millions of angels - cherubim - who transmit the message through the ether to the machine, which 'realises' their "continuous wingheight" and translates the message. The discussion continues to reveal that the moon - which is red and low on the horizon - interferes with the signal. A sailor offers the suggestion that the interfering signal actually comes from another ship, sent ahead of their own, which has in fact sailed off the edge of the earth, and is following the moon in its orbit. The priest with whom he is conversing dismisses this suggestion as ridiculous. Just like in our own world, Columbus and his companions are certain that the world is round. The priest offers scientific evidence for that, mentioning the ancient Greeks (Aristotle himself argued that the Earth was spherical, which could be seen by the circular shadow that it cast on the moon), and claiming that his own religious order - the Rogerians - had measured its circumference. Unlike in our world however, it transpires that this is incorrect. This world is, in fact, flat, and they have come to the edge of it, and the story ends as the ship topples over the edge.

3 April
Book Report - Frank Herbert's Whipping Star
Teacher: Robert Berold

This is not the book I wanted to read this weekend. I really wanted to read Frank Herbert's Dune, because I've just watched the movie and feel inspired by it. And I have the perfect opportunity, this weekend at the beach with the philosophy department, with nothing to do except lie in the sun and read, and talk, and sleep. Happily, the library catalogue listed Dune as available so, early this morning (Friday) I rush to the library to find it before class. It isn't on the shelves. When I ask the librarian, she says it has been missing for about ten years. You'd think they would have taken it off the catalogue by now. Disappointed, I do back to the shelf, hoping against all reason that it will be there, hidden at the back perhaps, but of course it isn't. Running out of time - class starts in fifteen minutes - I quickly scan the shelf, and take down the only other book by Frank Herbert. If I liked one of his books, I figure, the others ought to be good as well.

On Friday night, at the backpackers, after supper, but before the poker game and the drinking really gets started, I sit down to begin my book, listening with one ear to the conversation around me. The first chapter is interesting enough, but it doesn't wow me. It's been a while since I've read hard science fiction, so it takes me a few pages to get used to the style again. The opening pages are usually full of technical explanations and strange machines, designed to set the reader firmly in the new world. In this case, the explanations are political, describing the establishment of an official Bureau of Sabotage, whose task is to disrupt the processes of government, to prevent it from becoming tyrannical. So far so good - I like the premise - but it hasn't grabbed me yet. The technical specifications seem a little contrived to me - the mention of 'chairdogs' is a bit too much, but such small ... oddities? (cliché is the wrong word) ... are forgivable if the story is a good one. The key technology is the jump door - called an S'eye - which allows instantaneous travel from one place to another. Unfortunately, those using it do not understand its mechanism at all - the technology is a gift from the race of sentients called Calebans. At this point my attention is drawn to the conversation around me, and I put the book down - it's pleasant and mildly interesting, but I'd rather talk with my friends at this point - and join the poker game.

Saturday morning begins early, despite the late night. None of us sleep well in strange surroundings, and sharing a room with three others means that we all wake at roughly the same time. No one is interested in talking much at 8am on a Saturday morning though, so interaction is limited to sleepy nods and quiet directions as to where the breakfast cereal and tea can be found. Some shuffle outside for a morning cigarette, Alex (the most alert in the early mornings), takes out a pile of marking, and I curl up on the couch with my book. It's beginning to get more interesting. The human protagonist, McKie, is attempting to communicate with a Caleban - the last Caleban, in fact, who goes by the bizarre name of Fanny Mae - who is of such a strange nature that humans find it difficult even to perceive her. The description runs as follows:

The Caleban radiated. Its communication registered in the sentient mind as sound, but the ears denied that they had heard anything. It was the same order of effect that Calebans had on the eyes. You felt you were seeing something, but the visual centres refused to agree.

Now this is interesting. How could communication be possible between two such different beings? It is possible, it turns out, but it presents great difficulties. The human and the Caleban do not possess the same points of reference. How could they, when each experiences the world in such different ways? McKie makes the effort however, and gradually he and Fanny Mae begin to understand one another. Fanny Mae, it transpires, has contracted herself as a 'whipping boy' to a human - who likes to see other beings in pain, but who has been punitively conditioned to feel distress at seeing human beings in pain - in exchange for access to knowledge and teachers. While the Caleban does not feel pain at the whippings, each one drains her, and the cumulative effect will eventually lead to 'ultimate discontinuity', her term for death. As if that were not horrific enough, McKie learns that with her death will come the deaths of any sentients that have ever used one of the Caleban S'eye jump doors. And since this includes almost the entire adult population of the universe, if McKie cannot save Fanny Mae, all sentient life will die out. Despite these startling revelations, the action is still progressing slowly by the time everyone is awake enough for conversation, and I willingly set the book aside in favour of a morning on the beach.

It's a perfect day, warm and sunny, and the sea is clear and cold and gentle enough that we spend several hours in the waves before tiring and heading for the sand to bake ourselves dry. A slow walk back to the backpackers and a leisurely lunch leaves us all pleasantly weary, and we scatter about the house and garden. Alex takes up his guitar, Sharli and Julie begin a game of darts, punctuated by shrieks of fear at the wasp who has taken up residence in the dart board, and the others sit quietly talking. I am seized by a sudden need to be horizontal, so I make myself comfortable with my pillow on the couch, and take up my book again. It's pleasant, lying in the cool house, listening to the sounds of my friends around me, knowing that I can relax for as long as I want to. I read slowly, drifting in and out of a pleasant doze, only half aware of the story and the sounds of laughter and conversation around me. I am about to set the book aside completely, and let myself fall asleep, when a single phrase catches my eye. McKie has asked Fanny Mae to transport him to the location of her contract holder, so that he can find a way to get her out of the contract, and so save her life. This goes against the terms of the contract, and so she is deliberating about whether or not she can help him. He is in the midst of explaining all this to a colleague, when she interjects.

"McKie," the Caleban said, "I love you."

"You what?" McKie exploded.

"Love you," the Caleban repeated. "Affinity of one person for another person. Such affinity transcends species.

"I guess so, but ..."

"Since I possess this universal affinity for your person, connectives open, permitting accomplishment of your request."

"You can send me to a place near Abnethe?"

"Affirmative. Accord with desire. Yes."

"Where is this place?" McKie asked.

He found, with a chill wash of air and a sprawling lurch onto dusty ground, that he was addressing his question to a moss-capped rock. For a moment he stared at the rock, regaining his balance. The rock was about a meter tall and contained small veins of yellow-white quartz with flecks of reflective brilliance scattered through them. It stood in an open meadow beneath a distant yellow sun. The sun's position told McKie he'd arrived either at midmorning or mid-afternoon local.

Beyond the rock, the meadow, and a ring of straggly yellow brushes stretched a flat horizon broken by the tall white spires of a city.

"Loves me?" he asked the rock.

That makes me sit up and take notice. Until that point, this was an interesting story about the difficulty of communication - which is the same difficulty, I think, whether it is between two species or between two people - but suddenly we are dealing with love, which doesn't seem like it could be possible between two such different beings. Then I look around me, at my friends, the comfort we all feel around each other, and I realise just how possible it is. There is love here. This is not a new realisation for me. I've known for several years that what I feel for these people is love, but what is new is an understanding of why. Why, especially, do I feel the same love, or at least the same potential for love, for the new members of the group, some of whom I only met yesterday, as I do for those I've known for years? I can't put it into words yet, but I think that this story is leading me towards it. I can't continue reading just yet. I want to savour this moment, of almost understanding, and while I do, I drift off to sleep, still hearing the quiet talk and laughter that surrounds me.

There is a full moon tonight - a super moon. This is the closest that the moon has been to the earth in twenty years, and the weather has conspired to allow us to enjoy it fully. After supper, when the conversation around the fire has died down, and each of us is occupied with our own thoughts, I suggest a walk on the beach. There is no need for torches, the moonlight is bright enough to see by, but it gives the landscape a strange bleached look, as if all the colour had been drained out of it. We aren't alone on the beach - other dark figures are coming down to enjoy the strangeness of the night - but there is so much space that we might as well be. At first we walk in silence, but soon we fall into pairs and threesomes, talking. We talk philosophy, of course, as we always do. The subject matters very little, but each of us enjoys the game of figuring out what the other is saying, looking for a way to come to an understanding. We never reach an answer, but that isn't the point. The point is to understand. And suddenly, I know why I love these people. It is because they are not talking just to hear themselves talking, as so many people do. They are talking to understand, to communicate, to form genuine connections with other people. That is love, I think - genuine communication.

Brimful of my new discovery, I follow the others back along the beach, and home to bed. We all sleep well that night - already the strangeness has worn off, and we are tired. The next morning follows the same pattern, and I settle down again with my book. I'm not too

concerned about what will happen - I have faith that all will turn out well. I'm looking for more passages about love. I want to know the Caleban's reasons. And when I find them, I see that I was right.

"Do you still love me, Fanny Mae?" he asked.

...

"Affinity awareness," the Caleban said. "Love equates with this coherence I possess of you, McKie."

"How do you savour my single-track existence?" McKie asked.

"Intense affinity," the Caleban said. "Product of sincerity of attempts at communication. I-self-Caleban love you-human-person McKie."

4 - 10 April
Black Box Story
Teacher: Silke Heiss

Setting - a school
Time - a moment of truth
Character - an unlikely person
Situation - spying
Theme - kindness

Sara sat behind the curtain of the little alcove where the lights operator sat during shows. It was a good place to be miserable, perched high up in the gallery of the great hall. No one would find her there. If she leaned a little to the right, she could see a single beam of light streaming through a gap in the long curtains that covered the tall windows. Swirling dust gleamed gold in the light, making the sunbeam into a solid shaft of radiance in the dim hall that ended in a bright pool on the floor of pale wood. The hall was quiet, the silence intensified by the hum of hundreds of voices in the corridors and classrooms surrounding it. Her thoughts were quieter up there, as if she were removed from the world. This retreat was not without risk. The long gallery was off limits, the narrow wooden staircase that led to it blocked off by a red cord, and if she was discovered she would be in trouble. Still, discovery was unlikely, and the few moments of peace this place afforded made it worth the risk. Such moments were few and far between these days, now that her secret was out.

It had been a mistake, to tell the truth. She should have known that. Of course, she hadn't meant to tell the whole school, only Jenna, but Jenna had wasted no time in spreading it around. The story was all over the school now. Some of the boys had been decent about it, but the girls had turned on her overnight, and everywhere she went there were whispers and unkind laughter. Conversations stopped when she entered a room, and even the older girls looked askance at her as she passed. If only she had had enough sense to keep her mouth shut. But Jenna had been persistent, and now it was out there and she couldn't take it back. And all the girls were treating her like she had some kind of disease. None of them would undress in front of her in the change rooms anymore.

She pulled her long braid over her shoulder, and twisted it around her fingers. She stroked the ragged ends and fought the stinging behind her nose and eyes. It was at least a hand shorter now. Of course Taryn had claimed it was an accident. The Bunsen burner just happened to be turned up too high, and Sara had been standing too close. And of course Mr Mason had believed Taryn. And Jenna had said, 'Don't worry, Sara. Don't girls like you usually have short hair anyway?' and everyone had laughed.

'She's got to be around here somewhere.'

Sara stiffened in fright, a sudden cold twisting in her stomach. It was Jenna speaking, her voice coming from outside one of the glass doors leading into the back of the hall. They were

looking for her. If they came into the hall they might think to look in the gallery, and then her hiding place would be discovered. She strained to listen to their conversation.

