



Fact, fiction, faction: rehearsing social work through [novel] autoethnography

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I sit and write in Bundjalung country as a descendant of white, English colonisers and pay my respects to those Elders past, present and emerging who nourish this land, the rivers and the sea, all of which were never ceded.

I also pay respect to those who may read this in other countries colonised in centuries past.

I acknowledge that as a white, English-born, privileged male, government departments throughout Australia have, in the past, done injustice and intergenerational harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through child protection legislation that conformed to a policy for the assimilation of Indigenous people.

I assert these lands always were and always will be Aboriginal.

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THESIS SUMMARY

There are many different types of child protection stories. The voice of the child in these narratives always remains silent. Typically hidden from these narratives are also the voices of the parents...The story of the child protection workers...are untold - Of what it is really like to carry out the most demanding duty with the most desperate families in a community that wants all children saved but is also deeply disturbed by the violation of the family. (Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 188.).

This thesis places myself as an autoethnographer in the cultural context of Australian statutory child protection social work.

I seek to make an original contribution to knowledge by revealing the practice of social work as distinct from its place within the academy - Exegesis. This is further explored through a creative artefact – Fiction – to provide commentary on statutory social work that is otherwise hidden from public view and scrutiny.

My cultural background as an Anglo-Saxon, white, entitled male born in England and re-settled in Australia in 2004 is a separate, yet conjoined area of research – Fact – and is included as a separate artefact - Diary. This draws on a personal archive that includes diaries and other writing, composed between the ages of 16 to mid-20s, that casts light on my intellectual and sentimental development, as well as giving insight on how, late in my life cycle, I chose to re-train as a social worker - Exegesis.

Fact, Fiction and Faction are blended in a virtual performance dedicated to a life-story, one who has lived ‘...a multiplex life: sailing at once in several seas’ (Geertz, 1988, p. 77)¹.

¹ Geertz was making reference to fellow ethnographer Malinowski when he wrote this.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and
2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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INTRODUCTION

*...in any present our heads are filled with plans for the future.
(Eakin, 2014, p. 26).*

*To create a professional self requires asking, who am I and what does social work mean to me? How does my own life and history affect my professional practice? How does my personality, psychology, cognitive make up affect my recourse to theories and my accounts?
(de Montigny, 2018, pp. 453-454).*

*

Let's begin here: we are conditioned by social and cultural forces, conventions and norms.

Take me for example. I am white, English-born, atheist and a man. Since 2004 I have lived in Australia. More accurately, I have dual nationality, conflicted by where I live, by what I'm employed to do (since 2014 as a social worker in statutory child protection), and by a country, this unsettled place, still clinging to its colonial past and at odds with those whose lands have never been ceded.

I am a social worker. Yet while this appellation now identifies who I present to others, within myself, secured by memory and evidenced by journals I kept when younger, I identify myself as a writer and creative, and for 23 years earned a decent living as a journalist.

At the heart of this thesis, therefore, is acknowledgement of memory as recorded contemporaneously in various physical documents in my archive, the material of archaeological memory² (Olney, 1998), as well as memories triggered as I re-read that material or of other forgotten recollections re-stirred or re-stored to the surface³. There is a strand of this thesis, therefore, that might be described as a *Bildungsroman*, more precisely a *Künstlerroman*⁴, tracing the emergence of a life story and awareness of self. But now in my seventh decade there is an additional element to this: that of narrating a 'lifestory model of identity', which psychologist Dan McAdams defines as, '...an internalised and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose' (1992, p. 132). By 'myth' McAdams actually identifies three phases he labels as 'premythic', 'mythic' and

² Itself derived from St Augustine in Book 10 of *The Confessions*.

³ This archive being a pre-digital record.

⁴ The former 'a novel dealing with early life and development', the latter 'a novel about an artist' (OED). The Episodes, written in 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1982, encapsulate a *Bildungsroman*.

‘postmythic’. The first occurs in childhood; the second in adolescence to young adulthood (my ‘archive’); while the third is when ‘...the elderly person looks upon his or her life as something that has been and must now be reviewed or evaluated as a near-finished product, a story that may be accepted (integrity) or rejected (despair) but which can no longer be substantially changed’ (ibid, p.136). My life has reached that point.

There is also another factor involved in this third life stage, one which has been classified by British sociologists Tinkler, Fenton and Cruz as ‘resonance’. They define this as ‘...how aspects of youth seemingly create ripples across biographical and historical time that are reconstructed, animated, experienced, felt, interpreted, imagined and mobilised in the present’ (2022, p. 3-4). I will discuss this further in the separate exegesis to the diary and episodes..

Another strand to the thesis is the creative artefact, in which I fictionalise an account of a social worker – someone like my-self – to reveal the ‘messy, disorganized, confusing, unfolding, and uncertain’ (de Montigny, 2018) world of social work - let alone life.

What I term [novel] autoethnography enables me to clear some of the ethical hurdles placed to trip up those who wish to let in daylight on this ‘invisible trade’ (Pithouse, 1987). I will demonstrate that my interpretation of a child protection social worker is not as a professional applying practice based on knowledge from the social sciences (Epstein, 1999), what has become known as Evidence Based Practice (Plath, 2006), but is entangled in a performance ‘...in which the people who do the working (the social workers) and the people with whom they work display the human frailties, contradictions, weaknesses and imperfections that are a part of the human condition’ (Ife, 2005)⁵.

This [novel] autoethnography traces and re-connects many parts of my-self: that of late adolescence; a writer and journalist; a late-in-life (post-50) social worker. I observe this self from a range of viewpoints and, in so doing, sketch the fragmented patterns of a life that knits in and out, back and forth, connecting points in time⁶. I do, as suggested by Tulving, mentally travel through time (2002, pp. 3-5).

⁵ The debate between social work as art or science, or both, is discussed in *On the political in the art of social work*..

⁶ This carries with it also a ‘mixed-methods approach’ with a nod to ‘braiding’ that climaxes in ‘methods braiding’. See Denzin for an overview (with a US bias) of what he terms the ‘paradigm wars’ Denzin, N. K. (2010a). Moments, Mixed Methods, and Paradigm Dialogs. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(6), 419-427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780041036460> . Also note the use of knit as a metaphor. I first wrote

I also develop a thread from de Montigny (2018): 'Being a social worker demands bridging the at times incoherent unfolding and development of oneself and one's organic being in the world to the putative orders of texts and professional discourses' (p. 453). Doing this through [novel] autoethnography enables me to offer you, the reader, decoder, interpreter, co-author if you like (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 162, though used there in a different context), access to the voice of a statutory child protection social worker. While there have been other voices recorded (Brydon, 2006; Chan et al., 2020; Cortis et al., 2019; Cree, 2013; Cree & Davis, 2006; Ferguson, 2016; Gordon, 2018; Wilder Craig, 2007; Zufferey, 2013), this [novel] autoethnography presents a singular fictionalised voice that is multitudinous in its dimension, for my voice is fractured and a discordance emitted through the writing which disperses a spectrum of voices largely unheard before. Following Ungar, my 'fiction...is part of the same project of deconstruction, juxtaposition and social revelation' (2011, p. 300).

It is also, as interpreted by Watson, '...an inventive space through which lived, messy, sensory realities may be commonly experienced' (2022, p. 349). She writes as a sociologist and this connects with what Mills calls the 'sociological imagination' (first edition 1959, this edition 2000). In his summation of craftsmanship (which he considers essential to scholarship), he writes about a certain 'quality of mind' able to shift between perspectives, from the impersonal to the intimate 'and the relations between them' (2000, p.7). But there is more to this approach from the point of view of the writer, since Mills believes that '...your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience' (2000, p.196)⁷.

In relation to the unmasking of social work, Witkin, in one of the few edited books written from the point of view of the relevance of autoethnography to the discipline, suggests this method is about 'enriching understanding', that through sieving and refining, of interpreting and re-interpreting, we can '...generate a richer, more nuanced understanding' of the experience (2014, p. 11).

My [novel] autoethnography, therefore, braids a number of themes, as much of my life as I am able, and *willing*, to bring to your attention (Tedlock, 2017; Watson, 2020).

'weave' but, on reflection, I know more about knitting (which I can do) than weaving (which I can't and haven't). The latter seems to me industrial and professional; the former artisan and homely.

⁷ Pyyhtinen's update of Mills introduces the Latourian concept of 'more-than-human' as a new pathway. Pyyhtinen, O. (2015). *More-than-Human Sociology: A New Sociological Imagination*. London: Palgrave Pivot. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137531841>

Through these pages I will focus on the person I was with the self I think I am now, tracing the threads of a consciousness that finds expression in social work and creative/art-based practice.

Finally, we cannot, nor should we, forget from where we have come. As Haraway writes: 'I have a body and mind as much constructed by the post-Second World War arms race and Cold War as by the women's movements' (2016, p. 51). Broadly speaking, I can subscribe to this perspective. I might also refer to Bourdieu and his notion of *habitus*, an individual's social life that, according to this sociologist, is laid down in childhood and reverberates throughout a lifetime (Garrett, 2018, p. 126)⁸. As you read through the Episodes and the Fiction this will come into sharp focus.

Habitus is, importantly, not deterministic and, as I will recount, a welter of life experiences have resulted in the person now seated at the keyboard. Nevertheless, in this [novel] autoethnography I return again and again to the 1970s because I am the custodian and interpreter of the archive.

This thesis will make an attempt to illustrate how the person I am now has come to be formed within a social and cultural domain that includes England and Australia, through the method of fact, fiction and faction. I will also try and unravel one of my identities: that of a social worker who writes imaginatively, for when I qualified I had the clear intention to develop creative practice as a core element of my practice framework. I will conclude by making the case for creative writing to be introduced to social work students as a way to explore the narrative identities of those they work with, as well as developing their understanding of themselves.

⁸ I will discuss Bourdieu's concept of habitus and its related concepts of fields and capital in the section *Social Work as Instrument of the State*.

GUIDANCE FOR THE READER

The thesis is in three sections, identified as follows:

Artefact: Fiction

Exegesis: Scenes from social work

Artefact: Diary and Journal

The parts are braided and can be read at the reader's discretion, either consecutively or separately, allowing control over the process.

Note: It may help to open the Navigation window to assist with your chosen passage through the thesis:

View. Sidebar. Navigation (Mac)

View. Navigation (PC)

ARTEFACT: FICTION: THE BOY WHO STOLE THE MOON

The Boy who Stole the Moon is fiction and all names, places and descriptions of specific incidents have been drawn from the well of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or people is co-incidental.

ACT ONE

ONE

Yellow and black.

Colour.

Vibrant, intoxicating, erotic, slap-it-on-thick-and-burning-bright. Colour. Yellow.

Take yellow.

Yellow of high summer. Yellow of rock gold. Yellow of beaches at dawn. Yellow. Chrome yellow, citrus yellow, Castile yellow, banana yellow, vomit yellow, jaundice yellow, syphilis yellow, urine yellow, old woman's snakeskin yellow.

They don't cut the mustard. They're no more yellow than dew on a leaf or light draining from the sky at sunset. We're all yellow.

Except when we ain't.

When we're white.

I'm white and yellow inside.

*

I'd like to hear your story, Jimmy.

Nothing to hear.

We've all got a story.

No one wants mine.

He relights the stub of his cigarette, hunches forward so I can't see his face.

How'd you meet Sam? I ask casually, not wanting to make him think I'm probing, like I'm a cop or something.

Dunno.

Ok.

I regret the unintended patronising tone of the government man.

Ok.

Okay.

Which ever way you pronounce Ok there's a risk it can sound like a throw away.

Ok. I don't care much.

Ok. (I'm not listening actually.) Ok?

That Ok?

Who's Ok?

You Ok?

I'm Ok?

No.

What?

Who's not Ok?

Why say that?

Who says they're not Ok?

Ok?

That's not Ok.

*

I try again.

How long you known Sam?

He shrugs and I sense the child inside longing for acceptance.

*

A week later and I'm in the car with Sam, driving back from an appointment at the doctor's.

An eagle feather! she exclaims.

What's it about eagles?

I saw it drop around here a couple months ago. Can we stop. Can we stop. Please? It's here somewhere.

I pull up.

Are you kidding me, she says. You stopped.

Why not? I say. You asked me too.

I watch as she wanders off in search, returning with her prize.

Thank you.

And she puts in it her hair bun and smiles.

*

Another week passes and I'm saying to her: Why'm I sitting here with you in your house? I can take your kids away you know.

There's a stink in the room of cat piss.

Is that what you wanna do?

No. I want you to stay together. You, Zayde and Tanaya. But it's not what I want, Sam. It's what you want. You're the only one who can do this.

(Tanaya's her two year old, asleep on the sofa.)

I look across at her son – he's 11 - lying under a blanket on the floor watching TV. He had an accident. He was riding his bike, trying to show off to friends, do a wheelie downhill. Maniac. He hit his head hard on the road, blanked out he says. I can't remember he says. A neurosurgeon did scans. He was in hospital five days and Sam visited once. Rather he stay there than be at home, she says. He gets fed and looked after.

What does Zayde think of you? I ask.

She shakes her head soundlessly.

What do you think of your mum? I ask Zayde.

She's a bitch, he says.

I'm thinking then and I'm thinking now back in the office in front of my computer, typing up the notes of the visit: It's the messiness. The bitterness and the messiness and the filth, filth in your hair filth, emotional filth that sticks. Filth.

Think of a colour that's filth.

Think of it.

Think harder.

While you're doing that I'm taking a phone call from a nurse. She's come to change Zayde's dressings. She tells me there's an argument between Sam and another mum. Then Sam has called a taxi, shouted at her son, You go then. Go where you think you belong. Come back when you need your mum.

The nurse says to me: I don't know what to do. I've never been in a situation like this.

I say to her: I don't suppose you have. Let me speak to him, put him on speaker.

What's going on, I ask. He mumbles and I can't work out what's he's saying.

I say to the nurse: OK I'm coming down. Give me 30 minutes.

If I had a blue flashing light I'd put that on
When I get there Sam's returned, Tanaya folded in her arms.
The nurse is there too.

I say to Sam, What were you doing? Why did you get a taxi? Why did you leave?
She's mute.

I walk with the nurse to her car and say, Make a report to the Helpline please. Here's
the number.

Sam calls to Zayde who's standing in the yard.

We need to talk, she says.

We all need to talk, I say.

She's rolling a smoke now.

How many you had today?

I don't know, she laughs. Maybe six or seven. Can't remember.

When'd you start?

I don't know.

What was it like when you didn't smoke?

It was good, she says

In what way good?

My head was clear.

Zayde pipes up: Yeah you stop for about a day.

She says, No, it was a month. I smoke to forget.

You might be depressed, I say.

No. It's all labels. This and that and this and that the doctors want. You know that film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?

It's based on a book, I say. You should read the book.

Maybe I'm Asperger's. I read up on it.

You're not Asperger's.

Einstein was, she says. He was so clever.

Got that colour coming yet?

We move into the kitchen. There's a pan on the electric stove boiling water.

Haven't you got a kettle?

Why? I like this, she says.

She's standing at a bench colouring a Unicorn in a colouring book with felt tips.

Zayde's filling a plastic bottle with water and vegetable oil.

What are you doing? I ask him.

Making a lava lamp.

He starts to add baking powder.

I need Coke, he says.

And Mentos, she says. I need a car, she adds, looking at me.

I thought you had one, I say

She went through a red light, her son says, shaking the bottle.

You lost your licence? I ask.

No, she says. I can still drive

Yeah like, he says

Keep that colour coming.

We've moved outside.

Zayde picks up a skateboard, puts on a helmet, motorcycle helmet, says he's going round to his mate's, says he's going to stay there for the weekend.

Are you going to come back on Sunday night? Get ready for school? Sam asks.

Dunno.

My phone rings. It's a teacher about another kid. Coincidence or what? My small world at present is about kids and school.

Her phone rings. She giggles and laughs and says, I love you, then hangs up.

She shows me the back door. It's been pulled off its hinges.

Someone came round late last night, she says.

I say, Who might that be?

It's him, she says. I think he's come back.

Jimmy?

She doesn't answer.

I fix the door punching nails in with a flat heavy stone she's found in the front garden.

I'm going now, I say.

She's in the front garden on her knees pulling up weeds. Tanaya's trying to eat them. I kneel next to her, start pulling out weeds myself.

She's crying.

This is what my life's like, she says. I don't want my kids' life to be like this.

They're going to be different, I say. You're all going to be different. You can change this. It doesn't have to be like this for ever.

She stops weeding, says: Do you carry burdens?

I'm thinking what should I say? My body stiffens. I say nothing

Two days later I scrape dirt from a fingernail, remember the weeds, kneeling into the earth, pulling out weeds.

*

There's two gates and a door to get through before you're inside my office, each activated by a pass-card. First time I thought this worse than a prison. Irony is we're meant to be 'open and transparent'. A bit of a joke when you think about it. All this security just to keep them out and us in, and safe. But when things get bad, when some mum or dad or grandma or grandpa turns up demanding to see their kid or grandchild who was removed the day or night before, or we get wind some parent with a history of assaults is in the area, then in a flash security's on patrol, on the look out and us in lockdown and Admin send out texts such as:

Potential for aggressive client today after court meeting. Please avoid using main entrance...Potential risk due to client meeting occurring at 1:00 PM. Please be aware of your safety coming and going from the office premises today. Guard is on site.

This afternoon it's quiet. Everyone's hard at it, eyes locked on computer screens, mobiles, in with managers. There's no time for Hello. This is serious business, frigin' serious business and we are frigin' serious people doing it. I sometimes think we should be called the Department for Frigin' Serious Shit. One of my colleagues is already logging out. She's a single mum with twins and needs to get to childcare. Another is talking about some date

she's got. She's divorced and ever hopeful. In the distance I hear so-and-so going on about how hard the day's been and she's going to get a neck massage and her boyfriend is cooking curry tonight. (How sweet, but I don't need to know.) My manager says don't stay late. There's life outside this place you know. I mutter something about paperwork. Soon I'm alone. It's a good time of day. My phone buzzes. It's my daughter. What time am I getting home? she texts. Can I get some chocolate on the way? She's restless, cranky, hormonal and not much older than Sam's son. I worry about her. I text back: I'll get chocolate. 😊 she replies.

Red.

White.

Sky's tangerine by the time I leave. Dirty tangerine like a giant's jumped in a celestial bowl and swirled it around with muddy feet. I climb into my car and orientate opposite. That's when I see the big Moon hung over the shopping centre. White. Or is it? The English painter Lowry speaks of different whites he uses as background to scenes, stick figures of people living, making a living, trying to make a living, barely making a living in the English Midlands in the inter-war years. What sort of whites are those, and what white is the Moon tonight?

Next day a colleague says: Some of them children should have been brought into care years ago. We didn't do the right thing by them. And now this one. She's saying to me, this is the kid, she's saying, You left me there in that caravan park with meth dealers and all sorts of shit going on between my mum and what not and you didn't do fuck all. And now these years later, now I've my own kid, you come and tell me to do this and this so I can keep my kid! Fucking liars.

I've a social work student with me, just starting out, on placement. Part of my job is to show her what life's like on what they call 'the frontline'. So I'm taking her to see one of my other families. They don't live in a house. It's a converted shed, rather a converted factory, small factory, old factory, built of wood with a mezzanine floor. It's sort of comfortable, laid out with carpets and sideboards and beds and upstairs the kids sleep. There's three of them, all girls.

It's school holidays so all the kids are there.

I stand at the doorway waiting to be invited in.

Hello, I shout.

The parents are at the other end and a dog comes running up to us. I'm not that much into dogs as it sniffs at my leg, but pretend for the show of it.

I make a bit of a wave and then enter saying, I didn't want to come in uninvited.

My student follows.

The three kids are on a lounge playing a game on a phone.

I say, Hello, as we pass.

Their mum comes forward.

What are you doing here? she demands.

We had an agreement, I say. This afternoon you said you'd be home. It was okay time. You said you were off work.

Well it's changed. I got to go and do nightshift and I've barely slept and then you keep coming into my house. Why do you keep coming into my house? I don't like you coming into my house.

She's scanning between me and my student, who I've introduced as so-and-so, the social work student.

I explain again that she invited me. We made the arrangement so it would fit in with her schedule. Not mine. Yours.

She's getting louder.

I'm looking into her eyes.

Red.

I've told you how many times? she shouts. I've told you so many times. I don't need you here. It was all a mistake. I've apologized what happened that day. Why do you have to keep coming back?

It's a process, I say. You've worked with us before. You know how it is.

She's standing close up to me.

My student is retreating, trying to find a safe place. Finding it in a corner behind a fridge.

She walks away.

I follow.

She turns.

What you following me? Why you invading my space? What are you doing here?

It continues as I seek to pacify, keeping my level and not, definitely not, getting caught up in her head.

What colour red?

Bloodshot.

Bloody Mary.

Drained.

Whoosy.

Red.

You said you're human too, my student says in the car on the drive back to the office.

(Home, I call it when we start off, correct myself and wonder aloud why I call it, the office, home. Because I spend so much of my living time there?)

You said you were human too and that you were not a label that said *Government*.

I tried, I say. Did she get it?

I think so, my student says.

And what about you, what did you feel?

I don't know.

You never know, I say.

*

It's raining steadily and Tanaya's splashing gleefully about in some newly-formed puddles.

My student's making sure she doesn't wander far as I speak with Sam. She says Zayde's taken off to stay elsewhere, says he wants peace and quiet.

I love my kids, she says. But I see them going away and that makes me sad. I feel like there's this spell on me and I can't break it. I fail in everything and I won't ever be able to get away.

You've got to keep trying, I say. You got to break this spell. It can't keep on repeating.

Tanaya returns with a stick. Mum's weeping, head in hands.

It's too hard.

You can.

I never finish anything.

You can.

*

What are you going to do? my student asks later, as if there's an answer.

It's about risk, I say as we drive through the outskirts of this town back to ours. Let me give you an example. A colleague says she wants this mum to change so she, mum, can have her son back. My colleague's angry, annoyed, frustrated, all of that, because mum hasn't done things like drug tests that might show us, the department, that she wants her life to be different, wants her son back. My colleague says something on the lines of: If mum doesn't change her ways then she'll have this on her conscience. But next moment she's saying: If she doesn't do these things then I've failed her and her son. My colleague's taken on all the risk and all the risk of her son too. She so much wants this to happen, to be a new start, a new beginning without understanding that we can't change them. Only they can. It's so easy to get drawn into this risk game.

I don't understand, my student says.

Try this. You've been held against your will and a grenade's been put in your right hand. You've been placed beside a fast-flowing river. Your captors push a small girl forward. She falls into the water. She screams. She can't swim. To save her you'll have to release the grenade but as soon as you do that it will explode and you'll likely lose that hand, perhaps the arm, be maimed with shrapnel. But you take that risk to jump into the water to save the child. You put the safety of the child over the risk to yourself. That's what we do all the time in this work. We take on risk for others. Sometimes we get hurt. Often we're left with the scars.

*

There's full moon tonight. It's said more reports are made on a full moon.

I wonder if that's just one of those things we say.

It might be that whiteness Lowry speaks of.

Virginal

Frigid

Ice-box

Candle

Egg

Sick

Milk taste

Toilet tile

White

*

Can you come? a colleague asks.

What's going on?

A kid's told his teacher he was beaten by his step-dad last night.

We prep in the car.

Who's the step-dad? I ask.

Name's Jim. Or is it Jimmy? Who cares?

Maybe the kid?

The car radio is talking about Trump and how he's been blessed with divine powers.

Doesn't make much sense to me, my colleague says.

Trump doesn't make much sense, I say.

The principal's sitting behind her desk and Zayde's standing by her side trying to look like he does this all the time, is on best terms, one of the stars of the school, and we've come to offer congratulations, present an award.

I recognise him at once, and he me. He's in bad need of a haircut. The principal looks wearily at us. Here again, I imagine she's thinking, here so often you might as well set up office along the corridor.

Hi, my colleague says. I'm Suzie and this is Ed. We're from Child Protection. Do you know what that is?

We've met, I interrupt. I was at your house a few weeks ago. Remember?

He doesn't look at me, his gaze fixed on a glass paperweight on the principal's desk. Inside there's a red rose. The paperweight's about the size of a tennis ball and solid enough that if he wanted he could do some serious damage. Then, if he wanted there are plenty of

other things he could use as makeshift weapons to take someone's eye out or break a bone or two.

You come to take me away? he asks. There's an edge to his voice already, as if he's thinking: You try and take me and I'll flatten you. Think I won't? Try me.

No Zayde, I say. No one's here to take you away.

Don't call me Zayde. I'm not your friend.

What would you like me to call you?

I don't give a fuck.

Zayde. Tongue, the principal snaps.

It's nearly end of term and I bet she can't wait. Get back to her garden and those roses maybe.

How's mum? I ask.

I don't know. You tell me.

What if I don't want to tell you?

Then fuck off.

The principal stands, puts a hand on Zayde's shoulder and nudges him to a sofa beneath the room's only window. I notice she's wearing a pair of red loafers, same colour as the rose. She tells him he isn't being helpful, that these people are here to listen, find out if there's anything they can do for him.

Bullshit, he says. You all talk bullshit.

He jumps up and runs from the room.

The principal shrugs her shoulders.

That's it. He's suspended.

On the drive back to the office I suggest we stop for a coffee. My colleague speaks about resilience, wonders why some are more resilient than others.

If you find the answer to that one you bottle it up, I say.

*

I go for a haircut. I sniff coffee being ground from the coffee boutique on the industrial estate that's a beacon for colleagues who can't start their day without. Why do this job when to get even the smallest thing done there's a heap of admin to get through, managers who don't have enough time to listen, think, weigh pros and cons, have to answer that

incessantly ringing phone. Each day you're fighting, fighting not only yourself, your conscience, the place you work in, the people you work for, your disgust at the state of society, and this all before you've had breakfast or freshly ground coffee.

