

# Moonscapes & Mallee Scrub

*Diaries of a Vagabond*

Andrew Miller



3

BRITANNIA MARIE  
WILHAM

4

APRIL 1974

We have not so much  
'personalities' as  
**textualities**  
...

6

Date: Mon, 2 Feb 2009 11:04:05 +1030  
From: Samantha Schulz <samantha.schulz@flinders.edu.au>  
To: Andrew Miller <andrew.miller@flinders.edu.au>  
Subject: yes!

Part(s):  2 She's Worth It.doc application/msword 6582.79 KB 

it downloads perfectly ... I just haven't written back until now because I've been at my parents' house working on that same darn journal article!!

a few quick things:

1. I definitely like the first title better. In my mind it sets up a contrast between something slick, sleek and professional sounding (eschatologies) and the more subversive sub-heading. I also like the way that you explain what eschatology means and how, by starting off deliberating over the future, you're being subversive (writing up against the grain of the 'accepted' memoir).
2. Love the cover design.
3. I heard something on radio national last night at about 6pm about 'biographies' (or in the same vein, autobiographies, memoirs, etc) as having a socio-historical function; they are 'technologies of the Self' ... Very Foucauldian (I note that you reference him) ... I think you also touch on the idea that writing of this nature has a social function (rather than the hyper individuality that it tends to project). For example, in terms of you work being a 'technology of the Self', you state, "I am writing to find out who I am (and who I might become) and where I've been (and where I might go)." All very Foucault ... I'll email you my paper when I ever finish it (or at least some of the notes), because there's some overlap here, I think.
4. ahhhhhhhhhhhh
5. Saphy is such a gorgeous leading lady (Megsy's trying to be; refer attached collage entitled "because she's worth it").
6. I have to sign off and get back to the grindstone. Well done!!

Samantha Schulz  
School of Education  
Flinders University  
GPO Box 2100  
Adelaide 5001  
8201 5672

... What do you get when you cross a mafiosi with a postmodernist? Someone who will make you an offer you can't understand ...

Every time we  
re-describe ourselves,  
**we die**  
and are born again  
...

**M**an is born to die – How dreadful is this truth – Brought into this world by pain & sorrow – to go through it in pain & labour & to die with pain & sorrow ... every minute – every hour – might be our last stage of this life ...

(William Anderson Cawthorne,  
*Literarium Diarium*,  
9 January 1843)





COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

*Nationality and Citizenship Act.*

**CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION  
AS AN AUSTRALIAN CITIZEN**

WHEREAS Brita Wilma Marie GUNTHER has applied for a Certificate of Naturalization as an Australian citizen, alleging with respect to herself the particulars set out on the reverse side of this Certificate, and has satisfied me that she has fulfilled the conditions for the grant of such a Certificate prescribed by the Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948-1966.

NOW THEREFORE I, the Minister of State for Immigration, hereby grant, in pursuance of the Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948-1966, this Certificate of Naturalization, whereby, subject to the provisions of that Act and of any other law affecting the rights of naturalized persons, the abovenamed applicant shall, as from the date upon which she swears or affirms allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her heirs and successors, and swears to or affirms that she

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DATED THIS Twelfth DAY OF December,

ONE THOUSAND NINE HUNDRED AND Sixty-seven.

Tim Hedden MINISTER OF STATE FOR IMMIGRATION

ISSUED BY AUTHORITY OF THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR IMMIGRATION [Signature] AUTHORIZED OFFICER

I, William Ewart SCHNEIDER hereby certify that on the 12th December, 1967 the grantee of this certificate Brita Wilma Marie GUNTHER appeared before me at Adelaide swore allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her heirs and successors and swore to observe faithfully the laws of Australia and fulfil her duties as an Australian citizen.

SIGNATURE

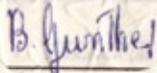
[Signature]

TITLE Officer-in-Charge  
Citizenship Branch.



E.F.(1) N<sup>o</sup> 194106

PARTICULARS RELATING TO APPLICANT

SURNAME .. ..	GUNTHER
CHRISTIAN NAMES.. ..	Brita Wilma Marie
ADDRESS .. ..	Glengarry Avenue, Glenalta, South Australia.
DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH	21st March, 1940, Hanover, Germany.
NATIONALITY, PRIOR TO GRANT OF THIS CERTIFICATE	German
HEIGHT .. ..	5ft. 4ins.
VISIBLE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES .. ..	Nil
COLOUR OF EYES .. ..	Blue
COLOUR OF HAIR .. ..	Blonde
SPECIMEN SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT	





## THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE



The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time. The dead have a presence. Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead? They are also in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling. Perhaps we are what they dream.

(Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1984/1986, p. 98)

I AM A SHAPE-SHIFTER. I have been changing forms and identities ever since I can remember.

I am four years old again. I am very small. My brother is even smaller. He is a pillow of pink flesh lying beside me. We are in a caravan. The River Murray is out there somewhere, in the night, beneath the orange cliffs. There is a blanket hanging over our bed, separating us from them. The light still creeps over. I am scared and my brother sleeps.

<sup>1</sup> An American hobo symbol from the 1920s and '30s. Translation: 'Good road to follow.'

... Lord help her!  
 She hath drank deep  
     from the cup of  
     sorrows – She hath  
 been the victim of  
     Adversity and if  
     it pleases Thee?  
 Great God! Let the  
     evening of her  
     life be spent in  
 tranquillity & piety  
 – Oh Father! Hear  
 her prayers & grant  
     her requests so  
     far as they accord  
 with Thy Holy Will  
     – Bless her with  
     happiness & health  
     & finally may she  
 inherit thy kingdom  
 hereafter ... Spare  
     her Merciful Lord  
     – Forgiving her  
     manifold sins &  
     wickedness for the  
 sake of our redeemer  
 & Jesus Christ Amen  
     ...

(William Anderson  
 Cawthorne,  
*Literarium Diarium*,  
 23 October 1842)

He inflates and deflates as they fight beyond the blanket.

I am four years old again. The shouting continues and the caravan door slams as my mother leaves. Dad remains behind. There is silence now. And my brother sleeps. He is only two. Hours later and I am shaken from my dreams. My Dad's face is lined with fear and worry and tears. I am scared now. A pebble has been moved with a toe: an avalanche is sure to follow.