'She can't be in there. It's not allowed.'

'She must be. We've looked everywhere else.'

'We can't look in there. We'll get caught.'

'So let's get her caught instead ... excuse me, Julian.'

'Yes?'

Sara bit her lip. That was the head boy, Julian.

'We're looking for our friend, Sara. She's missing.'

'Sara?' asked another voice. Sara cringed. That was Leigh, one of the prefects. She enjoyed her authority just a bit too much. 'Isn't that the one who ...'

'Why do you say she's missing?' Julian cut in. 'It's break. There's nowhere she's supposed to be.'

'She sneaks off on her own.' That was Jenna again. 'We thought she might be in the hall.'

'She shouldn't be,' said Leigh.

'We could go and fetch her out,' Jenna offered, her voice eager.

'No.' Julian answered firmly. 'You lot get going.'

Sara breathed a sigh of relief, but caught her breath again as the hall door opened, its lower edge grating on the floor. Someone was coming in.

'I'm going to look for her. If she's hiding in here she should get a detention.'

'Oh come on, Leigh. There's no one in here.'

'She could be up on the stage. I'm going to check.'

Footsteps echoed across the floor, heading toward the stage. Sara leaned forward, heart thudding in her ears, and peered cautiously around the curtain. Leigh was climbing the stage steps, but Julian was standing in the middle of the hall, facing the back. The edge of the

sunbeam fell on him, his dark hair gleaming like a halo around his head. Sara sat back quickly, jostling the curtain as she did so. She held her breath, hoping he hadn't seen it.

Leigh's footsteps came back down the stairs. 'She's not up here.'

'I told you,' said Julian. 'Come on, let's go to the tuck shop.'

'Hold on. She could be up in the gallery.'

'Alright, fine. I'll check.'

He moved to the bottom of the stairway, and the first step creaked horribly as he started up. He was going to find her. The whole thing suddenly seemed more terrible than she could bear, and despite herself Sara began to cry, trying desperately to keep quiet so that they would not hear her.

'Is she up there?' called Leigh.

'I don't see her,' he answered. He was up in the gallery.

'Check behind the curtains. This kid is trouble.'

'What's trouble about her?'

'She's the one who ... you know.'

'Oh, that one. Christine told me about her.'

The curtain was moving. Sara tried to stifle her sobs behind her hands. When it opened she blinked in the sudden light, staring at Julian in terror. He looked at her, taking in her tearstained face and shaking shoulders. For a second he hesitated, and then gave her a gentle smile and swung the curtain closed again. 'She's not up here,' he said.

11 - 17 April
Fiction
Teacher: Robert Berold

The Substitute - Flashback Scene

Anna hadn't wanted an open casket. She had always said she didn't want him to see her like that. Stephen had agreed, but the sight of the closed lid was somehow harder to bear. He stood alone at the front of the church, facing away from the other mourners, an immense weariness like a barrier around him.

The coffin was made of a light coloured wood, carved into moulded edges around the base and lid, and polished as smooth as glass. He traced the curve of the side with his fingertips, pausing at a slight roughness near the foot. There was a scratch in the wood at the corner, just above the brass handle; a small curved line of lighter wood, as if someone had pressed a fingernail into the polish. The imperfection made him suddenly, irrationally angry, and he shut his eyes tight against the threat of tears, choking back an urge to scream.

Behind him, the murmur of voices swelled with the entrance of some new arrival. He stiffened, unwilling to turn and face yet more sympathetic words. He focused his eyes on the scuffed floor, running one finger over and over the scratch. Footsteps approached, and he steeled himself for more condolences, but no one spoke. Instead, a pair of hands placed something on the small round table at the head of the coffin. The bringer retreated, leaving him undisturbed, and when he could feel empty space around him once more, he turned his head to examine the gift.

It was a tall vase of folded blue glass, flared at the top, and filled with flowers. They were Anna's favourites, a cluster of pale lilies and those tall blue flowers - what were they called? - surrounded by sprays of those tiny white flowers with the strange name ... baby's breath, Anna had called it. The lilies were the open kind, each petal perfectly curved to a point, forming an even six pointed star, and the translucent filaments of the stamens, each topped with a dark cluster of pollen, floated above the centre. The lilies seemed to glow, paler than the tiny, rose-like flowers of the baby's breath that clung to its dark green stems like clouds of cotton. But what were the blue ones called? He had bought them for Anna before. Why couldn't he remember? They had argued, in fun, about the colour. She said they were purple, but they always looked blue to him. He could never see the subtle differences between the shades like she could. The flowers stood up from the stem like an old fashioned ruff collar, two feathery petals turned down on either side of the centre, each with a vein of yellow at its base. What was the name? He closed his eyes and bowed his head, trying to remember.

Nothing. The name was just there, hovering at the edge of his mind, but he could not capture it. He opened his eyes and jumped back, his stomach jolting in fright. A face gleamed on the lid of the coffin. Heart thudding in his chest and temples, Stephen took a deep breath and stepped closer. The face shifted, and looking up, he saw that it was a reflection of a stained glass window, thrown onto the mirror-like surface of the coffin by the late afternoon sun. The window was set high into the wall on the right, the figure a tall saint in blue robes, hands pressed together in prayer. The face was tranquil, surrounded by a halo of golden glass that merged with a flower design in the arch of the window. Irises ... that was the name. Purple

irises. He turned back to the coffin, and compared the colour of the flowers with the blue robes of the saint. They were purple after all. His lips tugged themselves into a wry smile.

The Substitute - Opening Scene (Original)

Stephen waved to Andrew through the glass door of the classroom. Andrew dismissed his students and beckoned for Stephen to enter. Stephen stood aside to let the students pass him, noting the curious stares his presence drew.

A dark haired boy tripped on the stairs on his way out, and fell, knocking Andrew over in the process, and scattering papers everywhere. He scrambled to his feet, offering stammered apologies, and helped Andrew to his feet. Stephen chuckled, and stepped forward to help him gather his papers. When he had gone, Andrew turned to Stephen.

“It’s good to see you, Stephen,” he said.

“You too,” Stephen replied, “it’s been too long.”

Andrew’s smile faded, replaced with a look of compassion, and he brought his hand up to grip Stephen’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry about Anna,” he said quietly.

Stephen swallowed back the familiar lump of grief and nodded. “She said I should tell you to stay out of trouble.”

The Substitute - Opening Scene (Rewrite)

Stephen paused outside the classroom to watch his friend through the glass door. It appeared that fashions for university professors hadn’t changed much in the eleven years since he had graduated, and Andrew had always been good at blending in. But the shapeless tan jacket did little to disguise his movement, and when he stood to illustrate some point on the immense blackboard behind him Stephen could still see traces of the soldier the man had once been.

Turning back to the class Andrew caught sight of Stephen, and smiled. Dismissing his students, he beckoned for Stephen to enter. Stephen stood aside to let the majority pass him, noting the curious stares his presence drew.

The last to leave, a slim dark-haired boy wearing fingerless gloves and a pin-striped waistcoat over his T-shirt, missed his footing on the stairs and fell, knocking Andrew to the ground and scattering papers in every direction.

“Oh man, Professor ... I’m so sorry ...” he stammered as he scrambled to his feet, face rapidly turning bright red. “I swear, I didn’t mean to ... I’m sorry ...here ...” and he offered a hand to help Andrew to his feet.

“I’m really sorry, Professor ...” he began again.

“It’s fine, Thom,” said Andrew, with an amused smile, “don’t worry about it.”

Still offering rapid apologies Thom began gathering his papers together. Stephen stepped forward to help, and the three of them collected what looked like a set of scientific calculations illustrated with sketches of various odd-looking characters bristling with swords, axes and other assorted weaponry. Mixing thanks with more apologies Thom accepted the papers and left, almost colliding with the doorframe on his way out.

Andrew chuckled, and turned to Stephen, grasping his hand in a firm handshake before pulling him into a brief hug.

“It’s good to see you, Stephen,” he said.

“You too,” Stephen replied, “it’s been too long.”

Andrew’s smile faded, his face softening to sadness, and he brought his hand up to grip Stephen’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry about Anna,” he said quietly.

Stephen swallowed back the familiar lump of grief and nodded. “She said I should tell you to stay out of trouble.”

Andrew gave a half-laugh. “I’m managing that, alright. Unless you count being run over by students.”

“Happens regularly, does it?”

“Only when Thom is around. Kid’s a genius, but he can trip over thin air.”

18 April - 1 May
Poetry
Poetry: Mxolisi Nyezwa

[Untitled]

every night I skirt around the gaping holes
where things used to be

my eyes tug against the emptiness
as I thread a path on fragile sands

each breath a struggle in the scouring winds
the edges draw me in, call for an end

but in the cold dawning, the light catches
on waving grasses, and I move on

[Untitled]

What is it that you would forget?
Or perhaps you have forgot?
Have let the impulse pass you by
and so remembered not?

Why stir the depths of things now lost?
The dread of things gone by?
Let's think instead of pleasant things
like sunshine and the sky.

What is it that you would forget?
What thoughts would you suspend?
Why even ask the question, friend?
It happened. It sucked. The End.

2 - 8 May
Poetry
Teacher: Hazel Crompton

Graveyard

No well-tended graveyard this;
the carven names all but lost
under lichen on fallen headstones.

Memorials writ by those long dead;
even those who mourned are gone
and no one now remembers.

The rustles in the silence are
not ghosts, but grasshoppers
among late summer flowers.

Shell

Hermit-like, I find a home
in loving these people,
who paint the pale walls
with pink traces and joy.
I draw them around me
like a second skin,
stitch a second nature
from pieces of theirs.
In the new shell, I grow
and become someone else,
who is partly who they are
and partly myself,
and partly someone
who I ought to be.

Matches

Matchbox Safety Tip:
DO NOT SET YOURSELF ON FIRE.
Good advice. How rare.

9 - 15 May
Research at NELM
Teacher: Robert Berold

Research Assignment: SA Literary Magazines

Part 1

Reading through so many journals in such a short space of time is confusing, and it's difficult to choose just three. It's easier to pick the overall feeling that appeals to me. I dislike the journals that focus on protest poetry and stories about Apartheid and the struggle. It's not politically correct to say so, but even though I understand that it created a huge wound in the psyche of the country, sometimes it feels like it's not being allowed to heal, mainly because it suits the people in charge to keep reminding everyone about it. As far as I'm concerned, I can't remember a time when things were different to how they are now. And I'm tired of reading about it, and hearing about it. It's exhausting.

In general I prefer the traditional style journals, where the main aim is to showcase writing, rather than political or social issues. Since my writing is usually about personal moments (none of which have political relevance) and fairy tale type themes, it would fit better in the more classical journals.

The journals that interest me the most are Green Dragon, New Coin and Carapace. I also like New Contrast. Usually I don't really like magazines that are a combination of poetry and prose - I prefer either one or the other - but I like the focus on nature poetry in New Contrast. Also, it makes sense that the combination would attract a broader readership. New Coin and Carapace have a nice mix of light and serious pieces, and most of my work would fit in to either of these two.

Green Dragon's mission statement is "a celebration of illusion - the illusion of art - that explores or reveals truth in whatever forms it takes". I like that, even if it is a cliché. They print a lot of mythical type poems, and there's a dark, ominous sort of feeling about some of it. Some of my darker work would work well there.

Part 2

I found two great poems in Carapace, about writing poetry, and the difficulty of writing - the search for words.

Telling Words

Now when my mind goes blank
I recall what a young woman said;
'Think around it.' And she drew a circle

in the air between us.

Alzheimers?

No ... no. Now I remember!

I've faced this before.

To write poems we also wordlessly sieve
through words and hope to discover
ones that will tell us what we are saying.

And it must be what young children feel
before they have words to play with.
(Is that why they so often scream?)

- Ruth Keech

The last two stanzas are amazing, especially the last line. There's something really dark about that idea that I like.

Ignoring the poem, Ruth Keech seems like a bit of pompous ass. This is why I don't like reading about the poet, instead of just reading the poetry. She's written a book called Better Marriage, Better Life, which based on the reviews, is a book of tips for the perfect marriage, because hers is apparently perfect. There's something really obnoxious about books like that. Self-help books are annoying. And I actually didn't like the rest of her poetry. The one above is great, but the rest don't appeal to me.

The other one I found is about the same difficulty. It talks about the contrast between the time when the words come really easily, and everything is beautiful and just waiting to be turned into poems, and the times when it's really hard work to find the right words, and when you do find them, they're not easy or clear or beautiful, but somehow still true.

The Ringing of Breakable Things

Today you can run your finger around the rim of the sky
and it will sing clearly for you in glassy blue. The trees
will harass your eyeline: they are cocky with inner sprouting
and pose athletically like cats. All is well. Your iris is awake
in the sun, your pupil plumbs the precision of things
with telescopic panache, and your lens curves perfectly
parallel to the blue curve of earth. Yet there's too much
ringing in things. Tonight you'll dream

of the dam where water is narrow, banks steep
and ringed like wood, scoured with the dispossessions

of drought, each scar a notch of loss, a brown tide
of sinking. Yet crocodiles have crossed land for this place,
laboriously, at night (when at times of disgrace, darkness
must do for a river). You don't see them. You assume
they have withdrawn into themselves, recouping
in the depths. The waiting of water is unbearable.

- Carola Luther

There's not much information on Carola Luther, except that she grew up in South Africa and now lives in England. I can see that in her poetry, and it makes me wonder if she's happy in England. There's a deep sense of longing in her poems - and the images that have the most power are the ones that are of South Africa. Or perhaps that's because they're images I am familiar with.

"... the idea of river survived even through the longest years
of drought, because sound was there to imagine a river in, pouring down
from the trees like floods from mountains and filling the space ..."

- Carola Luther, *Collision*

... it's cool as a bubble of shade down there
and the deep green smell of the oil and the river-pump's mutter
make of the shade a place of dreaming.

- Carola Luther, *Waiting for Rain*

... finally give in
to that other compass of longing:

the south, the south, the south.

- Carola Luther, *Compass*

29 May
Book Report - Books on Writing
Teacher: Paul Wessels

I was pressed for time in the library, so I only glanced at the first page of each book before deciding which to take. The first page of one described a conversation on writing between two poets, one of whom complained, 'I cannot find a worm to ride.' That was enough to make it a keeper. Unfortunately, I didn't read any further, and now I can't find the book, although I was sure I added it to the pile to take home. That was a week ago, and despite everything else I have read in the interim, that phrase has stuck with me. It might be because I associate it with the story of *Dune*, in which a swift, but dangerous, means of travel involves summoning and hitching a ride on the back of a giant sandworm. I am willing to bet that the author of the book on poetry did *not* have that story in mind as a metaphor for the writing of poetry, but it is a perfect one nonetheless. The summoning is not always successful, and once you are on for the ride, there is no guarantee that you will end up where you wanted, or expected, to go.

It's difficult to pin down one particular book or essay that has been particularly inspiring. Most of those that I have read are variations on the same themes, so what stands out is usually a phrase that catches my eye, like the worm one. *Nine Gates*, by Jane Hirshfield, has a really interesting essay on the philosophy behind Japanese poetry, called *The Myriad Leaves of Words*. She quotes a Japanese poet, Tsurayaki, writing in 905AD, "a nightingale singing among the blossoms, the voice of a pond-dwelling frog - listening to these, what living being would not respond with his own poem?"¹ I like the implication that poetry exists in instances like that, and all the poet does is respond. Hirshfield talks about the Buddhist belief that life is comprised solely of brief instances. Japanese poetry is a response to that transience, focusing our attention on small moments and renewing their intensity. I'd like to write like that.

Another passage that struck me as true was this one:

In each of these poems, nature simply is. The horses grazing on wildflowers are horses grazing on wildflowers, the murmur of water is murmuring water - their meaning is their own existence, nothing more. Yet within them lies also the irresistible seduction of Being itself.²

This is not a new idea, but it's a beautiful expression of it. It reminds me of another quote - "a poem should not mean, but be" - or something along those lines. I don't know who wrote it. The same sentiment pops up again and again. I read an essay by Robert Frost, who writes, "[a poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom."³ They're all saying the same thing. A poem is only really about itself. It just is. But underneath it, there's something deeper, that can only be felt, and not explained.

¹ Hirshfield, 84

² Hirshfield, 130

³ Frost, *Perspectives on Poetry*, 350

In terms of my own writing, the best book I've read so far is Old Faithful, a book of writing exercises used by various writers. I've used a few of the prompts already this year. Most of the poetry exercises focus on concrete things, like using a particular sense, or writing from a painting or music. It's really just a guide to noticing the kinds of things that make up a poem. Of course, that can be just about anything, so there's more to it than that.

Another book that I found really useful was Kenneth Koch's Making Your Own Days. He talks about the language of poetry - the differences from prose that make up the music. It's nothing new, but I like the way he talks about it. One thing that struck me was about how poets use the work of other poets as a base, and then create something different from that. So the language of poetry is always changing and building on itself, because if the earlier work wasn't there then there wouldn't be the same possibilities for change. So every poet has to assimilate everything that is already there, and then use it in a new way. That's quite a tall order, but it makes sense.

The more technical books also all talk about the same sorts of things. The only differences are in the ways that they approach different aspects, like rhyme and form. I read a few chapters of Marjorie Boulton's The Anatomy of Poetry. Normally technical discussions about iambs and feet put me to sleep, but she writes in a lively enough way that I could actually follow. It was good to have a refresher on all that sort of thing, since I haven't paid any attention to the technical aspects of poetry since high school. It's good to have the knowledge lurking in the background.

References

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Koch, K. *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Part Two: Reflective Journal

[extracts]

Thursday 10 February

I had my first meeting with Laurence today, and he gave me some guidelines for the journal. It pretty much has to include everything about this year - notes about seminars, notes on what I read and what I don't and why, ideas for the long writing project, bits of writing and reflection on the writing process. That's a lot, and my first instinct is to separate them out into different documents, but he says I shouldn't do that - I should keep it all together so that there's a complete picture of the writing process. Something to keep future literary scholars occupied. *grin*

If I'm going to write a book of poems - and I'll stick with that plan for now - I need to think about how to structure it, or about themes. So far there are several themes that have emerged in my poetry: trees, sunlight, time, childhood memories, and a sort of spiritual/questioning strand. There ought to be a way to weave those together into a book.

Friday 11 February

Today was sort of painful. I don't think my reading research was what it was supposed to be. Robert says he's worried. I'm not entirely sure why. I suppose I could have put in all the books that I want to read, but he made such a big deal out of how the books have to be serious enough. He keeps contradicting himself, saying that we should read what inspires us. But what inspires me doesn't seem to count as serious. I think I'm just going to start on the pile waiting on my bookshelf.

Paul says that it's obvious that I bring a "formidable intellect" to bear on what I'm reading - that it's obvious I read on a meta-level. I take that as a compliment, but I don't think it was meant as one. I've spent the last three years training myself to pick up on the nuances and implications of what I read. It's a hard habit to break.

Monday 14 February

We went out to Robert's farm today, and had our seminar there. We mostly did free writing exercises, which I'm not very good at. I can't seem to stop myself from editing as I write. I wish that I hadn't done that, because the second piece that I wrote is quite beautiful, but there was more to it that I censored, because there was this sudden shift in emotion and I didn't like it at the time. I should have just gone with it. I did eventually put some of it in, but there's a lot that got left out, and I think it could have been really good. I'll have to practise free writing.

The prompt for the second one was the new ITCH theme, which is just three parallel lines: III
It reminded me of my reading spot by the river in the Drakensberg. I like where this one
went.

*There is a place, at a bend in a river, where two dead trees rise, bleached bone-white against
the sky. On the hillside opposite, two more stand, a doorway in empty space, just a step into
the blue. At midday, the light catches lens sparks and circles, and the three points connect.
My own personal Bermuda triangle. If I could step out into the air, I could walk right through
into a new dimension. In the high places, I understand the longing for flight. To float, and
dive, and follow the curves of the earth, and wheel from the treetops into the clouds, and
breathe in the blueness, and be awake. My eye splits the light into laddered rings, receding,
climbing. I could dream myself into that space, and melt, dissolve, disappear. It sings peace
through me, this silence. It deafens, it breathes, it fills me with dreaming. I lose myself in
learning this. I shed words like scales, strip my armour, leave behind the dragon spear. Lie
back in the grass and let it grow through me, fill my lungs with tangles, bare my ribs to the
earth below. Sleep myself quiet.*

The last freewrite wasn't worth much. We went swimming in the afternoon in the dam on the
farm, which was amazing. The water was warm on the surface, but cold underneath, like it
was in two layers. But the sun was very hot, and I had a splitting headache by the time we got
to the last writing exercise. The first paragraph is the only one that's worth anything.

*This circle is beginning to feel whole, out here on the grass, each with our notebook and cup
of tea. The quiet shade of the afternoon is broken when the baboons begin their calls,
startling the dogs into a barking match. I'm beginning to feel at home with these people - the
words in the air bringing us together. Robert is watching me, sitting with my pen paused. I'm
a problem for him, I think, because I can't do what he wants of me. But I'm not sure what that
is.*

I do sort of feel like the problem child in the class. I'm having trouble getting rid of the habit
of academic writing. It's so ingrained in me now. Robert gives me the impression that he
doesn't know what to do with me. I hate that. It makes me feel like maybe I shouldn't be here.
I'm stuck somewhere in the middle. In the Philosophy department I was a problem because
my writing wasn't academic enough. Here it's too academic. But it's early days yet. I just have
to keep trying.

Wednesday 16 February

I've been looking through the books of poetry that Robert gave me. There are some amazing
ones. I especially like Louise Gluck's poetry. She tells these sad little stories about her
childhood, and the understanding that she had as a child. Sharon Olds does the same sort of
thing. They both use a really plain prose style of poetry - quite long lines and no rhyme
scheme at all. I like that - it makes what they're writing about more powerful, because they
just state it, without dressing it up at all.

* * *

The day the snow came, we awoke, the three of us,
to a world unfamiliar with winter white, coating
the dark green of the ivy in the garden, lining the ridges
of the roof, where the pigeons sat, waiting for the world
to unfreeze, and the seed to be scattered - the seed
that my mother always scatters, though she says she shouldn't
because the birds make a mess of the roof. That day
she was not there to protest, and we doubled the usual handfuls,
tripled them - the birds must be hungrier we felt, on a day
when the cold coalesced from the air into this foreign beauty
on the ground - the ground that held our childhood
in familiar footsteps, tracing patterns in connect the dots, there
the tree that held our homemade swing, until the storm
claimed its branches, here the sandpit, covered over now
and sheltering spiders, there the rusting jungle gym, the
jagged slide, and here the trampoline, a perfect circle,
white on white - the snow fell geometrically, a circle here,
triangles in the wheelbarrow frame, straight lines in the roof,
hearts on the leaves of the ivy - hearts in us too, rediscovering
the shapes of those things, and of each other and the world
and of the snowman - the snowman that we built once
long ago, when the snow fell far away, and we drove
all day to reach it, stopping in the first field to play,
and scrape, and build one small misshapen figure that
was all we could have wanted, that and the chance
to make snow angels, in the snow that was much colder
than it should have been, and wetter too, soaking through
our shoes and gloves, until we shivered with the joy of it -
the joy, which came again that day, as we scraped another
figure from the ground, quickly, racing the early morning sun,
that scattered diamonds across the whiteness, and lit our faces
to match our smiles.