I need that haircut.

I ask the barber where he lives.

Out bush, he says, and when it's a big wet we get cut off for days and days. Love it, he says.

Can't do anything, go anywhere and the fridge is always stocked.

How deep does the causeway get? I say.

He puts the side of one hand against top of a thigh.

That's when leeches come into the conversation.

You get leeches? I say.

They used to use them in barbershops, he says. To let the blood.

That's where the red and white pole comes from, I say.

That's right – a bandage covered in blood. We were the first doctors you know. They called us barber surgeons. That's why surgeons now call themselves mister. They don't want to be reminded where they came from. They left us with pulling teeth.

*

An Aussie flag tied with green electrical wire hangs from its short edge to the security screen. The bottom is chewed, torn, burnt. Glass lies shattered. I peer into the living room. Beer bottles. Garbage. There's been a party? On the concrete a pale pink bra, scrunched, thrown there. I write a note for Jimmy. Slide it into the door frame.

Driving away sugar cane burns in long shadows of a late afternoon. The ash will fall as black snow but now there's red-orange and black-grey rising smoke inclined 30 degrees. A car ahead of me slows to a crawl, its driver distracted by the burn. We both indicate right. I accelerate past, and watch as the slow car evaporates in the mirror. I dial up the volume on the radio. It's a Scarlatti sonata, though it sounds like Bach.

*

One of Jimmy's mates tells him: If you want to get rid of the cunts say you only do a bit of dope. You's use for a bit of stress relief. Tell 'em if you start yelling at her you go for a walk, leave the house. Just say you have a fight now and again like ordinary folk. Tell 'em: No I

don't touch the stuff. Ice. No it stuffs with people's heads. That's what I tell 'em. It's what they want to hear and they's leave you for a bit.

*

Sam's got the shutter screen closed, a purple tie-dye sheet hanging over.

You there? I say.

Yes, she says.

But it's a long way off and I don't know if there's someone with her.

I open the screen a crack.

On the table a book lies open. It looks like a Bible from the fine, dark black printing in two tightly packed columns. I recognise the buckling India paper on which the text is printed.

Come in, she says.

Zayde home?

Don't know where's he at. Hardly see him now.

You don't seem yourself, I say.

Which one of my seven personalities you mean?

(It is the Bible open to Corinthians, the First Epistle of Paul.)

What you been doing? I ask.

This and that. That and this. She laughs. Keeping to myself. Letting it flow.

Zayde's got a medical, I say.

Oh, has he?

You forgotten?

Maybe. I don't remember. He's not here anyhow.

It's important. The school says...

The school says this and that. Why don't they tell me?

Because they can't get hold of you. You don't answer the phone.

She goes into the front room where the Sony is showing Playschool, Tanaya laid out on the sofa, thumb in mouth, half-asleep. Sam sits down next to her and picks up some basketry she's just begun. Sits there weaving the straw round and round a circular frame. It might be a hat she's making.

You heard from Jimmy?

He's not been here.

Really?

You don't believe me? Go and check if you want. Go on. Go and look in all the rooms. Open all the doors. Take a good look. You always like that. You can leave now. Now. Go.

*

We live near the beach but never go there. Mum says it's too dangerous. She don't mean the sea. She means folk who go there. She says a lot of weirdos go to the beach. They hang out there, she says, say they're helping you in the surf when all they want is touch you up an' take photos when you ain't looking. That's what she says an' that's why we never ever go. She don't go nowhere much anyhow. Keeps to herself with sis.

So I go to the beach with Jimmy instead. We don't tell her we're going. It's our secret.

Jimmy stays over on weekends and sometimes during the week when he's too high or had too much to drink and can't make his way home. I know he's there cause of the smell and the cans by the sofa and her not getting up to see if I'm at school. Besides, when he's here I hear him and mum yelling in the other room late at night. They must think I'm asleep. I put my hands over my ears an' dig my head deeper under the pillow an' pull my doona tight around me. But I still hear then yelling and screaming. That's when I dream about the rocket ship I'm going to build. It'll take me into space, away from all this shit. It'll take me to the stars an' I'll float just like you do when you lie on your back in the sea and look at the sky. That's what I think about when they're screaming an' yelling an' smashing stuff. Some of the other kids at school call me names. They call her things too like slut and cow an' that she has blokes round the house and sucks their cocks. It's all shit. Jimmy's the only one who comes to the house now and all he does is drink. It makes me angry when they say that stuff.

On Monday I got into a fight with this kid. I got this anger in me and I felt it rising and all of a sudden I jumped him an' started thumping him all over 'til a teacher pulled me off. He got well hurt, had to go have the blood wiped away. He smashed me too and I felt like kicking him till he couldn't move but this teacher said I can't do things like that. But that's what Jimmy says when we wrestle and lark about on the beach sometimes after school when she ain't home. He tickles me first till I can't take it any more, then pushes me away an' goes back to where we left our clothes to get a smoke. He offered me one the

other day. He says smoking makes him calmer when he gets angry. He must get angry a lot cause he's smoking all the time. I told him I'm only a kid.

I was smoking when I was eight, he says and lights up.

He tells me to hit kids hard when they call me things and say dumb shit about her. He hits me too so I get the feel of what it's like. It hurts when he punches me in the gut but I don't tell him that.

Boys don't cry, Jimmy says. Boys don't blubber like girls.

The teacher says he'll have to call Welfare and let them know what happened. I said they'll try an' take me away like they did last time. The teacher says he'll think about it but if it happens again he'll have no choice.

TWO

There's a dolphin, Sam says.

I don't see it but peer in the direction she points. Still don't see it. I've brought her down to the headland overlooking the ocean. I need to talk with her about why she'd not doing any of the things we've spoken about: going to see her doctor, getting a mental health plan, fixing an appointment with a counsellor, maybe a psychiatrist for a diagnosis, cutting back on weed. I thought, perhaps naively, a change of scene might open her up. It's mid-morning and the wind is gusting at deaf speed. A sun-browned man in swimmers, head rolling to the beat from his earphones, descends a metal walkway to the beach, walks a bit on the sand, starts to dance, jigging from foot to foot.

She giggles. Then she's off to dance herself. Stands in the sea, one foot raised to the opposite knee, arms stretched horizontal, before her hands roll as she brings them together in front. She plunges into the waves like that dolphin, emerging to do it over and over and over.

I'll give her this time before we must talk, watching as she scrambles barefoot over rocks in search.

This is for you, she says, handing me a shell.

She lies in the grass, covers her eyes against the sun.

I'm tired too at the end of a week of meetings. But not as tired as she is.

Heh, wake up, we need to go, I say.

She stirs, says, Where are we? I fell asleep and woke up and didn't know where I was, how I got here. Like virtual reality.

She giggles.

Sea blue.

Space blue.

Marble blue.

Dead.

Blue.

On the way back she directs me to a lake. I park up and she says she's going to look for things.

We must talk, I say. You don't seem to realise how serious this is.

Not here. At home.

As we pass by the eagle nest she says, Can we stop?

We stopped a few weeks back. You picked up a feather. What happened to it?

Gave it away, she says as we drive by.

There's a man at the house when I drop her off. In the shadows.

Is that Jimmy?

Who?

Jimmy.

I'll catch you later, she says, opening the car door..

We need to talk Sam, I repeat.

Not now. Another time. Thanks for the lift.

*

I wake in a sweat to thunder rumble. I'm awake thinking of all the people in my life, all the people not in my life and they're all no one who's family. Not the woman who sleeps by me, sleeps as thunder rollicks, lightning spreads. Not my daughter who has her chocolate and stirs in the room next to ours. The people in my dreams are those I work with. They're my demons. The ones who won't go away.

The woman with dark eyes.

The woman who swims with dolphins.

The man who drinks and punches his woman, kicks her, leaves her bleeding.

The five-year-old cuddled by mum who puts her hand up, cries, screams, waits for police as he reverses in his ute.

It's exhausting holding all this in your head every day and every night.

That's what sport is for, isn't it? Games like soccer. A game with two halves as they say. At the end it's win or lose. Except when it's not, a draw, and there's a penalty shoot out.

We have lots of those in my game.

I sink back into dream.

I'm walking in rain.

Driving rain.

Spitting.

Hurting.

Violent rain.

It can be.

Especially in dreams.

What you'll do if he comes back, slams down the drink, starts beating you? I say.

It was an open hand, she says. An open hand.

What does he drink?

VB heavy. Sometimes vodka.

What you gonna do if he gets too much drink?

It's raw, she says. Does that make sense?

I'm on a tall building. Empire State? No. World Trade before people (again) got blown all over, plunged us (the live ones) into terror, lockdown, scrutiny and surveillance.

Rumsfeld's speaking: Shock and awe.

I jump off the top for the hell of it.

Jump over a 737.

That's

Not

Where

It's

Meant

To

Be

Long jump.

High jump.

Triple jump.

Land on Ellis Island.

Weather's perfect.

Opal blue.

I'm at a concert, in the audience

Now, in your mind, consider the audience. They've paid good money to be present. Made arrangements. So many. Spent time considering how they will present to the concert. Dressed up. Put on the glad rags, as someone once said to me. You scrub up well.

Some in the auditorium are likely asleep, or dozing, wearied by a long, perhaps tedious, even unfulfilling, or stressful and exhausting day at an office they'd rather not be in; and now a long evening at a concert they really didn't want to attend. Wasn't there that show on TV tonight...?

But they didn't buy the tickets.

It was a well-meaning partner. Or lover. Or one who'd like to be a lover. Or a friend doing a good turn. Maybe a brother or sister, aunt or uncle. Godparent. Or they came alone. In love with Mahler. Or just in love with music. People come to concerts for a multitude of reasons. There's always a story behind their attendance.

One more cynical might say: It's culture don't you know. Let's do some culture because that's what we do when we can afford the ridiculously expensive tickets.

We can talk about the concert at those fancy dinner parties we go to.

Half the people there would have been, seen each other.

Were you there too?

Oh. I must have missed you. It was so, so packed that night. And as for the interval drinks!

Well! Where do I start?

Did you see so-and-so?

Wasn't she just gorgeous? That green, or was it emerald? Anyhow, suited her skin tones so well. I said to her afterwards You look wonderful Katharine. So Egyptian. Just like Elizabeth

Taylor. Which reminds me. Are you free Tuesday? We're having a few people round.

Nothing too formal. About seven?

Consider the players plying their trade.

Dressed appropriately also.

You wouldn't want to see them in T-shirts and jeans now would you?

(Though sometimes they do. It brings in a younger audience, it spreads the word that 'classical music' is non-exclusive, non-elitist, non-white.)

Quaint.

Very stylised.

Very, how shall we say, posh?

Prim and proper.

Well manicured.

Not a hair out of place.

I'm there. Somewhere. Alone.

Somewhere else.

It's City Hall, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, north of England. It's 1977 and John Lill is performing Beethoven's sonata 106, the infamous Hammerklavier. As with a lot of music I'm distracted by the people, by the orchestra, by my thoughts. Or a combination of all three. I need to train myself to listen.

This performance ends with Lill almost falling forward on the keys. I look at the programme, and read: *Language becomes altogether powerless before the towering fugal edifice of the Finale, with its strangely hesitant, slow – quick, slow – quick introduction, and its violent trills, so characteristic of Beethoven's mature style; like the Grosse Fugue finale to the Bb string Quartet, Op. 130, it seems to strain at the limits of music and of piano technique.*

No wonder Lill almost drops headlong into the piano. He's probably exhausted, poor man, after all that running around the keys. Think of the pain in his wrists. He needs a drink and a cigarette. Not that he probably does either. But it would be a great scene in a movie. Think of Helfgott in *Shine*. Now there was a smoker!

I think I'm watching, then I think (in my dream):

Soon they

and you

and I
will be gone.
Forgotten.
Long forgotten.
It's inevitable.
Extinguished.
Except for a stone memorial.
If that's what you're into.
Gone.
People have a habit of falling off the perch when least expected.

*

There's a bush turkey in Sam's kitchen. The garbage chook it's called hereabouts.
They walk in and through, she says as if this is everyday normal.

I stand in the sunlight, feel the warmth.

Was Jimmy here?

I've seen things, she says.

What have you seen?

I sat with a woman who wrapped a cloth around her arm. She had a baby in her arms. She put a needle in her arm. The blood spurted over baby. I took baby. I cleaned baby. I gave it a feed while she went off her face.

Has Jimmy been here?

Who?

Jimmy?

She shrugs.

He can't be here, I say. There's an AVO.

You say. Why the fuck's it all about you?

It's not.

She looks into the distance.

I got this spell, she says.

What spell's this?

Spell. It's The Spell. He put it on me.

Who?

Tommy. He did that.

Tommy? I say.

Their dad.

Tommy's the one. He worked in the meat factory, she tells me, she in the chicken plant down the road. They worked hard, played hard, drank hard and at Christmas spent everything on presents for the kids. Spoilt them rotten.

She still does.

*

I'm back on my bike, mended it best I can, an' I'm cruising around, practising wheelies, snaking in and out of pedestrians, leaning over the front wheel, pulling hard on the brakes to get the back to slide out, give them a scare. Sometimes I come across this real fat guy who drives one of those electric buggy things. It's got an Aussie flag at the back on the end of a long stick and a sort of roof to keep the sun off and a shopping basket on the front full of grey plastic bags. He pisses me off cause he takes up the whole pavement and drives so slow. Anyhows when I see him I hang right back, judge the moment when I can zoom by, shouting at him: Road hog, face like a hog, hoink hoink hog.

I make him pull up. He starts to splatter something, all this spit spewing out his ugly mug, but by then I'm off and away leaving Hogman to shit himself.

I go back to the street where I had the fall. I ain't afraid. You belt as fast as you can down a long stretch and at the bottom it kinks up an' if you hit it right you fly through the air. It's awesome, just like going into orbit. I do it three or four times, counting down from ten...nine...eight...seven... the rockets fire...Mission Control checks the computers...You're ready for take-off....three...two...one...I kick off, concentrate hard, pump the pedals, feel the hot air rush by....the blast from the rocket engines pounds into me as I launch, getting more and more distance. Whooe! I'm thinking how I can get cardboard and put it round me and the bike, make a frame an' get some gaffer tape to keep it in place. It would be real cool. Hey bro.

A kid on a skateboard pulls up next to me.

What's with the helmet? he says.

None of your fucking business, I say.

Wanta race?

He smiles and I'd like to get pliers out of Jimmy's tool box an' fucking pull his shinny white teeth out one by one. Where's he come from any hows? Likely he's been watching me.

You scared? he asks when I don't answer.

I spin the bike round. The hill's too steep to ride up unless you want to use all your energy but I ain't going to let the kid beat me to the top so I'm pushing hard and he's running, holding the board over his head with two hands, dancing like more than running, running backwards sometimes so he can stare at me, talking all the time about some crazy shit I don't understand. Then he just strides away.

He's waiting for me at the top cause I have to stop to get my breath an' wipe the sweat from my face. It's getting hotter and from up here you can see the sea sparkle which makes you sweat more cause you want to be down there. I get to the mark I've made on the road, turn the bike, steady myself, notice he's spinning the wheels on his board, not looking. It's my chance, so I kick off. I'm already gaining speed before he's realised and kicked off too. I bend lower, I need my booster rockets to fire right on time but something don't feel right. The front wheel's shaking. Flat. I'm holding it steady as hard as I can and watch this kid shoot past when I can't hold it no more an' I'm jacked to the left and hit the road. The bike cartwheels away an' I'm rolling an' I feel like I'm going to die again.

I lie there looking up at the sky, thinking how I've had to parachute out of the capsule that's exploded at launch and soon the rescue chopper will arrive an' I'll be taken back to Mission Control an' they'll probably give me a medal or somethin'. There's this cloud I stare at, shaped like a donut or it could be a face, it keeps changing, now it's like a kangaroo an' I'm thinking it's hopping when it disappears and there's this kid holding a bucket and he tips it and all this water comes on my face at once that it feels like I'm hit with a stick. It makes me splutter, shake myself, sit up, wrench off the helmet, throw it at him, an' I grab hold of his skinny legs, pull him down, start belting him in the gut, my fists slapping his skin. I feel like I've suddenly got this super-energy and there's nothing I can't do to this fucker who's lying on his back laughing.

You're tickling me cunt, he giggles. Who taught you to fight like a girl?

I've got my hands ready. I'm going to twist his fucking neck off I'm thinking, when he's rolled me with a jab of his knee in my side. He's jumped to his feet, looks down. Come on. I was just helping. You got winded. You're lucky. Could've broken somit.

Like fuck he knows, I'm thinking.

What's your name?

Snake, I say. Call me Snake if you want.

I don't know what made me say that. Sounds stupid, and now he's holding his hand out like he wants to help. I'm not sure. Maybe it's a trick. He smiles. This time it feels different. This time I don't want to smash him. He pulls me to my feet. We're standing chest to chest, 'bout the same height 'cept he's stringy.

Wana get somit to eat Snake? he asks. Call me Dusty.

I go get my bike. Somehow it's all in one piece, the wheels spin real good 'cept for the flat. He's flicking his board with his foot. We start off towards town, me pushing, him playing with the board, sometimes on, sometimes off.

You got a place here? he asks.

Yeah, me mum's.

He goes off in front, stops, points at something.

See that Snake? Did you see that?

I got no idea what he's on about.

That eagle, you see it? You see it hover there and then swoop? That's magic. Bang! Now it's gone. Beauty.

He's smiling so large I can't help myself.

You're crazy, I say.

I know I'm smiling even if I try not. He's footing it all of a sudden. I jump on the saddle, kick off, even with a flat you can ride. I ain't going to lose him. We're almost in town now and I think he'll be heading to Maccas 'cept he goes right by and hangs a left and then we're at some place I've never seen.

Stay here, he says, then goes into this shop sort of. I'm thinking this is stupid. I'm thinking I should get going. Then I hear Jimmy shout: Hey kid what you doing?

Nothing.

Don't piss me.

He's on me now. I drop the bike. He grabs me arm. It hurts.

What you doing round here? he says like a threat.

I's on a ride, that's all.

The kid comes out. He sees Jimmy with me. Thinks Jimmy's some cunt going to do me, comes up, pokes Jimmy in the chest. Jimmy shouts at him like he's nothing, like he's dirt. Jimmy don't stop. He hits him real hard, real hard I mean. There's stuff coming out that kid now an' I ain't looking. Then Jimmy's on me too.

Don't you ever fucking ever go off by yourselves, he shouts in me ear. Now we're going. You got that kid?

Whata bout me bike?

Leave it.

I'm off, running. Jimmy's running too cause some big guy's come out the place where the stringy kid was to see what's going on. We're both running now. Jimmy's breathing hard. I pull him. I pull him and we're out of here till we can't run no more an' we duck into this dollar store an' pretend we want a card an' look hard at the cards till we think it's Ok. Jimmy says he needs a drink. He goes to the bottle'o and buys someit in a brown bag. When we get back to mum's she's real pissed off. I go to my room. If dad was around he'd kill Jimmy if he knew what he does to me mum.

*

I meet Sam at home. I ask: Where the cats gone?

Gone, she says.

Like for good?

Tanaya's filling up a paddling pool. Playing with the hose. Water spurts in a cascade, some on me in my long trousers and long-sleeved blue shirt. I dodge the plume but glad some falls on me because of the heat.

I can't stand here in this sun, I say. I'm not used to it. I'm an Englishman.

She sits near the pool, mug of tea, cigarette. Yellow dress. Dark hair, dark eyes.

Christmas is coming. Storms are coming. But not this afternoon. Perhaps later.

Tonight I heard the forecasters say on the radio as I was driving to work.

That night the woman who sleeps by me asks, Anything of interest happen today?

No, I say.

(But Sam made the call to rehab. Why aren't I pumped with enthusiasm? Because I've heard it all before from others who never went through with it.)

*

I go outside the office for breath of fresh air and a youth swaggers by. Swaggers though his legs seem wide apart and I'm thinking more of chimp to be honest. He's in a grey T, black shorts with another, older man on a mobile by his side, head down, walking hard. The youth looks at me, says loudly, John Wick.

He offers his hand. I do a fist tap. I have a vague recollection he was a kid I worked with a few years back. He doesn't stop, repeats John Wick and when I say to his back How you doing? hear him, I think, reply Just out of jail, so doing good.

I walk a few dozen steps, stop, turn and see them standing at the traffic lights waiting for them to change. I can't for the life of me remember his name. Was it Michael or was it something else? I knew him, whatever his name, when he was 15. How old he'd be now? Looks 19, maybe 20. Can't think why he calls me John Wick. Has he also dis-remembered?

Days later I'm browsing on Netflix and there's this movie about John Wick, some man who kills for a living. That's John Wick. To this swaggering kid that's me. Do I look like him? We've both got beards. But I don't carry a piece.

*

What do I learn from my 'clients'? How much do they teach me stuff I don't know about myself? Where's the social in social work and where's the social in me, the imperfect, flawed social worker?

*

She called me (this a colleague talking) a fucking whore, prostitute, child snatching fucking whore who wears fancy ear rings. She focused on my ear rings. They cost me \$4 and yet she thinks they are fancy.

*

The rains have come now. Two days and two nights. The weather's all over the news. La Nina it's called. It means more time indoors, humid nights.

*

It's seven days before Christmas. Sam's in hospital. Emergency. Teeth. An abscess. Couldn't be predicted. Her toddler's with a temporary carer and Zayde's staying with a mate of his from school. I see him at the park and let him know mum's not well. He glides by on a scooter as a drug deal goes down in the background. It's getting dark and I ask where he's going, if he's seen Jimmy. He tells me to F-off and goes. I speak with Sam on the phone. She's been transferred to another hospital to have surgery. You'll look after my babies, she says. Then sends a text with loads of emojis.

The weekend passes. I ring the hospital first thing Monday, find out if she can come home. She wants to do rehab but it's four days before Christmas and there's no beds. In an ideal world, I say to her.

But it's not. She speaks about everything being a conspiracy. You'll stand by me, she says.

It's 8pm when I drop her home, an empty, lightless, soundless home. This shit home, she says.

Before that we've been to the beach and I've sat on a dune watching as she dances in the surf, gesturing to something, someone.

It's all in my head, she says. All up here, screwed up here. I've PTSD, and a bit of dementia and I've been knocked on the head, bashed and punched and thrown around. That's normal and yet you're trying to tell me I'm mental or something?

That's not normal, I say. All you've told me. That's not normal.

As I leave her at the shit home she says she's going to have a bong. Pain relief she calls it.

Make sure it's just the one I shout out the window as I drive away.

I call in at a servo and pick up a chicken and mayo sandwich for my dinner.

*

Is she bipolar? I can only deal with her for a time, says a friend of hers I meet in town.

It's the day before Christmas.

She's my Ma-ma, says Sam.

She doesn't hear what her friend says. Her attention caught by a python basking in the sun.

Can I take her home? she says. She'll eat my rats.

*

One day, I think, I'll write about this. About some of this because I can't write about it all. If I wrote about it all then no one would understand a thing. About how it's not just one person, or one child or two. It's about a multitude all crashing around inside your head. All I'm writing down here are fragments of moments within fragments of days and weeks. I'm distilling a fraction of what happens, concentrating on a few bits to try and make a story that can make some sense to a reader who has no idea of the complexity of this work. If I tried to put down that complexity I would run out of energy and the reader would no doubt run out of patience. This is a fiction or a faction, please yourself, that has to have a line of momentum. It has to have a sense of going somewhere so you will keep reading.

I don't know what will come next.

I was only reflecting yesterday about how things (things – life, whatever) might have been if eight months ago Sam's two kids had come into care. Would they, her children, be better off now – better off in the sense of 'happier' whatever that means? I really wonder about whether I give too much time to mum and her problems and my attention should be on the kids. But how do you do not when Zayde won't speak with you and Tanaya only wants to play?

My empathy bucket is on empty.

It's Christmas.

Come 5pm colleagues swarm out of the office. Have a good one! See you in a couple of weeks! Don't be a loser!

The supermarkets are still busy. Yet there's a feeling of exhaustion.

THREE

Sam tells me her dad loved country music.

I loved Lauryn Hill when I was a kid, she says. I heard her music when I was at school. I had a good music teacher and my grandma sent me \$50 notes wrapped in a doily.

She offers me a Lamington after telling me this, hands me a book about a Somali woman who's told her story about growing up in this war-torn country in the 1980s. I got to chapter 17, she says, then I couldn't remember what happened.

The book is told in the Somali woman's voice, like her voice I'm writing here for you to read.

It's the morning she's going to detox and I give her *Alice in Wonderland*. Why? She told me once she read this as a kid. She may have seen herself as Alice and it seems like she lives in a Wonderland much of the time. I write at the front: *You can and will do this*.

As we drive to the centre she points to the line of clouds in the distance, hanging above the fields of sugar cane.

There's angels in those clouds, she says.

They've come out for you, I say. It's a sign.

She wants to stop for a smoke. I pull up beside a branching fig tree. She tells a story about a dog. She got rid of the dog. She remembers coming here when that happened.

We pass a car with number plate that spells DANTE.

She says, Do you know Dante?

I think, Yes I do but I don't think it's the same Dante as you're thinking about.

She tells me about a cartoon with Coco and Dante the dog and this spins us to Mexico because the cartoon is set there she says.

I say I've been to Mexico, and tell her a story of a holiday back in the '90s and she asks what I remember and I say I didn't like the food as I had something to eat once and it came with chocolate. I speak about the pyramids that are even bigger than those in Egypt and that spins us to Egypt and then I'm telling her about the tombs and how they're still discovering tombs.