And here it comes. My Dad is saying things that make no sense. Yet his gestures speak of terror. *Perhaps Mum has gone to Blanchetown. Perhaps she has caught a bus back to Adelaide. Perhaps, barefoot, in the pitch black, she has walked the ten kilometres, through thorns, down dirt roads, to the roadhouse. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps she has flown away.*

And I am small and I feel my heart racing.

*Ba—Boom.*

*Ba—Boom.*

*Ba—Boom.*

... we are the  
highest form of  
life on earth and  
yet ineffably sad  
because we know what  
no other animal  
knows, that we must  
die.

(Don Delillo,  
*White Noise*,  
1986, p. 99)



I am four years old again. We drive silently to the police station. It is neither morning nor night. Our car is travelling between worlds and between outcomes. My Dad gets out, he leaves his body, he is someone else.

'I've lost my wife,' he says. I think he is crying. I know I am.

The absence of my Mother began with the slamming of a caravan door in 1974. The aftershocks have continued ever since. She never returned. Her absence is an active and volatile presence. Somehow she ended up in a muddy lagoon in the backwaters of the River Murray, somewhere within the grey skeletons of dead river red gums, a bloated body, bruised and broken having fallen from the orange cliffs, having smashed her head, having drowned.

While I slept a woman lay dying.

And I never knew that woman, but she was my Mum. It took me nearly twenty years to realise that she threw herself from those cliffs that night, and with that desperate lunge she changed every day of my life to follow and those of my brother, Dad, and others too. None of us returned. We all fell over the orange sadness after her.



I am four years old again. I am caught in the trajectory of my Mother's dive, forever falling and forever following.

As I lay sleeping a woman lay dying. That woman was my Mum.

*Ba—Boom.*

*Ba—Boom.*

*Ba—Boom.*

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

(Prospero, *The Tempest*, IV.1.156–8)



## SPEAKING WITH BUNYIPS

Love and death will strike, come their time; only you have no inkling when that time is.

(Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 2003/2006, p. 3)

‘Mummy, what’s it like?’

...

‘Dying—?’

...

‘Dying and going to heaven—?’

...

‘Stepping off the edge and flying—?’

...

‘Face first into infinity and beyond—?’

...

‘Like a pelican into a river—?’

...

‘A shooting star into a black hole—?’

...

‘Plunging into death, into the muddy green depths—?’

...

‘Where the mussels bark and shrimps bite—’

This staging of language postpones the other's death: a very short interval, we are told, separates the time during which the child still believes his mother to be absent and the time during which he believes her to be already dead. To manipulate absence is to extend this interval, to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death.

(Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 1977/1979, p. 16)

...

'Living with the Bunyips, yabbies, carp, and cod—'

...

'Like the wedding ring that fell from Dad's finger and sank in the mud—'

...

'Beneath the towering orange cliffs and honeycomb sky—'

...

'Where the wombats burrow and the wild things hide—'

...

'Where you die for me, fly for me, every day of my life—'

...

'Plummeting headlong into the abyss—'

...

'Like a wish, like a name, like the pebbles rolling beneath my feet—'

...

'Out of reach, just there, on the edge of my heart—'

...



'Mummy—?'

...

'Mummy—?'

...

'Look at me fly—'

...

'Mummy, Mummy, look at me die—'

*And so I kiss her goodnight and snuggle up to her shadow.*

*Ahooooooooo—*





26 October 1973





D 22

District of . . . .	KAPUNDA	No.	12	19	74
Surname . . . .	MILLER				
Christian names . . . .	Brita Marie Wilma	No.	241A/3073		
Date of death . . . .	26.4.1974				
Place of death . . . .	Blanchetown				
Date of burial, cremation or other disposal of body . . . .	1.5.1974				
Place of burial, cremation or other disposal of body . . . .	Centennial Park Crematorium				
Sex . . . . .	Female				
Age . . . . .	34	years			
Occupation . . . . .	Wife of William James MILLER				
Usual Residence . . . .	13 Centre Way, Belair				
Place of birth . . . .	Hanover, Germany				
Length of residence in Commonwealth . . . .	25	years			
Conjugal status . . . .	Married				
Age at first marriage . .	19	years			
Name of Spouse . . . .	William James MILLER				
Total issue . . . . .	Living	2	M.	1	F.
	Deceased		M.		F.
Cause of death . . . .					Duration

OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL REGISTRAR  
ADELAIDE. S.A.

I, Eric Douglas BYERLEE, Deputy Registrar of Births, Death South Australia, in the Commonwealth of Australia, do hereby true copy of an entry in a register kept in this Office. 10th day of May, 1974.

Births, Deaths and Marriages for the State of  
Victoria, do hereby certify that the above is a  
true and correct copy of the original as filed in  
this Office. Given under my hand and seal this

*K. B. Young*  
DEPUTY REGISTRAR

No 145824

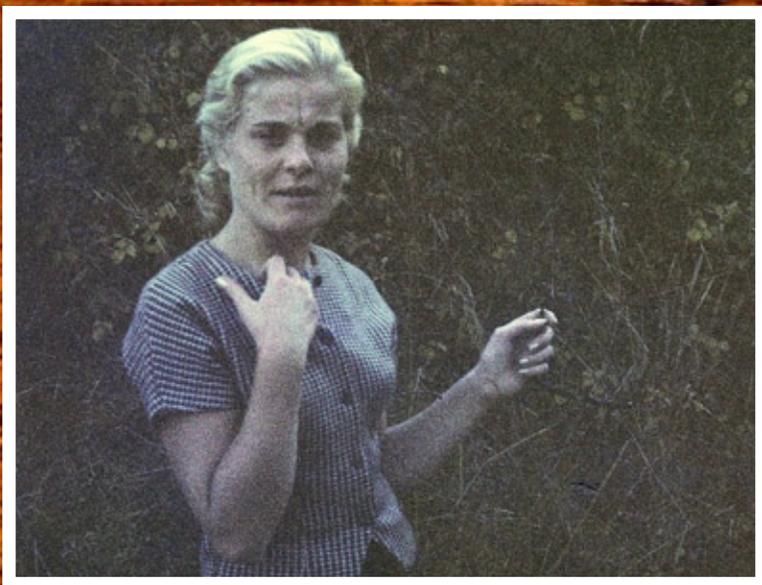
Age at first marriage ..	19	years
Name of Spouse .. ..	William James MILLER	
Total issue .. .. .	Living	2 M. 1 F.
	Deceased	M. F.
Cause of death .. ..	Duration	
	Drowning	