Thursday 17 February

I had a meeting with Robert today. He was pleased that I've found a poet that I like, and he recommended a few others. We talked about the manuscript I submitted to Aerial publishing. He said that the reason it wasn't selected was because there was too much range in quality - that there were a few that were superb, but that the others weren't that great. Which is a fair enough assessment, I think. He suggested that what I need to do is figure out the process that went into the really good ones, and then try to duplicate that.

We also talked about my habit of memorising my poems, and other people's. Robert says it's unusual to find a white person who does that. I hadn't really thought about it. It's just something I've always done. He seems to think it says something interesting about me as a writer - that I engage with my work on such a visceral level. I'm not sure what it says, but I'm curious to find out.

Friday 18 February

Today was good. I think the feedback session went well. Turning the snow poem into free verse worked really well. It still needs a lot of adjusting, but there's much more depth to it now. Robert suggested that I take out the flashback scene, but keep some of the images. That makes sense. I wasn't too sure about adding it in at all. Maybe I could write a sequence of poems - turn the flashback into another one.

We talked about run-on lines - I need to learn more about the technicalities of using them. The idea is to make it so that the lines can be read both ways and still make sense. I also want to read up on blank verse - that could be interesting to try, although it might be a bit too restrictive.

Monday 21 February

The seminar was very slow today. Paul insisted on reading the notes he gave us out loud, which was excruciatingly boring. I didn't want to say anything, but really - we're all adults, and we all had a chance to read the material before class (in fact, surely the point of reading something before class is so that you don't have to read it in class?) Also, the points he was focusing on seemed so obvious that it almost wasn't worth mentioning them. For example, that changing the point of view will change the way that a story is told. Duh. Everyone kept getting off track too. When we read Paul's Lolita-style piece, everyone got hung up on the moral issue, instead of focusing on the writing. Very frustrating.

The exercise was great though. I wish we could have done more of that, instead of the reading. He gave us three poems, and then asked us to do a free write on one of them, changing the point of view. I picked *A Dream of Hanging* by Patricia Beer.

He rang me up
In a dream,
My brother did.
He had been hanged
That morning,
Innocent,
And I had slept
Through the striking
Of the clock
While it had taken place,

Eight,
Just about time enough
For it to happen.
He spoke to me
On the telephone
That afternoon
To reassure me,
My dear brother
Who had killed nobody,
And I asked him,
Long distance,
What it had felt like
To be hanged.
'Oh, don't worry, lovey,' he said,
'When your time comes.
It tickled rather.'

I wrote from the point of view of the brother:

I was hanged this morning
And I was alone
The crowd empty
Of familiar faces
When I scanned it
On the eternal walk
Up that too-short flight of stairs.
She wasn't there, my sister
And I was glad
Not wanted her to see
The moment
When the rope jerked
And my eyes closed.
I pictured her
Watching the clock
Counting down
The minutes
In silent grief.
I was glad
She was not there,
But I missed her
And I have things to say
Like, 'I am innocent.
You believe me, right?'
So I'll call her later

Just to check,
And to tell her
It was not so bad,
The hanging,
More like a dance
That I'd never learned before
A quick step
In empty space
A reaching for the ground
That was too far away
And then the moment
When I stood on air.

Thursday 24 February

I read Island of the Blue Dolphins, by Scott O'Dell, today. It's a very simple story, but there's something about the way that it's told. It's the story of the lost woman of San Nicolas - she spent eighteen years alone on an island after her people were evacuated, and when she was finally rescued, there was no one left who understood her language. She only lived for six weeks after that, so there was never time for them to translate it. It must have been almost terrifyingly lonely, but she obviously found ways to cope. He imagines her making friends with a wild dog, and various other animals, and so even though the whole story is effectively about a single human character, which means there's no dialogue at all, except in the opening chapter, you almost don't notice it. He goes into great detail about the tasks that she has to complete - things like building a house, and making weapons to hunt with, all of which she would have had to figure out on her own, because she was only twelve when her people left. The details are interesting, but it's more what they say about her situation that gets to me. I imagine she would have had to focus so closely on the details of what she was doing as a way to keep from thinking about how alone she was, as well as to figure out how to do them in the first place. The sense of time passing is very strange - in the last chapter she describes how she kept a record of the time she was alone, and at first she marked the months, and then the seasons, and then finally only the passing of the years, and eventually she even stopped doing that. It does the same thing in the book - at first you have a sense of the days being very long, and the nights even longer, but over the course of the book it shifts so that you only have a sense of the seasons passing, and the final chapter covers several years. It's quite a feat to cover eighteen years in a one short book, but you almost don't notice it, until at the end, when she is finally about to leave, she makes a comment about how she was no longer a girl, and it sort of hits home.

Friday 25 February

Today went surprisingly well. Robert said I was the only one who actually wrote a proper flash fiction - the others were more a synopsis of the story. It felt good to know that I actually got something right. There are plenty of kinks to be ironed out still, but I really want to go

ahead and turn this into a proper story now. There needs to be a lot more character development - I need to give more clues to the relationship between the Captain and his mother - I picture them as having a sort of good-natured competition going all the time, trying to outwit each other. I also need to integrate the science fiction element more into the story - perhaps change the parrot into some kind of strange creature? And I need to show why the jacket is an issue for Jimmy if I want to end the story like that. I think it's mostly that it makes him uncomfortable to be out of uniform, but I have an image in my mind of the previous escort showing up six months late barefoot, and wearing a really strange assortment of clothes, looking like he's really had a rough time of it. Turns out that the bet doesn't need to be such a big issue - all I need is for her to run out of money, and Jimmy to make a bargain with her when he steps in to help. I'd still like to make it something more interesting, but I'll work on that.

Monday 28 February

We're working on characters this week. Anton brought in a whole lot of random notes that people have found and turned into a website, and we had to imagine the person who wrote them. I picked a note about someone stealing laundry, and I think I did ok on the free writing exercise, but I don't like the character I created. She's a very unpleasant person. That's alright. You need unpleasant characters in a story too, but I don't like writing about them all the same.

One useful thing Anton showed us today - something called Jahari's Window - or something like that anyway. It's a way of working out how to present information about characters in a story.

	What others know about me	What others don't know about me
What I know about myself	Publically available facts - physical appearance, personality etc.	Secrets, some aspects of personal history etc. Can be revealed in the course of the story.
What I don't know about myself	Dramatic Irony comes in here - when the character is unaware of, or is mistaken about, how other people perceive them	? Could be revealed as part of the story

I could see it being really helpful to fill in one of these for each of the characters in a story. For our assignment this week we have to write a monologue, either using the character we created today or another one. I'm going to use Jimmy for mine. I want to work on his backstory, so I think I'll do something about him being about to leave for the academy, or deciding whether or not he should go.

We also have to write a dialogue, using the character from today, and working in pairs. I'm working with Songeziwe. We were in different groups today, so I don't know what his character was. We're meeting on Wednesday to write it. It's supposed to be some sort of conflict situation between the two characters.

Robert and I met afterwards and went through the two poems I've written so far. He suggested a lot of changes. Some of them are good, but I don't agree with a lot of what he says. He's an interesting person. He can be really insightful and has these really great ideas, but every so often when you're talking to him you hit a brick wall - he just has certain prejudices.

Thursday 3 March

Today went better than expected, although Ruth and Oliver's dialogue was way better than ours. Oliver was hysterically funny - his character was a suspicious old lady, and he played her so well. Ours was pretty lame in comparison, but Robert and Anton seemed to think it has some potential.

I ran into Harry Owen today. He's busy organising a poetry reading as part of the international Save the Serengeti protest. Apparently they're planning to build a massive highway across the northern Serengeti, right across the migration paths. I want to try and write something to read, but if I can't I'll have to find something good.

Saturday 5 March

I had a really weird dream last night. Writing poems about dreams doesn't seem to work very well, but it's worth a try. I scribbled a few notes when I woke up.

I dreamed that the end of the world
came in an explosion of rainbows
and we painted the light
onto the walls with our fingertips
and the children's skin bubbled
while they laughed
and their parents screamed

* * *

We're supposed to write a book report over the next two weeks as well. Robert says that it should be a response to reading the book, rather than a synopsis or a review. He says we should 'engage with the whole process of reading'. The problem is that the last time I did that - for the reading research report - he said that I was being too analytic, and focusing too much on the philosophical implications of what I was reading. But that's what the reading experience is like for me. That's what I get out of it. So I don't see how I can write a book

report about the process of engaging with a book without talking about all the connections that I see. That's what makes a book good or bad for me. Unless it's pure fantasy, and then I can just enjoy it. Although even then I'm seeing philosophy at every turn. I like that.

Monday 7 March

The seminar this morning was a session on poetry, but we didn't get around to actually doing any writing exercises. We spent the whole time talking about the poems that Mzi brought, which would have been interesting, except that people kept talking about things that are completely irrelevant - talking about personal stuff that the poems reminded them of, but not about the poems themselves. Made me want to scream. Mzi is obviously not a teacher - he has no idea of how to keep a class on track and focused on what is relevant to the lesson, and he just let it go on and on so that we never actually got to the interesting part. The poems were pretty good though. The one that I really liked was by Don MacLennan, titled *Funeral III*.

The metaphors the minister employed
were ancient seeds as edible as wheat:
whatever dies becomes the food
of new existence and outlives
death's appetite miraculously.
But the conversations of the pigeons on the roof
broke my willing suspension of disbelief.
Let the dead bury the dead.
I went out and bought hot bread,
took bread and tea
and ate it in the garden.
Eating in the sun
with flies and ants
seemed right.

I thought it was beautiful, and I liked that it was making a philosophical point. But Robert didn't like it - he said it was the worst poem of the lot, and I'm pretty sure he implied that I was pretentious for liking it. He doesn't seem to think much of Don MacLennan's poetry - he said that it was too egocentric, saying it implied that he (Don) saw himself as some kind of pagan priest, who had the answers to life. I can understand that, but I'm not sure that it's a problem. The image of Don MacLennan as a pagan priest doesn't seem that farfetched to me. And he definitely had some answers, which I think are mostly the right ones. I don't see how that makes his poetry bad.

I think Robert and I are going to butt heads a lot over poetry - we have such different ideas about what it should be. I'm willing to listen to his views, but only up to a certain point. I'm not going to compromise my writing style just because he doesn't like it. I don't think my opinions are any less valid than his. Paul agreed with me - I could tell by his face. I really

hope that Joan Metelerkamp and I hit it off, because I don't think I want Robert to be my artistic supervisor. I want someone who will work *with* my poetry, and make it a better example of the kind of poem that it is, not someone who will try to change it into a different kind of poetry altogether.