Tutankhamun, I hear myself say as we speed along the motorway to make the appointment.

Wait a minute, she says and seems to go into a trance as she tells me: What's the only things that's stopping me. It's my inspirations, my only creations, the beloved darlings God gave me. They give me strength to carry on. You look after my kids, she says as we draw near.

I turn the radio on. It's Vivaldi's *Domine Deus, Rex Caelestis*¹⁶. Is that a sign too, I wonder?

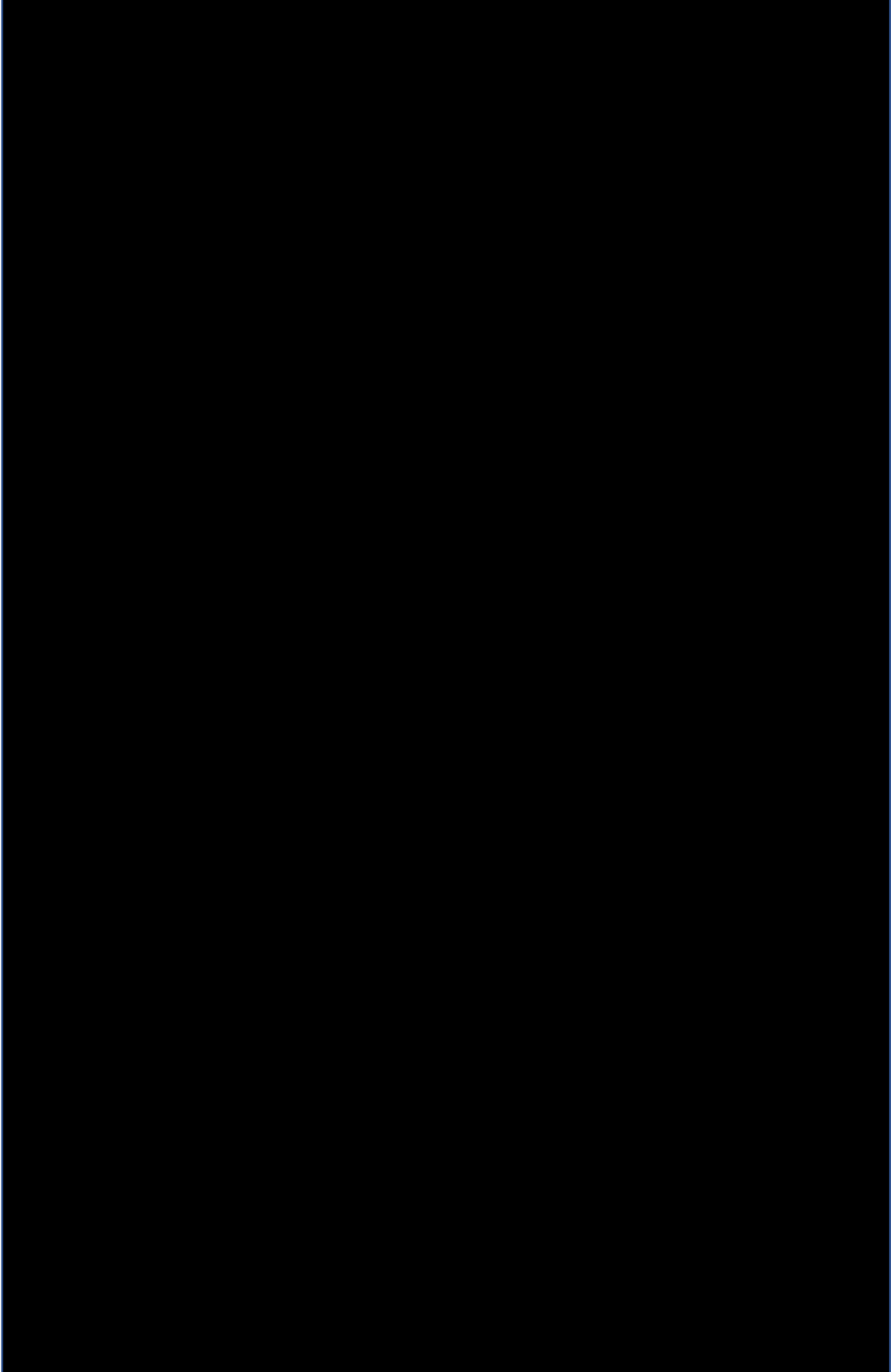
The map on my phone tells me to pull off left and I see we are near, less than 300m. Then it tells me to do a U'ey, and I'm cursing inside why it's doing this. When we arrive she goes mute when asked her name by one of the intake workers. She fishes in her wallet, pulls out her Medicare card like she can't or won't say her name.

I got two distinct paths right in front of me, she says as I'm about to leave. Imma going to choose the right one. At least I know my old Ma will be proud. I reckon everything happens for a reason.

I drive away.

A day later it all goes black.

¹⁶ Listen to the music here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9D9QIVK31M>



Go and see a psyc they tell me. Or there's the Employee Assistance Program. Take some time off. It'll do you good. Selfcare they chant. My wife says the same. So I do.

*

How long have you been a social worker?

Not long. Six, seven maybe. Time flies! It was a career change.

What were you doing before?

Here come the questions, rat-a-tat-tat, bang-bang-bang, her pen skidding across the pad as I reveal, surprising myself at how much I disclose, how much I want to disclose, at how easy it is to disclose. I tell her I was a journalist.

She smiles, encouraging more.

You liked this work?

To begin. Then it got boring. Then I got bored. Then I got older. Then I was next in line to be fired. The whole industry changed within a couple of decades.

She nods and by that nod 20 years of my life are scrubbed as she moves on.

Social work? How does that fit?

Easily, I respond with a well-rehearsed line. Journalism's about talking with people, listening to their stories. Same with social work. It's a good fit.

She absorbs this detail, shifts her legs, guides her pen to place a stray strand of hair behind an ear. I stare at her shoes. Red loafers to match her red blouse. Red like the principal's I remember when I first met Zayde.

And your partner?

Alice keeps things afloat. Makes good money.

She scrutinises her pad. I'm getting the feeling she's got me down as a potential troublemaker who isn't taking this at all seriously.

Children?

Boy and girl, son, daughter.

I see from the form you filled in that you are mildly depressed. How long would you say?

As long as I can remember.

Ten. Twenty. Years?

Longer probably.

How does this affect your work as a social worker?

I keep things in balance. At least I try and keep things in balance.

Self-care?

Yes.

Such as?

Red wine. Shiraz mainly. But I don't smoke.

Well, that's something I guess.

She scratches her left ankle. Shifts herself. Rearranges her legs. Again. She looks directly at me. She has brown eyes and a small mole on her right cheek. Her lips are full and the lipstick matches her shoes and blouse. Light from the window behind highlights tawny hair that falls loosely to her shoulders. She's probably half my age.

Ed, she continues. It strikes me you don't want to be here. There's a look on your face that says, Maybe, maybe not. I can't work with you if you're not here. Can we at least be adults and acknowledge you might actually get something useful out of today?

I nod. It's my turn to fidget.

How would you describe your depression?

Mild.

No, I mean, if you were to say hello to it...Put it this way, if depression was sitting opposite where I'm sitting, so to speak, what would you say?

That's an interesting question.

I'm glad you think so.

I repeat slowly: What would I say to depression?

Your depression.

I think I'd ask: Haven't you got anything better to do?

Good. It sounds like you're suggesting depression take a hike?

I'm suggesting depression might have other things to do.

Yes, exactly. So why don't you just say that when you're feeling low?

Because it isn't sitting in a chair opposite.

So where is it?

How the hell do I know?

That's what we're trying to find out Ed. If you can identify depression, give it a name, personalise it you might be better able to control it.

I know where you're going with this, I say. I may only be a social worker but I've had a fair bit to do with mental illness.

Yes, I take it you might. In which case you'll understand the importance of what I'm saying.

Sure, I'm thinking. I get it but I don't at the same time. I've had depression for decades, been on and off medication as long, and see depression as part of who I am, my shadow partner. I live with it, share my life with it, humour it and at times wrestle with it. It's me. The last thing I want to say is goodbye.

I've changed my mind.

What's that?

About what I'd say.

What would you say?

I wouldn't say anything. I'd just go across and give it a hug.

You'd embrace it?

Yes.

That's cool too.

Why this focus on depression? I ask.

That is why you are here Ed. But it helps me to get a broader picture of who you are so I can assist you with your recovery.

I appreciate that.

She pauses.

Tell me, would you prefer another psychologist? A male one perhaps? I won't be offended.

There's a lull, a respite as when a kite dips to the ground in the absence of wind. I have an image I'm that kite wheeling and circling, seeking to escape, with the psyc holding the string, determining my course, sensing my desire for escape but pulling me back each time as I cavort, mistaking that for free will. I find I'm staring back at her, though without any sense of rancour, instead a curiosity to know more.

I'm fine, I say. Fine about continuing.

She makes a note, no more than a line, an underscore. I'd love to see what she's written but maybe I'd be disappointed, might be no more than a succession of doddles, her portrait of me still unfocused, an outline sketch only.

I'm wondering, she says, what it's like being a man working in an organisation that's predominantly female?

You don't flinch from asking the hard ones do you?

You don't have to answer.

But I do, telling her it's not something I reflect on any longer. I knew I'd be in such an environment when I made the decision to become a social worker and, yes, there was some initial adjustment, nothing though any different from working in an office where the majority of workers are male. In fact, I prefer the former: emotions may be more on display but egos are generally in check.

You're coming from the wrong angle, I say. That isn't where the frustration lies.

Where does it?

In the system.

System abuse?

Yes. Whenever you raise your voice there's a sharp intake of breath, this weary reply: We've heard that all before and, try as we might, we can't do anything about it this minute, so you'd better just get back and do your job best you can. Kids get cancelled out: another generation lost. Another Stolen Generation happening.

During this she hasn't shown any reaction, the expression on her face stone still. She makes another note, longer this time, before asking: Would you say you feel appreciated? When I was younger, much younger, I wanted to be an astronaut. So what do you think? I think, Ed, that sometimes I don't know whether to believe you or not.

I did! And I'd still like to be one.

So you can escape from all this bullshit?

I don't reply.

Do you love what you do? she asks.

Do I what?

Love, enjoy what you do for a living?

I don't know I'd ever use the word enjoy. It's not a job you enjoy, does that make sense? It's not like you ever get any praise, any appreciation to go back to what you were asking a moment ago.

Then what makes you do it, go to the office every day knowing there's so much wrong, can I say wrong? with what you do? You've just told me the system is broken.

Sure. It's band aid much of the time. Patching things up and hoping they'll go away for someone else to pick up the pieces. Close the case and get on to the next one. It's a factory line.

That makes you angry?

Of course it does, but I'm just a small bit in the whole game.

You see it as a game?

Isn't it? Look, when I started out, and remember I came to this work later in life after another career...

...journalism?

...yes, which I started out loving, to use your word, because I saw myself as able to right injustice, help those unable to help themselves, those being exploited if you like, and ended up disillusioned. When I came to social work I also thought I could be part of the same change process. But I can't. The odds are stacked against.

You are, may I put it this way...

Go ahead. I've probably heard it before.

...you strike me as an idealist, one who has not found their Utopia.

I nod in agreement

Our time's almost up, she says. How would you like to proceed?

I'm not sure.

That's fine. You don't have to let me know right now. Have a think about it. If you'd like to return give me a call.

*

That night I drive 250kms north at 9pm to help out a colleague with a 15-year-old girl who's been arrested and is in police custody. She will be released to us so she can go to a hotel overnight but the protocol is two workers are needed and there's no one else available and I'm on call. I arrive god knows what hour – let's say midnight – and immediately go to the police station where she's being bailed to us. She's also been using Ice so she's in a terrible way to say the least. We drive to the hotel, she crashes immediately and I crash on a trundle bed. The following morning I wake at 6, look out the window and notice the hotel is right on the seafront. Joggers are out, people with dogs, some with coffee, on bikes. Normal

activities for a morning. But I might as well be in a prison for the use I'll get of it – a prisoner, or a prison warden more like, denied the pleasure that's tantalisingly near.

*

A young woman, after telling me her story of being assaulted, beaten and controlled by her partner, has taken him back. She's on the phone and I tell her I'm confused and trying to make sense of it all. She says it was all a mistake, what she said to me. I listen, make noises down the line. I say I need to see her face-to-face and can hear her partner in the background. He comes on the line and says it's all the fault of someone else. She repeats it never happened. None of it. Domestic violence is happening everywhere and do I take too much the male part in this and seek to excuse? Am I too much seeking to find possibilities in the male that will mean they 'change', because that is what they tell me? I'll change, they tell me tenderly. I and my other become complicit in all this. What needs to change in myself and my-other, to motivate the men I meet to not see me as their complicit but to see me as their nemesis? I try too hard to 'connect' with the male so they see me as their 'man', on 'their' side of the fence. This worries me, given I have my own challenges, regrets, disappointments. I have no answers to anything, to anyone. It's too complicated and I'm worn out.

*

He sits a metre or two from me. He's been smoking weed. I can tell that from his eyes, the way he speaks, the way he doesn't look at me, the way he wants to focus on things I'm not speaking about but which are in his mind. The way his fingers flex. I ask him if he's been using. He leans forward and wants to assert himself. No. No. I sense this is my opportunity, my only opportunity to make him think about who he is. What does he value as a man, as a father? I struggle to remember the things I've been taught and riff. He says he thinks of himself now as not amounting to much. He wants to get a job. Good. Get a job, but also think about who you are. Go deep into yourself. Will he? Who knows? I've had my chance; I've done what I can, us two alone in a room, me pushing and pushing him and pushing myself in the process.

*

I'm at a meeting of professionals. We've been brought together in this room to discuss a family. There are many layers to the story and everyone has their say. Some themes/patterns emerge. But towards the end there seems a consensus that we (the government people for that's who we are) need to use 'the stick' (that was a word used) to 'tell' the parents to do something otherwise their children will come into care. I'm aghast. It's like collective hands sweep into the air - nothing good can come of this so why waste more time, when time (it's years' services have been working) have gone by and there's little sustained change?

*

What do I feel when I meet with the parents in their home the day after that meeting and try to explain some of the outcomes? When I leave I think to myself: These kids are doing OK but they're not doing all they can. Yet if I 'yield that stick' will the parents ever recover from the shock, the humiliation, the judgement made that they are not capable to parent? How do I carry that on my conscience? That's two-dimensional thinking. Consider how many other dimensions there are: mine, the parent, each child, my place within an organisation, my relationship with my manager, the parent's relationship with their family and friends and the children's relationship with their parents. How many dimensions is that? I wonder about the parents, what they might be thinking, talking about, since I came. What stays in my mind, though, is their one-year-old wandering at my feet and trying to eat tangerine pieces off the dirt. What do I feel? Confused. Frustrated. Angry. Upset. Sad. At my wits end? Unable to. To. Do. Anything. Angry that this is what it is. Upset that we still allow this. Sad. Sad at myself for not being able to do more. It's politics darling, a colleague once said to me. You want to change all that, become a politician.

*

Out to another family. Middle class, well-off, both working and a smart home. But they say they're at a loss as to what next to do. They've tried everything, researched widely, are always looking out for the next best medication that might help their autistic child. Currently they're trialing a different medication but it doesn't seem to be having much effect or making much difference. You must think us failed parents/lousy parents, one of

them says as we stand in the driveway as the child shouts from the top of a shipping container in a garden nearby.

*

I've noticed a colleague has been absent from work for some weeks, a couple of months maybe. Today there are packing boxes on the desk she sits at, her name written in block capitals in black Texta's on the sides. I turn to my colleague and ask if she knows where so-and-so is? My colleague is quiet, reflective, sad, all in the same moment. I anticipate bad news. She has breast cancer, she says. I'm rocked speechless. What does one say to that? Oh my...I think, I utter. We both silently acknowledge the loss and hope for recovery.

*

I spend several hours late in the afternoon with four children, two boys and two girls, ages from 12 to 6. The boys slowly gravitate towards me while my two female colleagues spend more time with the girls. We drive to a local caravan park where two cabins have been rented for the night. The kids splash about in the pool, then the boys want to go fishing. We find some discarded line and I buy squid bait from the store. We find a wooden oar among the mangroves and the youngest girl hunts for crabs. As darkness falls I'm told I can go home, reflecting on the comment the oldest girl made to a colleague that when they were taken from their carers they'd been with for five years, it was the best day of her life. I return the next day, around noon. They ask me to jump in the pool. I play with the youngest boy. Throwing him, as he asks, into the air – once, twice, Then the older one calls out, Come here. So I do and get into deeper water and find I can't touch the bottom. I'm not a strong swimmer and if my feet can't touch bottom I panic. I start to panic with everyone around me oblivious. The older kid is shouting to me and all I'm trying to do is get out of this deep water. It takes me what seems like ages but eventually I do. I breathe deeply, in pants as you do when stressed. Then I return to the present. These children are in transit, without having any idea where they're heading. Nor do I.

*

Sometimes the office sounds like a typing pool, the typists joking with one another, sounds of sporadic laughter from time to time, killing time, making the day a bit easier to pass, put out of mind the next phone call that will bring who knows what.

*

Another week passes and I get the call from detox that Sam can go to rehab.

FOUR

It's only a week before rehab call again. Come and pick her up, I'm told. She's broken the rules, she can't stay here tonight.

When I arrive, Sam tells me her story.

I'm sitting watching this Harry Potter movie and they're in another room watching the rugby and I'm feeling afraid. I tell a worker and then the worker comes and turns off the TV and I say, You can't do that, we're watching a movie. She tells us to go to our rooms. It's bedtime, she says like we're four-year-olds or some'in. I'm feelin this spiritual connection with another human. So I go to his room. I ask if I can lie with him and I climb into his bed. I touch him and ask him to hold my hand. Then he wigs out. You can't be here, he says. You can't be here. I'm only there because I feel this spiritual connection but he doesn't have that for me. No. We went together to see the social worker and we told her what happened. Then the next thing is everyone's having a go at me and saying it's me. But there's others kissing and carrying on. But it's always me, me who's the wrong doer. I'm not going, I say. I'm not going.

I hear another, different story, from the social worker. I drive Sam home, back to what she calls that 'stinking house'. I can't go there, she says. I can't go inside.

In the garden the pool is crumpled, dirty water puddled in one end.

It's got memories and I don't feel safe, she says. Someone could come and hurt me. I don't feel safe in this town. I don't feel safe with these people who've turned against me and my babies. It's all to do with this man I loved. I was to marry him and he came into my life and the lives of my babies, then he left me and it was the community and those people who turned him against me.

I'm listening but then I'm all of a sudden not as she starts to talk about the spirit woman she saw in the park who is either white or dark, depending on something I can't

remember now. I've read a medical assessment of her and it says she might be PTSD or it might be schizophrenia. Whatever. It's probably something unless it really isn't.

*

We had these cats and then we didn't have them. I found one out on the street and I called it Jin and gave it bits to eat. Today I found it in the road, dead, like its run out of breath, maybe not had enough to eat and died. Cats can die if they're hungry. I ran to the sea. Dusty's there.

What you want to do Snake?

Bury her.

Bury her?

Fuck you, you deaf? On a raft, a blazing raft, send her out in the sea.

He's thinking again.

OK, he says.

You real?

He stares at me and I know he's real. He gets wood off the beach, bits and pieces around, gets some discarded fishing line to tie it together.

That's yer raft, he says pointing, then he's smashing stones together to get a spark.

It don't look much to me but I believe him an' I lay Jin on this raft thing. There's smell of smoke, colour of orange and red and smoke's everywhere. Everywhere. True.

You ready? he says.

I carry the raft and wade into the rollers. Dusty's got this smoke in his hands, blowing it to keep it alive he says. When a roller comes I push the raft off and the kid's put it to the fur which goes up fine. He pulls me back cause it's smoking good now and the sea's got her but when the next roller comes it takes out the smoke an' the raft. I'm about to dive after her but the kid's got me by the legs, dragging me back, saying, The sea's taken her down, she'll be OK.

Under the water I am. Small fish I see, then blue like the sky an' distant floating, fur sort of steamin'. Then I'm out the water, spluttering with the kid in my face on the sand telling me to breath. Breath 's what he's saying. I roll over, spew, yet all I want is hold Jin, smell her. So I'm looking an' I see this shape pushed up the beach by the sea, this shape that's cat but not cause it's all messed up. He see's it also and goes gets it, holds it to him.

He gives me her. I'm all wet an' the cat's not cat anymore, smells of sea and death. Let's bury her, I'm saying quickly, not wanting it anymore cause she's a mess an' in my head I think it's Jimmy who's done this. He's goin' pay. I'll make him pay, like he don't know how I'll make him. Dusty takes her, he's got her stiff and smelling of shit and stuff.

Where you goin'? I shout.

He keeps walking an' walking an' I get up covered in sand so much that I'm spitting it out my mouth an' feelin it in my hair but I gotta keep eyes on him cause he's got the cat even if she's dead now. Jimmy I'm thinkin. How you'd do that? I'm mad angry at him, so angry I smash my foot in the sand an' all I can think of is smashing him well hard. Laying him if I see him. Yet all I see is the other kid on his knees digging with his hands a hole under a tree.

Wanna say someit? Dusty says standing up.

He's shoved leaves and sticks over her then hands me a seashell.

What's this for?

Put over her eyes.

He pulls a packet of smokes from his shorts, offers me.

Just baccy, he says lighting it. Calms you. Try.

It's hot in my hand an' on my lips and he cracks up when I start spluttering. I toss it far as I can. I think: I'm gonna end up like all fucked up kids. Mum's a loser. Dad. Where's he? All I got's myself and little sis. I gotta look after us.

*

A 13-year-old's showing me rapper videos on YouTube. It's 3am and we're sitting at my desk in the office.

You heard of *Spanian*? he asks.

No.

You not heard of *Spanian*!

He seems incredulous that I haven't heard of either *OneFour* or *Future* or *Bevin* for that matter. He clicks on something else.

He's real that guy.

I look at the number of hits and they're in the billion.

An hour earlier we're in local police station, and 16 hours from now I'll be back there again.

There were four police cars, he's telling me. Four with lights flashing. They came to my girlfriend's house. That's where I was trying to get to. She rang but they wouldn't let me speak to her. I've got this bad feeling about her. I need to speak to her.

His girlfriend is 14. They met a month ago down by the jetty on the river.

Back at the office we're playing a game of chess. I could take his Queen with my rook but decide not to. I let him win. He's had a tough day.

Two hours earlier we're standing on the pavement outside the apartment building his mum and partner are renting. We can't get in because he doesn't know the room number to key in to the panel on the wall by the entrance. I press a button marked 'After hours enquiries' and speak with a woman who says she get the night manager to come down. He's a short, thin, wizened man, dressed in jumper and slacks that show bones beneath. In his hand he clutches the guest list and finally locates the name we're searching for. We get in the lift with him and rise to the ninth floor. The man bangs on the door. Once, twice. There's no answer and we retreat. As we descend he says to the boy: I'll remember you, in a tone that suggests if he ever sees him again he'll roast him alive. He tiptoes away and I wonder if he has an underground cellar somewhere decorated with the pelts of boys who've done wrong.

Sixteen hours later I'm standing in a police interview room that's been set aside so mum and her partner, but mum mainly, can talk with the boy. The three are seated round the table and she asks him to show her his face as he's hid himself in his hoodie.

I love you, she's saying. You've done some lousy things but I don't blame you for getting the police on us. It's made us stronger. I used to run when I was young but I don't run anymore. I don't need to. I'm not afraid of anything now. We got to do all this together. You and your girlfriend. Yeah, I know you love her but you're a boy. You're thirteen and it's natural. But if you want sex then we got to talk about it cause I'm your mum and your dad. Right? Right.

I drop them back at their apartment and wish them well. I hope the boy doesn't run into the night manager.

*

Dusty says he wanna show me some'in. He leads me through the trees, pulls some green plastic sheet aside, disappears. I kneel, see this big hole in the ground you wouldn't believe. I lower myself 'till I touch the bottom, spitting cause I need water bad. He tosses me a bottle like he knows. It's good. Everything smells sweet. Like there's sugar everywhere.

You live here?

Nar. It's secret.

We're sitting facing each other, knees bent, feet touching, plastic flapping above our heads. I feel I'm in a space capsule. I'm thinking of me in space cause all of a sudden it feels like I'm in space not on the ocean in a boat. Then I'm telling Dusty this stuff 'bout rockets an' astronauts. He's listening like he's thinking I'm crazy. Then he starts whooping some shit. What you doing? I say.

Floating. Ain't that what astro-whatevers do? Float? I'm floating and I'm whooping cause I'm happy floating.

So I join him an' we're whooping together an' it's good.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 1

ON SOCIAL WORK AS WRITING

Social workers are language workers. They operate in a community created by language and are immersed in language, which is their principal medium for doing their work
(Hall & Valdiviezo, 2020, p. 17).

The act of imagination is the opening of the system so that it shows new connections.
(Bronowski, 1978, p. 109).

*

It was thirty years ago that Richardson's article *Writing: a method of inquiry* was published (1993/2005). As she puts it elsewhere, this 'is a way of nurturing our own individuality and giving us authority over our understanding of our own lives' (2001, p. 35). But writing also implies privilege since it gives power to the author (Tullis in Adams et al., 2021, p. 111), enables their voice to be prominent above that of others: the author has authority.

This is no more evident than in child protection social work, where authority, the master narrative, is invested in the worker, however much denied on the grounds of anti-elitism; and where writing is the main method of professional discourse, communication, control and surveillance (Bastian, 2020; Bell & Hydén, 2017; Hall, 2013; Goddard et al, 2013; Healy & Mulholland, 2012; Henry & Austin, 2021; Margolin, 1997; O' Rourke, 2010; Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Taylor, 2008).

That writing accounts for a large part of the working day is acknowledged in the literature (Gordon et al, 2017; Henry & Austin, 2021; Lillis et al., 2017, 2020; Taylor, 2008; Taylor, 2013; Yuill & Mueller-Hirth, 2019) and Clifford's description of ethnography strikes me as appropriate for, replacing that nomenclature with social work, it reads: '[Social work] is hybrid textual activity: it transverses genres and disciplines...it is always writing' (1986, p. 26). In another vein, Stephen Muecke, an Australian academic, observed that the ethnographer (or social worker) exerts power over those being studied '...through the ritual of the communicative event', going on to remark that conversations with the subject are 'disarmed' and re-interpreted as 'professional discourse' (Benterrak et al., 1984, p. 185). In other words, the client's voice is appropriated, their uniqueness categorised as, for example, 'he misuses drugs such as Ice', or, more simply put, is 'an Ice user'; while a child is

labelled 'behaviourally difficult, disruptive in class, and their teacher wonders if they may have ADHD'. As England remarks clients¹⁷ are only known to others through 'the worker's eyes', through what is written in case notes (1986, p. 202), which, referencing Latour's Actor Network Theory, documents and reports being identified as non-human actors, are always 'partial accounts and not merely representations of reality' (Stanley et al., 2011, p. 52).

Not that this is anything new. Margolin, writing about the early years of social work in the US, observes: 'Because social workers possessed those new inventions, the typewriter and telephone, their words had special significance. To type an opinion and file it away is to separate words from human subjectivity; it is to transform them into facts and make them final' (1997, p. 37). The typewriter has been replaced by the computer, but the truth remains: people are objectified through the agency of the recorder.

What is written is also constrained by the organisational need for record keeping. Reports and assessments are prepared daily; emails flick incessantly between managers, caseworkers, psychologists, teachers, doctors, police and other professionals (Cortis et al., 2019, p. 57; Ferguson, 2017, p. 1018; Gibson et al., 2018; Yuill & Mueller-Hirth, 2019); while social work students on placement write reflective journals, though these often cease once they enter the workplace (Agllias, 2010; Ferguson, 2018). Pithouse observes that 'the Departmental view is that records will serve as evidence of unobserved encounters with consumers and will provide the base for case and wider organisational planning' (1987, p. 33), but they are also 'not, therefore a construction of past events, it is a practical construction of an approved reality' (p. 39).

What arises from this statement (and notwithstanding when it was made) it is always the Department's view that is privileged. In fact, I would assert that there's a virtual choreography in play between the writer of casework texts and the intended reader, particularly when the record is directed at the medical or legal professions. While social workers may seek to eschew jargon, avoid acronyms and otherwise display principles of social justice, when it comes to advocating for families they are sucked into the institutional conditions set down by psychologists, solicitors and, ultimately, the magistrate at Children's Court whose power is never transcended, whose power is absolute. Not only that, but there

¹⁷ Itself a word that denotes 'passivity': McLaughlin, H. (2009). What's in a name: 'client', 'patient', 'customer', 'consumer', 'expert by experience', 'service user' - what's next? *The British Journal of Social Work*, 39(6), 1101-1117. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcm155>

is complicity between these groups when they meet in what are called 'stakeholder meetings' – closed sessions during which a 'case' is studied, opinions aired and tasks for further work allocated among the professionals present. Furthermore, child protection caseworkers mingle with solicitors at court and inevitably, given the length of court days, develop inter-personal (and inter-professional) relationships which can, and do, reflect on the families they are working with, passing comment that is exclusive to their domain and, from which, once more, the subject of their informal conversations is excluded. The only time the latter get to read what has been written about them is in the affidavits and other related court papers served on them. In these they may come across references to: 'the volatile client'; 'they consented to do urinalysis'; 'the matter was allocated to...'; and 'so-and-so failed to engage'.

In this context writing becomes another form of surveillance. As stated by O'Rourke: 'The very exercise of observation and interpretation of clients' behaviour, and the recording of those observations and interpretations, is an exercise in power, which is the prerogative of the practitioner' (2010, p.29). A statement echoed by de Montigny who writes '...specialised language is essential for the exercise of institutionalised forms of power and authority' (1995, p.71). But, of course, nothing can be recorded as a written record in its entirety and social workers do not, unlike police officers, tape conversations. Therefore, these records are partial or, as described by Skotte '...patchworks of details...' (2020, p.132), the patchwork stitched by the caseworker to a pattern preordained by, and accountable to, the Department. If this were an actual, physical, game the playing field would most certainly not be level.

Writing then becomes nothing more than a task with creativity shackled. In this context, writing is a demonstrated and articulated instrument employed by educated and socially-embedded individuals who can satisfy the expectations of the bureaucratic and political elites. I would go as far as to maintain that if writing is considered at all in contemporary and task-driven social work it is to prepare graduates for publication in academic journals (Boddy et al., 2012). This is not to trivialise the practice for professional writing '...can honor social work values and ethics, by valuing time with and diversity among people' (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 395). However, it also honours the 'expert' view, relegating the subject to a passive ancillary to proceedings. Ultimately it is the social worker sitting at their keyboard who controls and constructs the narrative, shapes the report, often

relying on professional language and formulaic expressions such as abuse, compassion, curiosity, empathy, empowerment, engagement, lens, resilience, strength, trauma, unpack, and many, many more.

Is there another way, combining some of the objectiveness of professional writing with the novelist's touch that speaks to the contradictions, nuances and ambiguities of being human and interacting in a social space? What if, as Ely suggests in the context of qualitative reports in general, there was a way of writing '...more analogous to movies than photographs... [to] portray the dynamic and telling moments as fully and poignantly as possible' (1997, p. 52); or as Bochner, one of the pioneers of autoethnography, asserts: 'I want a story that doesn't just refer to a subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean' (2000, p. 271)? Pelias speaks of 'creative qualitative researchers' who '...call upon their literary skills to evoke the emotional and intellectual complexity of their subjects' (2019, p. 1). In the end, as put by Goldstein, a US social work academic who had a keen interest in creativity: 'Without sincere interest, a compelling curiosity, and aesthetic sensitivity, understanding becomes an objective undertaking that really belongs to the pursuits of the natural scientist' (1999, p. 395).

While social work is most definitely not a natural science, there have been, and continue to be, debates as to its place within the so-called social sciences, with the discipline sometimes sitting uncomfortably alongside psychology and other health-related practices which draw heavily on quantitative methods. (In most Australian institutions the subject is placed within the allied health faculty rather than social sciences, which typically include economics, sociology and political science.) In addition, social work continues to seek identity as a 'profession' (Tangey & Mendes, 2022) and has what might be described as an 'inferiority complex' among its cohort which are so recognised by the Federal Government. Hence, the emphasis on evidence-based practice in both frontline work and the academy over the last 20 plus years (Webb, 2001) to boost its credentials so as to be able to stand, head held high, alongside its peers¹⁸.

But, as Munro and Hardie observe, an over-emphasis on objectivity can undervalue 'intuitive and empathic skills' (2019, p.424), both crucial to the practitioner's work, for social

¹⁸ This begs the question: Why does social work, that is the organisation set up in Australia to promote the discipline, seek admittance to this clique when its own agenda and indeed its history is and has always been focused on activism, justice and radicalism? I will come back to this topic in Scene 5.

work practice calls upon elemental human skills that recognise gesture, tone and, especially, eye contact. How much more is revealed in a person's facial expression when sitting nearby than when conversing over the phone or, these days, by audio/visual link. Adopting the view that social interaction is a construction manifest in the dynamic of real-time connection between individuals, who also bring with them cultural legacy, biases, preconceptions and judgements, a social worker, I argue, is unable to interpret an interaction with another without reflecting that they are part of a performance in which there is no resolution. Goldstein came to the same point of view more than 20 years ago when he wrote: '...the social worker as a performing artist has the talent and will to move beyond the constraints of method and technique and respond imaginatively and creatively to the impromptu, unrehearsed nature of the special human relationship' (1998, p.247).

Continuing with this analogy of performance, with the implication of theatre¹⁹, it follows that social work is also ideally suited to textual representation, as in a dramatic script, though one full of opportunities to *ad lib*. This leads to my argument that social work, and the creation of literary texts, can be categorised as a form of storytelling, and this thesis makes the case for creative writing as a necessary and vital inclusion for the practice and education of workers, being comfortably positioned within the domain of critical reflective practice, a key pillar of the discipline (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

Another allied discipline, sociology, has already tested this path and lends support to my argument, having a rich and flourishing fiction genre. It includes the Australian scholar, Ash Watson, who writes both academically and fictionally and edits the website <https://thesociologicalreview.org> which publishes 'high quality short stories by new and established writers that creatively extend sociological imagination into fiction'. As she comments elsewhere: '...short stories and other fictional forms allow a scope and nuance that is constructive for exploring social worlds...Through writing fiction, we can open multiplicities in what and how we can know about social worlds...' (2022, p338-340). Take for example her novel *Into the Sea* (2020), described as '...a novel about "the Australian way

¹⁹ I sit in the audience (an audience) and listen to what people say as part of my research. I am a spectator and also interpret as does a spectator/audience/member of a play. We are all participants in this show. That, simply stated, is what this thesis boils down to. Nothing fancy. Nothing contrived. Lights. Showtime. Sit back and enjoy.

of life”, grounded in ethnographic research, and crafted to engage readers in sociological imagination’. This speaks to what I seek to promote in social work, which operates directly within and around the affairs of people, including of course those who work with and for them.

If one accepts the case for a sociological imagination does the equivalent hold for social work? Katherine van Wormer raised the topic in an article published in 2002 in which she defined the social work imagination: ‘...as a kind of suspension of disbelief in clients’ capabilities, a kind of faith that, if they work at it, the most disreputable or downtrodden of clients can find some meaning in life. Such imagination challenges all our creative resources to discover in collaboration with the client what countless others may have overlooked, some obvious solution to a problem, perhaps, or some new way around a difficulty’ (p.22). She concludes by emphasising how social workers need to draw upon a ‘...combination of empathy, suspension of disbelief, insight and resourcefulness’ (p.32) and places this against the prevalent doctrine of ‘clinical’ practice.

Though written more than two decades ago the situation today is, if anything, even more set against imaginative or creative practice, as evidenced by the way the discipline is currently taught in Australia with little, if any space, provided for the expression of creativity, which ties in with van Wormer’s ‘resourcefulness’. Much of this lies with the neoliberal and managerialist agenda that has almost sucked the marrow dry of nourishment for anything other than bureaucratic procedure, something raised by Lydia Rapoport back in 1968: ‘...bureaucratic organization can seriously interfere with both creative innovation and artful practice. It tends to diminish the span of control and the range of decision-making power in the individual practitioner. It also tends to reward conformity and discourage initiative and innovation...Procedures are reduced to rule of thumb operations, and routines replace professional judgment and choice’ (quoted in 1975, p. 17).

I write as one who has direct experience, having been formally through the two-year Master of Social Work (Qualifying) program a decade ago. In my final oral presentation to peers, a concise statement of what is called one’s ‘practice framework’, a rite-of-passage that precedes graduation and formal acknowledgement of legitimacy to practice, I delivered this statement about the type of worker I saw myself:

I come to social work with passion and enthusiasm drawn from life experience in many other fields of practice that I’ll summarise shortly. However, at the heart of my

practice is the principle, or value, that each of us has within a creative spirit that is there to be nurtured. In some it flourishes already, while in others it's dormant and requires to be awakened. My framework, therefore, develops from a belief that social work is as much art as social science.

On my first placement last year I reflected that social worker's must not hide behind the fortress of 'evidence-based practice', for evidence-based practice is, apart from everything else, ever changing in a sea of controversy. That is what science does – proposes and disposes. A theory is put up; it's kicked around; it lasts only until another is proposed, or is amended, reviewed.

Art, on the other hand, is organic and comes from within, not imposed from without. If a social worker is to engage with another individual then I believe it is more important they have a sense of self, a sense of justice, a sense of what it is like to be human than that they can recite the underlying motifs of postmodernism or know how many forms of dementia there are. Perhaps social work degrees could include a unit in the dramatic arts, the works of Shakespeare and Keats, or students could be encouraged to go and plant a garden.

This is not to say that I do not use theories – as you will see in a later part of this presentation – but I keep that in context, as just one part of my performance. That is my intellectual side – that part of my personality – of who I am...All in all my framework acknowledges that all of us have possibilities, that life is a pattern of discoveries and that as social workers we have the privilege of being with and alongside others as they embark on that discovery too (personal archive, 2013).

Ten years on I believe that not only have I adhered to those principles but I have also had the opportunity to pass the message, and the practice, on to students I have supervised.

But don't take my word for it. Let's ask my student.

*

I'm supervising them on their final placement, ninety minutes once a week for the length of the program, the equivalent of 500 hours or about 16 weeks. That's 48 hours of supervision over two years. They are not being paid and they are funding their studies through part-

time work in the evenings and weekends. The 1000 hours in total is longer than the requirement to qualify as a nurse (800 hours). They look exhausted.

What do you think about being creative in this work?

I'd like to think I can be...

But?

I was only thinking about this the other day.

And what did you conclude?

It's not reached that point but here's a start. As I approached my work station the other morning I saw a piece of paper lying face down on the keyboard. When I turned it over I saw it was actually something I'd written a week before after spending the day with a couple of teenagers. I'd written what I thought the department could do for them in the future. I had detailed everything of relevance to support them - housing options, trips to Centrelink, starting the process of getting a tax file number, names of the psychologists they liked to see, names of the basketball teams they wanted to join, the need for phone credit, organising their finances, getting their bank cards. I felt being able to compress this information into a concise list of actions made me useful. It was something I could do to help the caseworker. However, the list was beside the point really. To me it was what this plan could mean for *them*: a foundation of key life needs that could catapult these boys into a stable, normal life. Maybe it was a pipe dream but mapping out practical steps made me feel excited. It made me hopeful. After handing the list to the caseworker, I never heard about it again. Until that morning as it lay brazenly on my desk, almost in mockery of the effort I had originally put into it. I held it in my hand longer than needed to see if it would evoke a comment from the caseworker who sat next to me. Her vision clocked mine, but she didn't say a word. Why didn't she just throw it in the bin? I thought to myself. Why place it back on my desk? Don't be daft, I thought, she's letting me know, in a very straightforward way, that this list was not going to be actioned. I'd overheard that the department wanted to transfer the teenagers to an agency, and it seemed the caseworker had decided that her support for them would cease. I saw them slipping through the cracks to join the many who never receive what they need. I wallowed in disappointment for the rest of the morning.

Unfortunately what you have just described is so typical.

It's demoralising, isn't it, to have these 'lists' put back on your desk? The department places them on your desk, your manager places them on your desk, your colleagues place them on your desk, and sometimes you even have to make the decision to place your list back on your own desk! Your 'list' of the things you want to do, the actions you want to take, the support you want to give are confronted by the bureaucratic processes that inhibit the system you work within. It's hard to be the people who write these 'lists', but it's vital to do so. That they continue to pursue the 'lists' they want, the 'lists' they think will change lives, because sometimes, for whatever reason, we do get to tick things off our 'list'. We do get to make an incremental change. We do get to, sometimes, seldomly, have all our losses and failures momentarily relieved from our subconscious by that one thing we did for that one child, that one young person. Therefore, it was important to me to write that 'list' and feel the passion, the hope and optimism that comes with it. It's important I believe in what I'm doing, despite the social outskirts I may roam in my future workplaces because of this attitude. It's important for me to have the strength to pick up the 'list' left on my desk, move it aside, and write another one each and every time.

What do you mean by social outskirts?

I've already got a feeling you have to be on the 'outer' to make change happen in this sort of work.

Hold that thought a moment because you've raised some interesting points about the need to push back against the flattening inertia of bureaucracy, disrupt the consensus. I'm afraid to say that my idealism when I first started in child protection has been tempered and tested to breaking point by the constraints of a system which, during that passage of time, has eschewed any action that might upset the dominant narrative: make parents who deviate from social norms comply with drug testing, mental health appointments, and so on and, if they don't, bring their children into state and institutional care. Such an oppressive and dehumanising ideology might wear away at the moral resistance of others, but social workers are generally motivated by principles and values far removed from neoliberal attitudes.

So how do you keep going?

In these circumstances I believe you need to draw on 'creative courage'²⁰.

What's that?

Think of it as being on the outer, as you've just described, acting outside the norm, both individually and collectively, responding to situations such as the one you've mentioned in exactly the way you did. That's creative courage and it is linked to the social work imagination.

Like coming back again and again and writing my list?

By writing different lists each time, in different ways because you're thinking: how else can I achieve this, what's another way this can be done that will bring greater good to those I'm working with and for? And that's not easy. Far easier to go with the flow, do just enough of what's required (Walz and Uematsu, 1997, p. 24), and for a social worker courage is one of the virtues or values by which we practice.

For anyone surely?

Yes, and I don't mean to categorise a social worker as some supra-being, above and beyond mere mortals, neither to claim some exclusivity to what I'm saying. I am simply drawing a connection to the values we identify within our practice which, quite naturally, flow into everything we do.

It's interesting what you say about creativity, though, since that's not something which comes up very much, if at all, in the curriculum. There's this emphasis on theory and structures and human development and mental health, all important don't get me wrong, and sometimes a lecturer might mention the need to be flexible when working with people, being non-judgemental and so on. But it's not like there's an expectation for us to draw on what you're talking about.

I know, and there's still this attitude that creativity is somehow linked to being deviant, the artist as a rebel...

An outsider?

Absolutely. And creativity is so usually associated with art practice. However it's a necessary human attribute. Margaret Boden has written extensively on creativity over the years and

²⁰ This phrase is borrowed from Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (1975), Norton & Co., New York. He writes: 'Whereas moral courage is the righting of wrongs, creative courage, in contrast, is the discovering of new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built' (p. 21).

most recently has been seeking to explore if artificial intelligence, AI, has the capacity to be creative. She writes that creativity is not a 'special "faculty", but an aspect of human intelligence in general...it's grounded in everyday abilities such as conceptual thinking, perception, memory, and reflective self-criticism. So it isn't confined to a tiny elite: every one of us is creative, to a degree' (2010, p.29-30)²¹.

Yet how often do you hear people say, I haven't got a creative bone in my body!

It's like they are scared of it because it's unfamiliar, deviant almost. They may also be frightened of where it may lead them, to places in their sub-consciousness they would rather not go. But bear with me as I'd like to go a step further and ask you to consider whether creativity can also be described as a virtue.

I'm not sure I understand. I have read the Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics and it recognises three principles (2020, p.9).

That's correct. One commonly thinks of compassion, justice, humility and hope as virtues displayed by a social worker (but not exclusively), while the AASW also identifies honesty, trustworthiness and good character. These are certainly indisputable but what I wish to add to the list is borrowed from virtue ethics - moral creativity. Since I am not a moral philosopher I will draw on the work of those who are and refer you to their paper (Astola et al, 2022). Put simply the argument considers a person acting creatively and virtuously when they produce work or ideas that are new, that are surprising, that have value, that demonstrate mastery and motivation to the good. Now all of these words – new, surprising, valuable, mastery and so on – can lead one down a rabbit-warren of interpretation, and I'm not proposing we go there. But it is important to recognise that each takes meaning from the context in which it is used. Therefore, in our current setting, that of a social worker, I would suggest a surprising creative action, for example, might be the list you've written and put such time and trouble into. The next day you come into work, pick it up, read it through and then tear up or scrunch into a ball and throw in the bin. Why? Because you have had a new and ultimately valuable idea that lists don't matter as they conform to the 'tick-a-box' style of practice.

²¹ Boden is known for identifying three ways of creativity, exploratory, combinational and transformative; and distinguishing between 'psychological' and 'historical' creativity – the former an idea that's new to the person who comes up with it, but not necessarily 'new'; and the latter an idea that has never before been stated (2010).

That links back to creative courage.

Yes, there's a circularity of argument here and it brings me to writing.

Don't mention that. It's all I seem to do. To write endlessly. I don't have the time to see, talk, be with people because all I'm doing is writing. Even when I'm sitting in a meeting I'm being asked to write the notes or minutes or whatever. It's endless, repetitive, staring at the computer screen tap-tap-tapping.

And what do you write?

What they're saying or have said from the notes I've taken.

Do you?

Only partially. They speak so quickly. It's difficult to follow.

It's not verbatim then?

Well, hardly. I get a sense of what they're at.

Which is your interpretation in the moment?

I guess.

What if you make a mistake.

I don't get it down as they said?

Yes? You interpret?

Sometimes I think I'm putting words into their mouths.

Telling a story?

Maybe, though I'm in control.

But whose story is this? Yours or theirs or a combination of both?

Well, theirs I suppose.

Yet you are the archivist, the one doing the recording.

Yes.

So I would say it's as much your story as theirs.

Surely it can be a joint story?

A collaboration? I suppose it can be as long as it's told without sides being taken. As far as is possible the story is related to the other, the reader, as a dialogue.

Isn't that what novelists do, capture what people are thinking and doing without actually having direct knowledge, objective knowledge?

I call that an imaginative response to the human condition. We are all part of this theatre that is human life: we are born, about which we have no control, grow up, maybe have

children ourselves, have dreams and aspirations and then accept our mortality, about which we do have some control. We all tell stories about our lives pretty much all the time and we seek to spread them, usually orally, so our lives can resemble some sort of significance, so we are remembered. Everyone is (usually) remembered by someone, and it is through stories they/we have told, re-told or are re-collected by others that human life exists and endures. This is what is known as 'narrative identity' (McAdams & McLean, 2013)²².

So my identity is made through stories?

That's what this approach suggests.

Tell me a story.

About social work?

Why not.

OK. I've arranged to meet the parents at a café along with my colleague who is taking over casework. There's a couple of tasks to do: to give them back some of their children's belongings now they have changed placement, and to advise that I am moving on and my colleague will be their new point of contact. We wait for them at a table outside in the late morning sun and order tea. We are alone until two dogs, like greyhounds, come sniffing at our feet then leave just as quickly. They have collars so are probably not strays. My colleague points to a collection of hand-whisks hanging on a wall, a sort of display, and as I've been here before I mention the café turns into an Italian restaurant in the evenings. We chat and 30 minutes pass. I text dad, JG, to find out where they are just before we see him and his partner, CT, strolling towards us. They have a dog on a length of rope, one of the animals we'd seen earlier. JG says he's called the owner (the number's on the tag) and she will be coming soon. I say we'd noticed the dogs at the café earlier. JG and CT sit opposite. I introduce my colleague and the reason she's with me and wait for their reaction. But before that can happen the owner of the dog arrives. There's a conversation, thanks are given, the owner gratefully retrieves her pet, says the other dog is back at home. JG and CT are happy. I acknowledge this, say something about them being caring and so on. CT says if she could she'd have lots of animals. Then we start the conversation we must have. I make it plain they are to do two

²² I will return to this in the separate exegesis on *Diary and Episodes*.

weeks of drug screens three times a week. However, CT's focused on something else. She's upset at another change in caseworker.

This is the fourth she says.

I nod. I listen. I take it all in.

She says, It ain't ethical. Why say you are here for ever and then you aren't? Don't ever say you are here for ever again.

I listen. I nod. I say, I didn't know I was going to be moved.

(A lie since I've known for weeks I was being transferred to another position.)

My colleague interjects too, but I know how this is going. I concentrate on JG. I speak about how important it is to do the fortnight of drug screens, then they can move on. They tell of problems at their accommodation, their 'aunt' has said they must leave within the week. It's all, as usual, complicated, and we need to keep it simple. If only. As we end I speak with JG alone. Say you both will do this, I say. He doesn't reply, eager to be off.

I open the car boot to reveal the clothing and toys the boys had when they were in their first placement, apologizing for the black plastic bags they're in. However, they seem happy enough, though CT speaks of a certain bear. I hope it's there but think not.

I watch as they walk away up the street, JG with his arm around CT. I feel sad and my eyes water a little. I turn my face away so my colleague doesn't notice.

On the drive back to the office she comments: She's a feisty one.

Now it's my turn not to answer. I'm thinking of that lost bear.

What are your immediate reflections on that? I ask after a moment's silence.

All I can think about are the black plastic bags. It makes me upset to think those children's lives are contained right there. It's all the parents have to hold on to -literally.

And do you agree with that comment about mum?

That she's feisty? I thought that was really inappropriate and derogatory.

Coming from a social worker?

Well, yes, but coming from anyone actually.

You have to remember these are human interactions. We don't live perfectly politically-correct lives as set out in textbooks or journal articles. One of my purposes in reading this fictionalized account to you is to demonstrate the unvarnished nature of practice, to show what it can be like in action, as actualized not as reduced to bland scenarios you read in case studies or scenarios in the textbooks (Boxall et al, 2018).

So it's real?

Well, what is real? It's a fiction and novelists create social worlds and we enter those or, rather, are led into them, and suspend our disbelief. We go to the theatre and watch a re-creation of, say, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, set in a contemporary world that reflects the USA today. King Lear as Donald Trump! Where's the reality in that? Shakespeare wrote his story based on some historical episode current at the time and created a drama that has transcended the centuries. What happens in that play remains relevant to our current situation, however, which suggests human nature, human characteristics, are no different now as to what they were back then. And that is an elemental fact. Suffering and family dysfunction is nothing new – it has been there for ever. What creatives do is bring that into focus and, in my view, social workers are one element of that. We have to accept that life cannot always be evidence-based since human nature is not contained within boxes that conform to rigid scientific analysis.

You want me to write like a novelist?

Maybe not today! While I acknowledge that no social worker has time to write a novel about their experience with a family, what I am suggesting is that a social worker can learn from creative writing practices and literary techniques. Ash Watson, who has written about sociological fiction, suggests, 'Through writing fiction, we can open multiplicities in what and how we can know about social worlds...' (2022, p.340). Furthermore, we can offer a voice to those who do not find one in the academic literature. For example, a teenager being bullied at school who returns home to find mum asleep on the couch, still in her nightgown, with the TV blaring and his baby sister screaming. He calms his sister, makes her a bottle, takes her to his room and cradles her while he plays *Fortnite*. As he plays he speaks to others he has befriended online and discloses what is going on in his life so that we, the reader, learn more about him and his situation. That vignette already opens up scope for discussion, analysis and reflection while also acting as a prompt for development as a longer, complex story. Through the fictional re-creation of such scenes and characterisation the social worker-as-creative writer can reveal to a wider audience the extent of social suffering that is happening now and its consequences²³. Consider it another way of advocating for social

²³ Social suffering is a direct reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, mentioned in the introduction, and whose work will be referenced in later discussion.

justice and reform. Call it fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013)²⁴ or performative social science.

But how do you learn to write like that? All I've ever written since I was at high school have been essays and it's been drilled in to me how they are structured to ensure you get good grades. I wouldn't know where to begin.

There's only one place I know that offers a specific and structured program, the University of Iowa's *Creative Writing Workshop for Social Workers*. Let me introduce you to this.

*

The program was started more than 30 years ago by Tom Walz, a social work academic and disability advocate, and is the only course in the English-speaking world. I spoke with Ellen Szabo who has been running the summer workshop since 1999 (personal communication, 14 July 2023), having been asked to continue the program by Walz himself as he moved on to other projects.

Tom loved creative writing, Ellen told me, and saw it as a way to promote social justice to a wider audience. He felt that by creating characters people would care about reading, they would then identify and connect with social justice issues. He felt this was also a way to effect social change, was a way social workers could communicate ideas and seek to change the minds of those who wouldn't otherwise pick up an academic work. It was a case of providing a type of entertainment that could introduce social justice as a method to seek change in society.

How do you deliver the course?

The course has two main focuses: Personal transformation and social justice, but they are intertwined over the four days. The first element draws on narrative theory, the deconstructing of personal stories, journaling and memoir and research that shows how creative writing can improve mental and physical wellbeing.

What is that research?

I refer to the work of James Pennebaker.

[Pennebaker, a social psychologist, asked participants in an experimental setting to write about their emotional experiences for between 15 to 30 minutes per day for

²⁴ Also described as social fiction or performative social science and an element of arts-based research. Leavy argues that: 'Combining the tenets of qualitative research and fiction uniquely allows us to create believable virtual worlds into which we may insert a theoretical, philosophical, or socially minded substructure', p.40.

several days running. He concluded that ‘...writing or talking about emotional experiences, relative to writing about superficial control topics, has been found to be associated with significant drops in physician visits from before to after writing among relatively healthy samples ... Behavioral changes have also been found. Students who write about emotional topics show improvements in grades in the months following the study. Senior professionals who have been laid off from their jobs get new jobs more quickly after writing. Consistent with the direct health measures, university staff members who write about emotional topics are subsequently absent from their work at lower rates than control participants’ (1997, p. 132). Pennebaker’s studies commenced in 1986, since when it is reported that there have been an additional 200 research articles that have confirmed the benefits of writing for both physical and mental wellbeing²⁵. One of these looked at the benefit of using expressive writing among teachers and full-time workers in the UK to lessen the chance for burnout and promote wellbeing (Round et al, 2022). The researchers asked the cohort to write for 20 minutes either about positive experiences or neutral ones, such as what plans they had for the day or what shoes they might be wearing, and concluded that for full-time workers ‘...positive expressive writing is a useful technique for reducing acute feelings of anxiety’ (p.10).]

You have described the first part of the program, what about the second on creative writing itself?

I offer students the basic tools such as character development, structure, dialogue, as well as introducing them to the different genres. We do a lot of free writing and workshop it among the participants. I ask them to consider fiction as a way to take control of a story that becomes metaphor and can liberate us from trauma.

And how many students do you take?

We now cap the course at 12 and have also started a two-day masterclass which is limited to six.

What feedback do you get?

²⁵ See for example, <https://hbr.org/2021/07/writing-can-help-us-heal-from-trauma>

Well, this is all anecdotal of course, there hasn't been any 'research' done, but typical responses are that they feel better from taking the course.

That would support what Pennebaker and others have stated.

[As a sidebar to this, the University of Iowa's Carver College of Medicine runs a writing and humanities program that 'focuses on the humanistic and artistic dimensions of medical education and practice by taking a critical, transdisciplinary approach to the humanities and arts in the context of medical school'. Accessed through

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/opportunities-growth/writing-and-humanities-program>]

*

I suggest my student reflects on what we have discussed and offer to continue the discussion at a later date. In the meantime, the reader is directed to the archive and consideration of its place in the thesis.

EXEGESIS: DIARY AND EPISODES

As for things passed, when euer true stories are related, they bee then drawne out of our memory: not (I meane) the things themselues which are gone and past, but such words as being conceiued by the images of those things; they, in their passing throw our Sences, haue, as their owne footesteps, left imprinted in our minds. For example, Mine owne Childhood, which at this instant is not, yet in the time past is; which time at this instant is not: but as for the image of it, when I call that to minde, and tell of it; I doe euen in the Present behold it: and that, because it is still in my memory.

(Augustine, 1631.)

In our youth it is only the histories we write ourselves that seem to us to be just and true. As we grow old ourselves, however, our youthful certainties begin to fail us, just as our bodies do, and we see at last that we have been wrong to have believed as we have believed and that truth has no permanence but is a shifting thing.

(Miller, 2007, p. 25 paperback edition 2008.)

In this enterprise, this re-searching of my journals, which forms one of the braids of the wider thesis, I keep company with writers such as Roland Barthes. In his *Deliberation*, his last published piece, he wonders aloud as to the stricture of keeping a journal: 'Should I keep a Journal with a view to publication?' (2000, p. 480). He wrestles with this problem over the succeeding pages, agonising on how a journal is a form of mania, the journal-ist a 'comedian'. He continues to write when it might have been prudent to have desisted, knots himself in tangles, losing sight of the true essence of a journal, which in my interpretation is nothing less than a capture of moments²⁶.

In contrast, there is the anthropologist Michael Taussig, who writes: 'A diary is not an inert entity. It is a slumbering repository awaiting the lightning glance of its rereading, like the hibernating bear that one fine day in spring will awake with a start to a faster and larger rhythm of life' (2011, p. 50).

Which word, rhythm, points directly back to Barthes who, referencing the journal of Kafka ('...perhaps the only one that can be read without irritation...'), observes that it follows the rises and falls evident in life (ibid, p. 495).

²⁶ This echoes Nin, who writes of '...the living moment was caught' in her notebooks and diaries. Nin, A. (1969). *The Novel of the Future*. Owen. p.145.

Taussig continues (and to be precise he is referring throughout to the journal ethnographers keep during their field research) with an elaboration on time: the diary has its place in a certain time and when one comes to re-read it is another. He also indicates a difference between notebook (or journal) and diary: ‘...the provisional receptacle of inspired randomness, and ...that more or less steady confidante of the daily round’ (ibid, p.117). Which is apposite as I manifested the same in March 1976:

This notepad is to be used as an accumulative dictionary. In it I shall drop comments by people that have interested me, casual scenes which have been witnessed, witty or unfamiliar phrases which caught the quick of my imagination. It shall take the place of those tatty pieces of paper which seemed to litter my desk and hopefully, once the habit has been taken, it will become an invaluable source for either reference or reading. Like the painter has his notebook in which he sketches landscapes, trees, cloud formation, faces or any manner of object, I have this ‘writer’s notebook’... It is to make permanent what would otherwise be lost.

A diary, or journal (I will use the terms interchangeably throughout), is not edited and refined, neither sieved nor swept clean. It captures moments like a net captures butterflies that seek to evade capture, they ‘are repositories for moments often missed in the humdrum of daily life’ (Bayley, 2016, p. xv11). Murray Bail, for instance, is an Australian author who does this in his notebooks (2005) and in his most recent publication *He* (2021) offers this example: ‘The piano tuner who came to the house carrying a small bag as if impersonating the local doctor. Above the piano a framed print of Ruben’s painting of a boy with his hand around a white rabbit...The locust plague, Adelaide. Grasshoppers? They were large and settled on clothes, faces and hair, on all the leaves and on the streets, where they were squashed under the wheels of bikes and cars. Sometime between 1950 and 1952’ (p 10-11). Yet once caught, admired, inspected, the butterfly is released, or in times gone by, maybe still (I am not a lepidopterist), pinned to a board. So these words are released from their resting place for you to read from my 1976 journal:

A baby walking, hands in surrender – like a drunken man. Then falls. Parents watch laughing.

Or:

Market place in Windsor – there we have life! The old salesman bartering with his customers: four for one pound, who wants it? Come on sir. Okay you have it at ninety. Yes? Good. Stalls for vegetables, stalls for wet fish, stalls for odds and ends and a flag of shirts flying briskly in the air.

But for all his quibbles, Barthes knew this too. His writing was dedicated to the fragment, which he compared to a song cycle, referencing Schumann who ‘...best understood and practiced the aesthetic of the fragment’ (1977, p. 94). Though within a page he again torments himself about moving from writing bits and pieces to producing a ‘journal’ in the style of Gide.

Let us leave Barthes with his agonies and turn instead to Joan Didion, another writer from another continent, who quite simply states that a notebook allows us to ‘...keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not’ (2008, p. 139). One such was Susan Sontag. *Reborn* (2008) was published way after her death (and edited by her son) and lists her (voracious) reading and worries about growing older when she was just 16: ‘A good beginning. Could be better: more erudition, definitely, but it’s unreasonable to expect much more emotional maturity than I have at this point...Everything is in my favor, my early emancipation, my...’ (p. 51)²⁷.

I go along with Didion’s nodding acquaintanceship and, furthermore, assert that through the physical/objective existence of my written archives from 1973 on that make up a section (or braid) of this thesis, I telescope time, presenting the thoughts of, for instance, a 17-year-old in 1974 to bring that individual, that me, into re-existence nearly half-a-century later. It is a way to travel time without need for a *Tardis*. It’s mental time travel, as neuropsychologists will have it, who trace the concept back to St Augustine (Manning et al., 2013)²⁸.

But mental time travel is exhausting. As Taussig observes: ‘Truly writing is a complicated business – this is what diary writing reveals – but not nearly as complex as reading, especially rereading what one has written about one’s recent past’ (2011, p. 118). I

²⁷ Sontag surprises me by noting among her readings, this when she’s 17, Barbellion’s *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*, about the time I also came across this book (2008, p.64).

²⁸ I might also point to the work by Habermas and Black who argue that putting a coherent life story together begins in adolescence Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a Life: The Emergence of the Life Story in Adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5), 748-769. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.5.748> .

feel I am caught in an ongoing loop, or curve (Bochner, 2000, p. 270) like I am circulating within and without, then/now. For instance, I sit at my desk reading words/memories written when I was a young man, seeking to extrapolate some sort of knowing, some sort of understanding of who I am now as I work through an autoethnographic experiment I call [novel] autoethnography. As Olney puts it: ‘...the text is never fixed or single: it is ever rewoven, constantly renewed or reconstructed, constantly evolving, a story and a work in progress’ (1998, p. 344)²⁹. Serres draws an analogy with a crumpled handkerchief, and writes: ‘An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats’ (Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 60).

Reading the diary of 1973, I am re-minded of that year so vividly that I have an instantaneous connection between now as I write these words and then. All the years between are, as yet, blanked out. Think of a hurdle jumper: The gun is fired, I start, jump the hurdles and breast the tape. All I remember is the start and the finish. Philosophers debate the meaning of time, whether it is or is not linear. I would rather think of the trajectory between 1973 to now as circular and as ebbing and flowing. The novelist Alex Miller puts it, in his characteristic spare style: ‘Life, the span of my life I mean, has come to seem to me to be the brief inscription of a circle, the two ends of which are soon to meet, intimate and known to each other all along’ (2007, p. 119 from paperback edition 2008).

Another way of thinking about this is through the concept of resonance, suggested by a trio of UK sociologists associated with the University of Manchester’s Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives (Tinkler, P., Fenton, L., & Cruz, R., 2022). The authors define resonance as ‘...the relationship between youth and later life and reflecting on its significance. Resonance is how a person’s “youth” is *lived with* in the present of their later life...It shifts attention from linear and causal accounts of this relationship, even if linearity is often key to how people perceive this’ (italics in original, *ibid*, p. 2). So while in some respects I am physically different from my younger self (stamina, strength etc) I remain intellectually and psychologically connected to those persons who wrote the diaries and episodes, since: ‘Whichever way traces of the past emerge in a person’s later life, they are inextricably bound up with their present; they are not self-contained residues of the past, hermetically sealed, and separate from current life’ (*ibid*, p.4).

²⁹ Olney notes that the Latin verb *texere* means ‘to weave’.

This is put another way by Randall who refers to ‘autobiographical time’ and writes: ‘We view and interpret the past through the lens of our situation in the present and in the light of whatever future(s) we anticipate. And vice versa: We look to the future through the lens of the present by the light of the past as we have interpreted it to date’ (2014, p.364). How we do this is through narrative by constructing a ‘narrative identity’ as described by McAdams and McLean as a way ‘...people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future’ (2013, p. 233).

My narrative identity is through these diaries and episodes and, while such physical artefacts have been described as capturing fleeting moments, I had a sense mine would be archived. They were not accidental³⁰ and I purposefully wrote in a way that was literary in style and intent. Not only was I practising my writing (notebooks are a way of limbering up, finding a rhythm, outlining plots and so on) but was doing it with the clear sense that one day they would be artefacts³¹ providing written evidence to an older me, if you like, rather than having to draw on unreliable cognitive memory.

*

Sartre wrote: ‘I chose for a future the past of a famous dead man, and I tried to live backwards’ (1967, p. 125).

Though I am not a famous person, nor ever will be, in the accepted norms of our time, what I can offer is an autoethnography that is not just ‘...a sequence of events over time, structured comprehensibly in terms of cultural canonicity ... (but) something that endows it with *exceptionality*’ (Bruner in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 29). These are what I call ‘episodes’, extended fictional pieces written in the third person in 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1982, as ‘the anticipated parts of an autobiographical work to be published...late in my life’ (personal archive, 25 June 1977). They are slotted in at the appropriate years following the heavily-edited diary entries, and serve as what Bruner terms ‘turning points’, a ‘crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought’ (ibid,

³⁰ This accident of archives recovered in later life is documented by Lynch, C. (2013). Ante-Autobiography and the Archive of Childhood. *Prose studies*, 35(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2013.781414> .

³¹ As additional ‘evidence’, if you like, in 1973 I also wrote a series of what I called *Futoletters*, addressed: *To whom ever it may concern*. The first of these can be read in Appendix B.

p.31)³². Through these pieces, especially the first two, I am, as McAdams puts it, ‘...consciously and unconsciously working through an *ideological setting* for the lifestory. An ideological setting is the backdrop of fundamental belief and value that situates the story within a particular ethical and religious location’ (italics in original, 1996, p. 140).

What also interests me is that slicing through these calendar years, set like mountain ranges, block after dark block of seemingly impregnable stone, are what we all of us note as defining personal years – 16, 18, 21. Only later do we slip into another decadology, memorialising those years with a zero – 30, 40, 50 and so on. This goes back to Erikson, who speaks of the formation of one’s identity, noting that it is a ‘...lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society’ (1959, p. 113).

To take up a proposal suggested by Jones, in her critique of Ricoeur, who argued that we cannot be authors of our lifestory, I maintain an alternate view: that I was consciously ‘plotting’ my life from the age of 16: ‘...seeing oneself as an author thus takes one directly from the question “Who am I?” to that of “How should I live?”’ (2010, p. 62). An ethical question, and one that sinks deep into my practice now as a social worker. However, that my life narrative did not follow the plot I foresaw ‘back then’ returns us to Jones, who writes that: ‘As an author of my life, when I imagine a future event that I should like to bring about, then the ontological status of that event is, we might say, “fictional”. But if I am unsuccessful in realising the event despite my best efforts, then the event is not *false*...Plotted events which do not eventually occur are simply *unactualized*: we might compile a whole archive of such unactualized stories, an archive that, through memory, may be accessed at various points in future life when we reflect on “the way things might have been”’ (ibid, p.62).

On this proposition rests my case.

A note on methodology

I am both the person who created the archive and its archivist. This raises questions of transparency and, its alter ego, censorship. The diary records, in particular, are trimmed and edited to focus on my intellectual and creative development, rather than cast light on the

³² Also note work by McLean and Pasupathi, who write of ‘autobiographical reasoning’ when people seek to make sense later in life of events that shaped their future: McLean, K. C., & Pasupathi, M. (2012). Processes of Identity Development: Where I Am and How I Got There. *Identity*, 12(1), 8-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2011.632363>

cultural and historical events taking place around me, the relational record³³. After all, not everything one writes should necessarily be archived – a pressing problem for the digital archive. What I consider to be of interest in these entries might, quite naturally, be taken another way, many other ways, by another scholar approaching the archive from a dispassionate point of view, without a hint of Derrida's fever (1995). That may well be another study in the future, by another person in another time; and it is my intent to make this archive accessible to future cultural historians who may glean some extra worth from the content that is invisible to me. In the meantime, and for the purpose of this thesis, I must limit my compass, take on board and work within the constraints in which I research and write.

³³ Appendix A contains a selection of entries edited out that refer to the social and cultural records of 1973 and 1974.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1973 & 1974

In the 1970s it was the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons that ultimately led to détente. In the 21st century we face the existential challenge of the Anthropocene...It is not a matter, as in the 1970s, of defusing a nuclear stand-off or, as before 1914, a geo-economic rivalry....While we must do both these things, the novel challenge we face now is how to disarm economic growth as a planetary threat.

(Tooze, 2020, p. 13.).

PROLOGUE TO 1973

Let's go backwards. Backwards in time, all the way back to the beginning. Back to a country that neither of us would recognise, probably. Britain, 1973...A world that had never heard of Princess Diana or Tony Blair, never thought for a moment of going to war in Kosovo or Afghanistan... Sometimes people even had to do without electricity. Imagine!

(Coe, 2007, pp. 3-4.).

At 16 I believed I should have lived in a different era. I was, in many ways I still am, a displaced person, a refugee, a maverick.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1973

Feb 16: Listen to a radio programme entitled: in search of a creator. I listened to that programme and was ready to be convinced that my views were wrong. I was not convinced by any of the views put forward and as a result I just fail to believe that something of a higher order created us. NO. THERE IS NO GOD.

April 2: We cannot have the world run by 60-year-old men who are still living in the past. They just do not seem to have grasped the problems the world is faced with, and I don't mean political questions. Politicians could spend hours debating the annexation of some obscure province in the Far East but when it comes to ecological questions they turn a blind eye. Complacency or is it ignorance?

June 26: This evening we had a very bad storm. Nothing unusual in that, or is there? Are we heading for a climatic flip? ...A climatic flip, it's got to come by natural events anyway, will be speeded up by man. Is it too late to do something? Of course not. Isn't it about time man took some time off from work, sat down by the fireside, and began thinking?

28 August: ...I feel that my future lies in the sphere of LAW...But why do I want to go into this form of employment? It is exceptional hard work to qualify and even when one has qualified it is difficult to set up one's own law business. I want to because I feel that I will be doing a service to the country and even improve the lot of the people. Further, I could enter Westminster as an MP, which is my real ambition...Law is where I am heading.

December 3: Petrol rationing has, or at least the coupons necessary for petrol rationing, have been introduced. Will people now take heed of what we have to say and will Parliament surge forward in a torrent of measures designed to combat pollution, rising population and begin to establish nuclear fuel stations. I fear not. I was disgruntled when I heard two women talking the other day. This is what they had to say: Woman A: "What do you think of this crisis then?" Woman B: "A load of nonsense. It'll all blow over by the spring. These things always happen in the winter." They just aren't interested, and the plain fact of the matter is that you can't make people interested. What I think has happened is that the impending end of the world by population explosion has been overexposed. People no longer want to hear "bad news" they just aren't interested - they've heard it all before.

30 December:



PROLOGUE TO 1974

A transformative year. I'm 17 and moving away from being a lawyer to being a writer, from studying law at university to studying, or doing, writing. The tone of the diary shifts. I hear the debate being played out in my mind as I writ, and as the year closes I assert I have been going through a 'reflective cycle' that is 'typical of most teenagers of my age but I wonder if it affected them to the extent that it did me' [26 December].

I start to analyse what it means to be an artist: 'The fundamental aim of the creative artist, be he a poet, a musician, painter or novelist is to convey to the future contemporary fears, aspirations and doubts. To do this successfully the artist must be fully away of his environment and his people. His experience of life needs to be large and capacious but he must be emotionally and personally in touch with events and people' [28 November].

I also ask myself: '...why do I keep a diary because I really do not lead an exceptionally colourful life'. I provide one answer: '...through my writing I am disclosing my personality and my character. I write because I want to write and I like to write' [14 May]. In that same entry I conclude: 'I want this diary to survive me and to [be] a work of some significance'.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1974

March 25: It is a middle-class world.

August 2: Many labels will be applied to this age, the most usual one I should imagine being the ATOMIC AGE. But does that really sum up the type of environment that we live in today? I would think not. Surely a better title would be The Age of Automation, The Age of the Car/Machine, the Age of Speed, the Age of Pollution and Population strain. But put these all under one broad heading please - The AGE OF DECADENCE.

[On August 28 I leave for France, with a schoolfriend, taking the train from Victoria Station, London, to Clermont-Ferrand. It is my first time abroad and I write: *I am really looking forward to it make no mistake. We are to savour an entirely different culture from what I*

have known for the past 17 years. The flowers etc will be different, the food will be different. The people will be different. It is a very Catholic area that we are visiting. There will be churches in most villages that we pass. The 'adventure' was scheduled to last two weeks, but ended after about 10 days. I have no record of the trip.]

Sept 17: I honestly feel different from when I went [to France]. I don't feel depressive now and I feel more aware of my surroundings and people. I can now understand people more fully and am sorting things out. A philosophical stage in my development this but a very important one. This will decide my life - how I am to run my life.

Oct 16: Coming home...the night was young but seemed undecided as to what course to take. It was dark, yes very dark; a slight mist had settled and it was damp. The trees shimmered in the light of a street lamp and one could distinctly hear the dew or whatever it was, the sheer dampness, falling from the trees on to the ground beneath. There was little sound, it was little quiet. One could sense a something sinister in the blackness and it was not the devil! It was frozen and unadulterated.

Oct 26: I am...more Utopian than Realist.

Nov 15: ...I have been living in a delusion these past two or possibly three years; no best to make it two - ever since I began to write my pieces of petty poetry. I was convinced that I was something different - I mean that I was going to write such words that would stun the world...Today I must realise that I am merely a mortal playing at being a mortal...This is not a turning point but a re-evaluation.

Nov 18: How slowly and [indecipherable] history skips and spins; what I do not know is fact for you but what you will never know is fact to me.

Dec 5: Just supposing you were embarking on a novel which was to revolve around just one small, seemingly, insignificant event in a single day. The detail behind that event would be sufficient to fill 100 pages. Then take one full 20 hour day. The number of events that fill that must, I would consider, amount to several hundred. There you have the base for this

novel. But this novel must combine Britain as it stands now. It will be, if you like, a fully illustrated guide of contemporary Britain, describing in detail everyday events and happenings which we all regrettably take for granted. Take, for example, going to the toilet or cleaning one's teeth. But then go out to work. To write this novel one must have an immense knowledge...no knowledge is the wrong word. No you must have an understanding, and awareness of the world in which you live; and that world would be a middle class world. Write therefore a trilogy of working class middle class and upper class life or combine all three into one. A book to start now and to finish eighty years hence.

Dec 17: Literature must open your mind both vertically and horizontally. That is its main function. Literary criticism is positive in that criticism of a work can lead to a profounder evaluation of its significance.

Dec 22: I do not know who will read this in several years' time. No doubt I will re-read its pages for interest. By then events so clear now will have faded... I hope it will show the development of an adolescent, romantic adolescent, into a man.

Dec 26: ...I am what I am because what else can I be.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 2

ON AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

*The methods of autoethnographic life writing proceed from the corrective premise that a self is not a given, but always a contested becoming, relationally situated
(Douglas, S.A in Douglas & Barnwell, 2019, p. 100).*

I want to demonstrate my passion for autoethnography through a story or a conversation that shows multiple voices and positions. I want people to feel the story in their guts, not just know the 'facts' in their heads (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435).

I had never heard of autoethnography until 2018.

I can recollect the day exactly: 19 February. Even the time: 5.30pm. The meeting is in Building W, level X, room Y of University Z and I am there to pitch a proposal for a research degree partly based on a fictional account of a teenager, his mum and a statutory child protection social worker. As I outline my idea, one of the academics says: Oh, that sounds like autoethnography. That night I Google the word³⁴, come across some articles and begin what has now led you to this page.

I don't make further progress with University Z, but two-and-a-half years later find my way to a university I have never visited and supervisors I know only from virtual images on my computer screen. Reality is contained within a rectangle 280mm by 180mm³⁵.

What is this methodology that is called autoethnography and why have I chosen it, or it me³⁶? As with any intellectual activity, autoethnography is many things to many people and much depends on claims made by those who write and those who write about the work (Ellis and Bochner in Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 214). As a starting point autoethnography may be described as a method of qualitative research that puts the researcher/author at the centre of the study, articulating a point of view that is both personal and declarative. The word is a mash-up of the Greek *auto* (self), *ethno* (culture), and *graphy* (represent), or, as

³⁴ Entering 'autoethnography' into the search engine delivers 3.25m results, the first being a definition by the American Psychological Association: 'Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources...'

³⁵ Distance is one impediment: a pandemic another. This paragraph was written in mid-2020 when the world was hostage to Covid-19.

³⁶ One of the most well-known academic autoethnographers, Carolyn Ellis, writes '...autoethnography was a calling... indicating almost something supernatural going on.' Kafar, M., & Ellis, C. (2014). Autoethnography, Storytelling, and Life as Lived: A conversation between Marcin Kafar and Carolyn Ellis. *Prezegląd Socjologii Jakosciowej*, 10(3), 124-143. This is echoed by Bochner who goes as far as to remark that 'In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as it is a way of life'. Bochner, A. P. (2017). Heart of the Matter: A Mini-Manifesto for Autoethnography. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 67-80. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2017.10.1.67>

Ellis, Adams and Bochner write: 'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)' (2011, p. 3). Elsewhere, Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, suggest the *auto* '...foregrounds the *author's* personal experience and reflections...', the *ethno* is when the writer describes and critiques cultural beliefs, values, practices and identities, and use *graphy* or writing to '...offer compelling and insightful accounts of personal/cultural experience...Effective autoethnography is concerned with the craft of the representation, seeking to tell a carefully written, vibrant story that revels in rich description' (2021, p. 3-4).

But most importantly: '...the researcher/s and the researched are the same people' (Short et al., 2013). Freeman draws this all together rather neatly by stating '...autoethnography is ethnographical in its methodological focus, cultural in its interpretative focus, and autobiographical in its content focus' (2015a, p. 84). Autoethnography concentrates on the cultural relativity of the writer both as researcher and as the research, incorporating a data set (or archive in my case) from their own experiences (Barton, 2011, p. 437). In this way, an analogy – a rather simplistic one to be sure - may be drawn using the devices of telescope and microscope, oscillating between far distance and close inspection³⁷, between ourselves as individuals living within society and culture, interacting as agents of change as well as being changed by forces external to ourselves. Ellis goes further and suggests 'autoethnographer's tend to privilege the position of the self, so that the self has a significant role whether as a researcher interacting with other people or as a person whose life is the focus' (Gariglio, 2018, p. 566). However, as Muncey claims in response to critics: 'Autoethnography celebrates rather than demonises the individual story' (2005, p. 7).

Autoethnography, then, goes deep into this story rather than taking a surface impression or, as put by Geertz, in the context of ethnography, offers a 'thick description' of people within their cultures (1973, p. 312)³⁸. Geertz summarises the nature of ethnography

³⁷ Ellis writes of the 'ethnographic wide angle lens...then, they look inward...As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition' Ellis, C. (2004, p. 37). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

³⁸ Geertz acknowledges his debt for 'thick description' to the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle.

as: ‘...like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalised graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour’ (ibid, p. 314). (A decade later he took this further in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988).)

Edmund Leach, another social anthropologist, a few years later followed this up (and invoked the term again) by suggesting ethnography has ‘... ceased to be an inventory of custom, it has become the art of thick description³⁹; the intricate interweaving of plot and counterplot as in the work of a major novelist’ (1976, p. 1). A contemporary of his, Raymond Firth, writing in 1967 about Malinowski, even seems to have prefigured autoethnography when he writes: ‘The modern vogue for “reflexive anthropology” may sometimes seem to turn ethnography into autobiography. But there is a much clearer recognition nowadays that the position of an ethnographer is not simply that of a recorder of the life of a society, but is also that of someone who both affects that life and is affected by it’ (preface to 1967, p. xxviii).

Writing like a novelist or storyteller (the *homo narrans* as in Poulos, 2008, p. 127) has indeed become part and parcel of some autoethnography, as with Ellis who asserts autoethnography is a combination of ‘thinking like an ethnographer, writing like a novelist’ (2004, p. 330); or, in a later interview, ‘my goal is to privilege the story as a way of understanding social life...the ways we present our autoethnography is usually through stories that have literary qualities...I really mean personal stories’ (Gariglio, 2018, pp. 566, 569). As in a novel, therefore, autoethnography introduces the emotional, the hustle-bustle, the chaotic and unstructured part of our lives.

But what about autobiography: where is the difference?

Academics from what is now more commonly described as life writing or life narrative (for example, Roth, 2005; Smith & Watson, 2010) bracket autoethnography with other sub-genres classed as self-referential modes (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 2) that can be packaged together with memoir, or peel over into autofiction (Herbrechter, 2012, p. 335). For academics situated within this discourse, autoethnography is described as ‘hybrid’

³⁹ ‘Thick description’ is now out of fashion among postmodernists who prefer seeing writing as a ‘field of play in which we are always unprepared to make meaning’. St. Pierre, E. (2007). Writing as Method in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*. John Wiley & Sons.

(Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 157) with note made of its genesis in the 1980s when the post-colonial tradition of what may be called classical ethnography was being challenged (ibid, p. 259)⁴⁰.

For an autoethnographer such as Freeman, however, the distinction is manifest: ‘...autoethnography is generally thought of as a means of shedding light on society through one’s involved participation and is not about using that society as an opportunity to write primarily about oneself’ (2015a, p. 69).

For those rooted in the methodology, including its most ardent champions or progenitors, many concede that autoethnography is a constituent of ‘blurred genres’ (Geertz, 1980), which include native ethnography, self-ethnography, memoir, autobiography and fiction (Ellis and Bochner in Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 214). Others, such as Mendez (2013, p. 280), situate this blurring very much in that 1980s when qualitative research itself was opening into new domains⁴¹. Most importantly, autoethnography is political, which is to say those who write and publish seek to raise issues within society that demand the transformation of existing social and economic structures.

In a nutshell, autoethnography is, and is seen as by many writing in the field, as a ‘genre of dissent’ (Adams et al., 2021, p. 13). Put even more directly by Holman-Jones ‘the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world’ (2013, p. 765). As a social worker dedicated to social justice and standing by, and with, those who are disempowered, I also seek change and transform. From my perspective as a practitioner, this is currently done through day-to-day work, less so within the institution of academia and publication in specialist journals. (I return to this theme in Scene 4⁴².)

Yet right from the start of my enquiry into autoethnography in the first months of 2018 I was exploring how to combine creative writing with this methodology. I started to write pieces called ‘Journey into Autoethnography’ and one entry remarks on this quest:

⁴⁰ Two points here. Firstly, bear in mind that autobiography/life writing is a specific Western or even more limited Eurocentric form of self-meditation, with Orhan Pamuk, for instance, describing how writing privately, as in a diary, is uncommon in Islamic culture - Pamuk, O. (2004). A private reading of André Gide's public journal. *Social Research*, 71(3), p. 679-690. Secondly, the genesis of autoethnography as a standalone discipline is as moveable as Easter, with other commentators pushing origins back into the 1970s - Adams, T. E. (2015). *Autoethnography*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴¹ Mendez is here borrowing from *The Seven Moments of Qualitative Research* in Lincoln, Y. S., & Denzin, N. K. (2003), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage. Also see Denzin's *The Qualitative Manifesto: A Call to Arms* (2010b), where he adds an Eighth Moment in his chronological sequencing that ‘confronts the methodological backlash associated with the evidence-based social movement’ (p. 13).

⁴² My interest in politics started when I was 16 and may be observed in diary entries I wrote in 1973 and 1974, some of which are captured in Appendix A.

Seeking to define autoethnography from my perspective/self must be part of the initial inquiry I undertake. I also have to work out how this method dovetails with the fiction I will write and which, as I see it, will act as a thread that winds its way through the narrative. I need to define that precisely too... How I got from there to here is very much at the heart of what all this is about: some guilt at not having achieved earlier academic success, perhaps even a need for late recognition, paths not taken to misquote Robert Frost. All this has been layering my mind for years, now comes the opportunity for expression and analysis as I seek to join the dots of this medley. If this sounds too self-satisfying, too selfish then so be it. Research is bit like that I've discovered so far in my readings. There's a lot about ego.

*

A [very] short history of autoethnography

When did autoethnography come about? my student asks.

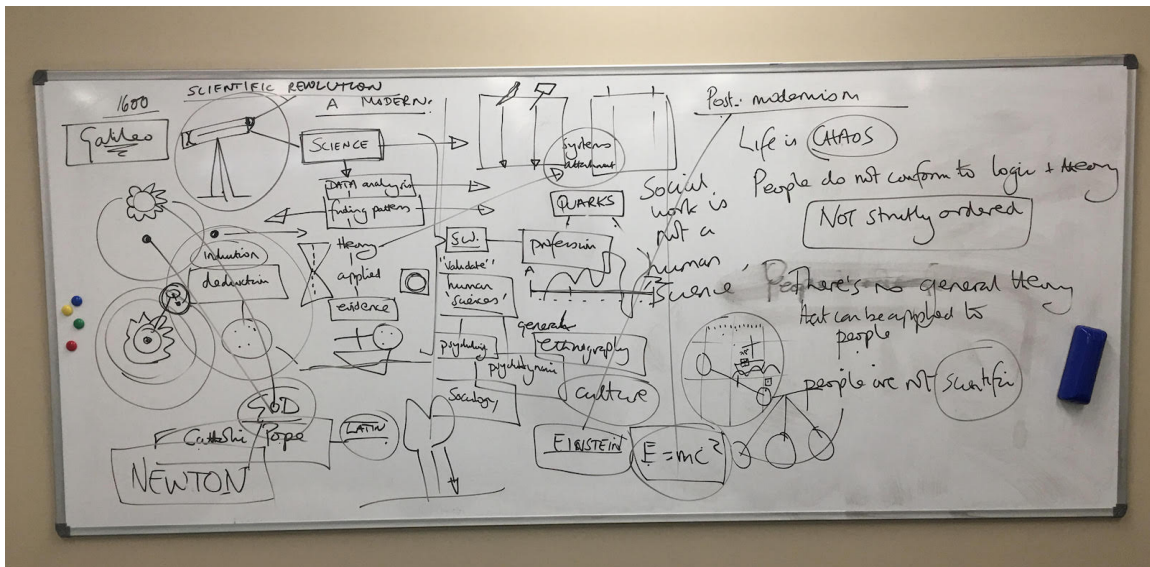
Its first recorded, published use was in the late 1970s but it wasn't until the following decade that scholars in the United States first began to grapple with the idea of participant observation and using their own voice in scholarly articles, which was pretty well unheard of and frowned upon by the gatekeepers to those revered journals. To give you this overview, by the way, I am drawing on two main sources: Susanne Gannon (2017) and Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2016), the latter being two of the most prolific authors in the academic discipline, both still associated with the Department of Communications at the University of South Florida where they taught for many years.

And Susanne?

She's a professor of education at Western Sydney University.

None of them come from ethnography then?

No they did not. It demonstrates the inter-disciplinary nature of the subject, something which was happening around the 1980s as academics from different disciplines began to share knowledge and the siloed nature of research broke apart. This was a decade that saw the rise of a postmodern perspective, one that eschewed the centuries old assumption of an objective truth that goes back to the Reformation. I am a visual person so let me draw this out for you on the whiteboard.



Within the field of autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis were taking the lead and demonstrating, literally through performances at conferences, that ‘...We simply were acknowledging that researchers live in the world too.... We believe these experiences are worthy of observation, examination, and reflection. We also believe that these experiences strongly influence our perceptions and interpretations of other people’s lives’ (2016, p. 50). In addition, and this is an important point in the context of my own research, they identified that to write about experiences they had to be ‘storytellers’. This bit is worth quoting at some length since it crystallises what I consider to be a fundamental undertaking of autoethnography, one to which I, in any case, wholeheartedly subscribe: ‘As social scientists, we have learned how to be systematic, methodical, and analytic. Our expertise places us in an ideal position to bring to light the meanings of emotionally draining, difficult, and demanding epiphanies on which human lives turn, including our own as researchers. Our project emphasized and underscored subjectivity, self-reflexivity, emotionality, and the goal of connecting social sciences to humanities through first-person, ethnographic storytelling. As you will see, we placed storytelling at the center of our project, which meant that some of the conventions of academic reporting would have to change. We wanted readers of our stories to be forced to deal with the concrete - particular people in particular places facing particular, often traumatic, circumstances of lived experience... We planned to speak to these readers in an intimate, introspective, and self-reflexive storytelling voice. Our project would be a theatre for investigating some of the most serious questions of existence as a living being, and promoting social justice as a societal imperative’ (ibid, p. 50-51).

Yes, I hear some of those words echoed in what you have been talking about, and especially of revealing the stories of people and using the first-person.

I know. There's also mention of 'social justice as a societal imperative' that speaks directly to us as social workers. When I first read that book chapter early on in my research, probably sometime in 2018, you can imagine how it inspired me. It revealed how I – there we go again - could develop this within the domain of the practice I was now working in, statutory child protection social work, but also how my previous life experiences, my social and cultural background, my personal story, and my passion for creative writing and fiction, or storytelling, could all be rolled into one. Somehow, as I didn't have a blueprint about how I was going to achieve this within the template of a thesis! While my background was not in social science, I did have a grounding in some of those methods, having studied sociology at high school and taken a bachelor's degree in archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge, which was then dominated by academics who were pushing out the boundaries of the subject to include ethnography and social analysis, what was then called rather charmingly the 'New Archaeology'⁴³. I immediately felt at home within autoethnography, as I still do not within academia. But to return to the history ...

You can't get away with it as easy as that.

What do you mean?

Not feeling comfortable within academia, like an outsider as we've spoken about before. Right. I think this is a feeling, a personality trait if you like, I have had throughout my life. I never felt comfortable at Cambridge – for one I was older than other undergraduates being a 'mature student' at 28 – and I did not feel comfortable when I was working as a journalist at the *Financial Times* of London. So I have had this hanging over me for decades, the classic impostor syndrome. When I commenced this research project I would have a recurring dream, or nightmare, in which I could visualise myself standing at the so-called doors of the Academy. I'm waiting to be entered. I'm nervous. It's this process that will decide if I can be admitted to the Academy. I need to speak the right speak, to articulate the nuances. They, the Academicians, hold authority over me. Must I speak their language? Or can I speak mine? All I am seeking is to ... tell it as it is. All I'm seeking to do is write a story that someone may read and think, *OK there was something in there*. That's when I wake up! Anyhow, now I am able to articulate that disjunction and find a voice for myself as well. Writing this thesis has been therapeutic in many ways and

⁴³ I was at Cambridge between 1983 to 1986, and taught by, among others, Colin Renfrew and Ian Hodder, the latter now at Stanford, whose recent writing discusses the 'entanglement' between humans and things, much in the manner of post-humanistic references to human and non-human agents.

referring back to that Bochner and Ellis chapter once again, and giving it a slight rephrase, ‘...[people expressed to us] their exhilaration about telling the stories that haunted them’ (ibid, p. 53). Does that answer your question?

It will do for now.

Just to finish off the history bit then. We have reached the new millennium and in 2000 out came the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, which is now in its fifth edition (2017). This contained a chapter on autoethnography by none other than Bochner and Ellis, one to which Gannon states ‘...is by far the most cited resource on autoethnography’ and abandoned ‘any pretence to objectivity in design, method, and voice’. Furthermore, she identifies that: ‘The writing strategies adopted moved beyond naïve reflexivity towards active and imaginative recreation of experience...it draws on literary and narrative techniques positioning the authors as characters in a short story ... with elaborated settings, dialogue, plot structures ... [that] reinforces how autoethnography values and deploys a literary, aesthetic, and affective mode of writing to construct “moment-to-moment” and “concrete” scenes from the world’ (no page ref as electronic material).

Can you illustrate that to me again as I’m still getting my head around all this.

Sure. I have written what follows as a piece of fiction. Let me read it to you.

My colleague’s name is Eve. Like Adam, she says to newbies, except there’s no apple. I ask if she has time to come out with me.

Twelve year old boy playing up at school, I say. Hit another kid a year or two older. Stuff going on at home. DV. The usual. Got to talk to mum.

There’s no usual, Eve says.

You’re right, I think, I must be getting lazy. I respect Eve. She’s grounded and got no time for bullshit, especially the bureaucratic sort. Only the other day she was going off at our manager about some new procedure we’re meant to follow that will eat up even more of our time, chain us to our desks, stop us from being out in what we call ‘the field’, like it’s sports time or something.

We arrive a little after 10. It’s a good time to pay a visit. If they’re doing OK they’ll be up and about, at least up if not doing much about. If things are not going so well or they’ve had a hard night on the booze or whatever they’re into then 10am won’t be on the radar. I’ve already got a hunch they’ll be no answer when we knock. The unit is in a residential block off one of the main arteries of the town, right under the flight path. The place looks normal enough: rows of three storey blocks, half-a-dozen units served by a central

staircase, some trees fighting for life. There's even a communal swimming pool and a play area for younger kids. But to the authorities it's a sink hole. There's more drug dealers and crack heads here, more babies with young mums and young single mums with bruises, more fights between pumped up youths with muscle power but no earning power than anywhere else in the district.

We need to be at 81 six. That's block six, unit 81. Except for some reason I head to block eight, unit 16. I press the buzzer on the entry board. A male voice, heavy with sleep comes back over the intercom

Who's that?

My name's Ed from Child Protection. Can we come up?

What you want with me fella? I isn't got no kids. Not here anyhow.

Is there someone living with you called Courtney with a son called Lukas? I persist.

What you taking fella! I told you there isn't no one here. You police or something? Cause if you are you isn't coming near me.

I look at my notepad, realise the mistake, stare at Eve who knows what's happened and indicates it's time to move on. There's music everywhere as if there's a competition on who can play the loudest, a strong smell of disinfectant, hidden eyes on us as we slide away, whispers already circulating via texts that, The Welfare are here.

I press the correct buzzer. Almost instantaneously, as if we are expected, a voice asks:

Yeah?

I recognise the voice, it's Lukas.

Hi, Lukas. This is Ed. Remember me?

The old man.

Yes. I'm not going to argue. To him I'm old, to me I'm just a bit past middle age. I need to talk with mum. Can you let us in?

She isn't here.

You alone?

Why?

You're a child Lukas.

I'm almost 13.

Can you open the door. Please?

Silence. Think of it, a kid of 12 (nearly 13) holding us at bay, negotiating with us, deciding if he will or if he won't. There's a click. I push and the door opens. We start to climb the stairs, concrete, the stairwell semi-dark, up to the third floor. Number 81. An off-white door with one of those spy holes those inside can look through. I knock. I wait. Will he or won't he.

Click.

Hello Lukas. I'm Ed and this is Eve.

Lukas has already retreated into the darkness of the room. Curtains drawn, it's cluttered but not cluttered messy, cluttered disordered, cluttered neglected like plates and food and bottles everywhere, the smell of nicotine or weed or sour beer, just too much furniture and stuff in too small a space and not a breath of fresh air. The TV is on, one of those morning shows with a group of perfectly dressed, permanently smiling or laughing City people sitting on a bright yellow sofa in a brightly lit, manicured studio (behind them carefully arranged books and magazines on shelves framing a fake window looking out on to a calm video ocean). At the other end of the room Lukas is lit by the fridge light as he takes a swig of Coke. Eve and I wait, stuck between two sofas, the cushions hidden beneath piles of papers and soft toys, the ones you get out of machines at shopping centres. It feels like we've entered a hoarder's den. Then I catch sight of a dictionary on the floor, left open like someone's been reading it.

Where's mum? I ask.

Sleeping.

Is anyone else home? asks Eve.

No.

Can you wake her please.

I'm being as gentle as I can. Though he seems calm enough at the moment there's every chance he'll change. This is his territory after all.

You going to take me away?

No Lukas. Just go and get mum. Please.

He doesn't have to. A door to our left opens a fraction.

Who's there Lukas? The tone is accusative.

Courtney, I say. I'm Ed from Child....

Before I can finish she's launched herself into the room, a hand holding a pink bathrobe together at the waist. She's not much taller than Lukas but there's this animal-like ferocity about her that I instinctively step back, pushing Eve back with me except she, having no space to step into, strikes the flat screen TV, knocking it backwards and at the same time somehow stepping on the remote so the volume rises three-fold, a cacophony of forced laughter filling the room. Later, Eve and I will laugh ourselves, but for now everything is split-second: do we leave or do we talk this through?

What you go letting them in? she yells at Lukas. Ain't I told you don't open the fucking door to no one. How do you know what they are, eh? How do you know they isn't going to snatch you? As for you creeps, you get out, do y'hear. Fucking get out of my place this second. Do you think you can just walk in here and scare the shitting daylights out of my boy? Eh?

I can feel Eve tugging at the back of my shirt as she steps to one side. We're getting out of here, now, is what she's signalling.

OK Courtney, I say. I see you're upset. How about we leave and try another time?

Say what you want asshole, there won't be another time. I've had enough of you's people sticking your filthy noses in my business. What gives you the right, what gives you the fucking right to push yourselves into my place without so much as asking? What if I come to your place, mister, and bang on the door and invite myself in and start snooping around in your cupboards and all. You'd like that would you?

I take a card from my shirt pocket and offer it forward. What am I thinking? She grabs at it, puts it in her mouth, chews then spits it out at my chest. By now we are in retreat, on the landing. I turn to Eve who's already descending. The door slams. I hear Courtney screaming at Lukas, imagine him ducking and diving as she throws those soft toys at him, as he shuts himself into his bedroom; imagine her throwing herself on a sofa, pulling out a cigarette, lighting it with a shaking hand, turning to the TV still with its immaculate laughing, joking, smiling hosts talking about some new way to lose weight that takes only a few minutes each day. I imagine all this as we walk to the Toyota and Eve says to me,

Did you see her eyes, how she was scratching herself on the arm?

No, I say, trying to sound calm but really I'm churning inside.

Ice, she says. I bet you she's using.

*

What do you think? I ask, putting down the sheets of paper from which I have been reading.

I think it's raw. I think it is intimate. I can smell the place, that stairwell, and I can identify with the fear that Ed experiences as Courtney comes close, as she chews his card and spits it back at him. I also have a vivid image of that dictionary lying on the floor, so incongruous like it doesn't belong.

Exactly. It is meant to trouble you, to make you as listener or reader connect with those life's you may never have thought about, what it may be like to be a single mother bringing up a teenager in an environment where, perhaps, and this is alluded to, 'crack' rules and dealers lurk in the shadows.

It's awful.

That *is* life. The generally unrecorded world of a social worker. The world of those who are unseen and unrecorded. That is why autoethnography is important and why what I call [novel] autoethnography is a means to that end. It can open the curtains on to what is otherwise closed off.

You write well. I don't think I could have described that as you did, with the nuances and the humour even like when they fall back on to the TV and the volume goes up. I can hear that and it is believable. It speaks to what is genuine.

Because?

Because I have never thought about describing those interactions in a fictional way. It's always been driven into me through my education that I need to be objective, not subjective, that it is objectivity that tells the truth.

In that piece I am not taking sides remember. I am stating it as it is, as a story that may have happened, could have happened, may well happen. It is what novelists describe as a showing, rather than as a telling, and leaving it up to the reader to build bridges between what is known and unknown. For example, that dictionary you refer to. Why is it there and what does it reveal about Courtney? Are we passing swift judgements about her as an addict when there might be other things going on?

I haven't thought of that.

Situations are always multi-layered and the social worker entering that flat can have no idea of that multitude. Through this writing I am attempting to show the situation as it unfolds, much like I am holding up a camera and pressing 'record'. It's up to the reader to interpret, and as a scenario I believe it has far more gritty realism than those pithy case studies so often used in the standard textbooks. This was discussed in an article by Boxall et al you might like to read (2018). In this they remark: '...case studies may create the impression that real-life service users, like their case study counterparts, are characters who lack emotion or personality; or that real-life social work with service users is a distanced, procedural activity' (p. 890).

*

Turning now to critics of autoethnography. Wall, a nursing academic and one more sceptical of the method, centres on reflexivity and (quoting Ellis) speaks of 'introspection as a data source' (2006, p. 148), before noting that some '...simply present the method and its product as personal narrative' (p.150). A view echoed by Freeman, who writes that '...if autoethnography is to function as more than a diary of the given writer's thoughts and if

autoethnographic research is to have any purposive validity then a frame of critical thinking and external views is inevitable' (2015b, p. 927).

This points us to critics who consider autoethnography to be none other than narcissistic, self-absorbed, navel gazing or self-indulgent; while one, Sara Delamont, an ethnographer, considers it to be 'an intellectual *cul de sac*' (2009, p. 51) on the basis that it does not subscribe to 'core social science objectives', these being, in her words '...to study the social world and to move their discipline forward' (ibid, p. 59-60). Leaving aside what exactly Delamont means by moving 'their discipline forward', I would have to counter her thesis by arguing that it is exactly the social world the autoethnographer *is* studying. Delamont's strident tone worries me (though she does make a case for using 'reflexive autobiographical writing'), allied to her distrust of postmodernism, and a fall into nostalgia for when conducting fieldwork was 'hard' – 'physically tiring, intellectually taxing' – whereas autoethnography 'is an abrogation of the honourable trade of the scholar' (ibid, p. 61).

Through her effort to rubbish the methodology, I believe Delamont reveals a blindness to unorthodoxy in research that might well do something to move any discipline 'forward', as long as its practitioners can step away from an either/or framework. Clearly, I bring my biases, given that I am dedicating several years of my life to this venture; but it is one to which I have come openly and with critical comprehension of why I have chosen autoethnography.

Firstly, because I do believe one of its merits is that by opening up one's experience the narrative can 'inspire critical reflection on your own' (Sparkes, 2002, p. 221). Secondly, I support the statement made by Ellis, Adams and Bochner that autoethnography tries to 'disrupt the binary of science and art', with research that is 'rigorous, theoretical and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena' (2011 no page ref as electronic material).

However, there is one charge Delamont levels that deserves closer scrutiny: ethics and her argument that it is 'almost impossible to write and publish ethically' (ibid, p. 59). Why? Because the autoethnographer writes personally and by implication involves others whose anonymity cannot be guaranteed, a dilemma of relational ethics, as discussed by Ellis (2007). Tolich, a sociologist with a strong interest in research ethics, having found what he considered to be inconsistencies and contradictions in his analysis of autoethnographic research papers, came up with 'Ten foundational guidelines' for novice or undergraduate

aspirants, with the caution ‘...treat all the persons mentioned in the text as vulnerable, including the researcher’ (2010, p. 1605).

As a ‘novice autoethnographer’ myself this thesis was approved by the university’s Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee after I was able to provide assurance I would not identify anyone or give context where people might identify themselves through their professional relationship with me. I argued that consent (the first pillar of Tolich’s guidelines, the other two being consultation and vulnerability) was not required as I was writing a fictional account of child protection, and could, as with the statement often seen on the colophon of novels, declare and affirm that: *Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author’s imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental* (Swift, 2016)⁴⁴.

However, this statement may be interpreted as a literary device, a way writers side-step or deflect criticism, an appeal to the mystique of the imaginative process. For the autoethnographer ‘...if there is a story that counters oppression and seeks to bring justice and positive change then sometimes in the telling, the greater good is justified. Each autoethnographer must weigh up the pros and cons of their work, and apply core ethical practices to each unique autoethnography’ (Gibbs, 2018, p. 14).

Tullis itemises a number of ways to protect identity and confidentiality of individuals, one being: ‘Creating composite characters by collapsing several people into one...to fictionalise parts of a narrative to disguise time and place, building some distance between the facts of an event and the researcher’ (included in Adams et al., 2021, p. 105). This is a method I use in *The Boy who Stole the Moon* and, as Edwards acknowledges, ‘...there is a delicate balancing act involved in getting this right but I believe it can be done’ (2021, p. 5).

Autoethnography, as an evolving methodology, does not place strict academic boundaries on observational methods, though researchers are mindful of, and adhere to, ethical standards. While I am at the centre of this research, others include colleagues and families who have not given formal, written and signed permission to be included within this

⁴⁴ Laura Bohannon, writing under the pseudonym of Elenore Smith Bowen, was a US anthropologist who wrote a novel published in 1954 based on her experiences in a central Nigerian tribal community. She had another take: *All the characters in this book, except myself, are fictitious in the fullest meaning of the word...I know people of the type I have described here...Here I have written simply as a human being, and the truth I have tried to tell concerns the sea change in one’s self that comes from immersion in another and alien world*. Bowen, E. S. (1956). *Return to laughter*. Readers Union/Gollancz.

research. My research is an observational view of the relations I have with others, all unidentified, all anonymous, all, it is true, unaware of my intent to broaden the discourse of social work within an institutional domain. My methodology works forward from what I call *Meditations*, or what more conventionally may be described as Recollections, of remembered events. I recall an 'event' and write about this. I do not 'name names' and I do not give 'judgement'. I simply tell it as it is and develop an analysis. This is autoethnography in action. From this, I then 'faction' (telescoping fact and fiction) a narrative that describes the operation of social work practice seen from the viewpoint of an individual working in an unidentified child protection workplace. Given the layers of distance generated through this method, I submit that no social worker, child or family will be likely to identify themselves and, therefore, that no psychological, social, economic or legal or demonstrable other risks or harm, discomfort or inconvenience will or can be done to those who are observed.

Whether or not I have been successful is up to you, the reader, to offer comment.

*

Returning to the methodology, Adams and Manning split autoethnography into four sub-species: social-scientific or analytic; interpretive-humanistic; critical; and creative-artistic (2015, pp. 352-353)⁴⁵, as noted here:

1. Social-scientific or analytic: characterisations include systematic data collection and coding; research questions; issues such as bias, reliability, validity and generalizability. The end result can often closely mimic a traditional research report (Anderson, 2006).
2. Interpretive-humanistic: broadly similar to conventional ethnography that puts cultural analysis and fieldwork at the core of the study, and relies on interviews and participant observation (Denzin, 2014).
3. Critical: supports the postmodern stance and includes feminist, queer and post-colonial points of view that make the case for social and institutional change. These

⁴⁵ This comes a long way from the short and oft-quoted essay by Hayano (1979), in which he identifies two branches, with a sub-category in the second (p.100). Hayano, it's worth mentioning, placed autoethnography (he used a hyphen to separate auto from ethnography) very much within anthropology given that was his field of expertise. He ends: Presently, it is a mixture of diverse researchers investigating different problems. But always underlying this omnibus spectrum is the inescapable, recurrent problem of the human presence in data collection (p.103).

autoethnographers use 'personal experience that shows accounts of contentious and unjust cultural values, practices and experiences' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016).

4. Creative-artistic: described by Chang as '...the boldest departure from traditional academic writing' (2008, p. 148) and '... goes against the grain of much academic discourse' (Denshire, 2014, p. 832). However, it is exactly because it flies in the face of what is considered 'scholarly writing' that it *is* accessible, though it needs to be acknowledged that to write well, to write creatively, is a task as challenging, indeed more so, than following the constraints and logical development of a formal research paper.

My sub-genre of choice is creative-artistic, which dovetails with my [novel] auto-ethnographic method through which I illustrate the practice of social work within the context of statutory child protection. [Novel] autoethnography, I suggest, seeks to reveal the practice of child protection social work from being a 'hidden profession' (Weick, 2000) or an 'invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1987) and articulate a voice usually absent from the academy, as noted by Ferguson, who comments: '...little research has been done into what social workers do in everyday child protection practice' (2018b, p. 15). What has been done often comes from researchers 'shadowing' their subjects or being 'embedded' in an office (Westlake, 2016).

The voice of the practitioner is generally absent from the literature for, as Gibbs observes: 'They are usually immersed knee-deep in the everyday bustle of seeing and working with families, writing up case notes, ensuring that administration is complete and meeting with colleagues' (2013, p. 15). Only recently has autoethnography been acknowledged by social work academics through Witkin's edited volume, though the essays included are all written from within the academy (2014). One notable exception is de Montigny's '...ethnography of front-line practice,' in which he confronts '...the disjunctures between the sterile academic discourse of mainstream social work and the dynamic, mysterious, challenging nature of everyday practice' (2015, p. xv).

My [novel] autoethnography builds upon that, drawing on observations, reflections and interpretations of social work using the norms of creative writing that include conflation, collaging, distortion, make-believe and time travel/chronesthesia. It also picks up on a comment by Pierre Bourdieu in his introduction to *The Weight of the World*: '...following the lead of novelists such as Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf, we must relinquish the

single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers ...We must work instead with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view' (1999, p. 3)⁴⁶.

*

For a novelist such as J.M.Coetzee: '...you write because you do not know what to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us' (1992, p. 18).

Writing as a novelist allows me the freedom – ethical and creative – to tell this story of statutory child protection social work from a distance, and a closeness, that is unimaginable from the viewpoint of the academic compelled to stand on the side-lines and look in.

Through my fictional self, I, or someone like me, is in the story.

That's what makes it novel.

⁴⁶ Reed-Danahay, an autoethnographer, notes how Bourdieu derided 'autobiography' and never wrote about his upbringings. Reed-Danahay, D. (2017). Bourdieu and critical autoethnography: Implications for research, writing, and teaching. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(1), 144. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i1.1368> . Michael Grenfell, who has written extensively about Bourdieu, however, notes that at the end of his life (Bourdieu died in 2002) he referred to 'auto social-analysis', as a way to make sense of the '...social forces which had shaped his life trajectory', although contained within academia (Grenfell, M., 2008, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*.Durham: Acumen Publishing.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1975

PROLOGUE TO 1975

Do we write a diary because we cherish immortality or at least remembrance? – 10 June 1975.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1975

12th January: [My 18th birthday] it rains; It rains very hard.

24th January: The creative artist will possess clarity of thought, depth of thought, preciseness of thought, accuracy of thought and a tangible feeling for what is real.

25th January: The novelist must capture the gossip of the people.

9 April: How about being a journalist? Well why not? No. I would prefer, if I was going to go into writing, to write for a living - be freelance - dangerous but not having to do things that you do not like.

4 May: I have got to learn how to write. I want to read and then write. ...A novel I write will be the labour of thousand, thousand hours. No false style but just expressing what I want to express through the eyes of a youth: the cough of the man next door, the bark of a dog, the song of a bird, the laugh of a widow.

28 May: So you want to be a writer. Well, first of all you must learn to write; that requires much study and hard work. Any man can write but to write well is more difficult, very difficult. Then you must devote yourself to this. No use trying to write in your spare time. And of course if you publish you appreciate that it will not be bought: if what you write is great it will not be bought in mass - people today only want sex, murder, petty excitement. Still it will survive longer than flesh.

10 June: Do we write a diary because we cherish immortality or at least remembrance?

11 June: ...the question to be put forward is therefore one of heart searching bluntness: do you want to write? For what reasons do you want to write? What have you got in you that makes you wish to record thoughts on paper? Yet also important is: do you want to be a lawyer? Do you feel that at your present age and development you know what you are doing? At what age is it necessary to write and does experience count. Should you write

your first novel at the age of hundred or twenty. These and a whole host of attendant and waiting questions line themselves up in my mind and require to be answered in the next few months. I am 18 years of age; these questions can and should be answered for own peace of mind. Let these pages serve as reference point.

14 July: I feel at the present time that my ambition in life, if you like my vocation, transcends that of the professional man. I want to achieve something that is extremely difficult. But if I do not attempt even to reach the high goal I have set I will be a frustrated and a disappointed and a deceived individual at death.

21 October: ...what struck me most about London I suppose was the rolls of paper being delivered to The Sun newspaper off Fleet Street; or the hatted man waiting to go into the House of Commons –‘have your tickets’: what's this a blessed cinema. The waiter in the cafe and that hen party sitting at my side. The German tourists and the inquiring man in Foyles⁴⁷. The woman selling chestnuts. This is the spread of humanity, that about which I shall write.

17 November: The purpose of writing in a diary concerns me greatly. I write this not for later fame. If I had that motive it may well be to call my sanity and sense of proportion into question. I think that this Journal is kept up for certain literary purposes. Not only am I able to declare my thoughts (my unframed, uncritical and as yet unquestioned thoughts) on certain aspects of literary theory but I am continuously expressing myself in words. Each night (but let us not forget that writing at night is often liable to be sloppy) I have the pleasant exercise of communicating certain ideas or worries. This ensures - maybe - a perpetual companionship with words and amplification of style. I write all this for my own benefit so that I can ensure a permanent record of my literary maturity. I may not confess all my thoughts to these pages but enough of them for the Journal to have some value in the future - in the future for me. I admit I rarely reread what I have written - a habit I do not carry with me when writing outside of the Journal - or revise. This may be good, for the book becomes an exemplar, the exemplar of spontaneous judgments and erratic proposals.

⁴⁷ Famous London bookshop in Charing Cross Road.

31 December: ...at the station a couple suddenly found they had to disembark just as the train was moving off. A sudden cry of alarm by the woman (of middle age, well dressed) and the man (well over 50 - *Financial Times*, umbrella) jumped to door, opened it and the train slowed. The reaction was spontaneous, full of life and action - the two got down, and the gentleman apologised to the guard. Between the cry of the woman to the man's offer of thanks there was but movement and not a word said.

These 'Episodes' are extended fictional pieces written in the third person in 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1982, as 'the anticipated parts of an autobiographical work to be published...late in my life' (personal archive, 25 June 1977). They are slotted in at the appropriate years following the diary entries, and serve as what Bruner terms 'turning points', a 'crucial change or stance in the protagonist's story to a belief, a conviction, a thought' (in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 31). They may also be considered parts of a symphonic score, in four movements, a reference I make on 8 January 1978 (diary): 'Must keep in mind that a novel can and must be orchestrated much like a symphony.'

An episode is also, as stated by The Study of Lives Research Group of Northwestern University, '...a specific happening that occurs at a particular time and place. It is most helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life which stands out for some reason' (accessed 9 July 2023 from <https://sites.northwestern.edu/thestudyoflivesresearchgroup/instruments/>).

Note: [...] indicates parts that have been omitted.

The leaves. Three is unlucky. A cat poured out from beneath a hedge. It had been sleeping there. The noise had disturbed it. The grass patiently righted. Soaking fur lank and tigers scaled head. Slunk to recover. A slight red spot over there where earth and sky meet. Dawn falling away. Cars scuffing the roads. Wetness eating the rotting leaves.

The rustle coloured leaves.

He said this slowly to himself then thought awhile. The morning wind blew a rill down the stalk of a flower. Flowers still tucked bound, the grass soaked. Little creatures lived in the grass. How many will be killed today?

Rustle colours... rustle coloured...rustle coloured leaves drop from trees.

The trees bowed with simplicity. Sly old things.

The rustle coloured leaves dropped singly from threading trees.

He said this slowly to himself. It was the end of autumn. He was becoming a poet. He had to search out his complete response to the season for he believed a poem developed from the senses.

[...]

He had left home early. It was essential that he notice and felt the dawning of the autumn scene. He had already decided to call the sequence of poems he was writing, *Poems Young*. They would be the final statement of his passing youth, he knew that his writing could only

develop further when he had achieved artistic maturity. That was a further reason for his early departure: independence must be declared. He would have to leave home.

Many questions remained unanswered. What is poetry? He remembered reading what others said but they had to be forgotten. He would ask himself, what is poetry? And answered: poetry is the conscious submission of the poet's whole being into the infinite universe from which is drawn creative imagination and original genius. Poetry had its own gods, so the maker of verse must have faith in belief. This was a dangerous philosophy: he was emerging from the shell of youth into the yard of manhood; like a snake his skin was being drawn away and he felt the bracken digging into the clean layer beneath. Like the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon he was caught between two extremities. He would not fail in this endeavour to force his mind into positive awareness.

The fresh gloss on the trees dulled. He heard hidden birds singing and insects' beating wings. So finally the stage of self-delusion was passed: he had answered those questions which each young person puts to himself: he was not unique among men: he felt as though he were entering on to a higher plane of questioning, demanding from him even intenser reasoning. It may kill him as an artist but he had to face this or suffer eternal misery.

Several people were wandering. All conscious of their immediate destination. All hurrying towards the railway station, where he too was bound. Like the lost people wandering forever he thought. He felt for his season pass, a flat card shaping to the inside of his trouser pocket. But he knew the ticket porter so was never worried if it was not there. A church bell clanged brutally and suddenly he felt the saliva in his mouth drain. He could now accept a part of his destiny, it was impossible to accept it all. His mind cleared, it was as if the universe had shot flares brightly. Superfluous ideas were swept from the van of his mind. He knew now what he had to do. He was aware that art without criticism is not only decadent but conceited. He was freed from conceit. He had to write and publish. Later. Later. Only later.

The rustle coloured leaves... He said this over and over to himself. The uncorrupted air of the morning was drawn up and released into his body and he became aware of life. His feet slid unable to grip the pavement tarnished by the blighted leaves. He caught his balance, rocked slightly then thought. The poem welled up in his mind as he balanced the critical with the creative intellect. He knew now that poetry is made by the perfect union of imagination and discrimination: sense and sound blended. The poem grew in his mind. He held each

phrase tightly as discrimination worked to fashion the best sense from the stock of imagination. Sense and sound were as one: creation was breached and the entire verse came ejected from the intellect.

Truly poetry is born and the making comes along way after.

[...]

People were waking from the peace of the night. Several cars crept along the road running parallel to the path he was following with their roofs frosted and windows opaquely glazed.

[...]

A neatly dressed young lady past, moving some distance in front before he noticed. He caught sight of her legs and was interested by the rocking movement of her body. She wore a mauve overcoat and round her neck billowed a colourful scarf, her hair tied beneath. He considered her age, estimating it to be not much older than his. He tucked in behind. Up ahead was the station, he could just make out the sign. A train clattered in. Doors banged back shut as people got off or boarded. Straining and pulling he felt the train rumble away. Birds began to squabble.

He kicked through the hundreds of leaves which littered the pavement reminding him of the seaside, walking along a dry seashore, turning over the glassy sand with the toe. The woman's back tensed and suddenly she looked round, surprised maybe that someone followed so close. Why do people look behind when they hear a person following? He thought. Was it curiosity or fright? [...] Her head rolled forward and he watched as she moved quickly away from him. She turned down a side road that led from the main street, once more glancing towards him. He stared. Her face was swollen, her tired eyes blinked and a thick red line grotesquely emphasised her mouth. He was worried by that face and stopped to consider. Then absently she lost her balance, toppled over like some ridiculous toy doll and fell heavily on the pavement. He watched. She picked herself up, looked at her coat where a streak of mud had covered the side on which she had fallen. Pathetically she robbed this place before ceasing and walked away, still conscious that she was being watched. He faintly heard the sound of someone crying. The wind blew away her tears.

[...]A train was speeding over the rails. Clickety clack. Clickety clack. Clickety clack. It was the London bound. What was the time? Too late? He began to run. Past an early morning walker, a small dog being tugged behind. The air buffered him, slowing him. He

caught the sound of doors breaking open. Carriages easing as the train halted in a whorl of sound. Running down the lane which led to the booking office. Racing through the unlit lobby, the wall clock displaying the time. It was too late.

Good morning sir. I'm afraid you'll miss it. But to be sure you're early. You'll catch the usual.

He didn't want to catch the later train. He couldn't wait. He had to get away from that woman he had seen, even from his family. He thundered down the steps which led to the platform.

Too late. He saw the yellow end of the last carriage weaving and wobbling away, mocking him.

The platform was deserted. Panting, he collapsed on to a seat and closed his eyes. He was tired.

[...]

Once more ideas emerged in his mind, so he sat passively looking at something and still at nothing as one might be absorbed in one stone on a beach crowded with stones, watching that particular stone with intensity, but not thinking. He knew that his friends would not be able to assist him in this struggle to a definition of his creative beliefs. And yet what he needed was someone to whom he could talk, then he would not feel as isolated from others as he did at present. The creation of knowledge is public but the working out of a creative belief is personal and solitary. On some days he wondered whether he was capable of undertaking the course. He did have one friend with whom he was able to discuss these matters and who would listen to his esoteric ideas. He had told this friend of his aims as an artist (how he still detested using that word artist - he was not yet an artist, and honour rarely applied) and vividly remembered the long conversation they had had one afternoon. He now accepted god in art, the sacred god of the muse. He knew that an artist's true meditative style is only made when his entire conscious, creative and critical intelligence, is committed to the artistic work. His attempts at writing had so far fallen below this. Perfection in art, he further believed, could be achieved, for great art is accomplished when the maker drains the waters of imagination and discrimination so producing the essence, even more than the essence, of the man in art or god in art. That was why great poetry was in his definition the submission of the poet's entire being to the infinite universe. The work of art committed in any other way is not great art; it is poor art, such was his. He realised the value

of trying to define literature as it was to him and also what it could be for others. He knew that great art, any art, was the acting of inspiration and imagination together, after which came revision by the faculty of discrimination. Poor art was the circumference, great art the centre of the mind.

His friend had smiled saying that too many people were writing. This he knew [...] But this was not why he would write. He had to write - it was his destiny. A man never chose art, it was forced upon him, remaining throughout his life. His friend had said, You are restless. Yes, he was, though recently he had suffered a deadening fatigue once more causing him to doubt his destiny as a writer.

He could not manage to break out to the new god-centred style which was foremost in his thinking. He would have to talk with his friend again but instinctively knew it would be of little value. He had finished with thinking, it was time to write. If he submitted to the warnings of sensible people he would have the shadow of failure strung around his neck forever. A restless and unhappy commitment to art leading to death. He was growing. A chameleon changes colour, he wished that he could change shape. Boyhood turning into man.

[...]

ACT TWO

FIVE

There's applause in my part of the office at some legal decision that means a child will be in care until they're 18. This is seen as a 'good outcome' given dad is not considered to be able to look after his 8-year-old daughter. I can't get caught up in this applause. It rings fake. Sounds like applause at the end of a stage show, recognition of a flawless performance, when it's anything but. Regrettably kids in care don't always do so well. That's what the data shows, and I know for myself the data, in this instance, is right.

*

Apparently I'm immortal, says the 15-year-old girl with a diagnosis of anorexia who hasn't eaten for 18 days, sitting (though rather it's slouching) in the doctor's room, refusing to be weighed. I've known this girl 11 months and for 10 of those she's been shut up in adolescent mental health. Anorexia's mental health but the specialists (experts) have been feeding her up, getting her back to a weight so she can be discharged.

I need to take your weight, says the doctor.

It's the one bit of the jigsaw that's missing.

No way.

You could die, she says.

That's when she replies, Apparently I'm immortal, and leaves the room.

*

All of us have archives. Places we store our memories. For this generation the archive is digital, in the Cloud. There's no physical connection. Yet it's there, digitally, for Facebook sends a message about an event that happened a year ago, sends a link to a photo. But my archive's written on paper, written in ink, and still so substantial it can physically, yes physically be weighed, sits on a shelf. My daughter thinks it's weird I have a 'library'. Yet it's this archive I draw on, pull down, flick open and feel the paper between finger and thumb. Those I work with do not. I'm more disconnected than ever I thought. I'm an archive myself,

trapped in a library I have created, surrounded by books never opened, that stare at me, plead with me to be opened, to be energised. Perhaps my daughter's right: it's all there in the Cloud so why take up all this space with these books that just collect dust and mites and are ugly as? What she fails to understand is that these books have a story that's comprehensible to me. I can recall, mostly, where they were purchased; in some I have written an inscription; in some are inserted relevant newspaper articles, reviews, that kinda thing. Me or someone else will stumble upon these as a traveller stumbles across a café in a remote part of town where only locals go. There's an intake of breath on both sides, an acceptance that this is what life is like. Its randomness and chaoticness. I don't need the orderly progress of the Cloud, nor Facebook, reminding me at regular intervals. I am a human. I am imperfect. These books tell my story. Imperfectly.

*

A colleague returns from the coffee boutique, and says she was walking back and Facetimeing her grandchild when a man comes up to her and asks, Do you know when it opens, pointing to the brothel behind her. She says she didn't know what to answer, perhaps he thought she was a prostitute. You should take that as a compliment, says another female colleague.

*

He says it was Heart, and with his right fist holds it to his chest. It was Heart that got him through.

I'm sitting with him and his partner on the verandah of his brother's house as they wait for their children to arrive for a visit after school. They were Ice users and their four kids taken into care. He and his partner have rotten teeth. He says he thinks his kids thought dad had 'lots of friends'. They've cut all that out, moved towns, State's even.

She says she learnt in rehab that it was nothing to do with the children. It wasn't their fault, she says. They weren't responsible.

She's spoken with them, explained what happened. There's no secrets. They know, she says.

The past year they've been doing everything to have the kids 'restored' to them. I'm sitting here today to supervise that, let the court know what they have done so the magistrate can 'restore.' Restore the order of family life.

*

A week later I'm another house talking with another couple. The home's almost uninhabitable. Cockroaches, flies, a smell like that of urine mixed with damp but worse, all pervasive, intense. A police officer told me earlier that in his 28 years of service it was the 'worst' home he's been in.

When we turn up there's been some cleaning, in the front garden mattresses are piled, wet from overnight rain, sitting on top a broken guitar. Dad says he used to play. Afterwards I feel the filth sitting on me, can smell it, in my hair, on my hands. I have an urge to change and shower. In the car on the drive back my colleague says she was watching these cockroaches near my hand as I was talking to them, wondered if I knew. I was looking at the flies. Back at the office we are debriefing with our manager when a cockroach emerges from my shoe and scuttles across the carpet. I squash it with my foot.

*

The doctor takes my blood pressure, does some calculations on his computer, then pronounces: You've a less than 10 per cent chance of having a heart attack in the next five years.

*

It's not often I get to speak with a dad. They're either at work or about to go to work, or have stuff going on, or interstate with their other family or just don't answer their phone. This dad invites me to speak with him at the park where I saw Zayde some time ago. He's wearing sunglasses and his jacket, I notice, has flecks of grass as if he's been sleeping rough. I get the faint smell of someone who hasn't washed for a while. We sit in the sun. I can't remember now how the conversation started. Perhaps I remarked on how he looked, not great. He apologises, says it has been one thing after another. His brother was released from prison the other day, after serving three-and-a-half months, set up by an ex-girlfriend:

They're all innocent in prison, aren't they, he comments. He's had a call from his ex's lawyer saying that his teenage daughter wants to change her family name. Her mum's got to her, he says, voice breaking, tearing up. I've not seen my daughter for years, now this.

I ask him about himself. He says he hasn't started taking his meds, they're sitting on the shelf. I disclose my own mental illness, say I'm taking anti-depressants, how they help. I suggest he starts, say it takes about a week before he'll notice any difference. Perhaps, he answers.

Time's getting on and he's going to his son's school to pick him up. He thinks he's being bullied by other kids. I repeat about taking one thing at a time, doing one thing each day, not getting overwhelmed. He nods and leaves. I take a deep breath in, then out and walk back to the car.

*

Her name, the name of the 15-year-old who doesn't eat, is Tiffany but, Call me Tiff, she told me when we first met. She's back in the mental health unit, which is where I meet her this Friday afternoon, in fact, every Friday afternoon for the past six weeks after she agreed to see me again. Often I arrive and she's decided not to. Other times I have to wait and then she comes, sits silently, head in hands looking at the floor. Mute. I don't talk if she's like that. There's no point. So we sit in silence and she might start a conversation or, more likely not, and walk off. Today she's in the main room doing something with modelling clay. I ask if I can join her and start to model myself. She makes an animal, a penguin I think, and I make a dolphin, at least that's the picture I have in my head. We go out into the courtyard where there's a giant chess set. I ask if she plays: I can teach you I suggest. She's not interested. I'm not going home, she starts. I'll be 16 soon and I want to live by myself.

OK. Let's work on that. But your parents will still be your parents.

They're not my parents. Don't call them that. I don't have any.

Alright. But if you want to live by yourself you'll still need, what can I say? Support, assistance, help?

I don't need any of that. I can look after myself. I'll get a job. I'll earn money. I can do it. I've done it before.

It isn't that simple.

Why the fuck not?

I'm not going to tell you anything that's not true. Understand? If you want to live independently when you're 16, that's fine. But with that comes responsibilities. You have to agree to compromise so you can do what you are hoping to do. That's all. I want to make this work for you but I can't work miracles. I have to work with what's possible.

I'm not going back to them.

I get it. But what about if you lived separately.

What you mean?

I mean, you could live in the garage for instance.

What! I'd still be in the same house wouldn't I?

Sort of. But your mum...

...don't call her that. I don't have a mum.

OK. Well, she says she can set it up so you wouldn't have to see her, come into the house when she's around...

That's bullshit. I'd still be near her.

She'd be at work.

She'd still be living in the house though wouldn't she? Sleeping there.

But you wouldn't have to see her. Not if you didn't want to.

She'd know what I was up to. She'd spy on me.

No she wouldn't.

You don't know her. She's evil. She drinks. She gets drunk then she hits me. That's what she's done but none of you believe me. She made me walk over glass from a bottle she smashed. She called me a whore, said I should never have been born. I won't go anywhere near her. Never. If you made me I'd kill her.

Or your dad?

He's not my dad. Don't ever call him that. You hear? He's not my dad.

She gets up, walks away, head down, chewing fingernails.

*

We have trouble finding the apartment and have to ask the way. We ring and a woman opens the security screen with her six-year-old daughter peering behind her. I've had no

time to read the case notes as I've only been back in the office 15 minutes or so before my colleague says, Are you ready to go?

My colleague's doing the talking and I sit there trying not to take notes but eventually I have to since there's a lot of information about family and dates and her recollection of events that we can compare later with what was reported.

Is he still living here? my colleague asks.

Yes.

I exchange glances with my colleague. We're both a bit surprised at this news. Mum says she's got an AVO and goes to find it. She slowly reads out the conditions, which mean her partner can be in the house. All he can't do is stalk her.

You feel safe? my colleague asks.

Yes. Because of this, she says, laying a hand on the AVO. It will protect me.

How? How's that going to work?

I'm only just discovering who I am again. Being able to be myself. Be a mum again. Does that make sense?

My colleague nods. We praise her for finally leaving this man.

I think he's booked in to see a psychologist, she says. I think he wants to know how to control his anger. He's never done that before. And he's got a job. He never had a job.

What did he do?

He spent most of his time at the gym. He's into bodybuilding.

My ballpoint's racing now as I simultaneously recollect what my colleague told me in the car as we drove over. How there'd been a party, a barbeque, drinks and laughing into the night; a line of cocaine taken after which events had turned; an argument about weight and he telling her she was putting on and should workout more.

Her daughter comes to where we are sitting

What if things could be different? I ask her What if I had a magic wand?

For mom and him to please stop fighting.

Later we try and call him. He doesn't answer. We leave a message, send a text asking him to get in touch. On his social media page he calls himself single amid dozens of photos of him posing with biceps and bared chest.

*

I'm at that point where Zayde and Tanaya will come into care. Today's the day. I'm told: Go speak with Sam. Tell her that if she doesn't go back to rehab this is what will happen.

It's a hot day in February. I'm with a colleague who has some knowledge of the family, has met Sam and the kids a few times. This is what it's come to, after all these months and meetings. It comes down to a conversation about the State's right to remove her kids because she hasn't been motivated by the threat of removal to do anything, anything sustainable, as we say anything different.

You're my friend, she says.

I am not your friend.

You're my friend.

I am not you're friend.

I trusted you, she says. Now you've changed. You've been brainwashed by them. I've watched you change. I saw you as my friend...

I am not your friend, I say.

...my friend. I've no one. I'm a single mother with two children and everyone's 'gainst me.

I've no one. You said you would help me, you promised me...

I did not promise.

You won't even do this for me now.

I've asked you to go back, finish rehab.

I'm not using drugs.

It's not just the drugs.

I won't leave my children ever again. You're a wicked man. You promised me.

She stares into my eyes.

There's nothing I can say that will change this now, I say.

You can go away.

I can't

Yes you can. You can go and leave me.

That isn't possible. That's not how this works.

Is this real?

What?

Is this for real?

This is reality Sam. This is happening right now.

But why? Why do you need to do this?

Why? You ask me now?

Yes. I thought you were helping me.

I can only do so much Sam. There's others too.

What others?

My manager.

Let me speak with her.

Of course you can speak with her but it won't do any good.

Let me speak with her. Give me your phone.

She tells her I'm a paedophile, a predator.

My manager tells me to remove the children.

After, when I return to the office and Tanaya's been sent to one place and Zayde another, I'm removed too. Removed from casework that is, told it's best I stand aside. Not that there's any truth in these allegations, it's emphasised. Just better for all involved if I'm out of the frame, that there's a fresh set of eyes.

*

I prefer listening. When it comes to answering I'm usually on the back foot except when they're those crass one's like: How you feeling today? How's it been the last week? What's on your mind? I take a moment, a Pinteresque Pause I call it if I'm feeling especially sardonic, before I launch on my monologue. Lecturing is what Alice calls it. She says once I begin it's hard to make me stop. And I say to her: All day I'm sponging up other people's stuff so now and again I need to off-load.

Not to me you don't, she says and promptly turns the TV up or flicks through Facebook or moves out of range or asks, When did you last have 'an appointment,' code for when did you last see the psych?

There's a last-minute cancellation but it'll have to be Zoom. Do I mind? Course I do but it saves having to drive to her office, negotiate the afternoon school run, find a place to park, hoping I'm on time. I don't need any more anxiety.

Only her head and shoulders show on my laptop screen. Mine on hers no doubt, revealing me sitting in my dimly lit garage where I work, have my sanctuary, my man-cave. Except instead of tools it's lined with bookshelves.

What's been happening Ed, since we last spoke?

Lots.

Tell me what you're thinking about right now.

There was this box of children's toys, fluffy animals and stuff on the kerbside waiting to be collected by a garbage truck. It was raining steadily and she's standing in the garden in a grey woollen dressing gown and bare feet.

Who's she?

Didn't I tell you?

Do you want to?

I'll call her...I don't know...I'll call her Meg.

So Meg's someone you've been working with? Is that right?

Yes. For a long time. Trying to work with her and her kids, boy and a girl, so they don't come into care.

And what happened?

They were removed.

That's blunt.

That's the words we use. Removed.

Because of you?

She blames me.

It sounds like you care for Meg?

I care for everyone I work with. Work for. Even when they call me names.

Did she?

She called me a paedophile.

What does that do to you, make you feel?

Hurts me, screws me.

Why does it screw you?

Well obviously I'm not. But more importantly I've failed her and her kids because of all the reasons I gave last time we spoke.

The system?

I suppose. But it's more than that.

Tell me.

I am the system. You are the system. We are all part of the system.

Silence. The sound dies, then the video. For a while there's a blank screen before we both log in again.

The Zoom curse! she laughs, before continuing. You've mentioned that before, how you've a sense you're sometimes, if not often, at odds with the system.

Not so much at odds, I say. More a disconnection. Like I don't know my place in it any more. Where do you think your place might be? she asks.

As a misfit you mean?

Your word not mine.

Where do misfits belong? In times past they would have been ostracized, stoned, beaten to death, buried alive. Eaten alive.

True.

Yet now they are tolerated...

...given a chance? What's worse? To be within the community yet not part of it? Or to be hounded out, sent into the wilderness like Lear? What do you think?

Very much the former.

I see her scribble something on a notebook out of view.

I remember last time you said you'd like to be an astronaut, she says. Now I'm beginning to understand how that may fit with what you've been describing. Tell me about your dad.

Why?

It's just context.

No it's not. You're joining the dots.

You're probably right. It wasn't that subtle was it?

Hardly.

So, what did your dad do?

He was a salesman for a flour company. Travelled the country selling flour, once joked that he thought of himself as the yeast that makes the profits rise. Not a very funny joke.

He was lower middle class, in the English sense of that word?

He was aspirational. He would have called himself middle class. He went to work, mum stayed at home. We were comfortable, moved home a couple of times while I was growing up to a better neighbourhood. Had a colour TV soon after they were introduced. Always a new company car in the driveway.

He was a good father?

He was rarely home during the week, and at the weekend he was always pottering around fixing up the house. It was only when I had our first child that he seemed to open up, came alive as a grandfather I suppose.

Is he still alive?

No. Both my parents have passed.

I'm sorry. Do you think he would be proud of you? For what you've achieved? For moving to the other side of the world and making a difference?

I don't think he was that much interested in success...No. I actually believe he thought of himself as a failure.

How can you be so sure?

I can't but I don't think he ever reached the potential he had. He missed out on completing his education because of the war and when that ended went straight into the workforce.

You're the first from your family to have gone to university?

Sure, but things were different by then. I'm a baby-boomer and higher education was still free. I had everything laid out on a plate. All I had to do was sit down and consume.

So how do you think about yourself?

I think last time you asked if I felt appreciated.

That's by others. What about yourself?

How do I feel about myself?

Yes. I remember last time you said you thought journalism would provide you with opportunities to right wrongs.

That was a part of it. But actually journalism was an after-thought. I wanted to be a writer, a novelist.

To change the world as well?

You've called me an idealist. Also you have to remember I was in my late teens, reading Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Solzhenitsyn and Thomas Mann...

...not easy reads...

...Joyce of course. Some Woolf. All perfectly in tune with my temperament. Eliot and Yeats and dramatists too: Ibsen, Pinter, Beckett and, to give some grist, Shakespeare and Marlowe. I love the theatre. As a university student I wrote a five-act play based on Napoleon. It was rubbish but I dreamt of it being performed at the National Theatre London, even considered who'd star. I think you'd consider me deranged or some other fancy word?

Not at all. But all this might that have some bearing on this feeling you have of being a misfit? I don't imagine many of your contemporaries or friends were doing the same. Perhaps I'm wrong?

No. I was totally divorced from mainstream culture. The late 1970s, when I was entering adulthood...

You make it sound like a line you crossed. Adulthood can begin anytime or, in some cases, not at all.

For me the 70s was crucial. I see myself as a product, if you like, of the 70s, while I completely ignored pop culture, the rise of punk and all that. I could tell you who was Home Secretary at the time but not who played in those legendary rock bands. Their names live on but not that of some second-rate Cabinet minister.

How about now? Are you still adrift?

Yes, I answer without hesitation.

A significant pause *a la* Beckett.

I imagine you spinning into the void, like Clooney in that movie, she says.

Gravity?

Is that what it's called?

He dies by the way. You don't think I've much of a chance do you?

That's not for me to say.

Perhaps I should open a florist's shop. What do you think?

It's not for me to give career advice either. Yet I'm fascinated by the thought you wanted to be an astronaut. Was that also a dream or a career choice?

In the 70s space travel was everywhere. We, the baby-boomers, were going to colonise the Moon and beyond.

Like *Star Trek*?

Like *Dr Who*.

The baby-boomers, she emphasises.

What about them?

You, and those born in that period, are sometimes referred to as 'OK boomer'.

Which means what exactly?

You messed things up.

Oh, thanks.

You've children.

Yes.

Do you think you've left them a legacy?

By which you mean what?

The world today.

It's a mess.

And your part in that?

My part? As a matter of fact, back in the 70s we were more concerned about a population explosion, not about climate change. We did think, in fact were obsessed, by the threat of nuclear war, prepared for it too. Yet nuclear energy was good, nuclear energy was seen as the way out from oil, especially as the Saudi's, as we called them, dominated the market. As it happens, and this I regret, I advocated for nuclear energy long before Chernobyl, before Long Island, before Fukushima. I know this because I wrote about it in journals I kept at the time.

What do you think about your generation?

I can't talk about my generation. I can only talk about me in that generation, and in that generation I was an outsider, a misfit to use your words. Where does that leave me now looking back? Do I think I've failed my children? No. I advocated for change. My change had nothing to do with climate change. It had all to do with feeding a growing population, one we believed that would consume all available resources. I had no idea this would lead to genetic engineering. Yet I was also concerned about waste. How much waste there was (and is), and that was before supermarkets started wrapping everything in plastic and water came in a plastic bottle rather than out of the tap. It's complicated. Did I do enough? No. Did I try? Yes. Do I still try? Yes. What do I think of my generation? We did our best is all I can say. Do you remember *Live Aid* at Wembley in 1985? Perhaps you don't, and I was unaware too because I was in Italy being an archaeologist. That's another story. What about Thatcher? That was the turning point. The Falklands War. Imperialism spread large. Greed at the head of State. That's the moment I failed. It may not have been my generation, but I failed by not condemning Thatcher more stridently. Blair too. I was complicit in that war on the Balkans. Does that help?

If it helps you it helps.

Silence. She coughs. Looks at her watch. Looks at me across the internet.

Our time is almost up. But before we end, please tell me what would you do if it came true and you were up there in space? After all, you can do that now if you've several hundred thousand squirreled away.

Which debases the whole experience, excludes the amateur enthusiast.

Like you?

Like me. I think I've always been something of an amateur my whole life. Not committing.

Except to writing?

Yes, except for writing. Yet not even then otherwise I'd not be sitting here talking with you.

Coming back to being an astronaut ...

I'd be petrified.

Don't focus on the physical. It's the magical I want to hear. Close your eyes.

I'm alongside Collins, I say, in the capsule orbiting the Moon while Armstrong and Aldrin famously walk there. We're going round the dark side. The immensity of the universe stretches before us. Everywhere. Collins points out this constellation, that supernova, that galaxy.

Know how long it would take to get there? he asks.

How long?

At the speed of light, 3.5 million years.

I think I'll give that a miss, I say.

I think humanity will give it a miss!

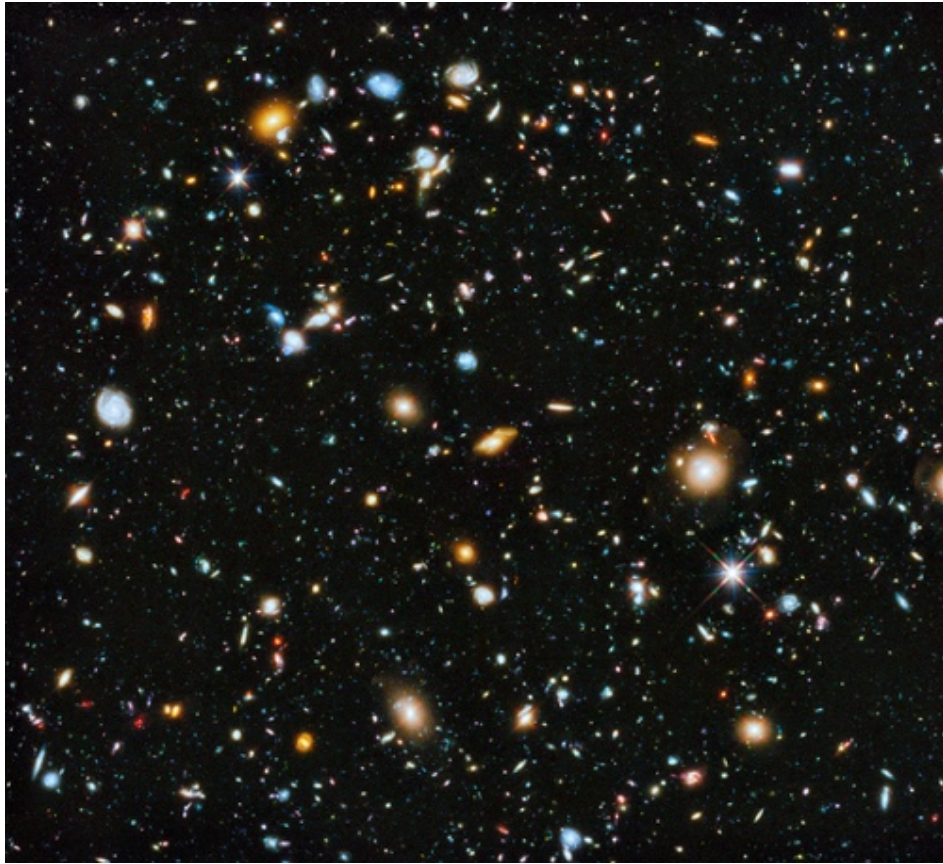
He laughs, while I stare at that spot of light and try to imagine who's there, what they're doing, what they might think as they stare back at me.

What else do you see? Collins asks.

Infinity, I say.

What does it look like?

It's very colourful.



48

SIX

Tiff is sending several texts a day. Like repeating when she's 16 she's going to do what she wants to do and no one can stop her. I don't text back. A nurse rings, asks if I'm coming down on Friday.

Does she want me to?

It would be good if you can. Keep the routine going. She likes routine. It's good for her.

She's in her room and I have to wait. They put me in the activity room which has windows out on to the car park below, and I browse through some books scattered on a table. There's one about the planets and I flick through the photos of Saturn and Jupiter,

⁴⁸ <https://www.nasa.gov/content/most-colorful-view-of-universe-captured-by-hubble-space-telescope>

about 10 years old by now but still fascinating for what they show and what they don't. She enters soundlessly, climbs on the sofa, sits yoga-like clutching a light-yellow towel which she draws to her chin. She looks terrible, pale and thin but still able to argue, as I will find out.

I didn't know much about anorexia when I started this but it's a mental illness and she's in a youth community mental health unit so she should be getting the support she needs. Yet from meetings I've had with the 'experts' all they seem to want to do is get her weight to a certain level and in synch with her BMI (suddenly I'm also an expert in these things) then discharge her.

Community is the thing, her psychiatrist told me a few weeks back. We will feed her and get her well and then she's best out in the community.

But where? I ask.

With her family.

But she's said she doesn't want to be with her mum and dad.

Well, that's your problem not ours. We will get her well enough. We have a bed shortage.

She can't stay here indefinitely.

I sit near Tiff.

Silence.

Silence.

Buzzing nearby.

Silence.

Silence.

Car revs.

Buzzer.

Silence.

Yet not complete.

Phone pings.

Cough.

Nearby.

Car or it might be a truck.

Definitely not a motorbike.

Light.

Fades.

Outside.

Inside. White light.

Artificial.

Lurid.

Others assemble in adjoining room.

Guitar.

Claps.

Strums.

Clapping.

Voices.

Merry.

More.

Or is it a car?

Again.

Can't be sure any more.

Tiff?

Silence.

Tiff, are you listening? If you get to go home...

I don't have a home. Stop fucking saying that.

If you went to live elsewhere, have you thought where that might be?

I've got friends.

Who?

People I know.

And have you spoken with them? Have they spoken with their parents?

What do I care. I've got friends.

I know. Who are they?

What's that to you?

I'm your caseworker.

Well, you ain't any fucking good.

Silence.

Pause.

Focus.

If you were you'd have found me somewhere by now.

It isn't that easy Tiff.

Why not?

You said you don't want to live in the garage...

Don't say that to me ever again, you hear? I don't have parents. I'm alone. I'll soon be 16 and I can do the fuck what I want.

What is it you want to do?

Silence.

Singing.

Fading light.

Shout from outside.

Wind.

It might rain.

It might rain.

Tiff gets up and leaves.

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I see Dusty down the beach. He don't see me and I ain't really wanting to see him neither, not with the losers I'm stuck with. She's called Joy and he's Steve and they're both about one hundred and fifty an' stink of Jesus. They won't tell me where sis is. The first night they got on both sides of me, one gripping me on my right hand, the other my left while they held hands too, then said do I want to sing with them? Fuck that I'm thinking, this ain't a party. I'm not here for fun, I'm here because I've been shoved here by welfare. As for singing, if it's some hard-core rap maybe. But Jesus loves me? Shit, no way.

Joy's got this smile on her ugly creased up face and Steve whispers so I'm straining to hear. He's got a scruffy grey beard and no hair an' this huge red nose covered in warts. Disgusting. Makes me want to puke every time he comes near, which he does all the time, thinking he's being friendly, asking what I like doing. I'd like to smash your fucking bald head into the fucking concrete is what I want to say but leave it. Then Joy, thinking I'm sad, tries to get up close and put her arms round me as if I'm a cat. I wish Jin were around as she'd have a go at her alright, scratch her fucking eyes out Jin would. I shake her off me and she throws her hands in the air saying, I didn't mean too love. You're probably tired. Would you

like a nice glass of hot milk? How'd they get to be my carers?

Do you know him Zayde? Is he a friend of yours?

It's too late. Dusty's spotted me an's running towards doing cartwheels.

Hey Snake, where you been? I still got your bike.

We're all standing in a circle an' I'm thinking any moment one of them is going to ask us to pray or Dusty's going to ask who they are so I crouch low, push hard against the wet sand with my toes giving me a flying start before they have a chance.

Zayde. Zayde. Where you going...I hear as I'm scudding away. To the stars is what comes to mind. I'm a turning, twisting, jet propelled rocket ship heading for orbit and world's beyond. Catch me if you can! Like fuck you can.

They can't but Dusty does. He jumps me from behind, pulls us to the sand, stuffs my face in it. I'm kicking and hollering. He's got me pinned, my left arm bent, him screaming and jabbering, Who's a snake, Snake? Who's a wriggly wriggly snake, Snake?

I feel his hand slide between my legs and, Where's your snake, Snake? Want me to catch it for you?

His mouth in my ear, his hand on my dick an' I want him off me so I'm jerking my body best I can when all of a sudden it goes light and I turn an' realise wart nose has grabbed him, telling him, Leave alone boy.

I see Dusty hesitate, taking the measure of the old fella. Will he have a go? The nose's got some weight on him but I doubt he's the guts to fight. Where you from son?

As I jump to my feet Dusty steps back and we bang together an' because I'm feeling right pissed I shove him hard so the old guy gets between us an' says, Gently now, we're men, not animals eh?

In the distance the Jesus woman's frantically waving. Stupid cow. Then before I know what's going on, cause it's going off like everything's speeded up a thousand million times, Dusty's waving back, the old guy's slapping him on the back, edging him forward, turning to me, beckoning me to follow, then getting into a crazy pretend race with the kid who's now really shitting me good. This anger in me's like one of those waves out there, rolling inside, wave after wave rolling in me. I hear... like, I hear the waves real clear now, it's the only sound I hear starring at the ocean, lost, no one, alone. I'm going to walk in the sea an' do it, get rid of me and this fucking bad shit that follows me everywhere. No one of you

understands what it's like being me. No one ever understands, can't. You must've think I make it up. I hate myself. I hear them waves good and proper. Think I see Jin too like it was when we made that raft an' all. Waves after waves after waves after ...

.... Who's that waving, who's got my hand, who's pulling?

Thought I lost you for a moment there Zayde.

That nose in my face. Puke.

We're sitting round this table back at their place having what Jesus woman calls afternoon tea. I'm wrapped up nice an' warm an' Dusty's feeding his face with these what she calls fairy cakes. I doubt he's ever seen so much food. I ain't seen this much food an' this is just something between meals an' all the cupboards are stuffed full too. It's like being in a supermarket. I had a sneak on the first night when they thought I'd gone to sleep. I heard 'em snoring an' snuck past their room an' got some tins to hide. Baked beans, pineapple chunks an' a packet of shortbread biscuits. I never had them before. I was hoping to find chocolate but no. I'll ask them to get me a couple when we're in town next. You ask for stuff an' you get it cause they know if you don't you'll make their lives crap. That's what I did when I was sent away last time mum lost her shit.

Dusty nudges me hard as the Jesus jerks clear the table.

I've a couple of cones, he whispers.

I tell them we're going out the back to kick a ball.

Have fun, she calls.

Maybe I'll join you when I'm done here, says wart nose.

Nah, it's Ok, I say quickly, putting on my sad face. Just wanta catch up with my friend.

They both smile. I guess they'll say a prayer next.

I don't really want to smoke but Dusty's hard on rolling, careful not to lose any an' I think what can it matter, not after what I been through. We squat by the fence, out of sight, an' he tells me he's been worried about me cause he ain't seen me about an' he heard what happened. He says he's got this plan to get Jimmy, make it right and even.

He's trash, he says. And know what happens to trash? Gets smashed.

He curls his hand like he's caught a fly.

He's right. Jimmy's a piece of shit an' we gotta flush him.

What you two doing?

It's the Jesus woman full and proper, arms folded, starring down at us. All I think of

is some witch come.

Now you know that isn't allowed here.

Dusty gets up first dragging me with him, smiles at the witch bitch then yanks me hard with that look on his face: We gotta run.

It must be over a K we run and I gotta stitch cramping me up.

You got no guts Snake. Know that?

It's my birthday coming, I say, kicking my heels in the soft sand.

Cool.

Yeah.

Whatta goin' do?

D'know.

Someit good?

Yeah.

Someit special?

Yeah.

Your full of shit, know that? he says all a sudden.

I'm ready to give it him. Who's he think talking like that. