

BUTTERFLY BONES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING)

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

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November 2011

ABSTRACT

Butterfly Bones is a lyrical sequence of poetry and prose poems organised to trace a rhythmical, emotional pattern of experience. In its subject matter, the sequence presents an implied personal narrative recording the author's grief in the ten months following her mother's death in January 2011. It presents brief, vivid scenes from the poet's daily life in a rural village outside Grahamstown, and observations of creatures and her natural surroundings, which serve as a counterpoint to her grief. It can also be read as a meditation on writing, solitude and the possibilities of poetry.

BUTTERFLY BONES

Painted nails

When mom got sick she stopped working in the garden. It was unsafe to put her hands in the dirt with her immune system so low. Her nails grew. She began to paint them again. Again? I don't know. Did she paint them before? Before when? Before my memory began? Sometime before, before she became housewife and mother, her hands at work in water and washing and soil? I didn't know that before person. But I watched her paint her fingernails, and the colour she chose matched my toes.

I rain into myself. I do not sleep. Blank page speaks louder. Rain on window slips. Rain rage clouds everything. Wet.

•

The ink sparkles in the eye when I'm this close to it under the light of the lamp at midnight. The shadow of the tip of the pen in my fingers looks like a minaret, or a large cartoon mosquito.

•

A praying mantis crawls from under the sheets, leaf-green against the white cotton.

•

Here comes the rain again heralded by distant heavens colliding, gods shouting, subsiding to irritable grumbling before flaring up to have the last word again. Raindrops scatter heavily to escape their wrath echoing after them.

•

A half-drowned earthworm seeking refuge creeps in under the door.

•

In the early morning the mind reaches to remember a half forgotten dream and starts to fill in the gaps, creating a new one.

•

A bee has traversed the snowy plains of my duvet, scaled the heights of my continental pillow reaching the pinnacle with steady determination. It perches on the very tip of the peak, waving its legs.

•

I share the bed with creatures, small songololos curled in sleepy spirals, to be removed every morning.

•

There are trees growing in the gutters and bees in the roof, and the sound of distant thunder beyond a patch of blue sky still dripping in the aftermath. Birds are calling as if nothing has happened. There could be more to come. Expect severe storms, she forecasts, brightly smiling from the TV screen.

Over and over

Over and over
I see my mother's face,
the blood on her lips,
and congealed
on her swollen tongue.

We missed the final breath—
we were just too late.
I held her hand
under the hospital sheet.
I felt the heat,
her flesh still warm.

I imagined the crematorium—
we were not there to see
the coffin in the furnace
consumed by flames,
her body burning,
reduced to ashes,
placed in a small wooden box.

We buried the box in the stony ground—
up on the hill,
the hole hammered out of the hard earth.
We placed her in the centre.
We covered her with soil and rocks.
We marked the place with stones,
with concrete and bricks.

I sit in the centre of this hum and buzz, bees taking over the room through open windows. They do not worry me if I ignore them, sitting here with my book and my pen on notepad. They surround me with increasing hum and numbers. What can I do? Well, nothing, just ignore them and hope they will eventually move on, hopefully not decide to move in. I am at the centre of the swarm. The quiet place in the middle of their storm. They land on the windows but not on me.

•

What can I write with my tired eyes?

•

Sticks and stones may break my bones, and words will always hurt me.

•

I learned a new word this year. Encephalopathy. En-ce-pha-lo-pa-thy. En-ke-fa-lo-pa-th-ee. The build up of toxins in her body affected her brain function. She was conscious but unable to communicate, her eyes stared, she could hardly move, just barely squeeze my finger.

•

I lie on the couch half awake listening to the hum of the swarm above my head, outside but also inside my head. Little bits of something are being dislodged, breaking off and falling down the chimney into the

fireplace. Fragmented thoughts and words break out
of my brain and fall onto the page.

•

Bees fly fruitlessly against the window pane when
there is a clear way out. If only they could discern
and turn the corner.

•

My head is filled with fluttering thoughts that I'm
trying to catch with a holey butterfly net.

•

The fridge hums to a halt leaving behind a silence in
which the bees' frantic buzzing becomes louder—
until the motor resumes again with a whirr and a
click.

•

The hoop, hoop, hoop of the hoopoe in the morning
loops all through the day, hooping with hope.

•

Bumblebees in the potato bush, hundreds of them,
vibrate in blue flowers.

In my mind's eye

I think of her at the strangest moments, like when I'm filling the toilet cistern with a bucket of water from the outside tap, because we've had to switch off the water supply to the cottage. I see her in my mind's eye walking down the stairs in the house, from the bathroom with a bucket in hand, a water saving tactic during the drought. She is wearing her grey tracksuit pants and a jersey. Her favourite blue beanie protects from the cold, her head worn bald from the chemo.

Pounding foot drummers. Monkey shaped shadows leap across the sunlit strip on the half shaded pillar outside the window. Live shadow puppets. A whole troop hump thumping on the roof, tails trailing. A shake of branches reveals their flying leaps into adjacent trees.

•

Sound strings ripple between my ears. Percussion knocks inside my skull bone, dripping down behind my teeth, humming in my saliva glands.

•

The sky is blue through the window. Cloudless. My eyes are adjusting. It is dim inside when I look at the window at the brightness outside, the edges of the window frames glitter with the contrast. There is heat on the leaves and the repetitive sound of a bird calling. Inside the fridge is humming. A softer light falls on the carpet by the door. A breeze picks up, blowing the branches. I can't look at the sun on the white painted pillar, reflected so bright it leaves a stain on the inside of my eye when I look away and close my lids to bright speckled darkness. The light looks hot, 29 degrees said the weather man in his shiny suit.

Rose Memoire

The night I watered the rose
 (with salt on my face),
the heavens opened
 (and washed away each grain).

Watch,
while the small white bud
slowly unfurls,
as each drop
soaks into the dry red earth.

How do you measure the rain
 when the cup overflows?
How do you measure pain?

A toad stands guard beside the shovel leaned against the wall by the door, below the bright light that shines whitely through the wings of the gathering moths.

•

A giant spider is pressed into the crease where the walls turn a corner.

•

The shrieking cricket will not stop, while something else flutters large against the window pane, wings beat against the glass with a clatter.

•

My heart beats rapidly and erratically; I can hear it in my hard ear pressed against the soft pillow.

•

Spiders between the sheets bite me behind the knees.

•

The heavens object, interjecting my thoughts with their rumbles.

•

When the giant spider crawls under the bedroom door, I trap it under a plastic cup and remove it to the wet grass, where it sits motionless while I look on, thinking – your move.

Books piling

panic rising

I must clear this space

clean the filth

from the corners of the carpet

where dead insects drift, decompose

even as I compose

The curious hornbill, crowned, in its feathered trousers, peers into the bathroom window.

•

The plumbago is in bloom, its lilac flower stars sprouting haphazardly. What a pity it will be cut back soon by the electric hedge-cutter.

•

A four legged spider lives behind the toilet – he's very nervous.

•

A feral cat amongst the grasses beneath the woodpecker tree is white, black and tortoiseshell. Looking for all the world domesticated, it lies in a sunny spot, eyes half closed.

•

Wood hoopoes feed in the tree by the door. I'm going to have to disturb them soon when I go to switch off the pump.

•

I step into her gumboots one foot at a time. My heel is exposed in her old worn sock.

•

Dead heart that feels. It feels like the small sickening crunch of songololo underfoot.

Unstitched

I sit where my mother used to sit,
and sew a button in her place,
with her pincushion at my elbow
and her needle and thread.

I look into the sewing drawer
where the cotton reels lie,
neatly arranged by her hand,
in colour-coded rows.

I choose a blue to match
the colour of my father's shirt,
and see her hand in mine,
as I guide the fibre to the eye.

I double the strands and cut,
carefully tie a knot,
then pierce the place,
and push the needle through.

As the thin thread follows,
it curls and twists,
through invisible tears
that blind me, and so

I must stop, and start over—
I have made a mistake,
must unpick the stitch,
and stitch again.

My mother's handmade cushion on my lap for my book, another at my back, my spine and the spine of the book supported, both.

•

The swarm in the roof has been forcibly evicted. In the aftermath, honey leaks down the walls and seeps out from under the heavy bookcase.

•

A skink darts in the door and across the floor, to find a place in the sun under the coffee table where it comes to rest, to bask in its own audacity.

•

Sunbirds flirt in japonica.

•

A lizard slithers into the leaves overhanging the kingfisher nesting holes which sprout miniature flowers and are littered by pink bougainvillea petals scattered there by the wind.

•

There's a very busy little spider running this way and that, quick, quick, like it doesn't want to miss anything. Reminds me of the White Rabbit – "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date, no time to say hello, goodbye.... I'm overdue, I'm in a rabbit stew... I'm late, I'm late, I'm late."

•

Every morning I check the kettle now, lifting the lid to see if there's another spider lurking there, waiting to be boiled, for tea.

•

My little cooking pot, with the blue enamelled lid, and flowers on the sides.

•

Chickpea fudge. Just stirring and stirring for twenty minutes non-stop waiting for the golden brown colour and aroma to fill the air. Letting my thoughts wander through the characters in my head until the peanut butter smell and texture emerge, eventually. A sticky delicious sludge of almost fudge, short of the sugar, the icing sweetness yet to be added and combined. And having to wait for it to cool, when all I want to do is to eat it straight away.

•

I miss the bees.

•

I got stung on the big toe by a dying bee, right through my sock, poor thing.

•

The white rose memoire is already fading and falling to petal pieces, but there is a small new pinkish bud appearing on the bush rose now.

•

I want to write everything. The wind in the trees and the way the leaves sound, the different trees dropping small fruits on the ground, the noise they make when they hit the hard earth. I want to write the grass and the scratchings from the hare. The sap on the ground in the pony field, the dirt and the muck in the water basins I scrape out with my bare hand and the rustle in the branches of something unseen. And the mousebirds' loud movements bristling in the bushes and the flapping, flurrying feverish sound when they fly. Away. And the way the fudge is sick in my stomach and on my sweetish swollen tongue. I can taste it like thirsty, but no amount of peppermint tea takes it away from me.

•

Set the bee free.

Listen

there's a stirring in the tree,
behind the evening leaves,

a rustle in the branches
of flight unseen.

the sound catches the ear
before the eye moves to see.

there's a movement in the grass,
below the meadow flowers,

a ripple on the surface
reveals the running beneath.

Difficult is watching your mother die. Watching her lie on the white sheet while the dark red blood seeps from her mouth, her jaw clenching, semi-comatose choking.

•

I recall the agony of the first weeks, and the thought of it makes me feel weak, but I can't feel it anymore. Part of me wants to be able to feel that again as much as it really doesn't want to. Knowing how sick it would make me.

•

I assumed that she'd inherited the longevity gene. Her mother lived to the age of ninety four. It never occurred to me that she wouldn't do the same. They were made of the same stuff, surely – fit and healthy, tough as nails, indestructible. I imagined we would have a hard time with her in her old age, that she would be the most stubborn old woman that ever lived.

•

She had an arrow eye, she could see right to the heart of the things, to the bulls eye.

•

The fight is over, she said, it's been tough.

•

I wandered around for a while trying to remember what I knew I had forgotten. It never came to me.

Suddenly

In the hospital she was confused and hallucinating. There's a man in the corner, she said, with a piece of bamboo in his mouth. There's a snake coming through the door. There's a snake just entered the room. They wrapped me in concrete, she said. They wrapped me in concrete. She sat up, suddenly, and hugged me. I know you think I'm mean and horrible she said, but I do love you. She disappeared again. She went away. She looked at me strangely. Her mouth was weirdly slack. She touched my face with her finger. Then she came back, for a moment. I'll see you again, I said. Hopefully, she said. No, definitely, I will see you again.

I remember the time she nearly stepped on a puffadder. That was what marked the occasion. It happened on her birthday. She was walking in front, saw it in the nick of time before her foot came down completely. She jumped. We stepped aside, behind her, and watched it slide down the path, and into the bushes.

•

I think of her every time I drive to town past the spot where she and I collected river stones by the side of the road. The same stones we placed on her grave.

•

Stubborn, so stubborn, she would never let us help her. So determined, bloody-minded. What precious thing inside had been crushed to make her so? Always fighting, her high defensive walls impossible to break through, righteous, controlling. Not allowing me or herself to be.

•

Sometimes I think I am feeling her feelings, in some ways becoming the angry person she could be. Sometimes I feel as if I am seeing things I could see before but in a new way.

•

I see her life in the drawers and cupboards. Everything remains the same; in its place as she left it.

•

In an old photo, she is sitting at the back of the boat in her Jackie O shades. I'm a tousled head asleep on her chest, sucking my thumb. She is holding on to me, protecting me from the wind blowing in our hair. When did we stop being that close?

•

There was a time she barely spoke to me for a year.

•

She told me how after I was born the nurse bought her the bottle to feed me, but hadn't removed the stopper inside. I sucked and sucked at the rubber teat, before she realised it wasn't going down. There was a small blister inside my mouth. Is that where it all began?

•

What am I missing? The only thing that I am missing right now is my mother.

Snapshot

I'm the curled kid cut off in the bottom right hand corner squinting a gap tooth smile, my hunched up shoulders resisting the mother-made pink pleated sleeves of my exploding summer dress. The slight upright figure of my mother stands sideways in the shadows of the open doorway behind me. In her muted trousers, her cream fitted blouse is tucked into the waist above bra-shaped breasts. Captured, she is walking away though her head is turned towards me. She is looking out past the back of my sun bleached hair beyond the eye of the camera, towards a future we cannot see.

I remember one time we walked for miles along the beach; mom, dad and I. I was visiting. We walked past Diaz Cross to Cannon Rocks, climbing over rocks and back again, following our own footprints in the sand, back to where we came from.

•

Dredge the memory, clear the entrance to the harbour of the mind.

•

How can I forget the things I cannot remember in the first place? Too deeply buried to recall, too painful.

•

Dad found the hat while sorting through the drawers, after the rat. That's a famous hat, that, he said. Worn and faded now; she never threw anything away. For as long as I can remember she had that cloth sun hat. It makes me think of family holidays. I see her again in my mind's eye, swimming; her head held above the surface, eyes shaded behind dark glasses with her hair preserved under yellow, red and orange printed flowers.

Widower

I'm going to stick to her routine,
he said, I'll do what she did.

She used to wash the linen and the towels,
on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

There's the same amount of bedding,
he said, but one less towel.

Dad and I walked up the hill and looked at the water in the river after the rains. Standing there, I bent down to look at a small orange-red flower, a tiny orchid shape cupped between my fingers. I noticed the other day how small plants are sprouting around the grave, poking through the bricks and stones. I don't know what to do about the garden, overgrown, there are weeds and clover everywhere.

•

My wheels spin in the mud; I'm going nowhere fast.

•

Giant lemons hang from the small tree, weighing it down. The long grass reaches up towards them, tickling the lower branches that conceal the already fallen fruit decomposing into mouldy lumps.

•

Lost amongst the sheets blowing on the line, a day of washing, with hands in suds, the machine that chugs and shudders as it spins, its centrifugal forces, suck the life out of me. Hanging me out to dry. I turn slowly in the wind again.

•

The dogs, old and blind, walk into furniture. Their arthritic squatting hindquarters struggle to relieve themselves. Time and time again, I find I must wash my hands of them. I don't mind.

•

The robin flies into the living room, bold as brass, and hops around surveying the scene. From chair to chair to table to trunk, it perches by the fireplace amongst unpolished irons and ash coloured wood, before nonchalantly making its way back to the door, and out again.

•

My clothes are no longer whole. I want to fix the holes that are forming, patch them up to stop the unravelling.

•

Close the doors against the wind. Watch the dog towels flap, for all they are worth, helplessly pegged, at the mercy of the tugging gusts. By evening they hang limply, exhausted.

•

Onion skins blow away in the wind above the compost heap.

•

When I open the cupboard door, I find a dormouse sitting on the clothes rail, looking at me, undaunted, as if to say: “Well, what you gonna do about it?”.

Mouse

I didn't mind so much at first

(when it chewed a few holes in an old pullover).

I was even prepared to overlook a few tufts of fleece

(purloined from my sheepskin slippers).

But I draw the line at my favourite jersey.

No more mister nice guy,

that rodent has to go –

It signed its own death warrant,

with its holey signature.

A glance of dark shape shoots across the patio from the wood store, in the early morning as I stand by the back door, looking out.

•

The cocksure robin stands on the kitchen doorstep, hops, tilting its head, a little closer.

•

The crisp half moon cut-out on the dark sky fades into feathery light against the bright blue morning.

•

Tiny collared sunbirds dart in and out the branches by the door.

•

Liquid beads strung on the fence wire.

•

A broken web suspended in the light between the knobwood and the old gnarled tree by the leaning gate, attached by imperceptible strands.

•

A tree frog, smaller than a kingfisher's beak, lives in the rain gauge with a pale green spider that could sit on my thumbnail, if it wanted to.

•

I feed the pony, mixing his mush of bran and pellets
and crushed corn with my bare hand. When I touch
his leg lightly he lifts his foot politely for me to
scrape the hoof free of the mud from the rain the
night before.

•

Pony, dog, tree, me. Standing in a curve down the
field, watching. Little birds alight on pylon wires that
define three straight lines across the sky blue.

•

The pony peers over his shoulder at me, raises his
tail, and farts.

The spring

The rains fall
to soak the soil
and feed the well
that overflows
to the running river.

Thoughts flow
as clear as the water
that pours from deep
inside the earth
and out of my skull.

The tracks of the buck stop here and there, they are everywhere but nowhere to be seen, signatures in the mud.

•

Canaries take off above a knuckle tapping on the water tank, a hollow sound. Water leaks out of the hillside flowing down the path over faint footprints in the mud. A loerie cackles before flashing a red wingtipped dash above my head, a necktwisting glance, away from the small worn trails that disappear into the bush and up the hill.

•

A click and a whirring starts pumping from the waterlily well where a trickle escapes over the wall and runs towards the redmuddy river.

•

Roots run like rivers from the base of the ancient tree.

•

The clouds are an explosion of downy feathers around the burning disc settled on the horizon, sinking between pastel hills. Tiny birds perch on the summit of trees, singing out of their breasts, piercing to the heart of the matter, through the sun-setting light and the clear cold air.

•

The sun is leaving me, blown away by the wind that stays, shaking leaves from the branches to fall onto me and out of my reverie.

•

I glimpse the loerie in the half-light evening, in the thorn thicket, amongst the aloes. I hear its guttural, heavy breathing, alarm call to my left and another at my right unseen, before it flies its silhouette into the canopy of the fig trees by the gate. I stand beneath and look and look for its shape amongst the filigree of leaves and branches, against the darkening sky.

Forgetting

when the wind whips outside,
howling for recollection,
internal stillness descends –
shutters down feeling –
to cut off the blows.

like the agony of childbirth
it cannot be recalled –
the moment that thought
strays near the edge of pain,
it veers away again.

There are cobwebs on the clock. While the wind blows leaf and branch behind misted glass, the hands on its face are frozen.

•

My toes wiggle for warmth under duvet, tucked in on couch with words on my lap, and birds outside singing through wet foliage.

•

Rain mist on the windows, the wetwashed world outside is a blurry watercolour dripping down the panes.

•

The vine on the trellis is animal, hovering in the wind it desperately reaches out its fine limbs to find some solidity to cling to.

•

Candyfloss cobwebs float under the table. The thin strands of an intricate three dimensional web stick to the sturdy wooden legs of the chair.

•

The kingfisher is framed in the window pane, sitting on top of the rain gauge, with vigilant intent.

the dog star

when sirius is gone below the horizon,
then summer is over, I'm told.

the stars appear in the heavens,
and on the tv screen, nightly,

while I sit with an open book,
on the tired sofa, just here,

with a bee on my bare heel,
and a dog scratching at the door.

The bees are back, looking for a way in. They come and go quietly now, leaving their corpses behind on the floor, the window sills and sometimes the sink.

•

A row of starling tails hang over the edge of the gutter, twitching.

•

The spider on the water jug ignores me when I pick it up to fill the kettle. When I'm done I put it back again in its place with its back to the wall. It hasn't moved an inch since.

•

The birds are bullets singing around my ears in the morning, shooting across my line of sight, as I sit contemplating the page.

•

I've become accustomed to the death throes of the bees that find their way in but cannot find a way out. I cannot save them all. I must clear their curled corpses from the floor and throw them out the door, where the robins wait to pick them off the ground. Their remains will fertilize the flowers.

•

The starlings flock with each other, colliding in mid flight to fight. They sit on the beams and the green plastic awning, fluttering and clattering. With their beady beaks and eyes they peek and peer over the

edge. Suddenly an imperceptible signal sets them off in unison and, in one swoop of wing, they are gone.

•

A single crested hoopoe preens on the outside windowsill, peering at its own reflection. It walks like a toddler, or an old man, comically, in short rocking steps from side to side, raising and lowering its crest and ruffling its feathers as it grooms itself with its long curved beak.

•

Why should I apologise for my solitary nature?