Tuesday 8 March

The classroom strewn with broken glass from the smashed windowpanes - smashed all the length of the building, like a flock of birds flew straight into it, but these were no birds. Angry students perhaps, bored students, angry staff, who knows? So much anger under the surface here. The chairs are broken and splintered - everyone must sit carefully, tread carefully, speak carefully. The ceiling is full of holes, panels missing, sagging with mould, held up by the corners. A songololo inches its way across the floor, crawling delicately over the shards of glass, and white moths camouflage themselves against the walls, the thin brown edges of their wings the only thing that gives them shape.

Wednesday 9 March

I went to go buy a new network cable this afternoon, and there was this old man in the shop. Really old school, like my Oupa - he wore one of those button-up jerseys, and a houndstooth cap, and carried a walking stick. And when I walked in he was complaining that his laptop had a virus and wouldn't allow him to access the internet, and asking if the guy at the counter could sell him a better virus protection programme. It was such a lovely contrast. The technician was explaining to him about Spyware, and as he left he looked at me and says, "so many tricks these days, so many tricks". There's a poem in there somewhere.

Friday 11 March

There was a huge earthquake in Japan today, and massive tsunamis all along their coast. The video footage is incredible to watch. It doesn't even look like water, it's just mud and boats and cars and whole houses being dragged across the fields - a couple of the houses were on fire, and the fires were moving with the wave. There was also a huge whirlpool just off the coast. I don't think it hit near where Jon is living, but I can't get in touch with him. His internet must be down. I hope he's ok.

Mzi has a very narrow idea of what poetry should be, and I disagree with a lot of what he says, although I can understand his reasoning for most of it. But he wants everything to be completely stripped down. He doesn't like the use of adverbs and adjectives at all, which I think is taking it too far. Certainly one should avoid using too many, but there's no call to get rid of them altogether. Brian Walter was sitting in today, in Robert's place, and he had some really helpful suggestions to make. The main thing he said we should remember is that we should not be too easily satisfied with our work. We should always try to take it to a higher level. That does require some distance though - setting the piece aside for a while - so it was difficult to do it today. Brian suggested that I work on making the three poems into a

sequence, by bringing images from the first two poems into the third, to tie them together. I'm keen to have a go at it.

* * *

I need to write a poem for the Serengeti protest. I'm running out of time. I thought maybe I could write something that sounds a bit like a legend or a fairy tale, describing how the herds used to migrate across the plains, but implying that they don't anymore. I remember seeing an advert on TV once, where an old man was trying to describe an elephant to his grandchildren, and they wouldn't believe that such a creature could be real. It was a conservation thing - along the lines of "do you want to tell your grandchildren that there *used* to be elephants in Africa?"

Monday 14 March

Brian Walter is an amazing teacher. He dealt with two main things today - the structure of a line of poetry, and the use of mythic images and resonances to give depth to poetry. The main thing about the structure is that each line of a poem should contain its own meaning - so it should be complete in itself, as far as possible anyway - and that a line should have more than one element to it, more than one idea. The way to do that is to use what he calls 'strong words' (nouns and verbs) at the beginning and end of a line, and adjectives and adverbs, as well as the 'weaker words' (and, the, but, so, which etc) in the middle. It's not a hard and fast rule of course, but it's one way to approach it.

The exercise he gave us was to do a free write about an experience we have had with string. The idea is to use an everyday object as the focus of the poem, and then look for mythic connections. He gave us a whole lot of mythic uses of string - Ariadne's thread, Penelope's tapestry, Arachne's web - and some examples of poems that use the concept. Then we had to edit the free write.

String

*How long is a piece of string?
Twice the distance from the middle to the end
Halved and twisted
And halved again
Into diamond patterns
Between our fingers
My sister and I
Wove a fragile web
From twine scavenged from the table
And carefully knotted
That we must not pull too hard
Lest it break, and the pattern tangle*

*The rough string slides between us
Pulled just tight enough
To show the pattern
Passing from my hands to hers
Strands of light
In the space between us
The diamonds opening and closing
In the twisting strands
And the careful dance of hands*

And the edited version:

Cat's Cradle

*How long is a piece of string?
Halved and twisted
And halved again
Into diamond patterns
Stretched between our fingertips
My sister and I wove a fragile web
Out of twine scavenged from the tabletop
And carefully knotted
The rough string pulled just tight enough
To show the pattern
Passing from my hands to hers
Strands of light
In the space between us*

*How long is a piece of string?
Twice the distance from the middle to the end
That distance filled with the twisting diamonds
And the careful dance of hands*

Looking at it again, I think I like the first version better.

Friday 18 - Sunday 20 March

This weekend was amazing. It was so good to be around people I can relax with. I miss the philosophy department, although I haven't really left I suppose. Saturday was absolutely perfect. The weather cleared up, so we all went swimming in the morning. The sea was cold, but completely clear and not at all rough - it was mostly just swells, so we could relax and just lie back in it - the breakers were close to the beach, but once you got beyond them it was amazing. We were in the water for ages - I'd say at least a couple of hours. When we got back to the backpackers for lunch we were all completely exhausted. I fell asleep on the couch. I

love that feeling, of being so deliciously tired, and being able to just sleep where you fall. The others played darts again, and I kept waking up and hearing their voices and drifting off again. It was good. We made a huge fire, and sat around it, and played Famous Names, which always seems to happen. There was a tiny praying mantis on the log in front of me.

There was a full moon last night - and it was incredibly bright. Apparently the moon was closer to earth last night than it has been for about twenty years. Whatever the reason, it was almost like daylight - you could see just as clearly, except that there was hardly any colour to anything. We decided to go for a walk on the beach, and it turned into a full scale hike. We went all the way along the beach to the far side of the bay, and the others climbed the dune on that side. I was tired by then though, so I waited for them at the bottom. It was so quiet and lonely, and the sandplovers were out, running around on the sand. It was difficult to see them when they were standing still, but when they moved I could see what they were. It was almost eerie, being alone on the beach in the middle of the night, watching the waves come in. I couldn't help thinking about the tsunamis in Japan - which is not a good thought to have when you're alone on a beach with no high ground to speak of. I imagined Poseiden rising from the waves in the moonlight, to stare at me as I stared back at him. The walk back was a long one, but it was so beautiful. It's almost impossible to describe. I'm having a hard time even picturing it now - like it couldn't really have happened.

I started reading Frank Herbert's Whipping Star. I went to the library to take out Dune, but apparently it's been missing for about ten years. You'd think they would take it off the catalogue in that case. I was bleak. So I took out the only other Frank Herbert book they had. I didn't get to read much of it - just a couple of chapters - but so far it's intriguing. The beginning chapters are about a man trying to communicate with an alien from a species that is so completely different to humans that there are almost no common referents that they can use. He can't even see the alien - his senses can't process the information that it gives him. So he knows that it is there - that he is seeing and hearing *something* - but his senses refuse to agree with him. That's a fascinating idea.

I did a few bits and pieces of writing, working on the feedback from Friday's seminar, and a couple of free writing pieces.

*The joint circles the table along with the cards
The air filled with the sweet smoke
I breathe deep
Taking my high from the breaths of the others
The bets are getting higher
With our spirits
A duel develops between Sharli and Grant
The betting racing ahead of Alex
Who looks on, amused
As he waits for them to notice
He's still in*

*Tom grins to himself, his boyish face alight,
But unreadable*

* * *

*A contented silence falls
Around the fire
Everyone well fed and satiated
Alex tinkers on his guitar
In the dark edges of the firelight
A preying mantis, just a centimetre long,
Makes its slow careful way
To the edge of the log border of the fireplace
Its fragile silhouette outlined
Against the fire
It slows there, as if to enjoy the warmth*

*Ania takes a phonecall, and conversation pauses,
As everyone stops to enjoy the sound
Of her speaking Russian
A nightjar calls in the silence*

* * *

Pictures of Sharli

*"I wonder how many kilometres we've driven together?
We don't feel the need to talk anymore. It's nice."
She smiles and selects another song.*

*Bending over the hubbly, she removes an earring
From beneath her long dark hair
And uses it to poke holes in the foil*

Monday 21 March

I don't think Joan Metelerkamp will be the right supervisor for me. She's very nice, but we didn't connect well in our meeting this afternoon. I felt like she didn't understand my work at all. Her comments were very stilted and not very helpful. So far Brian Walter seems like the best choice.

Joan spent the first half of the seminar this morning talking about the difficulty of writing - the experience of writer's block I suppose. She rambled a bit, but it was interesting. The others don't seem to understand what she was talking about. From some of their comments I felt like they were wilfully misunderstanding her - focusing on irrelevant details. It was very frustrating. The second half was cool - she asked us to just be quiet and think - she read some

passages from different things - and then asked us to write for twenty minutes. Not free writing - more a careful concentration, and then writing down something more formed. This is what I came up with:

*This silence is like breathing.
This is what a poem is - an understanding,
as breathing in is an understanding.
The outdoor silence
with its hints of birds and blueness
comes through the window
to mingle with the indoor one;
the buzz of lights
and the suggestion of thought.
What can I say to such a silence,
except 'I understand'?*

For our assignment this week we're supposed to repeat this same exercise three times, and bring whatever we write on Friday.

Saturday 26 March

It was Earth Hour tonight, and there was an event in the Botanical Gardens to celebrate it. There was supposed to be a concert and poetry reading, but it didn't work very well. People were already drunk and not in any mood to listen to poetry or gospel singing, which was all that was on offer. It was pretty terrible singing actually - very bad choice of music for the event. Also, they didn't build a bonfire or anything - just had candles - so it was freezing cold and pretty miserable after a while. We were better off because we took Sharli's portable braai with us, so we had a fire at least. We ended up being the last ones there, which was actually really nice and peaceful. It's been a long time since I was in the gardens at night. There was no moon, and the stars were so clear. And we saw a shooting star. Not a satellite. A real, honest-to-goodness, actually burning through the atmosphere shooting star. At first it wasn't all that impressive - it looked a bit like a firework, one of those that shoots out a single big spark every so often - but then I realised what it was. I've never seen one before.

Monday 28 March

Today's seminar was weird. Paul didn't really get us to do anything. We just listened to him tell a random story, looked at a set of cartoons, and then listened to him read out the notes that he had written for today. *I hate* being read to. But what really bugs me is that I think he was actually going somewhere with what he was doing, but it felt like we didn't get there. And not because we ran out of time either. He kept saying that he didn't want to open a dialogue about what he had read, so it was a very formal, static seminar.

Robert and I talked about editing. I'm finding that I need more than two days to edit my work - I need to let it sit for a while, and come back to it. He says that's fine. I'll be coming back to all of it anyway, when I start putting my long project together. I noticed something today - I didn't have copies of the latest poems I've written on me, so I tried to recite them for Robert, but I couldn't do it properly. That's unusual, because normally by the time I've finished writing a poem I have it memorised. But I've been making so many changes to the poems, with all the editing, that I can't remember them properly. Robert says that's to be expected, and that it's probably a good thing, because learning them like I usually do, writing them and editing them in my head, means that I'm resistant to editing them once I have them down. Which is not a great thing, obviously.

He also made a suggestion about the final project. He says I should include a recording of myself reading the poems, because the reciting is such a big part of the process of writing for me. I really like the idea. Hopefully it's something that I will actually be able to organise.

* * *

I went to reading group tonight. The paper was interesting, but I stopped listening to the discussion halfway through, because I was just enjoying the atmosphere so much. The contrast between how I feel around the philosophy department and how I feel around the writing class is so striking. When I am with the philosophy department, it's like I suddenly realise that I haven't been breathing properly until then. It's how I used to feel when I got back to Grahamstown from Johannesburg, like I can finally take a deep breath because I'm around people who speak the same language as me again.

The love I feel for these people frightens me.
I fear the end of my time here.
They know nothing of my dependence,
their presence necessary for my breathing.
'Intense affinity' the star said.
'I love you', 'I love all', I cannot contain it,
I could die from all this love.

Many connectives,
webs of thought.
The effort to understand,
to know the minds of others.
What is the fulfilment of that desire,
if it is not love?

* * *

The book report assignment is due this Sunday. I'm going to write mine about Frank Herbert's Whipping Star. We're supposed to write about our experience of reading the book, and this one is perfect, because I read it on the philosophy postgrad weekend, and the subject matter mirrored what I was feeling so perfectly. The description of love as 'intense affinity' is so

accurate. I must find that quote, and the one about laughter. It was something like "laughter is our common response to non-fatal surprise". The whole weekend was saturated with laughter. There was a beautiful moment when I was lying on the couch, reading, but my eyes were closing because I was so deliciously tired from the morning on the beach, and I just drifted off to sleep with the sound of the others talking and laughing in the background. I was completely relaxed and comfortable, and it was so lovely to fall asleep listening to the sound of my friends enjoying the day. I love the account in the book about the attempt to see and hear what our senses are unequipped to see and hear, and the attempt to communicate where there are no common references to work from. It reminds me of philosophy.

Thursday 31 March

I breathe in silver air
Frost tipped trees in the clear night

The coals of the fire that died down before it could warm us

A couple stumbles their way through the dark gardens
Using a cellphone for light

We huddle in blankets wet with dew
Shivering
But reluctant to leave

The stillness after the crowd left and the candles went out

The milky way in a broad stripe across the sky
The four corners of the bright southern kite

The flash of burning
A falling star
Looking much more like a firework
Almost disappointing
Until I realise what it is

A falling star flares in the darkness
Once, twice and then it's gone
Leaving a ghost trail on the back of my eyelids

* * *

I was complaining to Mom about having to write a bad poem for this week's assignment, and she suddenly remembered a snippet of a poem she learned at school:

My watch used to run, but then one day it stopped,

So I had a good look at the works,
And after I'd poked it around with a fork,
It went on a bit, but it jerks.

That's lovely. I'll have to see if I can find the rest of it. There's another poem that I've been trying to find for ages, but it's not on the internet as far as I can tell. It was a parody of *The Owl and the Pussycat*, and all I can remember of it is these four lines:

They sailed away and they landed one day
Where people cooked people in pots
They took them away and they ate them next day
With peaches and stewed apricots.

* * *

Now for the bad poem. The only thing I can think of is to use clichés, and write a Helen Steiner Rice kind of thing.

Shooting Star

Waiting in the moonless night
While all the stars are shining bright
I love to see the brilliant light
That shines upon the world

The dark night air is icy cold
I huddle in the blanket's fold
Watching as the night grows old
And new stars are unfurled

Then all at once, a shooting star
Comes falling from the heavens afar
To shine upon us where we are
Within the blankets curled

All at once I made a wish
As through the sky the star did swish
Swimming like a little fish
With silver scales imperled

LOL. Nothing like an online rhyming dictionary to guarantee a bad poem. That was actually kind of fun.

Monday 4 April

I enjoyed the seminar this morning. Silke gave us what she called a 'black box exercise' - a whole bunch of little cards in a black pencil case. There are five categories that make up a story - setting/place, time, character, situation/incident, theme - we each picked a card from each category. For our assignment this week we have to write a story using those prompts, and the standard structure: opening, turning point, resolution (and a second turning point and resolution if we want).

Tuesday 5 April

I got my feedback from Paul Wessels today. This paragraph mystifies me somewhat:

"Your work is consistently excellent but take care not to waste your formidable intelligence on hiding your equally formidable ignorance. Intelligence must always hurl you forward into unknown territory rather than being spent staking out an occupied and conquered one."

I get the second part, but what on earth is he going on about in the first sentence? I asked him to explain.

Thursday 7 April - Sunday 10 April

This weekend was crazy. There was so much going on for graduation that I couldn't possibly write about it all now. I didn't get a chance to write every day. It was good to see Mom and Dad, but I'm glad they're gone again. It's too unsettling to have them here. It messes with my head. Mom read the story I wrote for this week's assignment. It made me uncomfortable to show it to her. It isn't about me, but there's a lot of me in it. The character isn't me, but the desire to hide from everyone is definitely mine. And the hall I described is the Jeppe school hall. Mom would have recognised it. I didn't like showing it to her. It felt too personal, even if it isn't about me, because the feelings are definitely mine.

I got a reply of sorts from Paul Wessels. He says, and I quote, "I don't know what you're ignorant about but I am convinced of its existence!" In other words, he was just trying to sound clever when he wrote his comments, and he has no idea what he's talking about. It's so frustrating, dealing with people who are so careless about what they say. How the hell am I supposed to improve when that's the sort of feedback I get? At least I can expect better from Brian. I hope.

Thursday 14 April

I met with Brian today. I think he and I will work well together. He seemed genuinely interested in finding out where my writing is coming from, which hopefully means he won't try to force his own style on me, which was my main concern.

We talked about the long project - he says I should start thinking about themes and structure. I think that will have to come out of whatever I write over the year, but maybe if I look at what I have already it will spark other poems on the same themes.

Brian says he only has one concern, and that is that my writing is good. Which struck me as a really bizarre thing to say, but I think I know what he means. He's worried that I'll be less open to trying new things and techniques, because I'm quite firmly established in how I write. I'm open to new things, definitely, but my worry is that I don't really know how to go about trying them. It's hard to know where to start. I hope that Brian will be able to help me with that.

Monday 18 April - Friday 22 April

It's always strange, coming home. It's a sort of mix between feeling like someone I used to be, and feeling like I don't fit in here anymore. Mom wants to redecorate my room, and she's already taken all my posters down. It feels odd without them, like the room is smaller.

I haven't written much at all this week. I find it difficult to write here. It's unsettling to be here, even though I wanted to come. I miss home when I'm away, but I'm much more comfortable with myself in Grahamstown. Everything feels out of step here.

The assignment Mxolisi gave us is a horrible one. We're supposed to write about something we would rather forget. That seems counterintuitive, and guaranteed to generate yet more misery. It irritates me. Maybe I'll write a fiction piece. It's not so much that I object to writing about that sort of thing, but more that I have no intention of letting the rest of the class in on anything that deeply personal. It's none of their business.

Monday 25 April

Our garden is so beautiful at this time of year. The willow tree is just beginning to get its first yellow leaves, but there is a whole tree that is positively golden, one of the tall ones that make up the border of the garden. It is shedding yellow leaves all around it, which make such a pretty display on the green grass. The monkey apple tree is covered in little clusters of bright red berries that look like flowers from a distance, and the ivy is such a dark green that it seems almost black in places. When the sun shines it seems truly enchanted, like I used to pretend it was when I was little. I wrote a poem once, about this garden. I found it in my old file.

Changing Seasons

I watch my autumn garden
where all is calm and still
while winter's filtered sunlight
falls across my windowsill

high in the changing season's air
a lonely swallow flies
while underneath the willow tree
a golden carpet lies

It's dated 1997, and it's an autumn poem, so that would make me eleven. It's actually not too bad, for a beginner. There's something in the phrase 'winter's filtered sunlight' that I really like. It reminds me of Emily Dickinson - "there's a certain slant of light on winter afternoons".

Wednesday 27 April

Still nothing. This assignment is a real bitch. I've got a serious mental block against it. My sister suggested the following:

It happened.
It sucked.
The End.

I like that. I'm tempted to use it. Perhaps I can work it into something. I think this is going to turn out to be humorous piece.

I want to write something more serious as well. I can't talk about specifics, but maybe I don't need to. If I can describe the sense of loss, the total lack of emotion that happens, that might work.

Every night I skirt around
The gaping holes
Where they used to be
Afraid to go too close
In case I fall

I tread a landscape
Scarred with loss
With craters dry and dull
I thread a path
On fragile sand
The edges draw me in

Monday 2 May

Cool seminar today. We went on a field trip to the cemetery. I haven't been there in ages. I like it there. It's really peaceful, and beautiful, especially now, with all the flowers in bloom

among the grass. I love wandering around there, looking at all the old graves. Some of them are so old that you can't read the inscriptions anymore, and some are cracked open, or sunken in, which is a little bit creepy, even during the day, but in a fun kind of way. And it's quiet enough so you can hear the grasses rustling, and the insects. It was a gorgeous day today. We rode in the back of Robert's bakkie on the way back to ISEA, which was fun. I haven't done that since I was little.

No well-tended graveyard this
With headstones fallen and fading
Over graves sunken in
And overgrown, the long grass
Filled with rustling wind
And summer flowers

The assignment is a cool one too, although I don't have any ideas yet. Hazel gave us each a box of objects - a shell, some beads, a button, a couple of papers and a box of matches - and we're supposed to use that as a starting point. I'm looking forward to that.

Tuesday 3 May

I've been reading over the comments that Ruth send me on last week's assignment. I really wish I had been there for the discussion, because the things that they seem to be criticising are the things I was aiming for. I wanted to describe the lack of emotion, and the feeling of just going through the motions. The experience *is* abstract, so I don't see what's wrong with the poem being like that too. It's what I wanted.

Thursday 5 May

Brian gave me a lot of stuff to think about today, in terms of my project. He pointed out that my work often deals with a tension between an idealised, happier, imagined world and a harsher reality. He says it's a very common theme in poetry, and he thinks I should work with that as the main thread of the long project. I like the idea. He had some interesting comments on my manuscript. Basically I need to be careful not to be satisfied too soon - I need to be willing to fine tune my poems, even the ones I thought were pretty much finished. He also suggested I work with the haiku form a bit - not to write haikus as such - but to work on focusing on details. He says the haiku is all about merging the inside and outside worlds, which would fit with the tension he was talking about for my long project.

* * *

I've been working on the graveyard poem. It's too general, I think. I wonder if I could use Brian's suggestion about the haiku for this one. Although three lines doesn't feel long enough. But the graveyard does fit with the theme, although in this case it's sort of reversed - it's not the real world intruding on the ideal, it's more the ideal making the real world beautiful.

* * *

White shell, with pink dots around the edges, and scalloped opening - sort of girly

Hermit crab - uses the shells of sea snails for homes - looking for bigger ones as it grows

I draw them around me
Like a second skin
Create a second nature
Out of pieces of theirs

* * *

Hermit-like, I find a new home
In loving these people
Who paint the pale walls
With pink traces and joy

The reference to the hermit crab is too obscure, I think. I need to bring in the shell image more, if I want to use that. I'm not sure that it really works though.

Tuesday 10 May

I went to Hogsback today. It was really quiet. Maybe because it was early in the morning, but it didn't feel as welcoming as it usually does. That might have been because of the weather too - it's been raining on and off all day, and it's cold. Driving out of Grahamstown this morning was really amazing. The sun was coming through the clouds up ahead as I got to the top of Raglan road, but it was raining hard where I was. But not the normal misty type rain we get here - proper rain, with big separate drops that were hitting the road and bouncing up again, so that it looked like the road was alive and moving. I ended up buying some bread and ham and having a picnic in the park. It was absolutely gorgeous - all the trees are starting to turn red and yellow and orange, all mixed in with green, so it's all multi-coloured. I could have spent all day wandering around there - but it started raining again. I did scribble a few lines though, that might be worth something:

*The season begins to burn red
As the trees don their autumn robes
In all the warmer shades*

*The tall pine (?) in front of me
Wears its orange leaves proudly
As if to say
'what other colour could I be?'
Of course a tree should be orange
And burn brightly in the cool sunlight*

*Next door, its taller neighbour
Chooses yellow for its autumn suit
For when the sunlight isn't there
And a dwarf in the background
Displays a bright red coat
To defy the coming chill*

Wednesday 11 May

The clouds probe the hills
With dark fingers of rain
And the road unwinds
Its elastic length
Across the Karoo

The clouds probe the hills
With dark-fingered rain
With rain-dark fingers
Searching ...

* * *

The clouds billow out
From where the sun still smoulders
In the west

Monday 16 May

I scribbled a few lines in class today:

Why do I write?

*This is not encouraging
To be told how insane this choice is
Of course it is insane
No one would do this
If they had any choice
And because I have no choice
I tell myself
That I would not choose differently
Of perhaps I do have a choice
And I tell myself
That I don't
Because I would not choose otherwise*

It's weird. I didn't think I was ambivalent about my writing. Funny what comes out when you're not really thinking about what you write. I am looking forward to working on the long project now though. It will be good to focus, without the distractions of assignments and seminars.

Friday 3 June

The concert was fun tonight. It was very informal, and the choir isn't that good yet, but everyone seemed to enjoy it. There was one lovely moment - there were several cats in the house where it was held, and one of them seemed to really like the singing. When the soloists were singing it came and pressed itself up against their legs, but then when the applause started it would get a fright and run out of the room. But as soon as the music started it would come back in. The kids sitting in the front were in hysterics over it, and soon everyone was laughing. There's definitely a poem in there somewhere.

Friday 10 June

Even though I am coming to hate this job more and more, there are still days when I feel a surge of affection for my students, and it reminds me that there is still something worthwhile here. It makes me proud to see them all trying so hard - as I walk past their desks I see notes and essay outlines scribbled in the margins of their exam papers - they are following instructions. They listened. And they care - I can see it in their faces. Maybe not about the material - it is too early for that - but they care about the exam. They want to do well. It makes me wish I had made the paper so much easier, even though it isn't difficult by any standards, except perhaps theirs. I do like teaching. It's just this place that gets me down - everything is so run down and dysfunctional. But when I see my students trying so hard, it doesn't matter so much.

Saturday 11 June - Sunday 12 June

I'm meeting Brian tomorrow. I've pulled together some bits and pieces from my file of incomplete poems. I'm glad now that I save the little bits of images. I don't always know where they are going to fit in, but sooner or later I find a poem to go with them.

There are still a few fragments that I couldn't do anything with yet. But I'll keep thinking about them. That seems to be the trick - to just hold the lines and images in my head until something clicks, and I find the missing pieces.

Monday 13 June

Today's meeting with Brian went well. I wish I could meet with him more often. He makes me feel much more confident about this whole thing, and he gives really good feedback as well. We went through the poems I put together last night - most of them worked out pretty

well. He suggested I start working on sequences of poems - linking similar observations, or observations of the same thing over time, stuff like that - and then bringing it together at the end with a more meta poem. He also says I need to dig deeper into the philosophical side, because he thinks that I have the potential to write stuff with more depth. That's a tall order, but it's nice to know that he thinks I can do it. The main thing now is that I must write every day, without exception, because that's the only way I'll ever get enough material. He says even if what I write is terrible, the important thing is to keep writing, and the inspiration will come. That makes sense.

[Untitled]

I dreamed the end of the world
came with an explosion of rainbows.
We painted the light
onto the walls with our fingertips,
and the children laughed
while their skin bubbled
and their parents screamed.

Brian says I can leave this one untitled. I'll have to figure out how to work the layout of the final project - but any title just gives away too much. The power of this one is in the shock of it, I think. I wasn't sure Brian would like it - it's very different from the others I've shown him, but he said it was fantastic.

* * *

Germiston Lake

No paradise this:
a simple stretch of water
amidst factories
and high rise buildings,
the park on the far bank
not safe to visit.

But I recall
early mornings spent
sitting quietly in the back
of my father's canoe,
lifejacket digging
into my chin,
breathing in the scent
of motor oil and water,
watching first light
break over the lake.

Brian says the key to this one is in the link between the light and the idea of paradise - changing it to 'first light' will give the link back to the opening line. It gives the poem a hook. That's what I need to be looking for when I edit my work - a way of linking everything together.

Friday 17 June

I had a small inspiration today, despite everything.

The winter gales are here
Bringing strange windfalls
A branch drags across the highway
An odd shaped tumbleweed
The fallen leaves
Dance in the gusts
And someone's towel
Lands in the garden
While mine (left on the balcony)
Has gone to someone else

Not poetry, but I'll take whatever I can get at this point.

Thursday 23 June

It was weird being in the library tonight - it was almost completely empty, and there was no one else on the third floor, where I was. It's quite eerie, even with all the lights on. It would be the perfect setting for a horror movie, or something out of Primeval. There was a pair of starlings who are I think are nesting above one of the lights. I almost had a heart attack when they flew out. It was a lovely moment - just me and the starlings - they were flying around and perching on the tops of the bookshelves and the pipes running along the ceiling. I followed them all the way down the length of the shelves. It was so quiet that their calls sounded quite loud.

Sunday 3 July

I had a thought about a poem this morning, while we were shopping - Mom was looking at stuff for Kate, and we were wondering if she was old enough to appreciate a set of wings - I'm sure she is - and it struck me that she probably won't remember this time at all, and that's really sad, because all everyone wants to do is make her happy. I thought perhaps I could write a poem for her, for when she's older, to remind her.

Kate
Will you remember

I wonder
How the whole world
Sought only your delight
No cost too great
To see you smile

Tuesday 26 July

There was snow on the Hogsback today. I drove up at lunchtime, and there was still a lot of it on the ground, although it was starting to melt. The whole place felt festive - everyone was out, and there were a whole lot of snowmen everywhere, or halves of them anyway, because they were melting. I went to the botanical gardens and went for a very short walk - I only had about twenty minutes. It was gorgeous, and so strange. It had melted around people's footprints, and sort of gone soft around the edges, so it looked like foam lying on the ground. It reminded me of the foam that they use for putting out fires. And it made the mountain look so much bigger than usual, with the snow coming down the sides. I couldn't stop laughing.

Wednesday 27 July

The well delineated cat / the cleanly delineated cat

Good line. Just needs a poem to go with it.

Thursday 28 July

Concert

The sudden influx disturbs the peace
of the cleanly delineated cat
who long ago claimed the square foot
before the fire. She retreats
to the windowsill, and begins
a careful smoothing of affronted fur.

The crowd stuffs itself into the couches
and the floor overflows with children
too young to leave at home. The young man
in the dark suit keeps a watchful distance
from the others, his eyes on the conductor
who takes care not to touch him,

as he steps forward, all sharp angles
and suppressed flinches, and song.
His voice belies the timidity, liquid,

pure, and the moment stretches out, the crowd
hardly drawing breath, until the cat
abandons her disdain, to press against his legs,

and curve herself to the music.
He takes the applause like a blow,
turning from it, perhaps grateful
to the cat, who covers his retreat
with her undignified exit, yowling
her displeasure at the sound.

Wow. That actually came out pretty well, and a lot darker than I expected.

Saturday 6 August

I just got home from the Gender Bender Ball. It was a lot of fun. I enjoy hanging out with the OutRhodes people - they are so open and fun to be with. Men in drag are always interesting. And there's something beautiful about boys kissing boys.

I still don't have any ideas for poems. I suppose I could try to write about some of the things I saw tonight, but nothing really struck me. There were a lot of boys in dresses, and generally a great time was had by all, but there wasn't anything that could really be turned into a poem. I'm just going to have to tell Brian that he has to be patient with me, and that the poems will come when they come and not before.

Monday 8 August

I'm exhausted tonight. It's been a stressful day, but a good one. I met with Brian this morning. He suggested that I stop focusing on writing poems as such, and just work on getting observations and thoughts down on paper, so that I can work with them later. That makes sense. I think I was getting too stressed out about not producing anything polished, so I just wasn't really writing anything. I wish I could meet with him every week. The email thing isn't really working for me, but I couldn't tell him that. I'm just not accustomed to sending my random scribbles to anyone. But I need to get over that.

Tuesday 9 August - Wednesday 10 August

I dream of drowning
Breathing in the water
Waiting to die
But the breaths keep coming
Shallow surfacing
I can't even manage to drown myself
In my dreams

Instead I breathe underwater
Trapped below the waves
And wake up gasping

Friday 12 August

'they beat my boyfriend to death'
says the boy on stage
and in front of me,
Grant tightens his hold on Aidan's shoulder
his thumb moving in circles
that must be comforting
they are beautiful together

Monday 15 August

Laurence suggested again that I write an introduction to my project, about why I think poetry is important, and talking about my writing process - the difficulty I've been having with changing it from working mostly in my head to mostly on paper. About whether poetry is about sounds to me, or about the words on the page. There's something interesting there, because what I hear is often different to what is on the page, but that gives it an extra dimension which is really interesting. Sort of like the run on lines that Robert and I talked about - it's a complete sentence, but the break gives it an extra meaning.

Monday 22 August

Leaving the Eastern Cape
I trade the now familiar desert landscape
With its sharp, thin greens
And delicate flowers
For a small patch
Of a deeper green
In a distant city

* * *

Monet painting - water lilies and clouds occupying the same space

Upturned, dragged back
Into the boat
Moved round the bend
To find still water
And sunlight
Moved in slow ripples
Through a painting

Mirrored trees
And looked straight down
Into the sky

Tuesday 6 September

S slept over last night. He was still sleeping when I left this morning. And all day I kept thinking about that. I had this insane urge to tell my class that I had to leave early because I'd left a very beautiful naked man in my bed and I had to get back to him. That would have produced quite a stir. The thought kept me amused most of the day.

Thursday 8 September

My father wages war
on the birds and the crickets
that make our garden home,

or so my mother tells me.
Each day a new report
of water gun battles with the pigeons

who learned to perch on the spikes
that he laid on the roof;
as if to barricade even the sky,

and restless nights spent hunting
the sounds of crickets,
who are never where their voices are.

* * *

Float through the clouds
And the water lilies
like a Monet painting

Float through the painting
Between the water lilies
And the clouds

Float through the river painting
Between the clouds
And willows and water lilies

Sunday 11 September

I'm not doing too badly this week after all. This seems to be the trick - waiting until the ideas have accumulated a bit, and then playing with them. It's the same thing I've been doing anyway, I think, just sped up a lot out of necessity. Some ideas I play with for years.

Like the Monet one - that's an image I've had in mind for more than ten years. But I haven't been able to form a poem around it until now. It's still not quite right, but it's getting there.

Monday 12 September

We had a really interesting seminar this morning, given by Denis Hirson. He talked about the process of writing his latest book. It's taken him 41 years from when he had the first idea for it. That makes me feel a lot better about my own writing. One of the things that has been bothering me this year is the sense of time running out - like I have to write something amazing this year or I'll never make it as a writer. Logically I know that isn't the case, but it's still nice to have it confirmed. Liz said the same thing after the seminar.

Saturday 24 September

I've been playing around with the order of the draft I sent in. I think dividing it by seasons is still the best way to order things at the moment. It does feel a little bit too Wordsworth, but on reflection, I'm not sure that's a bad thing. I am heavily influenced by nature and the seasons, so I don't see why the book shouldn't reflect that.

I'm looking forward to the meeting on Monday. I'm hoping that talking with Brian will help me to get focused on writing again. With everything that's happened in the last month, I feel a bit like I've been hit on the head. The world is out of focus and I can't connect with anything.

Sunday 25 September

My book has divided itself into four sections
For each of the four seasons
Quite naturally, the shift comes
From summer, to autumn, to winter
And now to spring, when life is bright and hopeful

But now I seek balance
Each one should have equal weight,
And it seems I caught autumn
Just at that time when only the last of the leaves
Were left on the trees, and so it is too light
And I must remedy that.

But how to write autumn poems in the springtime?

Monday 26 September

Today was a good day. I feel much better about my project after talking to Brian. It still needs a lot of work, but I can do it, I hope. What I need to focus on now is getting the sections to talk to one another - I need a strong key poem for each section, and then a key poem for the book as a whole that weaves it all together - Brian suggested I think about Time for that one. I still need to add quite a few poems to it as well, and then work on fine tuning them. So still lots and lots to do, but I'm determined to make this project as good as it can possibly be.

Oh, and I must remember to find Robert Graves's book on poetic grammar, if I can. Brian mentioned it today, and it sounds interesting.

Tuesday 27 September

Ania came with me to Fort Hare today, and she gave me an idea for the key poem of the collection, about all the seasons. She mentioned something about how when you're depressed you can't ever imagine being happy again, and that sort of reminded me of how in summer you can't ever imagine being cold and in winter you can't imagine being hot. I'm sure I could work with that into a poem. It's definitely been a theme of this year for me personally, so it would make sense.

Brian just emailed me the report he submitted about my draft. It's not very positive. All I've managed so far is the minimum requirements - there's still a lot of work to be done. I think what I'll do is focus on one season per week for the next month, and try to turn each section into a really strong one by itself and then work on pulling them all together. I should start with Autumn I think. That's the one that needs the most added to it. Spring too, but it is still spring, so hopefully spring poems will come to me.

Saturday 1 October - Sunday 2 October

It's been raining hard all day, and I've felt this very odd sense of wellbeing, despite the hangover - or maybe even because of it - I spent most of the day in bed, feeling deliciously tired and relaxed, just listening to the rain. I had to go out and fetch my car from the Union, because I was too drunk to drive it home last night, and I got absolutely soaked, but it was sort of fun.

Wednesday 5 October

Look close, he said, and you will see
Amongst the autumn leaves
The places where his footprints were
Before he made the turn

Around the corner, painted there
Below the autumn trees

* * *

Playing Hookey

It's a grey morning
But the fresh air hints at spring
And the fork tailed bird
Outside my window
Seems to call like Browning's thrush
A song a fine rapture
That I cannot ignore
I could sit here all day to listen
And breathe

* * *

I'm not sure that this course has been good for me. I've learned a lot about writing, and about myself, but emotionally it hasn't done me any favours. The trouble is that writing a project like this requires long hours alone, to work, and I don't do well with that. Especially when I'm trawling for ideas and coming up empty. Or maybe it's just that this year has been difficult emotionally anyway. I don't know.

One thing I do know though is that this course has taken away a lot of the joy I used to feel in writing. Before this year, I had never tried to force myself to write - I only wrote when I was inspired, when I couldn't stop myself from writing. That was always a joy. But this year has turned it into work, and I feel like I've lost something. I don't even want to go to the poetry readings at Reddits anymore. I'm looking forward to being done with it, so that I can go back to writing just because I want to. That sounds self-indulgent, but writing was the one area of my life where I did indulge myself, and I think I need that. It used to be a respite from everything - now it is part of what I need a break from.

Friday 7 October

Martin came with me to Fort Hare today. I quite enjoy spending time with him, although half the time I feel like he's laughing at me. He makes me feel very young and uneducated, which is an oddly refreshing feeling. Not exactly comfortable, but somehow it's good to be reminded of that. He knows so much about the history of South Africa, and he was at university in the 80s, when the struggle was at its height. And he knows so much about nature - he keeps pointing out things that I have never noticed before, would never even think to think about, like why certain grasses only grow on the slopes of the passes, and why things are greener on the inside curve of the road than on the outside. I commented on the way in that all the purple flowers were starting to fade, and he just laughed at me, and asked if that was what I called them. Seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to call purple flowers, to me,

but he says they're called Verbena. It's cool that he knows stuff like that. We talked a little bit about my class for today, which was on animal ethics, and he gave me all sorts of interesting facts about animals to use. He looks at things from such a different perspective to philosophers, which is great. It inspired me, and I think today's class was possibly the best one I've given all year.

* * *

The bushes just sit there and scowl at you.

Good line. Something Martin said today. I might be able to make something out of that.

Saturday 8 October

The long ago day when my latest attempt at flight,
Launched at the high point in the arc of my tyre swing
Ended flat backed on the ground, among the autumn leaves
and drove the breath from my lungs, vision spiralling black.

Monday 10 October

I would say the purple mist of verbena
Hovers above the field
But it isn't mist exactly
More like dust
Or powder paint
Spilled across the fields
By a careless child

Such brilliance, it seems
Could not have come from the dark earth
Could only have been laid down
On the hills from above

That thought does not sit well with me
Who believes in no gods
Not even the dark ones under the earth
But this kind of beauty
Has something like holiness about it
Something of the uncanny

Thursday 13 October

Winter themes - snow, rediscovery, seeing, stars, winter flowers, death, journeys, silence, shadows, wild things intruding on human spaces (starlings, moths, songololo), moving towards peace

Autumn themes - trees, leaves, bright colours, memories, other worlds (elephant), playground, swings, flying, breath, falling, failure, war, Dad, silence, rage, dreams, end of the world, rainbows, loss, emptiness

Saturday 29 October

Today was fun. Martin and I went to the flower show, and he gave me a lesson in botany. Made the flower arrangements much more interesting. I bought a beautiful bonsai too. And then we went back to his office again and had tea and talked. I really enjoy spending time with him. It feels like it's been a long time since I had a friend like that - someone who's really easy to talk to.

* * *

The gardens are full of small movements
A haze of bees at ground level
Above the carpet of small spring flowers among the grass
A red bird leaves the dense stand of tall bamboo
That creaks in the breeze
To hide in the tall red of a blazing coral tree

Across the lawn a father teaches his small son
To turn cartwheels
A fallen weavers nest is the next lesson
And the boy loads his arms with trophies

Flowers bloom across the fields
In wide swathes of colour
As if some clumsy child
Had spilled powder paint
Across the green

The bird that flamed in the tree

I dream of stars
The foreign child
The singing landscape
Wet and wild

As if my home constellations
Were somewhere other
Than these

Familiar faced
The stranger smiles

Wednesday 2 November

Playing the hermit is good for my writing, but it isn't so good for me. I've done nothing but write for the last three days, and it's starting to get to me. Sometimes I wonder if writers are writers because they are mad, or if it's the writing that drives them crazy. Tomorrow I need to get out of the house, and see people.

Monday 7 November

I'm up in Hogsback this morning. It's much too beautiful a morning to waste it sitting in an office in Alice. It's starting to feel like summer, and everything is in full bloom here. All that's missing is Sharli to keep me company.

* * *

So what have I learned about writing this year?

I think the most important thing I've learned is about putting a collection together - looking for links between poems, so that the whole thing resonates. And I suppose in individual poems too - looking for images that will resonate and give it extra layers of meaning.

I don't like doing that on purpose though. Sometimes it happens without my meaning it to, and that's great - because then the deeper meanings were already there when I sensed the poem. But if I go through it later and add them in it feels dishonest somehow. Contrived. It does make for better poetry though, so maybe that's just something I need to get over. I still like it better when it happens unconsciously though.

Thinking about that, maybe I like that better because that way when I read the poem myself, I'm always surprised by it - because there are insights in it that I didn't know I put there. If I know I put them there deliberately, then it isn't the same. Which doesn't make sense, because they're still my insights whether I figured them out deliberately or happened on them by accident, but I still prefer the latter. It's like the difference between reading a story that I wrote myself, where I know what's coming, and reading a story by someone else, where every page is a surprise.

Wednesday 16 November

Keeping a journal has definitely been a positive thing for my writing. I plan to carry on with it next year. It also helps to keep all the earlier versions of the poems - the working out. I used to delete all of that once I had a version I was happy with, but it's good to keep them. Sometimes the earlier versions are actually better. Working on 'Verbena' really showed that up - if I had deleted all the notes I made then I wouldn't have been able to write the final version - and it turned out much better than the first version I sent to Brian.

The course has changed my writing style quite a lot. I used to compose poems almost entirely in my head - playing with the images and the sound of the words until I had a complete picture, and then I would write it down. I also tended not to edit it once it was on paper. I've had to change that a lot this year - because this project has required extensive editing. I think it has been a positive change - I've written much more this year than I ever thought I was capable of, and I think my work is better for the editing.

It's interesting though - working on paper has made it very difficult to memorise my poems like I used to. Composing them in my head meant that by the time I was happy with a poem I already knew it by heart. All the editing and different versions I've gone through this year mean that I haven't memorised any of the poems yet. The editing is good, but in a weird way I sort of feel like I don't fully own them yet, because I can't run through them in my head. Not that I can't learn them all now, if I feel like it. It's just interesting how differently I feel about them, because of the different way I wrote them.

Thursday 17 November

I realised something today. I've got the joy back. Earlier this year I was feeling like writing had become work - like I'd lost something by doing this course - but now I feel differently. I'm almost reluctant to hand the project in. I'm really enjoying playing with it - trying out different combinations and images. I could have handed in last week, but I'm stalling.

Thursday 24 November

Ruth, Liz, Reneilwe and I went out to Robert's farm again today, for a final end of year get together. It was freezing cold and raining, but I enjoyed it. It made the day very quiet, which was what I needed.

Robert read us some Chinese poetry, and he said something really interesting about the difference between Eastern and Western conceptions of creativity. The Eastern conception is that the artist or the poet is a sort of conduit for the artwork - so creativity is about being open and receptive and allowing the work to flow through you. The Western conception is more about planning and sort of chipping away at a work until it's right. The distinction reminds me of what I was trying to figure out before - about the difference between the poems that

arrive fully formed, and all I have to do is put them on the page, and the ones that I have to work at and rearrange and play with until they feel right.

I'm sad that this year is ending. But the four of us agreed that we're going to keep up the writing and feedback groups next year - to help each other to continue with writing. That will be cool. I don't want to lose the momentum I've gained this year. I'm also glad that we'll have more time together as a group. We've actually become good friends.

Sunday 27 November

This is my final entry - at least in the official journal. I'm going to hand this in tomorrow. As much fun as I'm having playing with it, it's time to finish off now. Starting tomorrow I can write just for myself again, and I think that will be good.

I didn't think finishing this would feel any different to my Philosophy thesis, but it does. This time last year, when I was doing final edits the night before handing in, I was completely drained. It was an achievement, and I was proud of it, but by the time I was done all I wanted was to curl up in bed and never think about philosophy again. I was worried that I would feel the same way about poetry by the time I was done with this, but I don't. I feel rejuvenated, and I can't wait to write my next poem.

This has been a good year. I've learned a lot through this degree - not just about writing, but about myself too. I don't think I realised at the beginning how much of a challenge it would be - to write something this deeply personal, and then to put it out there for other people to read. But I'm glad that I did it.

It's strange, but I feel oddly like I've grown up.