INFORMANT:

Name .. . . .	K. B. Young
Description .. . . .	Clerk
Residence .. . . .	193 Unley Road, Unley
Name of Undertaker ..	Alfred James and Sons
Address .. . . .	Unley
Date of registration ..	1.5.1974

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Entered at the General Registry Office this	3073
2 day of MAY 19 74	
<i>K. B. Young</i> Pro Deputy Registrar	



## STARRY STARRY APRIL NIGHT

Dear Mum,

Thirty-five years ago you stepped off the edge of the world and left me alone. Left me lying in a caravan under a blanket, beside Scotty, who was only two, and very small. Just a pillow of pink flesh lying beside me. No matter how big he got he was always *that* small. Even when he was burly, bearded, and covered in tattoos—he was *that* small. And you left him there, *me* there, *us* there, in the caravan, in the night, beneath the Milky Way, above the lagoon, on the cliffs, in the moonscape, in the mallee scrub, in McBean Pound, outside Blanchetown, in South Australia, in 1974. You left us there and leapt into space.

What I want to know is... No, it's too early for questions and too late for answers.

Let me start again. The other day I rediscovered your death certificate in a bunch of old photos and papers. What I find strange about this document is the date it gives for your death. It says you died on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974. I'm sure I've been told this date before and I'm sure I'll be told it again, but every time I discover this date I am struck by how

unremarkable it is. It's just another day in a series of days. It's decidedly unremarkable, unmemorable, and unsurprising. It doesn't articulate through its graphic structure 'death' or 'tragedy.' OR, 'today two boys and a man will face the horror of their lives.' OR, 'today two boys and a man will be betrayed by the woman they love more than life itself.' And if the *person-loved-more-than-life-itself* dares to leap from that life, then the quality of the lives for those to follow will surely suffer. It's not the dead, but the living, who bear the scars.

Is it any wonder that these two boys and man staggered through the 1970s like wayward ghouls, like broken children, like maniacs? And that the man battled the bottle and hovered over my bed at nights sobbing like a baby, sobbing for his wife? And that Scotty ran towards blonde women calling *mummy* for most of his infancy? But what is even more remarkable, or unremarkable, about this date, this forgettable date, this date I can't seem to remember, is that I don't know when this date *is*. Is it *that* night or the *next* day?

*Who decided which day you died?*

My memory of the night has you arguing with





Dad behind a grey blanket at one end of a caravan while Scotty and I attempt to sleep at the other. There is almost no space between us in this miniature world, this frightful tableau, and yet we seem worlds apart.

At some point in this argument, this drunken argument, full of sound and fury, full of everything and nothing, you burst out of the caravan door into the night, the Blanchetown night, probably a starlit night, probably mild given it is April, probably buzzing with mosquitoes and moths and smelling of river and dust. I imagine the baked earth crackling under your feet as your careen into the gloom. Three-corner jacks pricking your toes. And I remember quite distinctly Dad yelling after you in what would later sound like a lonely voice, a defeated voice, a lost voice, *to come back*.

But what I don't know is whether that date, that forgettable date, that '26-April-1974' date, that date that has me at four-years-old and Scotty at two-years-old, and Dad at (let me check) 39-years-old... Stop. *Thirty-nine is significant*. It must be written in numerals, not words. Dad was 39-years-old when you died. *Dad was 39 when you died*. I'm



39 as I write. It's taken me my whole life to write this letter. It's taken me 35 years to speak to you at all. It took you 34 years to die and me 35 years to write. At this moment, in this narrative space, Dad and I are *both* 39 and you are 34. I am older than you and the same age as Dad. Scotty stays at 2. Because he is small. Just a baby. Just a pillow of pink flesh lying beside me. I will guard him forever. But I will fail.

Is it possible that subconsciously I was waiting to be the same age as Dad to write to you? To begin to comprehend what the world looked like to him on that day and night in 1974? That night when he lost his wife? That night, an endless night spanning from 1974 to now, when two star-crossed lovers—he English and you German—took your lives—he *yours* and you *his*—because one without the other is impossible? I think it's significant. I think it's significant to know, as I now know, what it feels like to be 39 years of age, with little or no understanding of the world, and yet trying to make sense of that world.

I saw Dad at the time as 'ancient' and 'powerful.' But he wasn't ancient or powerful. He was 39.



Like me. And I know nothing, and each day I know even less. So I now have more empathy for *his* horror and *your* heartache. Before, even moments ago, I blamed him, blamed you, *blamed you both*. But you were only 34 and he was only 39. What could you or he have possibly known about living and dying in an impossible world on an impossible day?

Nothing.

But this wasn't what I was seeking from this date. Your deathday—26 April 1974—so specific and unremarkable—feels wrong. How late in the night is it when you storm out of the caravan? Is it *before* or *after* midnight? Is the date of your death *that* night or the *following* morning? Which of these two possibilities does '26.4.1974' represent? Did they get it right? Did you die that night after storming from the caravan—say, as you staggered through the starlit night, through the still, grey moonscape that is the mallee scrub above the cliffs, above the lagoon, above McBean Pound, near Blanchetown, a few kilometres off the dirt road to Morgan, in South Australia—say, as you jumped from those fossil-encrusted orange cliffs, like Tarzan

## Blanchetown

Located 133 km north east of Adelaide, Blanchetown is a tiny township on the Murray River which was an important transportation centre during the nineteenth century. It is now a strange mixture of historic buildings and temporary shacks built by holidaymakers on the banks of the river. The Murray River at Blanchetown is only 3.6 m above sea level and it is 274 km from the sea.

('Blanchetown,'  
*Sydney Morning Herald*, Travel:  
[www.smh.com.au/news/South-Australia/Blanchetown...](http://www.smh.com.au/news/South-Australia/Blanchetown...),  
 accessed 30.3.2009)

diving from a giant waterfall? OR, did you knock about the cliff tops, drunk and delirious, singing and dancing, yelling and screaming, in English and German, half naked, half insane, for hours, like a banshee, until slipping or jumping from one ledge to the next, until there were no more ledges, just a descent into hell, into the muddy green depths, into the lagoon, into the starry night? So, here's the thing, did you die as I lay wondering where you were? OR, some hours later, when I slept, when I dreamed? *Was I sleeping while you lay dying? Were we both dead at the same time?*

If this is the case then I hang my head in shame. This is not the hero I imagine myself to be. The hero who saves his Mum at great physical cost to himself. Who reaches over the cliff and pulls her back to safety, to him, to love, *to life*. I have dreamed this sequence every year since your death. I have flown like superman down from the sky and caught you as you fell, above the rocks, the jagged rocks, the carp-infested waters, the muddy green spume. And I have circled the sky with you in my arms and returned you to our lives. Like a hero. Like God. To Dad crying over my bed.



What was Dad doing?

What was Dad doing all night long when you didn't return? This kind of suffering is beyond writing and beyond speaking, and today isn't the day to butcher his pain with hollow imaginings. His suffering will remain silent, unwritten, and unspeakable. It's Dad's suffering not mine. He bore that cross all by himself.

For he was a hero. The lone warrior, like Mad Max or Clark Kent.

What I do know is you never returned. To my side, to my bed, to me, to Scotty, to Dad, *to us*. Save for dreams, save for nightmares, save for me to tell you off for not coming home. I have said this before and will say it again: we all followed after you over those orange cliffs that night, one and all, in our ways, every day, for the rest of our lives. Dad lived another 19 years after that night and Scotty lived another 24 years. But they weren't really alive, not in the richest and fullest sense of the word; no, part of them passed into the muddy green depths after you, to the bottom, to the Bunyips and muskells, to the mud below. I think I'm trying to tell you, Mum, that I've never been the same again, since

Being human means  
 we can remember  
 and tell stories  
 and pretend and  
 write and hope and  
 share, and in this  
 way add growth  
 rings of meaning  
 to our lives.  
 Being human means  
 that in addition  
 to going through  
 the motions of our  
 lives, we need  
 to turn back and  
 celebrate our lives.  
 We need to paint  
 and map and write  
 and make believe  
 and tell stories  
 and represent and  
 reminisce. We need  
 to develop the eyes  
 to see. What human  
 beings fear is not  
 growing old, but  
 growing old without  
 things adding up.

(Lucy M. Calkins,  
*Living Between the  
 Lines*,  
 1991, p. 185)

that night, my first night, my very first memory on planet Earth. And that's not a very good first memory to have. It's the kind of memory that poisons life from the inside out, forever.

How many years will I live after that night?

The other striking thing about that death certificate is not so much the absence of emotion, which is stunning, but the single word used to describe the 'cause' of your death. Drowning. No explanation, no elaboration, no context, just drowning. I have wondered about this for thirty-five years. I have wondered about this for more years than you were alive. I know technically you died from drowning—after all, *it says so on the certificate*. But how alive were you by the time you came to rest in the muddy lagoon at the foot of the cliffs? Were you not already half-dead, half splattered, and half gone, having smashed your head, having fallen—or flown—from such a height, into the night, into oblivion, from our lives?

This 'Drowned' (d-r-o-w-n-e-d) doesn't really capture the cause of your death in an emotional or figural sense. It's clinical but empty. It takes away all the drama and horror that swept you



Death is a  
wilderness in  
which everyone is  
lost for words.

Jonathan Raban, *Passage to  
Juneau*, 2000, p. 258)

off your feet. It doesn't mention the slamming of a caravan door in 1974 and the agony that led to the cliff, or the panic that led to a yellow Holden Kingswood speeding from the caravan in plumes of dust at dawn as Dad raced us to the police station in search of answers, to call for help, to scream. *Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps you flew away.* It doesn't mention the argument, the drunkenness, the leap, the suicide. Was it suicide? Or was it an unfortunate accident? Was it one last grand and futile act of a miserable woman? Crying out to the universe? A mouse squeaking orders to God? Or simply the idiocy of a drunken fool on the edge of the abyss?

That 'Drowned' doesn't capture any of this. It doesn't capture the trajectory of your body down the cliff face, the fleeting seconds it took to smash your way down the rocks to the bottom, and then plunge or ricochet into the muddy green lagoon, beneath the mighty river red gums creaking in the depths, or the wombats snoring in their dens, or me dreaming in my bed. And it doesn't capture the nature of the drowning that followed this leap of faith or despair. It doesn't capture whether this final breath was made in panic, in desperation, from

a woman conscious and struggling for life in the still, starlit night, or whether this last breath was made by a restful and unconscious woman who was, for all intents and purposes, already dead, having decided back at the top that the game was up, or whose heart had already been broken by life and had long since prepared herself for an eternal absence. That DROWNED is grossly inadequate to describe anything.

Were you conscious or unconscious when you took your final breath? Or were you already a pulverised and bloody mess simply going through the motions of breathing by reflex? Were you aware of anything after you jumped into the night? Were you even thinking at all when you stepped off the edge of the world and left our lives on that fateful night in April 1974? And is this date *before* or *after* midnight on the night I remember? Did you actually die on 26 April 1974? Or later? Or earlier? Or is this just a bureaucrat's best guess?

*Do you even know you're dead?*

According to CalendarHome.com,<sup>1</sup> the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 was a Wednesday: 'Day 114 of Year 1974.' I suspect that this is the Wednesday before



Childhood, looking  
back on it, is  
like this – a  
mess of memories  
and impressions  
scattered and  
clotted and pasted  
together like a  
mulch of fallen  
leaves on a damp  
autumn pavement.

(George Johnston,  
*My Brother Jack*,  
1964, p. 1)



the Easter long weekend. Knowing Dad, he would have driven us to Blanchetown after work to turn a four-day break into a five-day break. Driving incredibly slowly in his new Holden Kingswood, he would have driven us from our house in Belair through Upper Sturt, Crafers, Birdwood, Woodside, and Sedan before reaching Blanchetown two-and-a-half hours later and turning off on the dirt road to Morgan. Ten kilometres later, in the orange twilight, we would have turned off again, this time right onto a smaller track, before making our way through the mallee scrub to a rocky clearing above a steep sandstone cliff. Here we would have pulled up beside a small caravan overlooking a giant olive-green lagoon and the Murray beyond. In Dad's eye would have appeared that dreamy look he got when arriving at this scruffy piece of paradise. Six years later, on the verge of bankruptcy, he would sell everything to hang on to this block. *His block*. And so here we are, Wednesday night, before the Easter long weekend. And if this date is Wednesday, then I think, after all, the authorities got it right. You would have died *this* night, Wednesday night, a few short hours after arriving at the river,



even if the police didn't find your body until the next day.

Was it the police who found your body?

I hope Dad didn't find your body.

What I am confused about is why the caravan is above the cliffs. In all the years we owned that property, from the early 1970s to 2004 when I sold it, we always camped *below* the cliffs and *by* the river. The property itself, 2 acres wide and 10 deep, stretched from the river to the lagoon to above the cliffs. It was one of many such strips of land released in McBean Pound in the 1970s. Ours was Lot 8: the best block of the lot. We only ever stayed on the cliffs, overlooking the river and lagoon, when the river flooded and the lower plain swelled into a giant wetland. At such times we would row out to our caravans in canoes or by dinghy, because part of our block would protrude from the river, like an island oasis in a giant ocean. Maybe Dad had just bought the property and still hadn't set up camp below. Maybe it was flooded in 1974 and Dad had long since pulled the caravan out.

Whatever the case, we were on the cliffs on *Wednesday* 26 April 1974, at the beginning of what

Blanchetown,  
South Australia

Blanchetown is a small township in South Australia on the (west) bank of the Murray River, 130 km northeast of Adelaide. The Blanchetown Bridge is the western-most (and furthest downstream) of the four crossings of the Sturt Highway over the Murray River. During the nineteenth century it was an important transportation centre on the lower Murray...

Blanchetown is widely regarded as the entrance to the Riverland district.

(Wikipedia,  
accessed 30.3.2009)

I imagine to be a family holiday, at the beginning of what I imagine to be an Easter long weekend, when you leapt from our lives.

When you took the plunge.

When you died.

That date—Wednesday—April 26—therefore seems plausible.

But wait. I have just looked up Easter dates for 1974 and they don't match your deathdate. According to Ronald W. Mallen,<sup>2</sup> Easter Sunday fell on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April in 1974, not ten days later when you died. *So, why were we at the river on Wednesday 24 April 1974, midweek, a month or so after your 34<sup>th</sup> birthday, when you and Dad had a business to run?* Did you decide to take a holiday? Is this why you were arguing? I know Dad loved the river and thought it God's own country, but did *you* want to be there on this Wednesday night in April 1974? Given that we had no running water or toilet facilities, this would not have been a relaxing place to be with two boys, especially one in nappies. Of all the places in the world to take a holiday, this place would have seemed especially inhospitable and dangerous. With the nearest toilet 10 kilometres



away in Blanchetown, and the nearest hospital 60 kilometres away in Waikerie, our little caravan in the middle of the moonscape would have seemed a colossal joke. Not only would it have been smelly and cramped, but dusty and insect-ridden. Mosquitoes in the evening and flies in the day. Moths bumping around the lights at night and mice scurrying in the shadows. Did we have lights? Was the caravan hooked up to the car battery? Or were we using kerosene lamps? Did we have a fridge or esky? Did we have a gas stove? Did we piss by torch light? Did we shit in a hole? Was the weather warm?

As Darryl Kerrigan might ask, 'How's the serenity?' (*The Castle*, 1997).

But wait. I have just looked up the flood records for 1974. According to the State Library of South Australia,<sup>3</sup> there was indeed a flood in 1974. It peaked at 8.5 metres at Morgan just upstream from McBean Pound. This is a significant flood, although well short of the big flood of 1956 which peaked at 12.3 metres at Morgan. According to the State Library, floods over 5 metres are considered exceptional, and include the floods of 1931, 1956, 1973, and 1974. There it is, Mum. *We are up on*



*those damned cliffs because down below the world is turning to water.* But you already knew that. From our caravan we would have had panoramic views of a giant floodplain swirling with eddies and shimmering light. Tall eucalypts that once stood in dusty paddocks would have now stood knee-deep in olive-green water and licks of foam and froth. Pelicans would have dotted the waters and galahs and sulphur-crested cockatoos would have dotted the treetops. The evening would have erupted with hundreds if not thousands of cockies screeching in the river red gums and pelicans flapping their giant beaks with carp. Below and the cod and yellowbelly would have been spawning and the shrimps and yabbies biting. But above, a little round caravan would have silhouetted the reddening sky, a mere spot against the universe. And we would have been inside, having dinner, preparing for a long night ahead.

For an argument.

For a death.

The problem is I can't know the answers to the riddles outlined here. There is not enough evidence to reconstruct a sensible map. All I can do



is speculate on possibilities and probabilities of the night in question. But in the end I am making it up as I go along. I'm inventing the past *to make sense of the past to make peace with the future*. Only you know the answers to these questions—and something tells me even you don't know.

The problem is I have been telling myself these stories for so long the past is no longer accessible. It has bled into multiple pasts, multiple possibilities, multiple outcomes, and multiple realities—all swirling around in the giant swamp of my mind. There is no longer any one past that can claim reality. They all feel equally likely and equally unlikely. They are simulacra histories told by a myth-maker: an auto-archaeologist picking through the wreckage of memory and history. You could have died on Wednesday or Thursday for all I know. In my mind's eye I am watching a copy of a copy of a nightmare. The archaeology of self is never finished. This means the past IS NOT really available to any of us—no matter how hard we try to retrieve it. As Jonathan Raban (1999/2000) says in *Passage to Juneau*,

How to begin again?  
 How to recover the  
 knack of swimming  
 smoothly from one  
 minute to the next,  
 to keep on fitting  
 each new day into  
 the puzzle the way  
 everyone else does  
 without thinking?

(Janette Turner  
 Hospital,  
 Charades,  
 1989,  
 p. 37)



Memories of early childhood are never trustworthy. Memory always has its own dark purpose, often hidden from the rememberer; and it is a ruthless editor, with a facile knack for supplying corroborating detail. It's impossible to draw hard-and-fast distinctions between deep-dredge memory, retrieving material directly from the silt in which it has lain for many years, and the shallow-dredge variety, in which one remembers only an earlier act of remembering. Freud warned: 'Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused.' In fifty years, I'd had ample time to revisit the day when my father came home – going there on each occasion with a different agenda.

Now that my father was dead, I wondered if the scene might not be a work of self-serving fiction. (p. 309)

While Raban wonders whether his recollections of his father are self-serving fictions or not, I'm wondering whether my memories of you are self-defeating fictions or not. And if childhood memories



are unreliable and all acts of remembering are acts of forgetting, then I need answers from the only person still there: YOU. Or possibly the 4-year-old ME. But you're dead and he's asleep.

This is why I sift through the rubble of history with the care of an archaeologist, picking through the strata of self in search of origins, for clues as to how I was put together by language and experience.

By cliffs.

Rocks.

Water.

And death.

These layers have built my identity and shaped my being, and it is only through destabilising these sediments that I can hope to start again, to reconstruct myself (my-SELF) from the debris and dust of tragedy. Like the Six Million Dollar Man, we can rebuild 'me' from the ground up, with new descriptions of inherited knowledge and bionic imaginings. This way, memoir writing, as a form of auto-archaeology, as a technology of self, becomes a means of changing the self—of evolving.

Of shape-shifting.

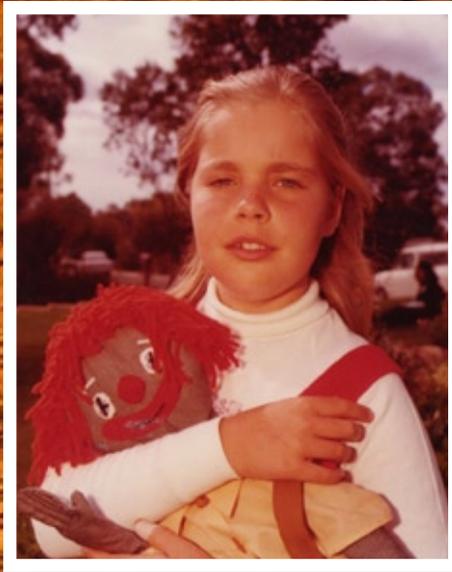
Metamorphosis.

And transcendence.

But wait. There is something even more peculiar than this, Mum. I am writing this letter not just to you. I am writing this letter as part of a research project I'm doing at Flinders University. I'm writing to you as part of my efforts to secure a PhD, which is like a higher degree. This means other people will read this letter. I am exposing our family business, Mum. I am exposing you and I am exposing me. I am exposing Dad and I am exposing Scotty. I'm exhuming your corpse for all to see.

According to Robyn Davidson, this poses serious ethical challenges for the writer ('The Honesty and Dishonesty of Life Writing,' Adelaide Writers' Week, 2008). Do I have an ethical responsibility to you? Where should my loyalties lie? With the dead? With the living? Or with both? Peter Godwin takes up Davidson's concerns and suggests that life writers betray those they *know* to please those they *don't know*. According to Godwin, our parents are *fictions* to us anyway—we *invent them* to suit ourselves—and often miss their 'real' stories and 'real' selves in the process.





And then there is something else, Mum, something even more horrible than this. There is someone I have written *out* of this history. Someone who is *always* written 'out' of this history.

Benita.

The real victim in this catastrophe. The lost one. The frightened one. The broken one.

Benita. Your daughter. My sister. The one I haven't seen in twenty years.

*Twenty years.*

So where is my sister in this story? Why don't I remember her? Why, through my whole life, have I always forgotten my sister? Why do I ignore her and erase her so easily? Why is she always absent? Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't there. Maybe she was with her father, your first husband. But I find this hard to believe. Maybe, because the caravan was so small, Benita went to Omi and Opi's, your parents' place, in Glenalta, in the Adelaide Hills. They did raise her after your death. She did have a room there since ever I can remember. Maybe Dad didn't consider her his own, which she wasn't. Maybe she was an inconvenience to this second marriage. But I doubt it. Maybe her 'difference' was



already apparent—that frightening way she stayed a child even when a physically mature woman with kids of her own—a child who would pinch, punch, and scratch me and then smother me with hugs and kisses and hisses and gibberish. Was she like this already—a liability, a problem, a heartbreaking agony—or did she become this AFTER you died, after you broke her heart? I hate to think.

Whatever the case, Benita wasn't there. Unless my memory has edited her out. But I doubt it. I think the 'new' family was playing holiday and the 'old' family—Benita—was at Omi and Opi's, where she would live from that day forward, until this household also broke down: when Opi drove his Valliant under a semitrailer and knocked his head off in 1977; while Kerry, his dog, sleeping on the floor, survived. Or maybe, just maybe, Benita had to go to school. Simple. The last I heard she had married again, this time to an old farmer in the southeast of South Australia, and had started a new family. So, given my absence, I hope you're watching over her. Because I can't. I can't go back there. Not yet, not today, not this year.

But wait. There *was* someone else there that



night, someone else I have forgotten. *Satan*. If memory serves, Dad bought *Satan* in 1970, the same year I was born. He bought *Satan* to complete the great Australian dream. But you already knew that. In 1974 *Satan* would have been a strapping young black Labrador brimming with health.

On Wednesday night, the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, *Satan* would have appeared out of the night as you slammed the caravan door and careened into the gloom. Did *Satan* pad through the darkness after you? Through the moonscape and prickles? Did he brush against your legs and circle your feet? Did you swear his name as you staggered towards the cliffs? Did you bury your face in his neck as you sat on the edge of the night? As you sat on the cliffs and stared down into the gloom? Did he lick your face and wag his tail, a warm shadow in the crisp air? Did he sniff the breeze as you sang, cursed, sniffled, and sobbed? Did he bark as you teetered on the brink of despair? Did he call you back with a bark? Did he whimper? Did he howl as you sprang into the night?

*Ahooooooooo—*

Was *Satan* the last family member to see you



alive?

His ears raised as you bounced down the face of the cliffs into the depths? His wet nose twitching as he tried to make sense of the impossible?

According to records kept by the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, the temperature on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 was 23.5° Celsius.<sup>4</sup> A fine day to die. The overnight low fell to 13.2°, but you were probably long dead by this time. In the still of night, in the overflowing lagoon, did shrimps and yabbies come out of the reeds to nibble your feet? Did carp, cod, and callop grope at your cheeks? Did you fill the muddy depths with blood? Did I gasp in my sleep at the moment of your death? Did Scotty cry out? Did Dad pass out? Did Benita scream 150 kilometres away?

Did the wind whisper your name? Did the stars flicker and blink? Did anyone or anything notice at all?

*Ahooooooooo—*

Of course he did.

But wait. A friend of mine has just reminded me that the 25<sup>th</sup> of April—the day *before your death*—would have been Anzac Day. According to Wiki-



Our life is like a  
moth & death is the  
swallow.

William Anderson Cawthorne  
22.12.1842

pedia, Anzac Day has been a public holiday in all States of Australia since 1927. It commemorates the landing of Australian and New Zealand forces in Gallipoli on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1915 during World War I. This means that we may have arrived at the river on Anzac Day—Tuesday 25 April 1974—rather than Wednesday when you ‘officially’ died. In other words, if we *were* at the river on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April then there is every chance you died on *this* night, rather than the next morning or following evening. Whatever the case, it may have been the Anzac Day public holiday that gave you both the idea of taking an extended break. For all I know we may have been at the river for a week before you died, a period of days rather than hours. We may have already become a family of trolls howling at the moon.

Perhaps cabin fever had already set in.

Perhaps the churning wetland began to look like a giant bath.

Perhaps the end of the world was nigh.

Ahoooooooo—

And where once a shepherd boy warned against meeting Catherine and Heathcliff on the foggy



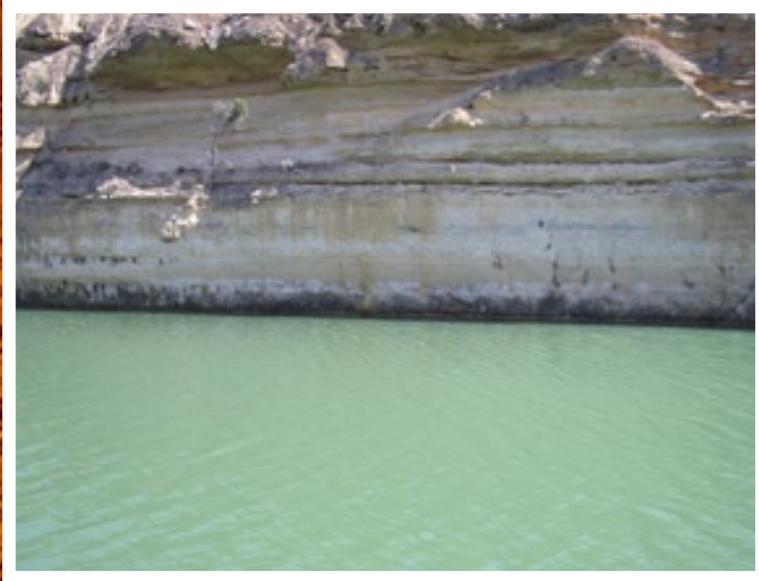
moors, this 39-year-old boy warns against meeting Bill and Brita on the rocky ledges, on the cliffs, in the moonscape, in the mallee scrub, beneath the stars, above the lagoon, at McBean Pound, at Blanchetown, on the Murray, in South Australia, at night. Two desperate wraiths wrestling before the cosmos. Before the abyss. Before God.

What I want to know is ...

is YOU, Mum. And this can never be. And this is what makes me sad. Because I don't remember you.

But wait. But stop. I have just come back from the Flinders University Library where I viewed microfilm of *The Advertiser* for April 1974. With the film scrolling through the projector, a different history emerged. With a flick of the switch I could scroll through the days in a dizzying blur, but when I stopped, when I focused, when I zoomed in, details appeared.

The 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 was NOT a Wednesday. It was a Friday. We weren't up the river because of Anzac Day or because you and Dad decided to take a week off work. No, we were at the river for the weekend, nothing more. We must have driven



up after work on the Friday night, via Upper Sturt, Birdwood, Woodside, and Sedan, as previously imagined. We would have parked the car by the caravan above the olive-green lagoon and orange cliffs. The river would have been flooding through the plains below, and the cockies and galahs would have been screeching in the branches of the giant river red gums. And within hours of arriving at this scene, you and Dad would have been drunk and arguing. And in the heat of this argument you would have said things you could not take back. *You storm out of the caravan and slam the door. I shudder in the silence. Scotty throws out his little pink arms in panic. Dad calls after you.*

*And Satan follows you into the gloom.*

*Ahooooooooo—*

And on *this* evening, this *very* evening, the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, just like the authorities said, you fall—or fly—from the cliffs to your death—from what *The Advertiser* would describe in an article three days later as ‘100-foot cliffs’ (Monday 29 April 1974, p. 3).

The title of the article: ‘Drowned’.

But it gets worse. I had hoped that Dad hadn’t



found your body. I had wanted nothing more from this whole bloody affair than for *anyone* but Dad to have found your body. But as I sat there in that small room deep in the university library, I was suddenly hit by a tonne of bricks—a tonne of orange sandstone—just as if I had fallen from that 100-foot cliff myself—by the fucking horror of discovering that my Dad—*your husband—my hero—*found you in 2 foot of water below the cliffs on Saturday morning—*he found you—*after what must have been the shittiest night of his whole damned life, and then—*and then—*had to lead the authorities to your mangled corpse.

How does someone survive that?

How does this man get the strength to climb back up the cliffs and gather his children and put them in the car and drive like a sane and reasonable man to the police station 10 kilometres away after just finding his wife dead and battered at the base of a 100-foot cliff—and then explain this horror to the police knowing full well that he—*my Dad—your husband—my hero—*would end up a suspect?

*Mum, how does someone survive that?*



AHOOOOOOO---

Satan

*How do I survive that?*

*How did any of us survive that?*

*How did Dad survive that?*

No wonder I waited 35 years to write to you, because any sooner and I might have gone under.

I hope whatever went on between you and Dad is now over.

According to *The Advertiser*, the weather reached 21.5 °C in Adelaide on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, and 24 °C in Renmark. Water levels rose to 4.85 metres overnight in Morgan, and Nana Mouskouri was scheduled to play at Apollo Stadium in June. *The Exorcist* was playing at Wests in Hindley Street and Gough Whitlam was Prime Minister. A 1970 Holden Kingswood Wagon cost \$2,899, with a \$99 deposit. And in the Funeral Notices of *The Advertiser* on Monday 29 April 1974: 'MILLER. — THE FRIENDS of Mr. WILLIAM JAMES (Bill) MILLER, of 13 Centreway Belair, are advised that the Funeral of his late beloved WIFE, Brigitte, will leave our Private Parlour, 193 Unley Road, Unley, on WEDNESDAY, at 2 p.m. for the Sir John McLeay Chapel, Centennial Park Crematorium' (p. 32).



But something tells me I didn't attend.  
*Ahooooooooo—*

Dear Mum,

I started out wanting to know why. But now I realise there are no whys, no explanations, and no answers. The rationalist machine does its best to paste over the chaotic and irrational disruptions that plague our lives—but they happen anyway, destroying our best laid plans and neat illusions no matter how hard we try. Some of us just get caught in the tumult of life, on huge winds that sweep us off our feet and off the world and into the sky. Loving us like pebbles into the muddy void beyond.

And others remain behind, standing inexplicably in their wake, missing them forever. As I do YOU.

*All created things must pass on.*

*We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.*

*(Siddhartha Gautama,  
Buddha)*

## Drowned

A woman, 34, drowned after falling down a 100-foot cliff near Blanche Town on Friday.

She was Brita Miller, married, of Centre way, Belair.

Her husband found her body on Saturday morning in two feet of water at the bottom of the cliff.

Police said the woman had been on a camping trip with her husband and two children.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.calendarhome.com/daycalc.html](http://www.calendarhome.com/daycalc.html), accessed 29 March 2009

<sup>2</sup> [www.assa.org.au/edm.html#List19](http://www.assa.org.au/edm.html#List19), accessed 29 March 2009

<sup>3</sup> [www.slsa.sa.gov.au/murray/content/dwindlingRiver/floodsDroughtsIntro.htm](http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/murray/content/dwindlingRiver/floodsDroughtsIntro.htm), accessed 29 March 2009

<sup>4</sup> Note that the maximum and minimum temperatures given here are for Murray Bridge, which is down river from Blanchetown. These were the only records the South Australian Branch of the Bureau of Meteorology could give me when I spoke to them on 6 April 2009. Nonetheless, these temperatures do give a general indication of the weather in the region.

And then, astonishingly, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2009 I had four boxes of slides processed that I knew dated back to 1967. I hoped to unearth a lost world, a lost day, a lost glimpse. I wasn't prepared for the images I extracted from the gloom of history. In the 129 images developed, two gave me a bewildering glimpse into a lost day in April 1974: *views from the cliffs my Mum catapulted from...*





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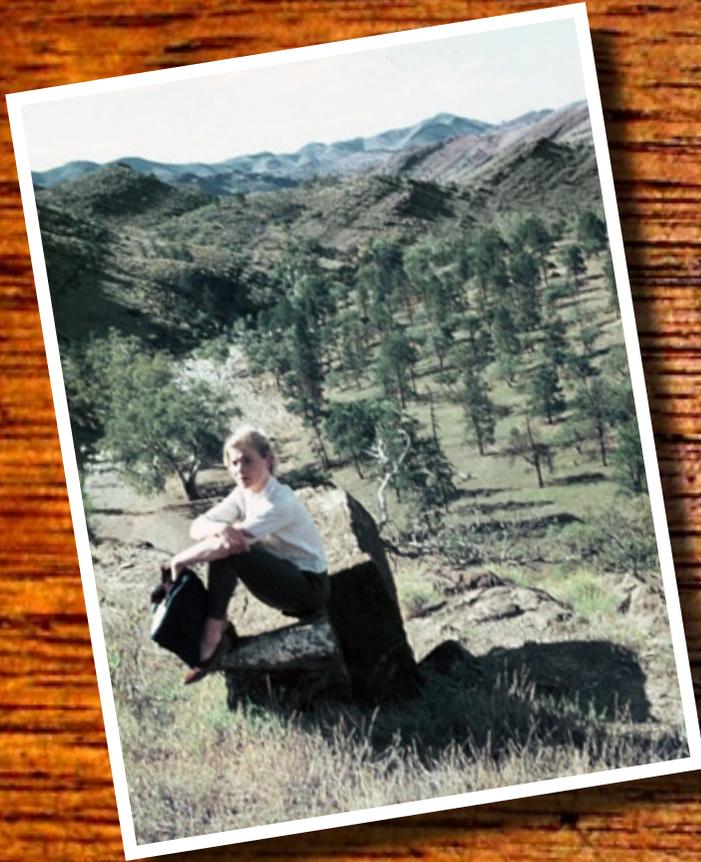


**S**o, that's what the world looked like on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1974 *from the cliffs*. What are the fucking odds of finding these photos in the detritus of history? But who took them (and why) on that fateful day? And did he or she glimpse the horror that was about to befall them? Dad, the poor bastard, would have taken these photos in awe, not horror, at the splendour that surrounded him. Little did he know what was to follow...



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**W**e, the humans, know that we are mortal – bound to die. This knowledge is difficult to live with. Living with such knowledge would be downright impossible were it not for culture. Culture, the great human invention ... is a contraption to render the human kind of living, the kind of living that entails knowledge of mortality, bearable – in defiance of logic and reason.

(Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 2006, p. 97)