The old lady

The old lady who lived on top of a hill was a character in a story from my childhood. When she was a young lady, she travelled, and along the way she collected a menagerie of unusual animals which included a yak from Tibet that made yak butter. She also had a brindle London squatting cat and Alexander, an alligator that liked to smile. Last, but not least, there was the magic mouse that “came with the house”. My earliest ambition was to be that old lady, and sometimes I still want to be her. Perhaps I already am.

I sit on the stump by the gate eating jam on toast with a cup of tea, and glancing up I see a heron passing – silent – above me and over the trees.

•

A hadeda duet flies overhead. Like an old married couple they argue to and fro, calling over each other, interrupting their flow as they go on their way to somewhere else.

•

The surreptitious sounds on the ground are of leaves falling down onto others already fallen.

•

I hear something moving in the undergrowth, crackling underfoot. It's more than a bird, but the dog doesn't stir, and I would rather let it be.

•

The heron lands to rest on the tallest electricity pylon, the wind ruffling its feathers. It glances around casually from its vantage point looking for better pastures, takes off and glides down to the pony field where it lands and stands elegantly amongst the grasses.

•

Kingfisher on a fence pole, considers me, perched.

Present tense

Laundry on the line on hot windy days,
hangs in the shade, a dog
flops in the sunshine.

Unripe lemons in the orchard,
rain in the dented watering can, a frog
in the agapanthus, next to the rose.

A daisy shaped flower,
buried in the thorn thicket, pushes
through the red rock earth.

Butterflies above the grave,
cut flowers in a vase, are balanced
on brick, surrounded by stones.

The setting sun burns a hole in my eye, while the moon waits calmly behind me in the cool clear sky.

•

It must be difficult to be in a state of limbo, my friend wrote to me. I think I've always been in a state of limbo, I thought. Yes, it is difficult.

•

I'm out on a limb, and no-one's going to catch me if I fall.

•

Lots of strange dreams, slipping away. Dreaming that I'm constantly searching for books that I think I've lost.

•

Slowly, slowly, softly, softly.

•

I find myself in a corner of books of poetry. Nothing but words to keep me company.

•

The quest to find the perfect reading position at bedtime: one small pillow behind one large pillow to lean against, two plump pillows to prop up the knees, ankles crossed, duvet tucked across chest and under armpits, another pillow angled against the thighs on which to rest the book. Perfect.

•

Anything is possible in the world of imagination. So
what can I write, on this cold night?

The old town cemetery

The stones are degraded; the names are lost perhaps still alive in someone's memory somewhere. When I look at this place I feel glad that we did not put her here or somewhere else like it; overgrown and neglected. I have found a less tangled spot to sit on the ground under a tree in dappled shade. There is the sound of traffic, distant human voices and dogs barking, cars hooting and crickets clicking, a clump of cacti nearby and wind through trees. But actually when I think about it, it is not so different in a way from where she rests in the bush, the wildness of it. There are butterflies above the graves here and the wildflowers are pushing through, scattered amongst the long grasses. All these people planted under stone. In memory, in memory, speak the stones, while the weather wears away the words. All the time I look around here though, my mind keeps bending towards the granite block on the hill at home, newly laid, with clean and pristine edges, its letters picked out in my mind. How long will it take to fade?

I sit on the earth as she lies beneath it. Butterflies on bare brick settle one at a time. They float in the air in pairs above the stone – the engraved granite block surrounded by smooth pebbles carefully placed against jagged red rocks splintered on the ground.

•

Butterfly bones.

•

I pluck at the small plants shooting through the stones surrounding her grave, pulling them free to clear the edges. They yield easily until I grip one last leafy stem and pull and pull, to find it resisting me and refusing to be lifted from the grasp of the solid ground. I imagine her holding on to the end of its long tap root from deep inside the earth. I have to let it go, to leave it there where it remains embedded in the soil.

•

I must water the rose again, now that the rain has gone.

•

I pull at the tangled weeds around the bush rose. With my garden-gloved hand, I push aside the strangled stems and branches to get a better grip. The fresh green stalks bend easily but do not break under pressure, nor do their thorns prick me.

•

I stand by the water tank and look at the hill. It appears to be sharply in focus, as if I had never really seen it clearly before. A jackal buzzard circles above it in the distance, while a small bird trills a high pitched song from the top branches of the nearest tree.

Under the breath

I thought of her as I walked away from the water tank, looking at the veld flowers spread out beneath my feet which stepped out in her well-earthed boots. Brushing through and crushing their delicate stems and petals despite myself, I felt that she was not there to see them: their little yellow heads scattered everywhere, interrupted by small constellations of purple stars bursting through, and little patches of blue, confettied here and there. In that moment of concentrated fleeting grief, a bushbuck appeared in my left eye. As I startled it, it startled me, and I felt an instant sorry sorrow as it took off in fright out of my sight. Apologising silently, under the breath of the daisies, I wished and willed it to come back, to lie again peaceably in that shady spot where it had been.

PORTFOLIO

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING)

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

ELISABETH GOWANS

November 2011

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Reflective Journal

Notes:

1. *The following is an abbreviated version of my reflective journal.*
2. *The parts indented in italics are excerpts transcribed from my notebooks.*

PART ONE – The Seminar Phase**7 February 2011**

A new chapter. We had our first seminar today for the Creative Writing MA. Am still feeling a bit disconnected. It has come about so unexpectedly¹ and so soon after mom's death. I'm not completely engaged with it yet. Everything seems a bit dreamlike and surreal.

Our first assignment for Friday is to research authors and books that we think we might be interested in and to write a one page report on how we went about it and how we came to select the book(s) that we want to read. The idea is to develop an idea of what we like to read and what books we think we can learn from in order to develop our own style and writing.

I wasn't able to register today and won't be able to do so for a few days yet. Which will limit my access to the library temporarily, so I decided to start my book research in the most obvious place – the bookshelves at home. As I browsed, it made me think of mom (see Assignment 1, *Book research report*, p45).

I remembered that I had lent her my copy of Antje Krog's *Change of Tongue* (Random House, 2003). She had needed something to read when she went to hospital for her treatment at Christmas time. It was lying on her dressing table. I picked it up. The back sleeve was folded into the book at page 231. She must have not finished it. I remembered speaking to her on the phone in the hospital. She said she preferred it to *Country of My Skull* (Random House, 2002), which I had lent her previously. I agreed with her. There were other books too. One was the sequel to Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* (Heinemann, 1972) which I have just finished reading. As I picked up and moved the books, a small box of chocolates was revealed. They were given to her for Christmas.

¹ I was offered a place on the course a few days before it started due to someone dropping out at the last minute.

Seeing them made me cry. I opened the box and there were only two missing. I closed it up again, put it back where it was and left it there.

8 February 2011

I feel like a fraud. I know nothing about poetry. I just write what I write.

I haven't really found my feet yet with this course. I am going to have to find some kind of routine. I can see it is going to be difficult to balance the time I need to spend on this with domestic duties and spending time with Dad. I didn't really achieve much at home today, but I think I need to not get too anxious about it though. The circumstances are what they are and I can only do what I can do. I took a selection of books from the bookshelves at home to browse through, then selected a few from the list and checked them on OPAC² to see what's available in the RU library. I will also see what's at the Grahamstown public library. I still need to look up individual authors and poets to find out more about them.

I managed to write something. I'm not sure that I could call it a poem exactly, but it could form the first draft of something. It is based on the telephone conversation I overheard in Cape Town (see Assignment 2, *At a payphone in Kloof Street*, p48). The woman who stabbed a guy. It is so stuck in my head. I also wrote a bit about mom. Nothing specific, or in any style or form. Just a few thoughts and feelings. I have been crying a lot today. I took Aslan for a walk this morning and sat by the grave for a while.

11 February 2011

We started our discussion group session by reading our book research reports. Everyone was looking at me to start first, which was nerve-wracking. The feedback I got from Robert and Paul [Wessels] was in a similar vein to what Laurence had said to me earlier about my writing being too 'tight and controlled'.

Later when I read out some of my portfolio pieces (from my course application), Robert reiterated that he preferred the poems – that they were more authentic. And that I need to learn to invest my prose with the same kind of emotion. Paul said I need to “unhide” myself – that whilst the prose was well-written, I tend to crowd myself out and hide behind others' creativity, and that it's harder to do in poetry so the poems are more me. He also

² Rhodes Library Catalogue.

said I should read William Carlos Williams and Robert added that I should read Rainer Maria Rilke.

I feel so ignorant about poetry, that I should know more, that I ought to be better read. I feel as if I have a mountain to climb.

Which reminds me of what Laurence said about the process being as important as the project itself, which is why the journaling is so important, to chart our own progress and to be able to mine our own reflections and journals.

I have sought out the few William Carlos Williams poems that are printed in the 'Voices' anthologies that I found in the house. They are a revelation to me. This is a style I can relate to. Maybe what I write could be poetry, after all. I mark the pages by folding the corners down – sacrilege.

13 February 2011

Yesterday morning I went to the book sale at NELM. Spent a while browsing and eventually came away with Antjie Krog's *Down To My Last Skin* (Random House, 2000) and *Whiteheart: Prologue to Hysteria* (Deep South, 2005) by Lesego Rampolokeng – I started reading it just now – it's so intense but I love it.

In the afternoon I typed up all my journal entries so far. Then I started typing up some of my notes, jottings and first draft 'poems', just stuff that I've scribbled. Some work better than others. I think they are really just beginnings, maybe raw material for something.

14 February 2011

Today was a great day at Ystervarkvallei. Just what I needed, especially swimming in the dam in the afternoon, like a child again. The whole day was relaxed and informal and unpressurised which was conducive to writing. For the first freewriting exercise we did, I chose the topic 'I remember' (see Assignment 2, *I remember*, p49) The freewriting exercises are liberating even though I found the second one difficult to get hold of the topic and was rambling a bit, but then Robert made a comment about poetry of association, so something came out of it. He's lent me *Leaping Poetry* (Beacon Press, 1995) by Robert Bly and three other books of poetry. My assignment this week is to write something along those lines, using a strong emotional undercurrent to create something through a series of rapid associations.

The final freewriting exercise was very open and I found myself writing a stream of impressions of the day. When I read it back to myself later, it felt good to me (see Assignment 2, *Kicking Floating*, p51).

15 February 2011

I'm feeling hermit-like today. Don't really feel like communicating or talking to anyone. The phone rang in the main house at lunchtime and I ignored it.

I started going through *Leaping Poetry* and reading some of the poems. I like *New York* and *The Quarrel* by Federico Garcia Lorca. They make sense to me. And *The Ruined Street* by Pablo Neruda.

I am also dipping into Antje Krog's *Down to My Last Skin*. I pick it up and put it down. I flip and flick and read and repeat. I like.

I can only read a few pages of Rampolokeng's *Whiteheart* at a time. It is too intense and traumatising. But I love it – not in the sense of enjoyment, because it's so disturbing and violent. But I love the way it is written, and the way it is structured with long paragraphs and short sentences.

17 February 2011

I'm struggling to focus and concentrate. I'm tired all the time. I feel exhausted and just want to sleep.

I looked up more poems by William Carlos Williams on the internet the other day and downloaded collected poems from PoemHunter.com. Did the same for Neruda and Rilke but haven't read them all yet. Am feeling slightly overwhelmed by all the reading I have lying around. The cottage is strewn with books, piles of them, haphazard.

I rediscovered 'This is just to say' by William Carlos Williams which I remember reading for the first time during my school days (many!) years ago:

This is just to say

I have eaten
the plums

that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

I've made six piles of books on the coffee table in the lounge: RU Library pile; Hill St Library pile; books from bookshelves at home – separate poetry and novels/short stories/memoir; my own books and the books that Robert lent me. I'm overwhelmed by all the stuff I've dipped into, and don't feel as if I've really latched onto anything yet. Don't know what I'm going to write for tomorrow's class. Feel a bit lost.

18 February 2011

Feedback on my writing was all fair and in some cases echoed my own instincts and reservations about whatever I had written.

Our work is all so different. I enjoy reading and listening to the others. I really like Songeziwe's writing. He has something, a way of writing that seems to come naturally to him, it's uncontrived.

I do think I have made some progress though since we've started. At least I have been writing stuff even if it's not very good or substantial.

21 February 2011

This week's assignment is a bit daunting for me. It's a prose storytelling exercise. The feedback I've had has been that my poetry is more compelling than the prose I've written so far, so I've got this idea in my head now that prose is my area of weakness. I've been told that I need to invest my prose writing with the same kind of emotional energy that is

present in the poetry. I guess this exercise is something that I can try to hang that idea onto and see what happens.

I'm not sure how I'm going to do it though if I have to invent a story and plot outline up front. I'm tempted to start with step 2 which is to write some sample dialogue, and see what comes out of that.

I realised after my meeting with Laurence, that I haven't been reading much prose these past few weeks. I tried to think of what I've read recently that I've enjoyed or found interesting. I thought of the Chaim Potok book that I finished just before the course began – *My Name Is Asher Lev*, about an observant Hasidic Jew who is an artist. I've just picked it up again and it opened on a page with a quote by Picasso: "Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth." That reminded me of part of the conversation I had with Laurence which touched on the reasons why I want or feel a need to write. And how it is possible to write about personal things and to disguise them in some way.

I just have to keep on writing no matter what. I must try not to think about seeking the 'voice of approval'.

23 February 2011

I feel I haven't been doing nearly as much reading and writing as I ought to be. I have just been trying to work on my assignment. I have a basic story outline in my head, and can see the characters and the scenario and know more or less how I want it to play out. I wrote a very short plot outline and then just made some notes about the characters for myself, asking myself questions about them, so I could picture them more clearly.

I broke the story down into scenes and then just freewrote each scene (see Assignment 3, first version plot outline of *A short story of Sally and Steve*, p55). I can hopefully use this for the flash fiction part of the assignment. However, I've realised that I now have a problem with the second part of the assignment where we have to write a couple of pages of dialogue between our characters. This is a bit of a problem in that my two characters are a husband and wife who are barely speaking to each other. In fact, the silence between them is a critical aspect of the story, so I'm not quite sure what to do about it.

28 February 2011

I felt a little under pressure on Thursday morning to complete my assignment in the morning before I had to go to work at Grocott's. It wasn't too bad though. I re-read the scene breakdown, then reduced it to 300 words for the flash fiction. I wasn't sure what to write for the dialogue so I just started at the beginning with Sally and Steve at home at the breakfast table and improvised.

At the feedback session on Friday I got good comments but Robert thought it was a bit too grim and the ending a bit implausible. Paul [Mason] suggested I change one or two elements in the story and see what happens. I tried to bear it in mind when I came to edit it, by changing the order of the scenes a bit e.g. starting with her thoughts in the car and reflecting back on the breakfast scene. I decided to make her murder fantasy into a dream (see Assignment 3, version two of *A short story of Sally and Steve*, p58). It doesn't have the same impact as the first version, but I thought that it might add another dimension into the whole story. Rather than the bare violent reality, the dream reflects her underlying emotions and that deep down she knows it works both ways i.e. that he feels the same way about her. The final scene reveals a softer view of him – he is more considerate e.g. he asks her what she wants to do rather than insisting. It hopefully creates a sense that there might actually be some hope for this relationship. Or perhaps it is ambiguous and it is not clear what his intentions are. He could be hiding them. Perhaps the reader can decide for themselves.

Today, Monday, was not a great day. I felt out of sorts from the start. Not engaged with the world or anything. Mind blankness. I hate everything I've written. I had no imagination for any of the exercises we were given. I can't get a grip on anything, it seems. I feel distant, far away. I don't really feel like talking to anyone. It feels like an effort. I just want to be alone. It was a bad day to be having my meeting with Robert. I was wordless, incapable of stringing a coherent sentence or thought together. My brain drain. I felt so stupid not being able to speak.

Robert was helpful. He talked about thinking of writing as a kind 'raft' in life. He also suggested I keep a grief diary. In addition, he suggested I try to write something starting with an external thing as a starting point, since most of what I've been writing is internal stuff.

1 March 2011

Following on from Anton's seminar, we've been challenged to see if we can keep track of our writing time. This morning when I sat down at my computer (at 9:25 precisely) I was basically brainstorming our dialogue assignment (see Assignment 4, *The Sweet Deal*, p61) which we are writing in pairs. It took me 49 minutes, then I had to get ready to go. I didn't measure the time we (Namhla and I) spent writing together – difficult, as we were chatting and eating lunch in between. Maybe about 2 hours – but I'm not sure if that counts.

Writing the dialogue together was challenging. I had the initial idea about how the characters would come into contact with each other and what the scenario should be. I had sketched out the beginnings of their encounter in the morning and it seemed feasible. Namhla liked the idea so we decided to stick with that and go from there. I found it quite difficult to develop it in such a way that it would remain interesting. I hadn't really thought about how it would pan out in the end.

We kind of talked it through step by step which I think made it seem a bit ponderous and uninteresting at first, partly because of the slowness of the process of writing it. It is interesting working with a co-writer. It definitely slows things down as you have to discuss and negotiate each step. Fortunately, I think we were more or less on the same wavelength though. We worked through it and ended up with a basic outline. We decided to both take it away and look at it ourselves later, rework or add any new ideas, then we can compare our two versions tomorrow, discuss and combine to make a final version.

I hate doing the shopping. It always makes me think about mom. I get flashbacks and it makes me want to cry in the aisles.

2 March 2011

I've been struggling to settle on a character for the monologue we have to write. I decided to drop the little fat kid as my subject as I just couldn't get into his head somehow. Then the woman at the payphone in Kloof Street popped into my head again, so I tried something with her. It's very sketchy, not really a proper monologue, but could be another poem (see Assignment 4, *Saturday night, Sunday morning*, p66). It'll have to do for now. It may not be good enough, but will do for a first draft.

10 March 2011

I realised the other day that I need to rethink and readjust the way I do my journaling activities, as it's not working at the moment.

I think I need to separate my more personal diary type reflections and my reflections on the course itself. My handwritten diary will be entirely free and personal, while this document will be more course focussed. There will obviously be overlap but I am writing them independently of each other.

I also carry a notebook with me all the time to write stuff down whenever I think of something, and I refer back to it when I'm writing and journaling to jog my memory or to start a new piece of writing. Life is fragmented and messy, and so are my multitude of notebooks and journals, but that's fine. It works for me.

I think I struggle with the whole reflective journal concept a little. I'm a bit concerned about over-analysing things. I think I'm probably unconsciously resisting it a bit. Sometimes I'm wary of dissecting every little thing, as if it might have the effect of killing spontaneity or creativity. Sometimes overthinking things is not necessarily a good thing.

Anyway, enough stalling and more reflecting, Liz. Reflecting on the past week, I guess I should start with the discussion session that we had last Thursday with Anton. We came with our monologues and dialogues with some trepidation.

I was concerned that I really only had the bare bones of a monologue and was expecting to be told to flesh it out. But it turned out to be fine as it was.

We read out our dialogue and that was fine too. It was interesting that some of the feedback that we (Namhla and I) received echoed some of our own concerns that had come up between us. We needed to tighten it up as parts of the conversation went on a bit too long.

Michael Rabiger seminar:

Mixed emotions about having my work (*A short story of Sally and Steve*) examined in this forum. I don't like attention. It just felt excruciating. I prefer to be invisible. I'm uncomfortable with any form of flattery too. With any kind of criticism I tend to just accept it. I'm so self-critical anyway, so I'm inclined to just agree with any negative

assessment. Anyway, that aside, I found his analysis really interesting. It's impossible to see your own work with such a clear critical eye and broken down in terms of its constituent parts and meaning.

The positive feedback that has stuck in my head were references to the poetic nature of the writing and its subtlety i.e. the ability to convey something indirectly with a few words.

Mzi Mahola class:

I enjoyed the class with Mzi. I like his poetry. The first poem we looked at was *He Came Down the Street*. I had read it for the first time the night before on his website and liked it. It is so simple. As soon as Mzi starting talking about poetry in terms of "painting a picture with words", I knew exactly what he meant. It seems natural to me to start with a visual image. To paint it in such a way that it creates a picture in the mind of the reader. But it's also not just a picture – if done well it will have a meaning for the reader, who will interpret it in their own way. Mzi talked about "stirring the world of senses". He was adamant also that the audience must not have to work out what it is all about. And that the words must show, not tell.

I think I already knew I liked writing in this way. I remembered scribbling something in one of my notebooks from last year and went searching for it. This is what I wrote:

What informs my style of poetry? I like the idea of capturing a moment in a few words. It doesn't have to mean anything in particular. The reader can interpret it as they wish. Mainly I would like to paint a picture in a person's mind. I like the idea that each reader will put these elements together in a different way, but the basic ingredients are the same, the monkey on the windowsill, for example. I also don't think poetry has to be intellectual, or necessarily have a hugely deeper meaning. It is also for the pure joy of playing with words and creating word pictures.

In my ignorance, I had no idea that I was talking about imagist poetry. I feel encouraged now.

11 March 2011

We had our feedback session with Mzi today, and Brian Walter. Mzi was very complimentary about all of our writing which was encouraging (see Assignment 5, p67).

I find the process of looking at other people's work very useful, not only to see what they are doing but also, by looking at what does and doesn't work, there are lessons to be learned. There was some discussion about the use of run-on lines and punctuation. Mzi also strongly expressed his view that one must be careful about the over-use of adjectives and adverbs, and that he felt it is better to describe something specifically using concrete images rather than using an adjective that is open to interpretation.

These are my notes that I jotted down from the class:

- *Each line must be able to stand on its own.*
- *Think about invisible punctuation.*
- *If a word is worrying you at the end of a line, then try to change the order, but it must end with a strong word.*
- *Keep reworking it.*
- *Make every word count – be selective and use appropriate words.*
- *Think about consistency in punctuation in the poem.*
- *Can use italics to introduce new voice.*
- *Always about making it clear to the reader.*
- *Avoid using same words in the poem unless for a specific purpose; use synonyms.*
- *Think about how a stanza ends, it should end quite strongly.*
- *Avoid using adjectives and adverbs, always question them, come up with specific image instead.*
- *Look at ways of rearranging words.*
- *Describe specifically – give concrete images.*
- *Always just put it down, then recraft/edit.*
- *There is a process to go through, a self-critical process, take something good and work at it, to shift it up a gear.*
- *Put stuff away, when you look at it later, you are more emotionally detached.*
- *Raise your own child, the way you want to raise it.*
- *Every reader has their own reading.*
- *Always try to come up with something fresh and original, reader wants to see something new, never use clichés, find new ways of saying things.*
- *Two types of writers: inspired – writes when inspiration strikes; or trained – trained to write every day.*

13 March 2011

I was looking through one of my notebooks today and came across some thoughts that I wrote down about creating characters:

Today I was thinking about materialism and how people prioritise wealth and status, how they behave e.g. how some people are arrogant in showing off their wealth and status. How others are down to earth and likeable regardless of their wealth and privileged backgrounds. It made me think about people I know or have met e.g. Becca; and then Chris, and Miranda, the other Becca and Tom. All these 'characters' started popping into my head. That set me off thinking about the process of creating characters and how we borrow / steal characteristics from people we know. How difficult it might be if they recognised elements of themselves in a story. They might think that the character is how you see them when it is actually a composite of real and imagined characteristics. It's a difficult and fine line to tread with people that you know. It was a random stream of thought but I then I found myself having an imaginary conversation with such a person, trying to explain the process. i.e. this is just a fictional character, it is not you.

21 March 2011

In last week's seminar Brian took us through the use of symbolism and myth in poetry. It was enlightening. As we looked through the examples he handed out, I began to see connections and possibilities for the freewriting exercise we did first of all on the subject of string, thread etc. I also saw possibilities for stuff I had written before. He gave us some useful advice on line construction for poetry, the use of "heavy", "strong" and 'weaker' words and creating rhythm and balance. "The line as unit is important." Also that "memories are important".

He encouraged us to be inquisitive and to access older myths, stories etc. so that we might reinterpret our own world through these stories that other poets and writers have been using throughout history.

Our homework was to write a poem/short story using the freewriting we had done on the subject of string/thread and try to weave the image throughout (see Assignment 6, *Cotton Blues*, p69). We should also repeat the exercise with another subject of our choosing – he

recommended we use something elemental e.g. rock, a bird etc. and research its symbolism, think about its symbolic nature and try to include it in the poem/story. He also advised us to:

- *Use words that use the image to create a logical progression.*
- *Keep to everyday images that are recognisable – can twist into something more profound.*

I wrote something based on the freewrite but also went back to four lines that I had written the week before that I wasn't sure what to do with, about the quilt and the blanket. The lesson helped me look at those lines in a different way which prompted me to expand on it. I only added another few lines and tinkered with it a bit, but it immediately added another dimension and some meaning (see Assignment 6, *After they were gone*, p70).

I chose water as my image and theme for the second part of the exercise and did a little internet research on the symbolism of water. I had a few ideas about what to write about but struggled to settle on anything in particular. Eventually I decided on the watering of the rose, but even then couldn't quite get into it. I wrote something but wasn't entirely happy with it. It wasn't working but decided to leave it at that and see what would come out of the discussion group and feedback which might help me (see Assignment 6, *Rose Memoire*, p70).

The feedback session on Friday was very useful. Brian is very specific with his suggestions and advice and we looked at each poem in as much detail as time would allow. He pointed out that I have a problem with punctuation (true!) and helped me to see how the poems needed more shaping and crafting. "Think about the reader – make it easier for them."

Joan Metelerkamp:

Our seminar with Joan was instructive. Her theme was "perfectly useless concentration", a quote from Elizabeth Bishop. Just listening to her speak frankly of her experience of writing poetry was helpful. She had a lot to say that was useful.

As an exercise she had us find a comfortable space to just sit and listen to her reading. She read so beautifully. I had my eyes closed. The one piece she read about the fly and the

deathbed took me in my mind back to the hospital room and my mom, and tears came to my eyes.

Then we were given twenty minutes to write something – anything that came to us. She made a point of saying that this was not a freewriting exercise. We should be conscious of what we were writing and concentrate, but not be under pressure to write anything specific. I immediately thought that I just didn't know what to write.

Anyway, I had to start with something so I just went back to basics and started with describing something that happened in the morning. This is what I wrote:

I drank spider tea this morning.

Did I boil it alive? I'm not sure.

I don't think so. Surely. It would have moved, when I opened the kettle, to pour the cold water into it?

It tasted foul.

I'm only writing this incidental thing now, of course, because I'm trying to distract myself from the image in my head, of the hospital room, the windows and the stillness and the storm. Remembering the tears then and feeling them now.

A cricket appeared over the crest of the couch. It looked at me for a while, unmoving, then turned away and went back again.

When I sat down, and took off my shoes, I could smell my own feet.

I'm not very good at writing on demand. I resist it. My mind shuts down, runs away to blankness.

I fed the pony. Mixed his mush, of bran, and pellets and crushed corn, with my bare hand, sticky on the gatepost. When I touched his leg lightly, he lifted his foot politely, so that I could scrape the hoof free, of the mud left by the rain the night before.

22 March 2011

Joan also talked about the question of authority. On what authority do you write? How do you answer that question for yourself? It's an open question and there is no right answer. Joan said that from her experience, the answer is that you do it again and again and again. Repeat the question, and find new forms for asking the question. At some point you have to say "this is how it is for *me*".

She talked about getting "your heart to sit in your brain". If I understood her correctly I think she was saying the challenge is to write entirely with your own voice and emotion, but consciously, with thought. To be able to ignore other peoples voices in your head. So, not just writing with your heart and emotion, without thinking, but to be able to concentrate and apply your brain to what you are feeling. It is the combination of heart and brain, that is entirely yours. To be true to yourself. The "heart's thought" is *your* imagination.

She talked a bit about how a poem is different from a piece of prose. These are a few notes that I jotted down as she was speaking:

- *Rhythmic construct is crucial.*
- *A momentary apprehension of the beautiful (detail, present, revelatory, being with your whole being).*
- *It is useful for yourself.*
- *The thing that stands also constantly runs away – it's transformative – the reader has to make it happen – there is a connection – a hopeful desire to communicate – intellect and feelings are connected.*
- *Feelings can get tangled – find the strongest voice – what makes a poem is the central thrust of the thing.*
- *Does the process of what you are writing arrive at the thing? Or is the process driven by the thing? A poem should arise as it goes along.*

I think the "thing" is essentially the essence of the poem, what it is about, and what she is saying is that the thing should arise through the process of writing the poem. It doesn't work so well the other way around – to start with the thing, it loses something.

In other words you need to know what you think and feel before you start writing, but you should not write it with the end in mind i.e. knowing what the point of it is. The process of writing the poem itself will reveal the point of it.

- *'Negative capability' is not freewriting – it is a question of focus.*
- *The poem might be prompted by an experience but it also transforms the experience itself.*
- *On the question of judgement, be your own aesthetic judge, cutting out the external judgmental voices. It is hard to trust yourself and not run to authority.*
- *Writing is not just about therapy, it's about life.*

23 March 2011

Oh, I'm writing. I was just thinking that the lack of a particular topic for the homework exercise that Joan gave us this week has been a good thing for me in a sense that I haven't been obsessed with tackling the assignment itself. I think that in the course so far I've been so focussed on just producing a particular piece of writing in the limited time available before Friday, that it sometimes crowds out any other reading or writing.

But these last few days I've just been writing stuff as it comes up in between everything else and have filled pages and pages in my notebook.

24 March 2011

I think what has been different for me this week also is that I have been able to allow myself to spend some time on my own in my own space without allowing outside concerns to intrude too much. I've allowed my mind to wander into different things. On Wednesday I had these characters talking to each other in my head. I just let them talk most of the time. Although I did write them down a bit, I was also afraid of interrupting them.

27 March 2011

I felt when I went into class on Friday that I didn't have anything fully formed, just bits of stuff that I had written down in the week (see Assignment 7, p71). I expected to get feedback and advice on how to form them into poems or something else. But I'm told that what I've written is in fact prose poetry and is basically fine as it stands. Robert said: "You could do a whole book of this stuff – just carry on doing what you are doing".

The one message that has been coming through for me amongst contradictory advice and opinions is that we have to trust our own instincts, listen to and find our own voice, do what feels right, what works for us. We are all individuals. I'm just trusting my own instincts now. What I've learned about myself is that if I feel really blocked, it actually doesn't help me to try to push through it. In fact that can sometimes be more harmful than helpful for me in a way. I have found that it is better for me to just walk away and do something else, so that when I arrive at the page I can write something even if it's just a little thing.

I wrote this in response to feeling blocked when we were asked to freewrite our project proposal. I struggled to freewrite at that moment, and the more I tried, the more my brain and my hand resisted. And yet after that class, I was driving home down the Salem road when little images and sentences started to appear in my head. When I got home, I stopped outside my gate, took out my notebook and wrote them down (see Assignment 8, *it's a mission, this sub mission*, p73).

29 March 2011

Had my supervisor session with Robert yesterday. He has shown some confidence in me and thinks the prose poems that I've been writing are the way to go.

I'm just not sure how I'm going to write all these prose poems without forcing them, without descending into self-consciousness. They come best when they just come to me. I can't just think of something as a starting point and go from there. They have to present themselves, slip sideways into my brain.

At the moment my notebooks are dry and empty.

7 April 2011

Silke's seminar on Monday was instructive and enlightening. She spoke very eloquently and it was particularly interesting to see her notebooks and what she went through in constructing her MA novel and other writing.

I really don't like what I've written this week for the assignment though. It's boring and bland. It has no life. I get the theory of narrative and structure etc. but I just can't seem to make it work when I write.

10 April 2011

I gained a lot from Silke's feedback session on Friday. I wasn't happy with what I wrote. Not so much the idea for the story but that I hadn't executed it well. I knew what I was trying to achieve but it wasn't there. Even more apparent when I read it out, it didn't seem to have much life. Just one thing happening after the next thing and I could see that I was explaining too much.

Had positive feedback anyway, but also observations that echoed my own reservations. That parts of it were too generic and need more specific details. Silke suggested trying to write it in the first person. And to make it more active by taking out unnecessary words and changing the tense.

There were other useful points that came up in the course of the session with regard to everyone's work e.g. the importance of thinking about the story and what is necessary for the story i.e. it is easy to see what is happening in your mind and to then just describe everything you see which means you could end up including stuff superfluous to the story itself. Also to be truthful to the emotion of the story – don't rationalise characters' emotions. Don't step back and abstract, keep things concrete.

When I came back to the piece to edit it, I tried to keep these things in mind and it did start to click into place more for me. Still not sure if it works entirely, but I feel a lot better about it now (see Assignment 9, *A new day*, p74).

I also went back to *Cotton Blues* today and reworked it a bit based on Brian's and Robert's comments. Added another stanza and made them all four line stanzas in the process. Tried to resolve the ambiguity in the word 'tears' that Brian pointed out to make it more specific to crying. Continuing to realise how much work it takes to polish a piece of writing, and how putting it aside for while and coming back to it can really make a difference.

There is a conflict between wanting to overwork things into something neat, compact and uniform, or to just let it be free, to stand as it is. I don't know what it should be.

12 April 2011

I was lying awake and started thinking about writing stories, and the difference between journalism and creative writing. Journalists *look* for stories. They know what they are

going to write about. Creative writing is mostly the opposite of that. Creative writers live, observe and experience life and then all of that stuff informs what they write.

It could be said that journalists are more exploitative in that way. They go into a situation knowing that they want to write about it, thinking about what angle they are going to take etc. They consciously mine life around them for stories to create a piece of writing. Creative writers on the other hand work more with the unconscious mind which stores information that they can draw on. They allow the story to come to them.

To take the mining analogy further, a journalist would find a likely piece of land that might yield some gemstones, they do research, they prospect and then they start digging to get as many gems out of the earth as possible.

A creative writer on the other hand, goes for a walk, she's walking along a river, she sees a shiny stone, she picks it up, turns it over, admires it, puts it in her pocket, forgets about it, finds it months later, it's a nice surprise, it makes her feel good, she remembers the day she found it, she decides to work it into a colourful mosaic she's making, with other stones and pieces of cut glass.

13 April 2011

In Robert's seminar we read through a selection of stories and poems which all had a different style and tone, the idea being that we should each get a sense of which ones we could relate to, then try writing in that style.

Notes about the Marias piece: the tense changes from present to past; the present tense in the beginning takes you immediately into the scene with its sounds and everything. As if he is reliving it, he then switches to past tense when he starts describing the shoes and what he could see of the woman etc, – it is described as a past memory. Then it switches back to the present as he reflects on the memory itself, at the time of writing.

I need to latch onto a memory that I can write about in the same way. The other piece that stood out for me was the Nina Cassian poem which is also about a memory, in her case a childhood memory. It is different in a sense that it has a lot of movement and the high emotion of a child's sense of freedom. Running, running, running, flight, holding, tearing, tearing, bursting, breaking,

feeling, flying... It captures fleeting memories. The Marias story is more subdued, reflective and observant.

The assignment has frozen me a bit. I don't know where to start. We are supposed to be writing in the style of the extract that most appeals to us, but I don't know how to do that. It seems to me a bit contradictory to 'finding your own voice' and I can't quite get my head around it. It's difficult enough trying to think of something to write about, let alone trying to consciously write it in a particular way.

I feel like I'm being set up to fail, and can't help thinking that whatever I write, it's going to be compared to the original extract that has been written by a great writer. And shown to be awful by comparison. What's the point? I can't write like them, I can only write the way I write. My writing may be crap, but at least it's my crap.

14 April 2011

Lorine Niedecker wrote:

'...

*But what vitality! The women hold jobs—
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
and go to church.*

*What would they say if they knew
I sit for two months on six lines
of poetry?'*

I can relate to that in a way. Just in relation to writing itself, I am amazed how some people can just write reams and reams of stuff in a short space of time. I can't work that way. Most of the time it takes me ages to write anything. I can end up with just a few lines. I potter around until a sentence slips into my head, then I write it down and that's the extent of it.

I think if I get one really good poem out by the end of the year, that'll be good going for me. And that's OK, that's just the way it is for me.

18 April 2011

I clearly felt very frustrated by the assignment last week. No matter how hard I tried to channel Marias, the writing still came out in my own way of writing or in my own voice. But at the end of the day, whether it worked for me or not, at least I wrote something – something came out of the struggle (see Assignment 10, p79).

Why am I doing this? I don't think I'm doing it out of a need or desire to achieve a masters degree, or to achieve some kind of recognition. I'm here to learn and develop my own writing practice. It's an opportunity to absorb myself as much as possible in reading and writing. It's a slow process for me, that much I have learnt already. I need to be able to go at my own pace otherwise it'll be kind of pointless. It's for me and my own sanity, not to prove anything or seek approval.

I've been thinking recently about the writing I've done so far, and starting to see themes emerging, starting to see how I could start to divide them according to time and place and theme, for example: a split existence and sense of identity; flashes of memory; of sights and sounds; UK / SA; Eastern Cape; nature; grief; childhood; fictional 'musements' – imaginary flights of fancy...

26 April 2011

Where does inspiration come from?

I'm trying to get into writing mode now. Have to write something for Mxolisi's class but what? Have been re-reading my notes about the assignment from the seminar:

Write about something you would like to forget, incorporating various levels of our experiences – try to involve ways of looking at the world. Not looking for logic, or event. Look deeper – look at what life is doing to us. What has happened to you? What would you like to leave behind? Process of reclaiming and excavating and laying things bare – no straight narrative please! See complexity embedded in our lives.

Whenever I am confronted with a topic where I have to consciously think about what to write and approach it in a specified way, I find it really difficult to get started. I think I understand what he is getting at, but I don't know how to do it without it being contrived.

In the end I tried not to think about it too hard, but to open my mind to thoughts, and observations of elemental things around me, and feelings that seemed difficult to express and to put them down (see Assignment 11, p81).

I could relate a lot to what Mxolisi was saying about his writing being a way of preserving himself and creating order out of chaos. It reminded me a bit about what Robert was saying about using writing as a kind of raft to put your stuff onto, to keep everything afloat. You can't change or control the course of the river, but you can use the raft of writing to keep yourself afloat.

It has occurred to me that if I just took a year off to write on my own, it would be seen as a self-indulgent waste of time – it would be viewed as 'unproductive' and would most likely be looked down on with a sense of scorn by friends and family. Framed within a masters degree, however, the exercise becomes somehow more legitimate or credible in the eyes of others. It is somehow viewed as more 'productive' because you get a piece of paper at the end of it to prove that you've done it. Which I suppose highlights the fact that writing is not viewed conventionally as a worthwhile pursuit in the so called 'real' world. I guess that is part of the function of universities – to provide a space for experimentation and creativity, in both the arts and sciences, where you are not 100% bound by real world constraints (apart from the fact that you or someone else has to pay the fees!).

I've been trying to go through the editing exercise that Robert suggested by cutting out all the bits and pieces I've written so far and rearranging them in different orders to see how they could fit together. Looking at what I've done so far outside of the assignments, it seems really insubstantial and worthless at the moment. I don't see how it adds up to much or anything worth reading, and am struggling to see the 'form' that Robert was referring to. There is no rhythm to them either, and they don't all link together. I would have to discard half of them just because they don't fit with the rest. What do I do with them?

3 May 2011

I enjoyed Hazel's seminar a lot. We started with a short freewriting exercise on the topic of mortality. Then she took us off to the local cemetery to write there for half an hour. She has given us a really interesting assignment – a little box containing a number of items as a source of inspiration for anything we want to write. There is a box of matches, two small white buttons, two blue beads tied together, a crumpled piece of paper with a hand-drawn heart scrawled inside, an advertising leaflet for a traditional herbalist, a small seashell and cork from a wine bottle (see selected extracts from Assignment 13, *Karen and Jonathan*, p88).

Robert suggested we also work our freewriting from the class into something for feedback on Friday as a second part of the assignment (see Assignment 13, *A few lines on mortality and Cemetery*, p89).

I noticed in class that I was feeling quite calm about the freewriting exercise. I didn't feel too anxious about it at the start, nor under pressure to carry on writing – I just stopped when I was ready to stop. I felt comfortable going at my own pace and just writing what I wanted to write at that moment.

5 May 2011

Notes:

- *Need to reflect more on the dilemmas I face, the questions that I ask myself about the process of writing and life.*
- *Think about how the UK stuff fits in. It is an important aspect for me and all the issues related to being away and returning. The internal conflicts that arise out of that in terms of coming to terms with yourself and where you are, literally and psychologically, emotionally etc.*
- *It may not be immediately clear how it all links together now but hopefully it can be worked into some kind of loose narrative, even if I have to separate them into broader categories too, which could also offset each other in some way.*

- *For me there is also the physical presentation of how it is presented on the page and in book form e.g. do they flow continuously? Or set on separate pages. These are all issues that affect how they are read.*

One of the attractions of this course for me is that it is a safe space to write. I don't need or want any more feedback on my work other than what I am receiving at the moment from the other students and the teachers. I'm not ready for a wider audience yet.

I've learned that writing is a slow process and that this year is just one small step in the greater scheme of things. I'm starting to see the long view beyond the end of this year; the many years ahead and that there is no end to it, no point at which you can stop and say, now I've got it, I'm a fully fledged qualified writer. It's an ongoing process.

All the books I've been reading recently about writing have had an effect on how I perceive writing as a process and a practice and a profession in the greater scheme of things. Not that I ever had any illusions about the difficulty of it before, but having insight into the lives of experienced writers has brought it more into focus.

I read Lorine and I feel I have found my place.

Reading generally has been important for me this year so far and has assisted me into a writing frame of mind. Robert asked us to reflect on our reading so far this year and write about it (see Assignment 12, *A voyage around my reading*, p83).

15 May 2011

A strange thing happened this morning: as I lay in bed, I started to design the cover of my book. I could see it in my mind's eye and started sketching in my notebook.

I have got into the habit of writing in my personal diary every day now before I go to sleep. It's mostly a mundane breakdown or report of my day, but it feels good to feel that I have to do it every night. It's become a routine thing that I feel compelled to do regardless of how late it is or how tired I feel, I do it anyway.

This last week has been a strange week in terms of the assignment, with a change of direction and focus. I struggled to come to terms with it initially (see Assignment 14, *Journal Research*, p90).

16 May 2011

Our final assignment this week was to write a reflective report on books that we've read about writing specifically. This is my response:

My response to books on writing

I was looking through some of my old notebooks from last year and came across a few excerpts that I had copied from a book called *Poets on Prozac* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), which is a series of essays written by poets on mental illness, their treatment and the creative process.

In David Budbill's essay "The Uses of Depression," he claims that in order to write poetry he needs to be "*empty, open, quiet, passive, receptive, dark*" and "*to do nothing in order to be filled.*"

This resonates with something I have discovered this year: in order to start writing I can't really attack it head on with too much purpose – I need to be able to just write things down as they occur to me, as they slip sideways into my mind, and to just let them be.

Like Joan Metelerkamp's seminar and the contemplative exercise that she set us for our homework: create a time and space in your life to just sit for a while, see what comes up in your mind and write it down.

Earlier this year I read *Writers and Their Notebooks* (University of South Carolina Press, 2010), a series of essays on different writers' experiences of journaling, which gave me some comfort in relation to my own haphazard practice of jotting down random thoughts in the spiral bound notebook I keep on hand at all times. The wide variety of approaches to note keeping by each author in the book shows the intensely personal nature of journal keeping; that there is no template or ideal.

In his essay, *My Own Particular Custom*, Reginald Gibbons describes a writing journal as "a process by which one looks at life and a way with words and symbols, with the

possibilities of image and story, or the enfolding of a sequence of rhythms and discoveries of feeling.” (p125)

Zan Bockes keeps four notebooks, one of which contains a form she calls ‘musements’. She describes these ‘musements’ as “*similar to prose poems, in that they look like a block of prose, but taste like poetry.*” (p56) The latter description struck a chord with me in relation to my own notebook entries.

This thought leads me to think of another book I’ve started reading called *Writing for Your Life* by Deena Metzger (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). This bit on page 22, made me laugh out loud with self-recognition:

“I don’t know what I’m writing,” wailed psychotherapist Dánahy Sharon Rose. “What are these?” she asked disparagingly. “They aren’t poems, stories, articles. They’re nothing.”

“Call them ‘pieces’,” I suggested.

... A piece can go in many directions, may resemble a prose poem, may be a meditation, a musing, a review, may incorporate poetry, drama, criticism, anything at all, everything, into it. Nevertheless, each ‘piece’ has a very precise form, determined by the content and language.

Metzger also poses the question: “*What is a poem?*” and provides her own definition as follows:

A poem is a penetration into the essence of something. It begins in a moment, is the thing itself as well as the surrounding space. A poem is the spaces between the words. (p11)

Metzger goes on to differentiate between poetry and prose in the following way, ending with an interesting metaphor:

Story takes moments, links them together, finds the order inherent in their relationship, and then fills them out. A story has a beginning and an end, has consequences. If the journal is the jumble of raw material – blood, bones, sinews – and a poem is the cell, the impulse, the story is the entire animal. (p12)

The selected notebook entries in Theodore Roethke's *On Poetry and Craft* (Copper Canyon Press, 2001) resemble my own scrawny journal scribbles, at least on a visual level: one or two lines separated by a divider between each entry. Having felt a bit dubious about my own notes up to that point, I felt a sense of hope rising.

In an attempt to tackle something technical, I dipped into Ursula Le Guin's *Steering the Craft* (Eighth Mountain Press, 1998), and settled on the following: "what details are included, what omitted...has to do with focus – the focus of the sentence, the paragraph, the piece as a whole."

She uses the term 'crowding' to refer to how a writer should endeavour to avoid "flabby language and clichés" or using too many vague words, but also to do so without losing vividness or movement.

I think this is a trap I have fallen into in my own writing i.e. using too many words in an effort to emphasise what I'm trying to say. I repeat the same thing but in different words, almost in an attempt to cover all the possibilities. So this is a lesson I can take to heart.

Leaping is just as important, Le Guin writes:

What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in. There's got to be white space around the word, silence around the voice.

I particularly like the latter description with its reference to white space which is a concept I can relate to. It also echoes what Metzger wrote when she referred to poetry as existing in "the spaces between the words." (p11)

Le Guin sums up with the following words: "It's as if the story, the work itself, has a shape it's trying to achieve, and will take that shape if you'll only clear away the verbiage."

Roethke expresses a similar sentiment in *On Poetry and Craft* when he writes: One of the great and early temptations is Beautiful Words. How they shimmer, those mellifluous counters that others have used so often." (p57)

He also has a lot to say about rhythm that I found useful to think about, such as: "rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature." (p69)

Finally, I'd like to turn to *Creating Short Fiction* (Martins Griffin, 1997) by Damon Knight. When I started reading, the following paragraph on page 3 of the introduction caught my eye:

Psychologists have found out a little about the personalities of writers. They are individualists, sceptics, taboo-breakers, mockers, loners, they are undependable, likely to be behind on their rent; they keep irregular hours and have strange friends. Professional writers, like criminals really live outside society: they have no regular jobs, they come and go as they please, they live by their wits.

He goes on to say that writers tend to be:

more unconventional in their attitudes. Writers are people who don't like to work for other people. They have vivid fantasy lives, and they feel a need to express their inner experiences in a form that can be seen, heard, or touched.

This portrayal of writers reminded me of Michael Greenberg, whose book *Beg, Borrow, Steal : A Writer's Life* (Other Press, 2009) I read recently, and who I think typifies this description and would agree with it wholeheartedly. I don't think I fit the mold entirely, but something about it rings true – it 'resonates', to use that key word.

Fast forward to a week later, and I found myself listening to Robert and the two Pauls talk about their own lives and experiences in relation to their writing in their seminar entitled "*Surviving as a Writer*". I found it had an interesting effect on me.

Firstly, I have no delusions about making a living as a writer so there were no surprises or disillusionment for me to hear what they had to say about that. I know from my own life experience, and from others I know who have not followed a conventional career path, what the realities are.

Everything they said sounded familiar, even though the details of their lives are different to mine, the gist of it rang true to my own. In a perverse way, listening to them was a strangely affirming experience, in a sense that I could identify and recognise the fact that whether I like it or not, this is who I am and where I fit in, in the world.

It may be somewhat depressing to acknowledge the implications of this, being, for one, that I am likely to continue to live my life in a state of relative material poverty, in a world where the prevailing discourse and powers-that-be do not value the things that are important to me. But on the other hand, I also know that I am not alone – that there is a community of people out there who are like me, ...each in their own unique way.

PART TWO – The Project Phase

1 June 2011

How is it June already? This last week has served as a bit of a break between the first and second half of the course. I finished updating the first half of the portfolio on Monday and then spent the rest of the week working at Grocott's, so haven't really paid much attention to writing anything new. I've been looking over my notebook scribbles and see some concern coming through about breaking the momentum and how to continue from here without the weekly structure and routine of the coursework.

Compiling the portfolio and going through the reflective journal up to this point was a useful exercise in taking stock of what we've achieved so far. It helped me also to take all the notebook 'musements' out and to put them all together – I can see them more clearly now, how they stand together as one continuous piece and how they might form the basis of my long project. They have a kind of shape to them. It has started to make sense, how they all hang together with a kind of narrative thread running through them. I feel free of the assignments now too, and I can think more clearly about the project.

In my meeting with Laurence this week he reminded me to be attentive to my thoughts, about the project, specifically, and not to ignore them, write them down as they occur, even if they seem really random or inconsequential at the time – it's all about keeping the wheels moving. It's tempting to focus on things that seem more concrete and to work on them, because they are mechanical and easy to come to grips with. I mustn't ignore where the body of the work is coming from.

I tend to find what I read about the technical aspects of poetry almost impenetrable at this point – it's not really helping me.

I've arrived late to poetry. I haven't reached the point yet where I can say the words "I am a poet" out loud without feeling like a fraud.

I'm afraid of settling into a numb non-creative headspace.

I want to read more poetry. The more I read the more it makes sense to me, it infiltrates my brain.

What I really want is to let myself be. To be able to shut out all the voices that are telling me what I ought to be.

3 June 2011

I have been writing stuff, but whether it is anything I can use for the long project is questionable. The notebook stuff has been mostly random reflective thoughts, but not in the same vein as before, not much to fit in with the 'musement' flow.

Mostly I'm not sure of myself at all; I don't know to what extent I should just carry on waiting for stuff to come into my head or to set myself exercises to keep myself writing. I'm wary of trying too hard and producing something forced. I haven't figured out the right balance yet.

6 June 2011

We had our first optional writing workshop with Paul [Mason] today. I decided to do them as a form of writing exercise, and a way of hopefully producing some 'compost' for other writing. But I don't want to get too sucked into the exercises that I end up spending too much time on them at the expense of the project work.

The thing that I enjoy about it though is that I don't have to worry about whether the exercises are any good or not because they're not for anything in particular. I don't have to wrestle with them. They're just an exercise in playing with words, and I feel free to write whatever I want and then just let it go. (see *Paul's class*, p104).

28 June 2011

I was reflecting this morning on what I've gained, and some of the main lessons I've learned, from the course so far:

- Developing a writing practice.
- Dealing with the real life challenge of balancing family, work and other life commitments with writing.
- Finding a form that comes most naturally to me.
- Gaining confidence in my own style and voice and way of working.
- Finding out what works for me in my writing practice.
- Learning more about poetry and poets.
- Finding role models in poets such Lorine Niedecker or Emily Dickinson – writers whose aesthetics and character and style of writing I can relate to.
- Being exposed to a wide range of teachers and their own perspectives on writing, as well as their practical tuition and advice.
- Gaining a sense of perspective and recognising that this course is just one small step towards a long term writing life.

29 June 2011

Hello, blank page. I'm not producing much new material for the long project at the moment. I did some editing work on the 'I am' [retitled *Presence* in the project] piece today which is taking on some kind of shape.

I sometimes get frustrated when I edit stuff though. It feels as if the more I work on something, the further away I get from the original thought or feeling that invoked the initial freewrite and it ends up looking and feeling like some dead thing to me, and I don't want to touch it anymore. Probably the solution is to leave it for six months, a year or longer and come back to it, but that's not possible when there's a project deadline.

5 July 2011

I've got serious doubts about doing the Wordfest reading tomorrow. I know that in theory it is supposed to build my confidence – but I know myself, and think it is more likely to knock my confidence down at this point.

If I've learned anything, I've learned that I need to try to remember to trust my intuition, to listen to myself. My intuition is telling me that a public reading is not the right thing for me to be doing right now.

I also can't think of a good reason why I need to perform what I've written to an audience at this point in time. I'm not a performance poet, I'm not trying to make a point, and I'm not selling or promoting anything. I don't feel as if I need it to be heard by a wider audience right now – there's no rush.

I intuitively feel that what I have written is meant to be read, silently, not performed out loud. Reading is more suited to the reflective nature of it. The notebook stuff, especially, is not intended to be performed. Read as a whole, it has a context – to only read out extracts would make no sense, especially to anyone who doesn't know me. There is a visual aspect to it for me also – the way it is laid out on the page – it needs to be seen, not heard.

14 July 2011

Robert and I also discussed my arrangement (see *Creatured* in Appendix, p115) of the material he selected for the MA book. It was an interesting exercise for me to do, in advance of what I'll have to do for the long project.

We discussed the three possible approaches I could take to the project: 1) to arrange everything into one long chronological piece; 2) to separate them into three separate pieces according to theme (mother/grief; nature/creatures; philosophical); or 3) to weave them into one 'musical' piece using the three different strands in a rhythmical pattern.

16 July 2011

I feel like I've shifted into a headspace where I'm reading and writing more for the pleasure of it, partly facilitated, I think, by reading the Kenneth Koch book (*Making Your Own Days*, Touchstone, 1999) and Paul Blackburn's journals (*The Journals*, edited by Robert Kelly, Black Sparrow Press, 1977) recently, and also doing the writing exercises for Paul Mason. Maybe it also has to do with removing the need to write an assignment every week. There is less anxiety about what I'm writing and I've become more receptive to what I'm reading, especially poetry which I'm increasingly enjoying as a reading experience.

I'm not trying too hard to make sense of things – it's enough to let it wash over me at this stage and let my brain absorb whatever it wants to, naturally. Paul Wessels suggested in our last session that I try immersing myself in a lot of poetry in this way (i.e. just read, read, read without looking at it too carefully or trying to analyse it) and, even though I can only do so much, I think I am starting to see the benefit.

This is just the beginning. I have so much more to learn and do. But I feel as if I am coming into focus.

21 July 2011

It has become increasingly clear to me that I usually have to go through a reflective phase in my writing process before I sit down to write anything, especially if it's prose or a narrative involving characters and different scenes. When I get an idea, it needs to percolate in my brain for a while first. I might write some notes along the way, but I need to be able to see it in my head so that when I come to write it, all I need to do is find the words to describe it, if I haven't already got them. Once I get started that way, then I have something to work with and can keep going to a point where I have to stop, put it aside, and go back into the reflective phase before I can continue working again. In the reflective phase I'm not really thinking about it consciously – when it rises to the surface and I can't stop thinking about it, then I have to sit down and start writing.

24 July 2011

For me there is often ambiguity in the words and phrases that I'm using, and the way that I use them. It's important to how I hear it in my head.

I don't necessarily approve of anthropomorphising animals, so I wonder why I do it. I hope that I am unsentimental in the process. I mean to show that these creatures are as much a part of my environment as I am of theirs. In some ways my intent is also to create a kind of magic realism too.

29 July 2011

This week I made my first attempt at arranging the notebook stuff. It was challenging, but as I got into the process it started to take on some kind of shape. I cut out all the pieces and laid them out on the floor and started moving them around. It became quickly apparent to

me that the most important decision is to decide where to start as it sets the rest in motion, and determines the tone and direction of the piece. There are so many different possible combinations.

For example, do I start with something that seizes the attention immediately, or something more subtle that gently invites you in and builds up a feeling from there? It also makes a difference to think about whether the piece is standing alone, or appearing in a volume with other poems on either side of it where it will be read within a context already created by the preceding poems – I know this particular consideration influenced the way I arranged the *Creatures* arrangement in the MA book (*Tyhini 2011*). In that case, the preceding poems were about mom's death, so I could start the arrangement with a reference to her without having to explain what had happened.

As I continued working on the full arrangement, the fragments started to fall into separate sections – almost 'scenes' that had a time, place and feeling of their own.

I just need to try to trust my own intuition and judgement.

I see writing as a practice, much like yoga in a way. Any good yoga teacher will point out that the point is not to force your body into a particular posture. The point is to listen to yourself and your body; to go only as far as your body will go at that point. It shouldn't hurt. But with regular yoga practice, if you do a little every day, eventually you will find yourself stretching and breathing in all the right ways, comfortably. I think the same could be said to apply to the process of writing. It's a very individual process, and so it should be. It's important not to rush, or force anything. And, like yoga, it is as much a mindset as a physical practice.

10 August 2011

Starting a new arrangement from scratch again has been more difficult than I thought, having already done one arrangement, I am tending to fall into the same pattern. Am trying to intersperse the poems and break it up a bit so that there is some kind of ebb and flow so that all the fragments associated with the initial grief period are not all grouped together as they were in the first arrangement.

I find my mind resisting having to arrange the same pieces again. It's tempting to revert to the first arrangement but I want to avoid that. Doing it onscreen is also a bit challenging although I have a hard copy to refer to as I work through it. The difficulty is not being able to see the whole thing at once as I could when I had it laid out in pieces on the floor, but at this stage I don't have the time to do all that again before I go away. It was time-consuming and fiddly, and I needed to be at home to do it. So instead I have to try and see the whole thing in my head as it unfolds.

11 August 2011

Still finding it difficult to find the creative headspace at the moment to work on the project. It's not just a mechanical process. It needs concentration and freedom from all other thoughts and distractions, which is just not happening right now.

12 August 2011

I decided to change the page size of my document to A5 to get a better idea of how much would fit more or less on a book-size page. It has helped me to see that I do have enough material to work with for a book length work even if it does still need a lot of editing. Some of it is obviously better than other parts but at least I feel a bit more relaxed about there being enough.

21 August 2011

I was sitting in the airport in Cape Town on Wednesday evening waiting for my flight to London when I overheard this woman talking on her cellphone. It inspired another 'found poem'. (see *Tea with Tutu*, p102)

7 September 2011

My trip is drawing to a close and I've been thinking about how I've been struggling to focus on the project. Having done the first unfinished draft, I don't know how to approach it now or how to wrap it up without creating an artificial ending.

12 September 2011

I've been thinking about the subject matter of my project, and my own state of mind, which is running through the core of the project. I think it will take years to completely

process what has happened in the past year and my feelings in relation to mom's passing in particular.

In part things have been clouded for me by the way negative aspects of the family dynamic have been brought sharply into focus and so my feelings have been accompanied and affected by anger and mistrust, feelings which are current, present and justified. When I read some of what I have written so far, I can see myself dissociating in order to cope at times. Turning to small things and details around me that distract and give me comfort – looking for beauty and simplicity in the midst of ugliness and complexity – the things I cannot control – in order to save myself.

13 September 2011

I read through the project again today and did a bit of tidying up – in particular I executed a comma massacre, and it does look better for it. I also tried to pick out some possible titles. I'm looking for phrases that reflect the spirit of the work without being too obvious. I can't see too many that can stand alone and capture everything, but have extracted a few things that I'll put aside to consider, including: *The Edge of Pain*; *Butterfly Bones*; *The Trees Sing*; *Roots Run Like Rivers*; *Over and Over*; *In Memory, Speak The Stones*.

15 September 2011

I've decided to settle on *Butterfly Bones* as my title. I like it because I think it encapsulates a few different ideas and feelings. It has no literal sense but the phrase does somehow encompass the themes of death and renewal and nature in the piece.

For me the title is about the associations that we make with the words 'butterfly' and 'bones'. Butterflies make you think of nature and renewal, metamorphosis, fragility and softness. Bones are resonant of death and mortality, and hardness – although like the butterflies, they can also be fragile in their own way – possibly brittle and breakable. It is these contrasting and similar associations that capture the themes and references to death and nature in the book.

21 September 2011

Robert raised the issue of whether or how to include other stuff that I've written this year into the final 'book'. We talked about whether it would work to have the *Butterfly Bones* sequence in the beginning with a separate section of other poems at the end, but I'm not sure that it'll work.

Butterfly Bones is so much its own thing and completely different from the other stuff that I've written that I'm not sure it would all hang together as one book. Even the other poems themselves don't have a common theme running through them – I think I should just leave them in the portfolio document.

Butterfly Bones may seem a bit slim on its own as a book, but I don't want to stick the other stuff at the end just for the sake of padding it out.

30 September

The *Tyhini* [MA book] launch on Monday went well. I wasn't nearly as nervous as I thought I would be. I didn't experience anything like the level of anxiety that I felt about the Wordfest reading in June. I think things have somehow shifted for me since then, in a natural way. I wasn't ready to read back then and I knew intuitively that it wasn't the right thing for me to be doing at that particular point in time – I'm glad I trusted myself.

All our readings were well received and I had a lot of positive comments afterwards, especially for *Creatured* which I hadn't been sure would work read out aloud. I'm still not comfortable receiving praise and never know how to respond, but it has given me some encouragement and confidence.

In my meeting with Laurence on Tuesday, I raised the issue of whether it would be possible to submit the project as an A5 book. I have been working with it in A5 format so that I can see how the piece appears overall as a book since most poetry books are published in a small format. But since most MA theses are submitted as A4, I wondered whether I would be obliged to submit it in that format. The Higher Degrees guide reads: "Unless the thesis writer has a special reason for preferring a different format, the A4 page size should be used."

As a test, I set a copy as A4 with one-and-a-half spacing and wide margins to shorten the lines of the fragments so that they are easier to read. It looks OK but I am a little concerned that some of it, especially the shorter pieces look a bit lost on a large page.

3 October 2011

Robert feels that I need to stop worrying about the course deadline, and just go into freefall with the writing again. But it's difficult, I can't ignore the fact that we are reaching the end of the course and have to wrap it up somehow, and submit it on time. And I can't force the writing to come.

5 October 2011

Sometimes I wonder whether I've really got anything more to give to this project for now. I'm still not sure how to round it off and finish it – I don't want it to just fade away in the end. It needs a strong finish, but also something subtle, not too obvious or in your face. I was wondering whether I should try to rearrange it again and put *Unstitched* at the end, even though it is one of the earlier poems that I wrote and so to my mind belongs in the early grief period.

I've also become aware that I have an issue with the use of past and present tense throughout *Butterfly Bones*, but I'm going to have to think about it carefully. I don't think it'll work to try to be too consistent i.e. making it all one tense throughout the whole thing just for the sake of it, as it may not be appropriate for all the pieces. In some ways shifting from past to present tense and back again forms part of the rhythm of the piece too.

Laurence's suggestion on how to deal with my page format dilemma is to submit the project in both A4 and A5 format, so that the examiners can read it in the suggested A4 format, but also see how it could be laid out in book form.

6 October 2011

I'm inclined to think I should just leave the project alone now, as I've looked at it so often, I'm finding it increasingly difficult to see it clearly anymore. The way I see it, the project is not going to end with the end of the course anyway – it will continue to grow and have a life of its own. I'm satisfied that the few new parts I've included have added some value

and represent a further shift. I've put the new piece *Under the breath* at the end which I think works well.

19 October 2011

Working at Grocott's these past few weeks has disrupted my focus on the course, but I have continued to jot a few reflections in my notebook as they've occurred to me:

Things that I've learned: the process of writing creatively is never 'finished' or 'perfect' (whatever that is); every piece of writing is simply a step towards another piece of writing in a lifelong process of writing. At some point in the writing of something, you have to let go and it becomes what it is and has a life of its own. It has its own shape and form, and like anything else in the world, some people will like it, get it, appreciate it, and others won't. But that hardly matters. What matters most is that you've given birth to something that came from you, that has its own character and voice in the world.

Sixteen rounds of edits and arrangements later and I've got some kind of book to submit. The course is over. So what now?

So, this is it. This is the end. But it is also the beginning. There will be more to come.

I've come a long way since it started and so has the project. I think I need to let it rest for a while. I'm not in a hurry to try to get it published. Robert suggested Aerial Publishing might be a good place to start – they sent an email out recently calling for submissions before the end of November, but when I saw it, my intuitive reaction was that I should wait until next year. I feel I ought to at least wait until I've had a response and feedback from the examiners too.

Is my writing or poetry any good? I don't know, but I think it's good enough for me at the moment, at this point in time.

The course has been a vehicle for the development of my own writing practice and has given me the momentum to keep on writing. The discovery of a particular form, or at least the realisation that the form of the piece can be regarded as poetry even though it's unorthodox, has been an important part of the process for me this year too. This has been

mainly facilitated by the reading I've done, in my own time and in the poetry sessions, that has revealed a wide range of diverse styles of writing that are widely regarded as poetic. It has helped to give me confidence in my own form.

I write because I need to write, not because I aspire to greatness.

The project has been an intensely personal process for me. I think writing poetry / prose poetry has become part of a way for me to be in the world. It's a place of freedom from influence, obedience to outside rules or any economic imperative. It has also been a way for me to transcend other stuff in my life that I have no control over.

I don't think I'll ever make a living from writing, but I will always write for my life. Poetry may not fill my pockets, but it has the potential to protect my sanity.

Portfolio of Writing

ASSIGNMENTS

The following pieces of writing are taken from the seminar assignments completed during the first semester.

Assignment 1 – for Robert Berold

Book research report

I started at home. I wasn't able to register this week which limited my access to the university library and resources, so I decided to head home and begin my book research in the most obvious place – the bookshelves in the house.

The shelves of our home 'library' are stocked with a wide range of books many of which are, or seem to be, old, out-dated and old-fashioned. Most date from my parents and grandparent's generation. There is a pile of more recently bought books stacked haphazardly on the windowsill. These include books that have been bought from the UK over the years by myself and my sister on various holiday visits, to be read, shared and swapped. Some of them bear '3 for 2' stickers from Waterstones.

As I browse, I find myself hankering for my own small collection of books which are presently sitting patiently in cardboard boxes in a storage locker in North London.

I scan the shelves for anything that might jump out at me. I notice a few books from my childhood. A row of Beatrix Potter, a collection of Gerald Durrell, a few Spike Milligans. I'm not drawn to the stacks of crime novels that Dad likes to read. I like 'people' novels. I like stories about characters in ordinary everyday, or extraordinary, situations. I like well written stories that create a believable sense of place and the people that exist within it.

I pick up a book called 'A Poet in the Family' by Dannie Abse. I don't know the name. Am drawn by the title only. Why? I'm not sure. Perhaps it hints at the idea of being a poet and therefore somehow alien, or set apart from the rest of 'the Family'.

There's nothing here that I can see that appears on the reading list. I'm certain I've seen a Doris Lessing title on these shelves before but can't find it now. I wish my mom was here. She would remember. Years ago she sorted through the entire collection, got shot of any duplicates and rearranged them into categories – a mammoth task.

There is a printed list presticked onto the side of one of the tall bookshelves in the 'library'. She defined each bookshelf alphabetically: upstairs anterior wall, downstairs interior wall, upstairs revolving bookcase etc., and these are cross-referenced against a list of genres of her own devising. On the shelves she separated each section with handwritten pieces of paper.

I find a small section downstairs of 'Poetry and Plays'. I feel I ought to be reading more poetry. I feel ignorant. I feel like a fraud with my own poetry writing. What do I really know about poetry? Not a lot. Not enough.

The books I find are really old. There is a school reader dated 1919. There are volumes of Keats and LongFellow. Then I find a few anthologies entitled 'Voices' published by Penguin Education in the sixties and seventies. I flip through them and amongst other poets, I spot William Carlos Williams – at last, a name I recognise from the reading list.

I also come across a small book of verse by Spike Milligan called 'Small Dreams of a Scorpion'. I've always liked Milligan. He is daft and humorous, but dark and serious at the same time, and he has a conscience about pollution, conservation etc. I find e.e. cummings, selected poems 1923-1958. Then I come across 'Tsetlo' by Mongane Wally Serote published in 1974. Dipping into it, it holds my attention the most.

My next step is to go through the reading list again and select a few authors that I think I would like to try, or revisit. I do a little internet research and check OPAC to see what's available in the library, once I get my student card. I make a list.

My intention is to take my list to the libraries and see what I can find. My intentions suffer a setback in the form of food poisoning. I spend most of Wednesday sleeping and reading a little in between. I dip into the anthologies and re-read a little book of mine called 'One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers' by Gail Sher.

The four noble truths are: 1) Writers write; 2) Writing is a process; 3) You don't know what your writing will be until the end of the process; and 4) If writing is your practice, the only way to fail is not to write.

On Thursday, still not being able to register, I head to the Hill Street library armed with my list.

One librarian says I can take out ten books.

“Yay!” I think. I browse, I flip, I peruse. I pick nine.

“Nay,” says another librarian. “You can only take five.”

Perhaps a blessing in disguise. It forces me to choose. I end up with:

- 1) Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter – Llosa
- 2) London Observed: Stories and Sketches – Lessing
- 3) The Exploded View – Vladislavic
- 4) Cemetery of the Mind – Marechera
- 5) It all begins: poems from postliberation South Africa

With the poetry books, I find I can’t read them cover to cover so I dip and flip and fall onto any page that opens up, whenever I feel like it. With the other books, I’ve read the first few pages / story. I want to read them all, but have settled on finishing Vladislavic first, with the Lessing short stories in between. I like the Lessing stories. They remind me of London. They are well-observed, perceptive, true to life.

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold

At a payphone in Kloof Street

Listen, I have to tell you,
I'm calling to let you know—
I stabbed him.

He was hitting the baby, see,
Then he was hitting me.
He was hitting me—
He was hitting the baby,
So I stabbed him.

I was in jail this morning,
But I'm out now.
He's in the hospital,
I'm going there now.

If he dies it's murder, hey,
Then I'm in jail for life, you see?

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold (cont.)**I remember**

I remember my mom swimming in the swimming pool. She is wearing a sun hat with an orange and yellow flower pattern. She is wearing large plastic rimmed sunglasses and she is swimming slowly, breast stroke. I remember she swims with her head sticking out of the water slowly. She doesn't want to get her hair wet. I remember the house in Dart Road. I remember the white Ford Escort my mother used to drive. We had a dog called Scampie he was a mongrel terrier he used to jump the fence, and roam the neighbourhood picking fights. My mom used to drive us to school. I remember Bristol road, Severn drive. The café on the corner where we used to buy chappies and ice lollies with pocket money. I remember dad giving us a few coins for catching crickets. I remember the school. I remember Elsa the alsation. She jumped the gate so high she could jump so high over the gate to the courtyard as tall as a man. There was a windy dry in the courtyard outside the back door. I remember high school I hated I remember sitting in the car with mom after school. Perhaps it was waiting for my sister. I don't know. I don't remember now. It was in the parking lot across the road. It wasn't the white ford escort any more. It was a yellow kadett. Yellow is a good colour for a car my mother said. It's visible. I remember asking my mom about periods in the car. I remember her not making a fuss. I remember when she used to smoke cameo cigarettes. I remember the side room I remember her sitting there looking at me like there was something wrong with me. I remember a distance. I remember nothing sometimes I remember we planted some seeds in the beds by the cottage. We planted basil and radishes. They were old seeds she said they've been lying there for ages. Let's just scatter them any old how and see what comes up. I remember. The basil grew tall. What happened to the beans? I don't know. I remember the hospital. I don't want to, I don't want to. I remember, I remember. Anne said, said that I should find a picture of her when she was happy and memorize it. Try to remember her that way. I remember her face. I see her in my mind lying there with blood on her lips congealed in her mouth, her skin and no hair, lying there I see her and I feel her skin. It is still warm. I remember in the hospital before when she was confused and hallucinating. There's a man in the corner she said with a piece of bamboo in his mouth. There's a snake coming through the door. There's a snake just entered the room. She was the one adding additives. They wrapped me in concrete she said. They wrapped me in concrete. She sat up, suddenly and hugged me. I

know you think I'm mean and horrible she said but I do love you. She disappeared again. She went away. She looked at me strangely. Her mouth was weirdly slack. She touched my face with her finger. She came back later. I had to go. I'll see you again I said. Hopefully, she said. No, definitely. I will see you again. I remember I remember.

[Original version – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold (cont.)**Floating and kicking**

It's a dog day, the best day, like a children floating in fresh water lilies and paddas and green and lush and muck underfoot and drops dropping in the water, plopping and rustling in the trees and bushes and reeds and floating, reflecting and floating and kicking and like a children again. We feel beneath our feet between our toes bugs bugging our skin and then someone said hallelujah and the magical horned beast appeared over the hill standing there majestic reflected in the mirror reflecting water and followed by the docile herd of followers, they followed, appeared and ambled black and white and mottled and docile placid creatures. While we floated and dozed on our floater. It's a perfect day, bare feet and sunshine and light shining through spiders webs in the trees and soil and stones under our feet treading carefully grass scratching and snorting at our ankles and bare conversations following the track back, to back, back to where. We started walking and talking and dog day delicious we playfully played like dogs fighting over pine cones and biting gently, not hard at their feet back and forth rolling and tussling on the ground prickly grass, tickly and scratching at ticks and snuffling, barking at barking baboons in the distance and breezy bright sun shining through tree leaves and quietly sitting, drinking tea and peacefully piecing together words from our somewhere, don't know where, keyboard tapping somewhere while pen scratching here inking on paper thin ideas flowing from nowhere but something coming down through the somewhere onto a page of empty filling with inky impressions flowing falling onto the page. It's a dog day afternoon of something nothingness lovely languorous landing on puffing and panting, planting trees or seeds of other things coming soon. Heading up stony ground back to reality bumping over rocks and ravines, ruts and getting out of ruts climbing up and up and out of somewhere, I don't know. Sighing and sounding something. I don't know what.

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold (cont.)

Over and over

Over and over
I see my mother's face
The blood on her lips, and
Congealed on her
Swollen tongue

We missed the final breath
We were just too late
I held her hand
Under the hospital sheet
I felt the heat
Her flesh still warm

I imagine the crematorium
We were not there, to see
The coffin in the furnace
Consumed by flames
Her body burning
Reduced to ashes
Placed in a small wooden box

We buried the box in the stony ground
Up on the hill
The hole hammered out of the hard earth
We placed her in the centre
We covered her with soil and rocks
We marked the place with stones,
With concrete and bricks

[Original version – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold (cont.)**The day my mother died**

I cried. I sat in the back. My father in the driver's seat, my sister in the front. My mother's wig lay on the seat beside me. I cried. At home I unlocked the gate I opened the front door, the curtains, and the windows. I cried. I helped my father unpack her things. We put them away. I went to the kitchen, I opened the fridge, I cleared out the rotten food, I threw it on the compost heap. I cried. I remembered to switch on the geyser, I took the dog's chicken out of the freezer, defrosted and cooked it. I swept the kitchen floor, I carried on out of the door and swept the patio too. I cried. We went to the funeral home, where the woman there hugged me as we came through the door. I cried. At home again I fed the dogs, I cut up the chicken, stored it in the fridge. My sister prepared a dish for our supper, I made a salad, and put the rice on to boil. I left the room for a moment, and when I returned my father stood at the door. He looked at my sister, fondly as she stood by the stove stirring the pot. 'You're doing a sterling job, my girl,' he said. He said nothing to me. I turned away. I went up the stairs. I looked to where my mother used to lie.

Assignment 2 – for Robert Berold (cont.)

Creature comforts

I share the bed with songololos. I find them in the morning under the pillows, in between the soft white sheets. I find them curled up, content, in their safe sleepy spirals.

Books piling

panic rising
I must clear this space
clean the filth
from the corners of the carpet
where dead insects drift, decompose
even as I compose

Evidence

I remember a time
when I was young,
a teenager, maybe smaller
I destroyed all my writings,
wanting there to be, no evidence
of anything, me

Assignment 3 – for Paul Mason**Plot outline for: A short story of Sally and Steve** – Version 1**Scene 1:**

The kitchen in their home. Everything is in its place. They sit opposite each other. Steven is reading the paper, holding the page with one hand, the other occupied with a piece of toast. He takes big bites, chews noisily and swallows. Sally hates the gulping saliva sound it makes as it slides down his throat.

She drinks her coffee, watches him, wonders if he is even aware that she is looking at him. She finishes packing the cooler box. Their bags are in the living room near the front door, not zipped up yet for last minute packing purposes.

He has finished his silent breakfast routine and comes alive, taking charge, being bossy, asking her has she packed this and that. Checking the bags she has already checked and packed. Asks her a question, she answers but then he checks anyway as if he hasn't heard her reply, or doesn't believe her, doesn't trust her to do anything right, or at least the way he wants things done.

Scene 2

They are in the car. Driving along the highway. They are both silent. There is music on the radio, Dolly Parton singing Jolene, please don't take my man.

Sally is staring out of the window. She is feeling irritable. The fields pass by her vision in a slow moving reel. There are sheep grazing. She remembers the holidays her family had when she was little. They used to all pile into the car together, happy, singing along to the music tapes her father had compiled. When she was very young she would point excitedly at the sheep in the fields, and exclaim in her child voice: "Sheets! Sheets!". It had become a running family joke.

They turn off the main road.

They pass under railway bridge. As they do so, a slow train rumbles along the track overhead.

“Make a wish,” Steven says, with false enthusiasm in his voice.

“What?”

“You know,” he says, “When you pass under a train, it’s lucky. You should make a wish.”

She looks at him not saying anything for a moment.

“Where did that come from? I’ve never heard that before.”

He says nothing, changes gear as they turn another corner.

Scene 3

They have arrived at their destination and unpacked. It is afternoon, and Steven has insisted they do a hiking trail from the mountain hut where they are staying. The weather has become cold and cloudy, and Sally is reluctant, but Steven insists. They’ve come all this way and only for the weekend. They must make the most of it. The trail is only a few hours walk and they’ll be back before it gets dark if they keep up a good pace. He is restless and itching to stretch his legs.

They take off up the mountain with their daypacks and walking sticks. Steven is striding ahead. Sally keeping up. They have walked some distance. It is the steepest trail. Trust Steven to pick the steepest trail, she thinks. There is a particularly tricky bit where the path passes perilously close to a cliff edge. She has never liked heights and keeps well away from the edge. She tries not to look down into the chasm below.

They reach the summit. There is no view, only mist. There is pile of stones at the peak. Sally picks up a stone from the ground and adds it to the pile.

In a moment of grim angry imagination, she pictures herself hurling the stone at Steven.

He is standing on the other side with his back to her staring into the mist. What’s he looking at, there is nothing to see.

The weather starts closing in as they make their way back down the trail. Soon they can just see the trail in front of them and not much else.

Sally feels sick when they get to the steep bit. She is conscious of the cliff edge so close to the path. Shrinks as far from it as possible. She is terrified, but also angry with Steven for

getting them into this situation by insisting on going on the hike in the first place. She is concentrating fiercely. She will say nothing to him. Will not admit her fear out loud. Not to him.

She can see Steven's back in front of her. He was walking quite quickly at first, eager to get back, out of the weather. She really has to concentrate to keep up. But then he suddenly slows down. Stepping carefully. She is right on his heels. She can see the edge of the cliff out of the corner of her eye, not wanting to look directly at it.

An idle thought slides into her consciousness from the edge of her brain. It looks at her from a distance. She is too busy concentrating on where she is placing her feet. But the thought is there. What if Steven tripped and fell. She sees an image of him tripping and falling. It plays through her mind. She can see it in her mind's eye from an emotional distance. She sees him falling, her reaching out to catch him, but not quite quick enough. He falls.

She is so close to him now, close enough to place both her hands on his back. A second later, he stumbles a little, rights himself. He turns slightly towards her as if to check she is still there. In doing so he steps closer to the edge. She breathes in sharply.

Final scene

The following week, Steven is sitting at the breakfast table. He holds his newspaper with one hand while directing a piece of buttered jam toast towards his mouth with the other. He bites and chews noisily, swallows. A headline in the newspaper reads: "Tragic hiking accident: woman dies in fall"

A short story of Sally and Steve – Version 2

Sally stared out of the car window. The fields passed by her vision in a slow moving reel. On the radio Dolly Parton sang Jolene, please don't take my man.

The sheep in the fields reminded her of family holidays when she was little. How the whole family piled into the car together, happy, singing along to the music tapes her father had compiled. When she was very young she would point excitedly at the sheep, and exclaim in her child voice: "Sheets! Sheets!". It had become a running family joke. A long time ago.

Now she glanced at Steve, and his silence, in the driver's seat. Their weekend break hadn't got off to a good start, she thought. Why were they doing this to themselves, to each other? How did things get to this point?

Her thoughts drifted back to earlier that morning before they left the house. She pictured Steve at the breakfast table, reading the paper, holding the page with one hand, the other occupied with a piece of toast poised at the edge of his lips. Sally thought about his sharp teeth, perfectly straightened and whitened white. How he took a bite, how he chewed it noisily. She hated the gulping saliva sound he made when he swallowed, amplified by the silence between them.

They turned off the main road, and passed under railway bridge. A slow train rumbled along the track overhead.

"Make a wish," Steve said, suddenly, startling her out of her reverie. The enthusiasm in his voice sounded false to her. In fact, everything about him seemed to rub her the wrong way these days.

"What do you mean?" she replied.

"You know," he said, "When you pass under a train, it's lucky. You should make a wish."

Sally stared at him for a moment before responding.

"Where did that come from? I've never heard that before."

He said nothing, changing gear as they turned another corner.

Sally almost immediately regretted her reply and tone of voice. She hadn't meant to sound that way, scornful and dismissive. She wasn't helping the way things were between them, she knew, but somehow she couldn't help herself. Words just came out that way with him. She tried to remember the times when it wasn't like that. There seemed no way back. The thought made her tired. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"Wake me up when we get there," her mouth spoke to the windscreen.

"OK" said Steve. She heard him switch the radio off as she drifted into sleep.

*

It was a few hours before they got to the mountain resort. Steve was eager to start hiking straight away. He seemed restless and distracted. Sally was reluctant at first. It was cold and there was something ominous about the clouds on the horizon that made her shiver. But Steve insisted.

"Come on, Sal," he said, irritation in his voice. "We've come all this way and only for the weekend. We should make the most of it."

He strode ahead, with Sally just keeping up. By the time they reached the summit there was no view, only mist. There was a pile of stones at the peak, placed by all those before them. Sally picked up a large stone from the ground to add to it.

Steve stood on the other side with his back to her staring into the mist. What's he looking at? she thought, there is nothing to see. In a moment of grim angry imagination, she clutched the stone which was as big as her palm, and pictured herself hurling it at Steve. But instead she just sighed, loosened her grip and placed it carefully with the others.

The weather started closing in as they made their way back down the trail. Soon Sally could just see Steve's back in front of her and not much else. She felt frightened, but also angry with him for getting them into this situation. She couldn't bring herself to say anything, though. She could not admit her fear out loud. Not to him. Not now.

She felt sick when they got to the steep bit. Trust Steve to pick the steepest trail, she thought furiously. She was conscious of the cliff edge close to the path, and shrank as far from it as possible. Steve was walking quickly.

“Slow down!” she blurted out, almost involuntarily, but just managing to disguise her panic. She hoped. He responded, adjusting his pace. She was right on his heels then. She could just make out the edge of the cliff from the corner of her eye, but did not want to look directly at it.

An odd thought slipped into her brain. It looked at her from a distance. What if Steve tripped and fell? She saw an image of him tripping and falling, tumbling over the edge. She could see it in her mind’s eye. She saw him falling, her reaching out to catch him, but not quite quick enough.

She was so close to him now, close enough to place both her hands on his back. A second later, he stumbled a little, then righted himself. He turned slightly towards her as if to check she was still there. In doing so he stepped a little closer to the edge. She breathed in sharply...

*

Sally felt a hand on her shoulder. It was gripping and shaking her, but gently. She heard Steve’s voice in the distance. “Sally, Sally, wake up, darling,” he said, “Wake up, we’re here.” She opened her eyes and looked straight into his.

“We’re here,” he repeated, smiling. Sally pulled herself awake, sucking saliva onto her dry tongue and swallowing. She sat up. She listened.

“It’s still early enough to go for a hike, if you want to,” he was saying. “We could just unpack the car quickly and go. What do you think?”

*

Steve sat at the breakfast table, holding his newspaper with one hand whilst directing a piece of buttered jam toast towards his mouth with the other. The headline in the newspaper read: “Tragic hiking accident: woman dies in fall”.

Assignment 4 – for Anton Krueger**THE SWEET DEAL****Co-written with Namhla Tshisela**

CHARACTERS

SEAN: A vain 17-year-old boy.

KEVIN: The podgy ten-year-old brother of MEL, the girl SEAN likes.

MEL: A vain 16-year-old girl who snubs SEAN.

SETTING

The characters live in a suburb in Grahamstown, South Africa. Their encounter is on a Sunday afternoon and takes place in about 30 minutes.

Scene 1

It's a split stage: SEAN is sitting on a park bench with his cellphone on the one side. On the other side a phone sits on a phone stand. SEAN dials. A cellphone screen is projected at the back of the stage for the audience to see the words MEL appear on the screen as he selects her number to dial. When the call button is pressed, it displays as ringing and the call tone is heard. Simultaneously, the phone on the stand rings on the other side. KEVIN enters and picks up. MEL is in another room blow drying her hair and unaware of KEVIN and SEAN's conversation.

KEVIN: Hello?

SEAN: Kevin... howzit? Is Mel there?

KEVIN: Depends... who's that?

SEAN: It's Sean. Let me speak to Mel. Is she there?

KEVIN: Um... (*chewing gum*) Let me check... (*calls out*) Mel, are you here?
(*pause*) Um.. No, I don't think so... She's not here.

SEAN: Where is she? Why isn't she picking up her cell?

KEVIN: Are you the one who tried to kiss her, or are you the one who can't take a hint?

SEAN: Hey? What? Nooo! *Who* tried to kiss her?

KEVIN: I dunno... I just thought -

SEAN, *irritated*: No, dude. Why did you say that? I never did anything. Who's kissing her? What are you talking about?

KEVIN: Umm, not sure... I think I have to go now...

SEAN: Ag, Kevin, stop being a little shit, man. Talk to me. What did she say? I'll make it worth your while, hey. Do you want sweets or something? Just tell me what she said.

Pause

KEVIN: What kind of sweets?

SEAN: Ag, anything you like, dude. What do you want? Just tell me. Tell me what she said.

KEVIN: Mmm... How about some Fizzers, or Astros -

SEAN: Ja, fine, whatever...

KEVIN: No, actually, I changed my mind. I really like those white Easter eggs with the chocolate on the inside. You know which ones I mean? Ooor, actually, maybe both. How much you going to buy me, anyway?

SEAN: Listen, I'll get you whatever you want.

KEVIN: You know what I really like?! I haven't had some donuts for, like, for aaages!

SEAN, *sarcastically*: Oh, what, you mean like since yesterday, or something? Anyway, aren't you supposed to be, like, on a diet or something? You know, you can't keep eating all that shit all the time. You carry on, and one day they'll be lifting you out of your bedroom window with a crane.

KEVIN: Cool!

SEAN: Come off it, Kevin. I'll get you the sweets, man. Just spill it.

KEVIN: So, do you, like, want to kiss my sister?

SEAN: No! What makes you say that? We're just friends, man.

KEVIN: 'Cos she says she thinks you like her.

SEAN: Hey? What did she say about that? I never said that.

Pause

KEVIN: I really like those donuts with the jam on the inside... and lots of sugar on the outside. I'd really like sour worms and holey moleys and maybe grape flavoured marshmallows with the gooey purple centre...

SEAN: Listen, I'm getting a bit tired of this now. I'll meet you in the park in ten and we can sort this out, OK? Come now.

KEVIN: OK (*hangs up*)

Sean gets up from the park bench and leaves the stage.

Mel enters as Kevin puts the phone down.

MEL: Who was that? Was that for me?

KEVIN: No, it was nobody.

MEL: What do you mean it was nobody, Fatso, how can it be nobody?

KEVIN: It was just a wrong number... (*starts walking towards the door*)

MEL: So where you going?

KEVIN: Nowhere... anyway it's none of your business...

MEL: It's always my business, you little creep. You better not be up to any of your shit, hey.

Kevin ignores her and leaves the room

Scene 2

Sean re-enters with a bag of sweets in his hand. He sits back down on the bench. Kevin walks up from the opposite direction and puts out his hand.

KEVIN: So? Gimme...

Sean hands over the bag of goodies

SEAN: So what were you talking about before? What did Mel say about me?

KEVIN: Nothing, really, just that you were like all over her, *(talking with his mouth full)*, like some kinda psycho freak.

SEAN: What! That's bull. She was all over me, and she knows it.

KEVIN: She thinks you're a bit weird.

SEAN: Don't string me lies now. You expect me to believe that?

KEVIN: I'm just saying what I heard... *(shrugs)*

SEAN: So who did she say that to? Who was she talking to, anyway?

KEVIN: I dunno. *(chewing noisily)* How am I supposed to know? She was on the phone.

SEAN: So how do you know she's talking about me?

KEVIN: *(rolls his eyes)* 'Cos she said you name, dumbo, who else would she be talking about? And she said you're the only guy she knows who still wears eyeliner... Like it's soooo 2000 & late... and lame, and stuff like that...

SEAN: What?! Where does she get that from? Besides, I don't know where she gets this idea that I like her, anyway.

KEVIN: I dunno... *(He's losing interest, more concerned with stuffing his face at this point)*

SEAN: *(starts ranting a bit)* No, man, who does she think she is anyway? I never said I liked her in that way. Who does she think she is? *(pause)* Besides,

I've already got a girl, and she's much prettier than her anyway. *(pause)*
You can tell her that.

KEVIN: *(shrugs, not really listening anymore)* Mm... maybe you should tell her...

SEAN: No way! I'm not talking to that bitch anymore...

KEVIN: OK, well, I gotta go now... *(gets up and waddles away)*

Sean is left sitting on the park bench, seething. After a short pause, he takes out his cellphone and starts typing; the message is projected on the screen at the back of the stage.

Yo Mel

I dunno where u got da idea dat I liked u. ur not my type & i thought we cud be fwends. I hv a grl & shez prettier.

END

Assignment 4 – for Anton Krueger (cont.)

Saturday night, Sunday morning

I stabbed him. Last night.

I don't know who called the cops. It wasn't me.

I did call the ambulance. Eventually.

I was just standing there looking at him. There was such a lot of blood.

Anyway, they came and took him away. To the hospital.

I opened the door for them.

Then they came and took me away too. The cops, I mean.

And the baby was screaming. Screaming.

They took the baby also. To the hospital.

He was hitting the baby, see.

I was screaming then too.

Then he was hitting me.

I don't know when I picked up the knife.

I just saw him lying there. Swearing like murder.

Murder.

I looked at the blade. It was liquid and red.

Bloody. Hell.

It could be murder.

Maybe.

If he dies.

Assignment 5 – for Mzi Mahola

The weaver

with a crumb
in the beak
it teeters
yellow
on the edge
of the feeder

Caught

A lone glass
on the kitchen counter
half filled
with amber liquor,
from the bottle, held
in his hand, poised
before the open cupboard,
about to be re-placed
at the back
behind the bread bin

On a hot Saturday afternoon

Small children
dropped one by one
into a little splashing crocodile
across the dam
they swam

Assignment 5 – for Mzi Mahola (cont.)

Found

The old rope ball
was discovered
under the bed
in the spare room
where it had lain
with the dust
for months unfound

Once found
it was offered,
accepted,
then gnawed
at its stringy edges
as if it had never been away

Assignment 6 – for Brian Walter**Cotton blues**

I sew a button in her place,
sitting where she sat,
her pincushion at my elbow,
with her needle and thread.

I took them from the sewing drawer
where the cotton reels lie,
neatly arranged by her hand,
in colour-coded rows.

I pick and choose to match
the colour of my father's shirt,
and feel as blue as the cotton itself
as it passes through the eye of the needle.

I double the strands and cut,
carefully tie a knot in the end,
then pierce the place,
and sew the first stitch.

I push the needle through
and the thin thread follows,
curling and twisting,
the tears prick my eyes.

I stop, and start over, for
carelessly, I have made a mistake
and must unpick the stitch,
and stitch again.

[Original version – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 6 – for Brian Walter (cont.)

After they were gone

She slept beneath the quilt
her mother had made,

that overlaid the blanket
her granny crocheted.

With their fibres they embroidered her
into what she had become,

and left her to unpick herself.

Rose Memoire

The night she watered the rose
 (with salt on her face),
the heavens opened
 (and washed away each grain).

How do you measure the rain
 when the cup overflows?
How do you measure pain?

Watch,
while the small white bud
slowly unfurls,
as each drop
soaks into the dry red earth.

[Original version – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 7 – for Joan Metelerkamp**The sky is blue**

The sky is blue through the window. Cloudless. My eyes are adjusting. It is dim inside when I look at the window at the brightness outside, the edges of the window frames glitter with the contrast. There is heat on the leaves and the repetitive sound of a bird calling. Inside the fridge is humming. A softer light falls on the carpet by the door. A breeze picks up blowing the branches. I can't look at the sun on the white painted pillar, reflected so bright it leaves a stain on the inside of my eye when I look away and close my lids to bright speckled darkness. The light looks hot, 29 degrees, said the weather report man, in his shiny suit.

Red shoes

She wore red shoes. Mustard yellow-coloured trousers and a pale green button-up shirt. She was bent over, hunched with osteoporosis. Her dyed red hair white at the roots. Her head seemed a little too large for her small body. Ears, nose and lips enlarged with age, and sun-spotted skin under powder and rouge. A little eye-shadow and a scrape of lipstick. She walked hurriedly in short sharp steps, one arm drawn into her body, the other free and swinging ready to grasp onto anything it needed for support. Her bright red shoes with little heels click clacked on hard surfaces. They flashed in the sunlight.

The Hooley bird

The Hooley bird had a loud laugh, infectious throaty and deep. Not shy to set itself free from her voice box, her chest, her diaphragm, her belly. It sang and made her whole body shake. With her long legs and long arms buckling and whirling.

Assignment 7 – for Joan Metelerkamp (cont.)**Chickpea fudge**

Chickpea fudge demonstrates the value and rewards of patience. Just stirring and stirring for twenty minutes non-stop waiting for the golden brown colour and aroma to fill the air. Letting my thoughts wander through the characters in my head until the peanut butter smell and texture emerges, eventually. A sticky delicious sludge of almost fudge, short of the sugar, the icing sweetness yet to be added, and combined. And having to wait for it to cool, when all I want to do is to eat it straight away.

I see

The white rose memoire is already fading and falling to petal pieces, but I see there is a small new pinkish bud appearing on the bush rose now.

Land of the free

Actually, I can sit wherever I like, she said. This is a free country. This is America, the land of the free. Once you get past the airport security. It's like a big open prison. With shopping malls.

Assignment 8 – for Robert Berold

it's a mission, this sub mission

project description: a collection of poetry and prose poems...

it's a small thing, that few will read, with white blank pages that I can flip with my fingers the way we used to do, to make crude animations, in our school exercise books, once upon a time... in small black letters, printed on the white expanse of the pale card cover, it says: how will I know what the thing is until I've written it? the inside words are written in invisible lemon juice ink, transparent to me and all who care, to read it, until they warm to the thing, to reveal itself.

Assignment 9 – for Silke Heiss**A new day**

Every morning I crouch down and pull up my socks. At 6.30am. That's when I stand at the entrance to the park and prepare for take-off. I stretch slowly, extend my arms up and to both sides, then grasp each ankle one at a time and pull them towards my buttocks. When I'm loose and warmed up enough, I start at a gentle jog down the path.

There aren't too many people about. A couple of cyclists pass me on their way to somewhere, and the dog walkers with their pockets stuffed with poop scooping plastic bags, stroll across the flat grassy expanse to nowhere in particular. Their dogs run excitedly towards each other, and with tails wagging, they sniff and circle. Their owners barely exchange words, instead they engage in polite apologetic nodding, and call their dogs back to them.

I gradually increase my running speed as I take the next path towards the bandstand, and my shoes crunch on the gravel as I run past it. The little Italian-owned café is still dark and closed – in a few hours it will be teeming with mothers and babies, their prams competing for space between the outside tables.

Today, as I approach the duck pond, a flock of geese are feeding on the grass and they move slowly away, honking and ruffling their feathers. The ground is splattered with bird shit where they come in and out of the water. I run around the pond and when I get back to the same spot, I see this guy walking towards me from the other side.

He's wearing low slung jeans and white sneakers, a black top and a black beanie pulled down over his forehead and ears. There's a little mongrel terrier trotting after him, running to and fro from one side of the path to the other. When it spots the geese, it takes off after them and they scatter with vociferous complaint.

The guy is talking on his phone, but I can't make out what he's saying. I can just hear the odd word spat out on the breeze: "...listen... fuckin'... bitch ..."

The dog is running back towards him and as it reaches his ankles, he turns slightly and without warning, kicks the animal viciously.

Jesus, I didn't see that coming...

The dog yelps as it flies to one side and lands awkwardly on the grass, legs kicking in the air. It struggles to its feet and stands there for a moment, warily, before it moves again. It cringes and creeps after its master, ears flattened, head down and tail tucked away.

The guy looks up and sees me looking.

“Watchu lookin’ at?”

I say nothing. I carry on running.

I get home and get on with the usual morning routine. Shower, change into work clothes, watch the news, eat breakfast, the usual: a banana, two slices of buttered toast with orange marmalade. One cup of strong coffee.

But I can't get this guy and his dog out of mind. I keep playing the scene over and over in my head. What could I do? There was no point in confronting him – it would only lead to trouble. It was best to mind my own business.

It's still on my mind when I walk to the train station. As I walk across the road towards the entrance, I get caught up in the human stream of commuters and pressed down the stairs. I pass through the ticket gates, down the escalators and shuffle onto the narrow platform.

Normally I don't pay much attention to other people on the train. I try to zone them out as much as it is possible. Mind you, it's not so easy when you are pressed up against complete strangers competing for space. Peak hour conditions force an intolerable intimacy as we hurtle towards our destinations.

But today I can't help looking at the tired resigned faces lining the carriage. As the train enters the next dark tunnel, it takes me a moment to realise that I'm looking at my own reflection in the opposite window, my own weariness indistinguishable from the rest.

I can sense the tension the moment I walk into the office. Judging by the ominous silence, it seems that something has happened but no one is talking about it. I don't bother to ask anymore. I nod and exchange 'good mornings' as I make my way through the open plan to my partitioned desk by the window.

I was so optimistic about this job in the beginning, and now here I am resigned to doing what I can amidst the bullying, the sucking up, the fear and silence. I try to keep out of it as much as possible these days, just keep my head down, and get on with the job. I settle into my cubicle and started checking my emails. The first one is from Stuart.

Stuart's the regional manager. He's a smug little bastard, I've come to realise. Suffers from little man syndrome. He's no higher than my shoulder, shorter than just about everyone in the office, but despite his height disadvantage, he manages to look down on everyone all the same.

His email invites me to his office at 11am, "...for a little chat."

I don't like the sound of it already. As the morning progresses, I watch the steady stream of staff come and go from his frosted glass bubble on the far side. Seems everybody is getting the "little chat" treatment. Not necessarily a reassuring sign.

11am. It's my turn. Yippee, can't wait.

As I enter, Stuart smiles his Cheshire cat smile, and closes the door behind me.

"Don't worry," he says smoothly, as he rounds the desk and sits down. "Nothing to worry about, this is just an opportunity for me to catch up with you and let you know about some of the things that are going on in the company. I just want to make sure that everyone is on board, you know, and understands where things are at."

I sit down on the other side of the vast desk.

"Now, I'm sure I don't need to explain to you, Peter, that we are operating in difficult times," he carries on, without missing a beat.

When he starts speaking, he has this habit of tugging slightly at his collar, adjusting his tie with one hand, smoothing it down towards his waist. The other hand reaches out for something to grasp, in this case a pen which he starts tapping lightly on the surface of the desk then turns it with his fingers, over and over.

"You see, it's just that there've been a few grumblings from upstairs, you know, some concern about performance and sales figures. Of course, with this headcount freeze that's been put in place there's no room for extra hires, so we'll all have to pull our socks up, so to speak..."

Pull up our socks? I'm thinking, Christ, doesn't he know most of the staff are already working to their full capacity, putting in extra hours... it's taking its toll, affecting performance.

I can feel my head heating up. Stuart's voice starts to sound like it's coming from very far away. My throat is throbbing. I want to point out, bluntly, that we are understaffed and overworked, but all I can do is watch Stuart's tie-adjusting hand move up to his forehead and push back a slick fringe of hair, smoothing it over his scalp.

"Already the higher ups are making noises about short term employment contracts and so on. You know what I mean, don't you? There's a few contracts coming up for review soon, and we'll have to look at them very carefully..."

He carries on talking and I'm aware that I'm nodding occasionally, but not really paying attention any more. What's the point? The message is clear: toe the line or you're out.

I go back to my desk but can't concentrate for long. After a while, I'm thinking it's no use, I'm not getting anything done, so I take an early lunch and go for a walk. Maybe some fresh air will help clear my head.

There's a small park near the office where I sometimes eat my lunch. Not often, since I usually stuff a quick sandwich down my throat at my desk these days. But today, I just don't feel like hurrying back. It's before the lunchtime rush so I've found an empty bench to sit on. And so I sit.

A woman enters the park steering a pushchair with one hand and holding the hand of a little girl with the other. When they are well inside the gate, she lets her go and the toddler runs a few wobbly steps ahead. Then she stops and squeaks, squats down and presses both palms onto the gravel pathway. She turns them over and looks at them, fascinated by the little indentations left by the small stones. She stands up, waves her hands in the air and stamps her feet. She's conducting her own little symphony of crunching sounds underfoot, accompanied by a delighted gurgle that frees itself effortlessly from her tiny throat. Her mother laughs. She looks up and sees me watching. I smile. She smiles back.

When I get back to the office I see Stuart standing at Ken's desk, berating him loudly. Ken is one of the senior salesmen, a dependable hardworking guy, one of the few I really

respect around here. The poor man is just standing there, dumbfounded by Stuart's tirade and unable to respond through the steady stream of verbal abuse.

There is a deathly silence as the rest of the staff either stare grimly at their screens trying to ignore the scene, or watching open-mouthed. A few seem to be enjoying the spectacle.

Stuart sees me standing by the door, watching, and I can see from the look on his face that he can sense my discomfort.

"Do you have a problem, Peter?" he says.

I look around the room at everybody avoiding my eye.

Yes, Stuart, I have a problem.

I turn. I walk out the door. I don't look back.

Assignment 10 – for Robert Berold**A slippery memory**

There is new snow on the ground. It crunches into my ears, as feet step with carefully placed determination around me. The cold air is silent. Nobody speaks in passing, except to mouth words at their boot-laced feet to watch their step. Don't slip.

Pedestrians barricade themselves against the weather. They are walking layers of coats, hats, scarves and gloves. The wind pinches exposed cheeks, and noses leak above numbed lips. Frozen eyelids blink cautiously.

Everything grinds to a halt and stoics to trudge to work grumbling gloomily about how nothing ever works. Even the slightest leaf on a line can stop a train here, they say, it wouldn't happen anywhere else.

A council truck rumbles slowly past, spewing grit on which we might never get a grip.

The squat

I wake up to the sudden sound of helicopters. Sirens screech through the hole in the window with flashing blue lights. A powerful searchlight sweeps, cutting through the darkness like a UFO landing. Human shrieks and curses echo through the hallways above my head. For fuck's sake, what time is it? Roll over, head under pillow, go back to sleep.

That council estate was a desolate place. My memories are full of shades of grey and tall dark buildings, around a central concrete courtyard, looking up to a piece of gloomy sky, drizzling on the clapped out cars, the dumpsters and mouldy furniture left outside to rot. It wasn't always raining, but that's how it always comes to mind.

I paid twenty pounds a week for that room, to a dark-haired guy whose name I forget, not that it cost him anything – he found the flat, empty, and so it was his, for the price of the tools to force the door. Finders, keepers.

In the morning, I see him sitting on the only chair in the living room, lean and wiry, bare feet crossed on the window sill, faded jeans and a smoke. A cracked cassette player, lay on

a battered floorboard, the overplayed tape hissing softly, Lou Reed singing, ‘... it’s such a perfect day...’

The cleaner

Nobody wants to work the trading floor, its vastness lined with rows of desks and flickering screens, like pews and their hymnbooks in a cathedral of greed. It’s impossible to wash away the stink of it.

We work nights, moving through the day’s detritus, hoovering, mopping, squeaking the mirrors clean with vinegar and paper towel. We pick our way through the mess like ghosts, clearing away the plastic cups with cigarette butts floating in long-cold coffee.

Gathered in the basement to receive our orders, we’re a mixed bag of allsorts, of little choice, of no money, no permit.

She, sitting in the corner, with fag in hand, hasn’t been the same since her house exploded, years ago. Birdlike, with frizzy blonde hair framing her child-sized face, she wears a fixed sweet smile. She chirps merrily without pause, repeating herself.

“What hangs from a tree, and goes: I’m a pear, I’m a pear, I’m a pear! ?” she says.

“What?” I ask.

“A mad apple,” she replies.

Assignment 11 – for Mxolisi Nyezwa

Forgetting

when the wind whips outside,
howling for recollection,
internal stillness descends –
shutters down feeling,
to cut off the blows.

like the agony of childbirth
it cannot be remembered –
the moment that thought
strays near the edge of pain,
it veers away again.

Listen

there's a stirring in the tree,
behind the evening leaves,

a rustle in the branches
of flight unseen.

the sound catches the ear
before the eye moves to see.

there's a movement in the grass,
below the meadow flowers,

a ripple on the surface
reveals a running beneath.

Assignment 11 – for Mxolisi Nyezwa (cont.)

the dog star

when sirius is gone, below the horizon,
then summer is over, I'm told.

the stars appear, in the heavens,
and on the tv screen, nightly,

while I sit with a book, here,
on the tired sofa,

with a bee on my bare heel,
and a dog scratching at the door.

[Original versions – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 12 – for Robert Berold**A voyage around my reading**

It began with Asher Lev, a misunderstood Hasidic boy. I didn't pick him – he was given to me as a Christmas present, in a book written by Chaim Potok called *My Name is Asher Lev* first published in 1972.

Asher is a sensitive artistic boy from a religious family and community who do not understand his talent or his determination to pursue it. Written in the first person, it has a sense of immediacy and authenticity in its time, place and setting. Potok writes in an understated way that I like and has an eye for detail.

My mother read the book I gave her for Christmas too – a recipe book: *Justin Bonello's Cooked, Out of the Frying Pan*. Slightly different from a typical recipe book, it is written in a narrative style with a background story and commentary associated with each recipe.

When she got sick at Christmas time, she sat propped up in bed, reading it as if it were a novel. Sometimes I sat at the end of the bed as she talked to me about it and her reaction to some of the stories, the people involved and the recipes themselves. We were never very good at talking about feelings.

I had an idea recently that I could try to prepare every recipe in that book over a period of time, and to document it. To write about it, and to tell my own story with each recipe success or failure as I go along, something like Julie in that film with Meryl Streep.

After mom died a month later, I remembered that I had lent her my copy of Antje Krog's *Change of Tongue*. She had needed something to read when she went to hospital for her treatment. I later found it lying on her dressing table. I picked it up. The back sleeve was folded into the book at page 231. She hadn't got to finish it.

I remembered speaking to her on the phone in the hospital. She said she preferred it to *Country of My Skull* which I had lent her previously and I agreed with her. There were other books in a pile on the table. One was the sequel to *My Name is Asher Lev*. As I moved them, a small box of chocolates was revealed. James had given them to her on Christmas day – they were Tiddly Reindeers from Hotel Chocolat. Seeing them made me cry. I opened the box and there were only two missing. I closed it up again, put it back where it was and left it there.

Shortly thereafter, when I was thrown into the MA course unexpectedly, reading became something I had to do. It became a mission. Armed with the course reading list, I struggled to latch on to anything. I couldn't find a book to tie me down to the chair and keep me there.

Well, there was *God of Small Things* which I had to read for my friend's new book club. I had read it before many years ago, and had only dim memories of the previous reading. I enjoyed it again second time around, and our first book meeting was a lively discussion of ladies of all ages fuelled by pancakes and bottles of wine.

Then there was Rampolokeng's *Whiteheart: Prologue to Hysteria*. I could only take it in small doses because it is so intense and traumatising. You can't be neutral when you read it – it forces you to feel something, even if it's complete revulsion. Even though it is disturbing and violent, I like the way it is written: the way it is structured with long paragraphs and short sentences.

There is one line that jumped out at me, at the beginning of the bottom paragraph on page 15. '*but still the street kept running its blades into all of us*' I like how it conveys life and death on the streets in a few words. It follows on with '*one of the boys died under a flood of lead bricks and bottles. I don't know if mine was the one that did it.*' There is something about the way he uses the phrase '*all of us*' in the first sentence which could imply a sense of loyalty or unity, which is then immediately flipped on its head by the image of a boy being killed and the narrator's own part in it, and the way he describes it so dispassionately.

By contrast, I rattled through Liesl Jobson's *100 Papers*. It felt and tasted to me like a bag of mixed sweets, quite a different reading experience to Rampolokeng – almost an antidote. And much easier to digest. I love how she can create a character that you can picture clearly, in a particular setting and tell a story in so few words.

I've been dipping in and out of reading various volumes of poetry since the course began – I haven't read much poetry before, but I keep turning back to William Carlos Williams. I've now got the second huge volume of his *Collected Poems* from the library. On page 302 of the first volume he describes poetry as a '*soft second light of dreaming*'.

Lorine Niedecker's *The Granite Pail* has been hanging around by its blue handle for some time now too. It has migrated around my living space from bedside table to writing desk,

to the table in the living room, next to the laptop, to the coffee table – to join the piles of books stacked in each place.

I recently retrieved two books about Niedecker from the Rhodes library, from where they have been languishing in the no man's land of Cataloguing. I was only allowed to take them out for 48 hours, so there wasn't much I could do but skim through them quickly.

The one chapter that I was able to read in its entirety, was a biographical chapter in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*. The chapter is entitled *The Poet in Her Homeplace* by Glenna Breslin.

I'm trying to recall now what I read in that essay that has stayed with me. Something of her personality came through – her sense of independence, for example. When she and her husband had financial difficulties, they separated and both moved back to their respective families. The author hypothesizes as to why Lorine didn't move in with her husband's family at that point. Her theory is that she did not want to move into an environment where she would not be able to give attention to her writing.

If she had moved to her husband's family farm, she would have lost her independence by being absorbed into the female domain of the household and having to do women's work on the farm. That she refused to do so implies something about her and the importance she placed on her writing life. It would also have gone against convention at the time, which demonstrates an independence of mind and strength of character. The author hints that in separating from her husband in that way, she was probably seen as a bit odd, a woman who did not want to be with her husband.

She strikes me as a self-contained person. She lived on her own for a long time before her second marriage, and was self-sufficient. She seems quite non-materialistic, neither seeking wealth nor status. She seems rooted in her rural environment, but also somehow caught between this and the wider world. She has a foot in both her immediate environment and a more distant literary world.

At one point in the essay part of her personality is revealed in her relationship with a neighbouring family. She bonds with the son through a love of music, and is embraced into the family circle. The family are pictured as noisy, easy going, good natured and open, and while she is warmed by them, she also sets herself apart in a way – it appears that she appreciates her solitude and finds them a bit rambunctious and intrusive at times.

She is interested in the world and people around her, but also has a broader view of the world, so the localised images she uses in her writing have universal significance. She isn't just a 'local poet', whatever that means, writing in an insular way about where she lives as if she is isolated from a wider world – her writing contains universal meanings captured in local images.

I admire her, and feel some sense of affinity although I'm not sure what it is exactly – maybe the independence, the need for solitude, the pragmatism, the relative poverty, the rural environment, the economical use of words.

From poetry to prose: at last I landed on *Agaat*, in all its 392 page glory. I got hooked from the start with the lyrical prologue: a son's monologue as he makes his way from his self-imposed exile in Canada to his mother's funeral. It then switches to his mother, Milla, the mute and paralysed first person narrator and, detailed entirely from her point of view, the past and present unfold. It is agonising. It is so well written and the devil is in all the finely drawn minor details. I want to be able to write like this. The simplest of sentences carry a lot of power, for example, '*My house can make more sounds than I.*' (Chapter 5)

One of the things that struck me is the way the characters make each other what they are, or what they become. Milla's strong character has been shaped and moulded by her mother, which in turn affects her relationship with her proud husband, who feels emasculated and abuses her, which in turn damages Milla even further. It's a vicious cycle. She adopts Agaat, a traumatised coloured child and proceeds to shape her with a tyrannical hand. Agaat is equally strong willed and although reduced to the role of servant, she is a controlling presence able to manipulate the people and events around her. Milla's son, Jakkie, becomes the pawn torn between all three of them.

I love the cover of the book too, as only a layout artist could. The careful placement of the letters against the perfect picture. It is so difficult to make something as seemingly simple as a book cover look so beautifully balanced. It takes a lot of effort to make something look effortless. The picture divides the cover into a grid. The author's name nestles in the white wall space in the top left hand corner. The title is delicately balanced in the middle, embossed in my favourite colour, like dried blood, the 'g' and the 'a' are carefully placed either side of the vertical line and above the hinge of the Aga door. The space for the quote and the translator's credit is delineated by the edges, perfectly situated to sit in their space and sized to be symmetrical. I note the small 'by' and the small caps.

There is more to come. The same browsing in the library that brought me to *Agaat* also yielded, amongst others, *Words on Air: the complete correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, a lovely big fat hard cover – brand new, I am the first to take it out.

And furthermore, a foray into a local bookstore means that Sally-Ann Murray is now also waiting in the wings with her *Small Moving Parts*.

I look around and see that I am awash – an island surrounded by a sea of books waiting for me to enter their ocean.

Assignment 13 – for Hazel Crampton**Karen**

She was about to start the car, when she noticed the leaflet fluttering under the windscreen wiper. Not another one, she thought. Irritated, she opened the door quickly and with one foot on the pavement, stretched over and pulled it off.

She didn't bother to read it, and was sure she didn't need the muti it advertised. She shoved it into the small recess indented in the dashboard below the car radio and behind the gearstick.

She had only just emptied the space that morning, clearing the accumulated bits of junk collected there over the past week – the chocolate wrapper; the small paper packet patchy with pie grease, folded around its crushed foil container; a few coins; a tiny white button; and a solitary seashell that she had found lying on the ground in a parking lot, far away from the ocean.

And the damned leaflet that kept turning up again and again. She swore that every time she eventually threw it away, another would appear the very same day.

Jonathan

He inhaled and held it in for a moment longer than usual, counting his own heartbeat. One extra beat and he let go, slowly, the smoke curling away in front of the full moon before him.

A half empty bottle of red wine was balanced on the sand next to a single glass and the discarded cork. This was the best beach time in the cool evening, holidaymakers gone home, just him left now, alone. He fidgeted with the matchbox, turning it over and over with the fingers of his left hand.

He had wanted to paint a picture of how he felt about her, to make up for the fight the night before. There were no words to express, so he scribbled the shape of his feelings and left it under the windscreen wiper, on the driver's side where it would be the first thing she saw when she got in the car that morning.

He had watched from the window when she picked it up, hesitated, and then with one swift movement closed her hand around it and dropped it to the ground before driving away.

He stared at the piece of paper now smoothed out on the sand where he sat, then struck a match and watched as the flame curled around the edges of his crumpled heart.

A few lines on mortality

I assumed that she'd inherited the longevity gene. Her mother, my grandmother, lived to the age of ninety four. It never occurred to me that she wouldn't do the same. They were made of the same stuff, surely – fit and healthy, tough as nails, indestructible. I imagined we would have a hard time with her in her old age, that she would be the most stubborn old woman that ever lived. Never say die, she would go down fighting to the end.

Cemetery

The stones are degraded, the names are lost perhaps still alive in someone's memory somewhere. When I look at this place I feel glad that we did not put her here or somewhere else like it, overgrown and neglected. I have found a less tangled spot to sit on the ground under a tree in dappled shade. There is the sound of traffic, distant human voices and dogs barking, hooting and crickets clicking, a clump of cacti nearby and wind through trees. But actually when I think about it, it is not so different in a way from where she rests in the bush, the wildness of it. There are butterflies above the graves and the wildflowers are pushing through, scattered amongst the long grasses. All those people, planted here under stone. In memory, in memory, speak the stones, while the weather wears away the words. All the time I look around here, though, my mind keeps bending towards the granite block on the hill at home, newly laid, with clean and pristine edges, its letters picked out in my mind. How long will it take to fade?

[Original versions – subsequently edited for the final project]

Assignment 14 – for Robert Berold**Journal research***Opening observations:*

I enjoyed browsing through the journals at NELM, but also found it a bit overwhelming – flipping through so many pages, I began to lose sight of them. I would have been much happier just to sit and read and savour the experience, and not to have to worry about having to write about it – that became a distracting thought in the back of my head all the time.

One of the difficulties that I faced in tackling the requirements is that there is a difference between some of the stuff that I'm attracted to and want to read (which is just about anything), and my own writing and where it would fit in.

I think I found the task a bit too complex too, for example: trying to compare different journals is not like comparing a single poet / author with another, because each journal consists of a multitude of writers. So if your eye happens to fall on one particular writer that you like or don't like, it doesn't necessarily characterise the journal as a whole. Add to that the fact that we also had to try to compare the same journal with itself at different time periods, and that many of the writers are represented across different journals across all the time periods, I found it too confusing to make comparisons in the time available.

My first day at NELM impressions:

The sound of hammers and saws and drilling in the background break up the words on the page, intruding into thoughts and concentration. I'm trying to zone it out but I think I will always associate this exercise with these sounds, despite the space and light through the window breezes – a peaceful place made loud.

The first thing I pick up is the June 2008 edition of *New Coin*, edited by Joan Metelerkamp. It has an interview with Mxolisi which I can't stop myself from reading even though I know I'm supposed to be looking at the poetry itself. I immediately want to write down what he is saying here:

.... I was sensing that all human life is a mistake – that there's no reason whatsoever to take things seriously. Reality is a big lie. This is actually very important to a writer: the sense that something else beside what you see or hear and smell is significant or really taking place. Good writers have this acute awareness, this perception of higher things. Very often you're in conflict with everything that you know. The sensation throws you off completely. And you want to try out new things. All of a sudden you doubt all the stories that everybody told you about yourself, how you fit in with the world. You know that you must begin to grapple with your truth before a bad thing happens.

... Poetry holds a special place in the true development of people. The most afflicted people will always hold the dearest poetry. There's a beautiful and intact relationship between affliction and the ability to speak the truth – to write a good story or poem.

... Poetry will always have some role to play – to create light, to fight for consistency; to discover and make meaning...

I move on to peruse the bound collection of *New Contrast* from 2004-2007. The same names keep cropping up and my eye naturally falls on the ones that I recognise, which probably defeats the point but I can't help it.

I'm just turning pages, and words run into each other, I don't see them anymore, not knowing where to settle. The drilling has stopped but the lawnmower drones on through the window, with a chorus of kids in the background. I hear the sound of childhood in their uninhibited cackling and whooping calls.

I jot down some of the shorter poems that I like, to simplify things. For example:

Suspension by John Forbis

For a brief moment
after a gentle rain
the earth stands
poised
as a drop snakes
down a window

As write it down I become aware that I'm doing this as a way of latching onto to something small and specific; I'm turning to a poem to pull myself out of the chaos in my mind.

Day 2 at NELM:

The drilling is blessedly absent. I carry on dipping into various volumes, but feel no nearer to knowing what to write. I copy down a poem that I like from *New Contrast, Autumn 2010*:

dual citizenship by Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

I was not born to this village but that one.
 i was born to the tribe of men, not women.
 but i was taken by them at a young age.
 and turned against them.
 or rather, they were turned against me.
 we are still healing this rift.
 i am still waiting, as are we all
 from the camp of women, for a warrior,
 messenger, to welcome me on home.
 and home, i'll come, without relinquishing
 my dual
 citizenship.

Concluding comments:

The honest truth is that I don't know exactly where my work would fit best. I'm not certain I even know what my work is yet. Sad, but true – I don't think I've reached that level of confidence in my own writing yet. But that's fine, I guess it'll come with time.

In the end I decided to pick the three journals; *New Contrast*, *New Coin* and *Carapace* in that order of preference, mainly because they have a long history, are well established and widely recognised. I guess *New Contrast* is at the top of the list because it publishes both poetry and prose which keeps my options open. In my dreams perhaps I would like to have joined the company of poets published in earlier editions of *New Coin*. I enjoy *Carapace* and Gus Ferguson's light hearted touch. It's small and easily digestible.

OTHER WRITING

The following pieces were written throughout the course of the year.

Giving and taking away

The boy's eyes are sullen and bitter. He puts on subservient begging gestures. Hands cupped together, head bobbing slightly, slowly from side to side.

Before that he greets me, looks at me straight in the eye: "Hello, madam, how are you?", with carefully constructed cheerfulness. His eyes are hard, looking at me, sassing me out, appraising. Am I likely? Yes, it's worth a try. He has seen into me.

Then the begging cloak comes on. Please, madam, give me some food. I'm hungry, please (touches belly, then hand to mouth). He has already seen the Pick & Pay packet on the passenger seat. He is a picture of studied subservience. But his eyes betray something truer. His mouth, his chin, are hard lines. He hates me.

What do I feel? Sadness, anger (why is the world like this?), frustrated helplessness, guilty and patronising. I feel patronising when I give him some biscuits. I cannot refuse. He needs food, but I do not know how to do this without damaging his dignity. It's catch 22. He knows it too. He has already had to swallow his obvious pride.

Auntie J

Auntie J was a speech and drama teacher. “Screech and trauma”, my dad used to call it. It was fashionable at one time (perhaps it still is, I don’t know) amongst white middle class families, especially English, of a certain type, to send their young children, especially girls, to “speech” lessons, extra-curricular.

She was an old actress – well, she seemed old to us, but she was probably just middle aged. She had long blondish hair scraped up into a kind of bun with various hair slides and pins vainly trying to maintain a sense of order. Loose strands escaped and hung down by her ears and neck, with wispy bits sticking out at all angles. Her face was powdered and rouged, with a smidge of red lipstick and blue eyeshadow. Her blouse seemed to be permanently askew on one shoulder, or the other, revealing a glimpse of a slightly frayed beige bra strap. She swelled heavily of perfume and her armpits were damp. She lived in a rambling old house in one of the better suburbs. Probably inherited, it had seen better days, and contained several lifetimes of clutter. She would usher us into the living room as we arrived, with her elocuted voice.

When all the mothers had left, she’d enter the room and sink slowly onto the sofa, her hand fluttering to forehead, with a sigh, and say something like: “Auntie J’s got a terrible headache today, darlings. Why don’t you all play little bunnies. Show me how you can hop. Hop, hop, hop! – Oh, that’s very good, Betty, splendid!” And so we’d hop around the room a bit, pretending to be little bunnies. Auntie J would close her eyes and appeared to doze. When we got a bit bored with being little bunnies, we’d find other things to do and drift off to play around the house.

My best friend and I would creep upstairs into Auntie J’s bedroom. It was our favourite place. Auntie J had a big old dressing table with large elegantly shaped mirrors, that angled on either side. It had lots of little drawers, curved, with little metal handles that flipped up and down, like miniature door knockers, and untidy shelves hidden behind pretty floral curtains. Every surface was covered with stuff – makeup, costume jewellery in little boxes of all shapes and sizes, silver-coloured handheld mirrors, combs and brushes.

Our very best favourite thing was a huge powder puff. It was encased in a round box with a lavender pattern. It had a satin ribbon loop on top which if you pulled it up, lifted the lid, which slid off to reveal the white fluffy puff inside, with its soft silky strands, as light as

downy feathers. The puff had its own loop to lift it out of its resting place. We thought it was the most wonderful thing we'd ever seen and took turns to brush it against our faces.

When we heard Auntie J coming upstairs we'd hide in the cupboard or under the bed. She'd come into the room, calling us, saying rather too loudly: "I wonder where they could be?" We'd hold our breaths to stop our giggling, before eventually wriggling from our hiding places to reveal ourselves, smeared and crumpled, breathless. "There they are!" she'd exclaim, throwing her hands to the air. "Come now," she'd say. "Time to come down, your mothers will be here soon."

Memory

We never had a nanny. Unlike many white South African children of my generation, I was not raised by a black woman. This was unusual, I suppose. Sometimes in a weird kind of way I feel I was deprived of something for not having experienced that. Perhaps I would have gained something from it, some kind of insight, a bond or at least an African language to show for it.

When I was very young we had a live-in servant for a while. He was an old man. His name, as far as I knew, was James. I was never told what his real name was if they knew it.

He used to work for my grandparents. He was what their generation referred to as a 'kitchen boy'. When my grandparents retired and could no longer employ him, he came to work for my parents in a state of semi-retirement. He was already an old man then. He moved slowly.

I don't remember connecting with him in any particular way. I was very young. He was an old man, or seemed to be to me. He was very tall. He may have seemed distant and perhaps slightly intimidating.

He lived in the outside room, the 'khaya', on the other side of the small courtyard opposite the kitchen door. Just a few short steps, but he may as well as lived in another country. It was taboo for us to go anywhere near his small room.

I can remember being curious and sneaking up the few short steps that led to his door, and peering into the dark interior to see what it looked like on the inside. I felt I was doing something naughty. I was out of bounds.

I remember we went away on holiday once, leaving James to look after the house and feed the pets – we had two dogs and a tomcat who was pure white with blue eyes. Before we came home, James decided to wash the animals – including the cat. He met us at the gate, beaming, when we arrived home. The dogs came rushing out to greet us enthusiastically. We noticed James had scratches on his arms. The cat stalked out from behind him, miauwing loudly, whiter than white, his fur puffed up and gleaming in the sunlight, bristling with indignation.

I think he developed a drinking problem and my parents let him go eventually. The room remained empty after that. From then on my parents employed only casual labour. There was a guy who came once a week to work in the garden. He said his name was Mona. My mother thought: that can't be right, it must be Morné, so that's what she called him for ages before she found out that his name actually was Mona.

My parents bought their first house in a new suburb outside Durban. It was all they could afford I guess. It was built right next door to Chesterville township. If you walked around the corner there was a dead end. That was where our suburb ended, and the township began. You couldn't see the township from our house because of the row of gum trees and the way the land sloped away into the valley. But sometimes on weekends we could hear the mournful singing of funeral songs drifting up to us from the cemetery down there.

There was a shop by the local primary school where we could buy chappies and ice lollies with our pocket money. It was quite far to walk, or to cycle on our bikes. There was a short cut that we knew about. It was a path that ran from the dead end along the edge of the township to a grassy corridor that served as a pedestrian entrance to the township from the road on the other side.

It was off limits. On the few occasions that we used that path we were aware that we were doing something naughty, adventurous or daring, perhaps even dangerous. So most of the time we never used that shortcut even though it was the shortest route to the shop. Instead we went the long way round. Up the steepest longest hill to get to where we wanted to go.

When I got older I would catch the bus to get into town. The nearest bus stop was miles away and the only way I could get there was to walk. Then I would have to wait. For god knows how long for a bus to arrive.

There were blue buses and green buses. The blue buses were the white municipality buses. They ran infrequently. They sometimes didn't turn up at all.

The green buses were more frequent. They came from the townships and were nearly always full. Sometimes after waiting for hours, it got to a point where I would just get on the first bus that arrived, never mind the colour, of the bus or the people in it. If it happened to be a green bus, I got on it – I wasn't going to wait for a blue bus that might never arrive.

I feel ashamed now. I knew without thinking that no one would stop me from getting on a green bus. I was the only white person on the bus, but not one bus driver or passenger ever said to me: you're a white, this bus is not for you, get off.

I only wanted to get to town as quick as possible. I was too shy and never initiated a conversation with anyone. Most people ignored me. Some smiled and greeted me, others just turned their heads away.

New pen

I bought a new pen today, blue ballpoint ink, medium, retractable, refillable, with a rubber grip for “writing comfort” it says on the package. Will the writing comfort me? BIC have a performance policy: “This BIC product has been designed and manufactured to give you complete satisfaction. If, for any reason you are not satisfied with the performance of this product, please return to BIC and we will replace it at no cost to you.” I wonder if it will perform for me. Will I be refunded if I write bad poetry? Satisfaction is not guaranteed; either way, there will be a cost, to me.

Miss Behaviour

She called herself Miss Behaviour and when she arrived, and I mean ARRIVED, the crowds parted like the Red Sea. A head above the rest, blond afro wig, hoop earrings, silver mini-skirted dress, sex on legs. She danced with my friend who, unsure whether to lead or follow, took the lead. She stopped her, with a slow finger wag and smooth husky voice: “No, Darling, I’m the Daddy.”

Amy – 23 July 2011

the image of Amy
shrouded in red–
she’s loaded–
into the black
of the vehicle–
dead.

Tea with Tutu

overheard at Cape Town airport

God, I've had the most amazing day, today –
we had tea with Tutu.

I was sitting next to him,
and I put my hand on his thigh,
you know, just to say: hello,
how are you,
 darling?

He looked at me, and said,
excuse me, you have your hand...
on my knee –
but that's OK,
I like it –
 Gha, gha, gha, gha...

That's how
 he laughed.

In passing

How name? This place? he says.

This place? It's Covent Garden, I say.

Yes? Ah, yes, he says, thank you.

You know where you are now? Yes.

PAUL'S CLASS

The following pieces of writing came out of Paul Mason's optional second semester writing class.

Flying

Flying through the air, staring, falling out of trees, blossoms falling around her eyes and feet, shrieking and licking in tongues.

When he came to her, she heard his yellow birds flying into her ear and out of the other. She had fallen out of the picture above the sofa – onto its feather softness where he spatchcocked her, dispatched her, until tornadoes blew out of her basement with coal dust and flames. Foot drummers pounded against her tin roof.

He left her there for years, while sheets floated down from the sky made of clouds, softly seeping into her white bones.

The years passed without thought to the consequences and her skin felt brittle around her soft skeleton sheath. He returned to her again and again, until she never knew he was gone, but sooner or later, she knew that she had departed, and all that remained were their fragrant farts that mingled beneath the cotton sheets.

Hair

His hair was tightly coiled into small dark whorls like a Greek statue, carved. They looked hard to touch, chiselled onto his head by a sharp tap with a small hard hammer, wielded by a tired dusty man with dirt and sweat collected in the flabby folds of his skin and grimy artisan overalls.

But she knew that if she reached out her light index finger to touch him, the curls would yield softly under that tender pressure that she had exerted on him many times before this moment of her quiet consideration.

Noun/verb exercises

Nouns: *hatstand / book / pyjamas / dog basket / window pane*

Verbs: *sprinted / taught / dived / sketched / hammered*

The hatstand hammered the message home to him as it fell on his head. He had sprinted towards the dog basket in his pyjamas, diving for the precious book that had taught him so much, in a desperate attempt to save it from the slathering jaws of the beast. His inescapable collision with that sturdy bearer of headgear sketched his agony in bloody streaks across the cracked window pane.

Nouns: *perfume / duvet / hoof / rain / fur*

Verbs: *demolish / appraise / wiggles / sells / preaches*

The heavy rain was infused with her lavender perfume as it soaked through his fragile skin into the marrow of his being. He was drenched forever, drowned.

He couldn't forget the way she had looked at him, appraised him across the pews, as they praised almighty allegiance to the heavens under the spell of her father's thunderous preaching.

His heart was pounding like the hooves of a hundred horses demolishing the hard earth, kicking up its dark rich clods, as they charged headlong towards their doomed passion.

Priscilla

Priscilla was thinking about her pink shoes. They were so pretty. She liked things to be pretty. They were satin, shiny, with a spiky heel and a peep toe, with a dainty bow, finished with pearly beaded embroidery. They were perfect, and when she wore them, they took her away to a place where nothing hurt.

The sky was lavender with yellow clouds tinged with shades of orange and red. The grass was blue and as soft as a rabbit fur rug littered with white daisies. Priscilla picked the daisies, one by one, plucking off the petals, and letting them go when she was done. She paid no attention when the wind took them away to satisfy their wanderlust.

She didn't see the bald vulture in a long black leather coat, flapping, circling slowly, spiralling lower, lower and lower, drawn to the death of the daisies as their shredded remains rose upwards in a slow twisting vortex of confetti petals.

He saw her as the soft centre sitting in the tranquil eye of the cyclone, oblivious to the talons that were soon to pierce her serenity.

Priscilla was used to shovelling happiness. Nothing else would do. She lived in a palatial mansion with white pillars by the door, and a winding staircase that took her from the hall to the upper floor.

Everything was pristine, it was like living in a dream, apart from the goblins in the cellar who hacked away at the foundations. They worked around the clock, in shifts, huffing and puffing and snoring in turns, out of sight, and out of her mind.

She was a wistful girl with a lisp. When she spoke, cherry blossom bubbles blew from her gorgeous lips and lingered in the misty heat that surrounded her wherever she went. She wandered through life with a peculiar wisdom contained in her shadow smile that was irresistible to all who encountered her.

Vulture boy had been watching her for some time, coveting her lithe bones with his own shadowy grin, from where he clung to the rock face. At last, he let go and fell, downwards in a swinging dive, towards her.

Priscilla gasped when she found herself uplifted, caught in the grasp of a powerful force she had never felt before. Pale pastel colours melted around her, spinning away as she felt herself sucked into a dark blood red vacuum.

When she slipped out of her surprise, she surveyed the scene in a furrowed daze. It was a dank gloomy cave rustling with leathery feathers, fusty with the undefinable scent of a vague familiarity that she couldn't quite place in her feelings.

The lack of light faded into a bulky vulture shape hunched in front of her. Two piercing crimson eyes shone their lights on her as it shuffled a little closer. Something that lay between pity and sadness slipped into her throat before she could speak.

"You are ridiculous," she said, quietly, not meaning to be unkind.

Vulture boy stopped and staggered backwards into a swirling rage which obliterated the space around them. With a symphonic screech he erupted in an explosion of plumage which plastered the walls with sticky regret.

As his squawking subsided into the remaining silence that rained downy feathers, Priscilla stretched out her hand towards the small red parrot that remained.

Black box exercise

The black box exercise is a joint writing exercise in which three or four people write a story based on five elements: character / time / place / theme / incident. Each person (in this case Paul, Ruth and I) made up a list accordingly, then passed it on to the next person. Each person wrote the first phase of a story to set the scene and lead up to an inciting incident. It was then passed on to the next person who continued the story from that point taking it through the rising action to a climax. In the final step the third person completed the story, so that we had three complete stories. These are my contributions to three stories:

Phase 1 of *Hollow*

Character: a scarecrow
Theme: regret
Time: at night
Setting: Alaskan mountains
Incident: a book launch

Outline:

Earth Apple is a professional scarecrow who leads a double life; he's a secret assassin. By day, he leads an ordinary nine-to-five existence working in the fields for a farmer. He has a wife and two kids, who are unaware of his other identity. By night, he is employed by shadowy underworld characters, and powerful corrupt corporations to scare their opponents, or anyone who poses a threat to them, to death. His underground alias is The Straw Man. This story is about his mission to Alaska where his unsuspecting target, an environmentalist author who has just written a hardhitting exposé, is about to get the fright of her life.

Notes:

I'm thinking Earth Apple is middle aged, getting on a bit, he's starting to lose his stuffing. Perhaps his conscience is starting to prick him a little and he's beginning to question what he's doing. This is where the theme of regret might come in.

Hollow

*“Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.”* (from *The Hollow Men*, T.S. Eliot, 1925)

Fright night. Always on a Friday night. Not that Earth Apple was superstitious about such things in particular, but he had his routines and was, in many ways, a scarecrow of habit.

He stared into the bathroom mirror, at his hollow eyes which were not quite looking back at him. How many mirrors, in how many lowbrow hotels, had seen this same wretched countenance? Well, it was not quite the same, he reflected (no pun intended) – the hard face in front of him was a helluva lot more weathered since this had all started about twenty years before. Yes, weathered, he thought, that’s what it was, all right. The weather was his enemy – an occupational hazard.

He wondered what it would be like to have a desk job, in one of those marbled monolithic monuments to power and prestige that some of his clients were so fond of – protected from the harsh elements. Many of his targets were people from that other insideworld too. He could tell from their smooth lily-white skin – as the blood drained from their faces at the sight of him.

He raised a wooden hand to his face and touched its rough hessian with his bonelike stickfingers, before brushing the thinning straws from his brow, carefully. He had never been blessed with good looks, which was no drawback in his profession, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to transform himself into that truly terrible being he needed to be – to do the job right. Not the day job – birds were easily scared off, he could do it in his sleep, in fact, he often did. The farmer never noticed – that’s the advantage of having eyes that don’t close.

There were times he really needed to switch off during the day, because of his night-time activities. He’d been moonlighting for as long as he could remember. Maybe this is it, he thought, maybe this should be the last – I’m getting too old for this stuff. How had he gotten into it in the first place, anyhow? At what point had it become part of him; the easy

deceits? Lying came naturally to him these days. At this moment, his wife, Raintree, believed he was at a scarecrow convention in Idaho.

He had never been to Alaska before. As the plane was descending to land that morning, he had gazed out of the window and thought of her. The snowcovered mountains below were beautiful.

Phase 2 of *The chipped violin*

Character: a musician
Theme: longing
Time: twilight
Setting: in a flea market
Incident: an assault

How could I not know it was her? This was the woman I had longed for, for as long as I can remember. Unbeknownst to her, she is so much a part of me, I can sense the scent of her breath immediately.

She was indivisible from the music that had coursed through my lifeblood from the moment I was born. In the same second that I saw her at that first youth orchestra rehearsal, all those years before, I knew that the slightest thought of her flaming hair would flow through my bow forever, creating a supernatural vibration in the air that only I would ever hear.

In my precociousness I knew then that she would always be with me, as much as she would always be beyond my reach.

As the sun sank into the sea over the market, I began to turn to see my fate.

A second later my head felt like a detonated grenade, and a thick stream of wet red silk flowed across my eyes. It was almost sensuous, I thought vaguely, too stunned to respond to the rapid blows that pounded me relentlessly. Dark heavy shades loomed through my vanishing vision and I barely discerned the sharp puncture to my neck before everything disappeared into a black hole. My last sad thought was for the precious violin that I felt

slipping from my tenuous grasp. As I was swept away on a tide of shadows, it seemed to me as if I could see the violin floating further and further from me on a sea of red hot lava.

When I come around, I can barely breathe. The air around me is stifling and I struggle to gain a sense of my surroundings in darkness. I am contained. I feel buried.

I try to stretch out and am restricted by a scratchy plastic barrier that itches my skin as I touch it. It soon dawns on me that I am inside one of those large checked bags they use at the flea market. I've been stuffed into it like used clothes.

I can feel the bumpy motion of a moving vehicle and the muffled sound of an engine. Fear rises, quickly followed by Despair, and Anger. I'm angry with myself – I had surely known that it would come to this. I was reckless, almost deliberately so; knowing that my actions could bring me close to her, regardless of the consequences.

The vehicle jolts me violently, then comes to a halt. That final thud strikes home and I realise with a precipitous clarity that I have to escape – to find a way out of this obsession. I grasp this thought with a sense of tormented grief for the woman I am about to lose; the same woman who I have never touched in the physical world.

I breathe deeply, and start to grope in the darkness along the edges of my plastic prison, feeling for the edges of the zipper. I catch the edge under my fingernail and push it carefully, working it loose at the end until I can pull it open.

I crawl out onto a pile of other bags, loose clothing and plastic sheets, still feeling woozy from the beating and whatever sedative was used to knock me out – I touch my hand to my head feeling the scabby stickiness of half dried blood and wait for a moment as my eyes begin to adjust to the gloom. It gradually becomes apparent that I am captive in the back of a mini van.

A sharp metallic scraping sound signals the door being opened and a narrow sliver of yellow light pierces my eyes. Without thinking, I throw myself toward the door pushing against it with all my strength. The door yields more easily than I anticipated and I find myself spread-eagled on top of a balding dwarf wearing a red leather jacket, winklepickers and a very surprised expression.

Phase 3 of *The pilot story*

Character: a pilot
Theme: loss
Time: midnight
Setting: under the sea
Incident: a dog barks

“Your father loved you very much, Luke,” she said, before driving away without looking back.

Luke didn’t know what to think. His mind was racing as he paced up and down the bedroom. The shock of the night’s events and revelations threatened to overwhelm him. He didn’t know where or how to place his feelings.

The final words of that enigmatic woman echoed through his mind. How had she seen through him so easily? Piercing him to the core with that well-aimed verbal arrow.

Memories of his father were resurfacing from that deeply drowned place in the ocean of his feelings. The sight of the damaged reef had fractured his carefully constructed emotional barriers, opening up fresh wounds of grief.

His father’s death twelve months before had been devastating to him at the time – but time, he thought, had knitted a fragile scab over the pain to contain himself. But this new realisation of how little he really knew about his father, and his undersea activities, deepened his sense of loss. It was unbearable.

He lay on the bed and stared at the table covered in maps for the morning’s mission, finally slipping into an exhausted slumber.

He overslept, barely made it to the airfield on time, and got ready for take-off. The night before seemed a surreal half-remembered dream, as he focussed on the job at hand, following the procedures, mechanically, step by step.

Soon he was soaring, looking down at the earth shrinking below, and a familiar sense of calm came over him. As the aeroplane left the edge of terra firma to the air above the sea – that rolling liquid mass stretched out as far as he could see, and what he could see, then, was Clarity.

A vision of Clarity appeared to him as a woman with waves of auburn hair, with a mermaid tail glittering green and blue in the diamond sunlight reflected on the surface of all that was important to him. He knew then what he had to do.

Appendix

Creatured

An early arrangement of the notebook 'fragments', published in *Tyhini 2011*, a book of work produced by the MA students during the first semester, edited by Robert Berold.

Creatured

It was the time she nearly stepped on a puffadder. That was what marked the occasion. It happened on her birthday. She was walking in front, saw it in the nick of time before her foot descended completely. She jumped. We stepped aside, behind her, and watched it slide, down the path, and into the bushes.

☪☪☪

Butterflies on bare brick, in pairs, but settling one at a time, dance in the air above the engraved stone – the heavy granite block, surrounded by smooth pebbles, and jagged red rocks splintered on the ground.

☪☪☪

My head is filled with fluttering thoughts that I'm trying to catch with a holey butterfly net.

☪☪☪

I want to write everything. The wind in the trees and the way the leaves sound, the different trees dropping small fruits on the ground, the noise they make when they hit the hard earth. I want to write the grass and the scratchings from the hare. The sap on the ground in the pony field the dirt and the muck in the water basins I scrape out with my bare hand and the rustle in the branches something unseen. And the mousebirds' loud movement when they fly through the bushes bristling against the edges and the flapping, flurrying feverish sound when they fly. Away. And the way the fudge is sick in my stomach and on my sweetish swollen tongue I can taste it like thirsty but no amount of peppermint tea takes it away from me.

☪☪☪

A praying mantis crawls from under the sheets, green against the white cotton.

☪☪☪

I share my bed with creatures, small songololos are a recurring theme, to be removed every morning when I make the bed.

☪☪☪

The shrieking cricket will not stop, while something else flutters large against the window pane, wings beat against the glass with a rhythmic clatter.

☪☪☪

Spiders, between the sheets, bite me, behind the knees.

☪☪☪

When the giant spider found its way under the door into the bedroom, I trapped it under a plastic cup. The next day I removed it to the wet grass, where it sat motionless while I looked on, thinking– your move, wondering– is it still alive? Later, when I looked again, there was no sign of it.

☪☪☪

A four legged spider lives behind the toilet cistern, he's very nervous.

☪☪☪

There's a very busy little spider running this way and that, quick, quick, like it doesn't want to miss anything. Reminds me of the White Rabbit – 'I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date, no time to say hello, goodbye.... I'm overdue, I'm in a rabbit stew... I'm late, I'm late, I'm late.'

☪☪☪

Every morning I check the kettle now, lifting the lid to see, if there's another spider lurking there, waiting to be boiled, for tea.

☪☪☪

I sit in the centre of this hum and buzz, bees overtaking the room through open windows. They do not worry me if I ignore them, sitting here with my book and my pen on notepad. They surround me with increasing hum and numbers, invading my space. What can I do? Well, nothing, just ignore them and hope they will eventually move on, hopefully not decide to move in. I am at the centre of the swarm. The centre of their storm. The quiet place in the middle of a tornado. They land on the windows but not on me.

☪☪☪

I hear pounding on the roof. I see their monkey shaped shadows leaping across the sunlit strip on the half shaded pillar outside the window. Live shadow puppets. A whole troop hump thumping on the roof, tails trailing. A shake of branches reveals the flying leaps into adjacent trees.

☪☪☪

The curious hornbill, crowned, in its feathered trousers, peers into the bathroom window.

☪☪☪

Bumblebees in the potato bush, hundreds of them, vibrating in the blue flowers.

☪☪☪

A feral cat amongst the grasses, beneath the woodpecker tree. White, black and tortoiseshell, looking for all the world domesticated, lying in a sunny spot, eyes half closed.

☪☪☪

I glimpse the Knysna Lourie in the half light evening, in the thorn thicket, amongst the aloes. I hear its guttural, heavy breathing, alarm call, to my left and another at my right, unseen. It flies its silhouette into the canopy of the fig trees by the gate. I stand beneath and look and look for its shape amongst the filigree of leaves and branches, against the darkening sky.

☪☪☪

Kingfisher on a fence pole, considers me, perched.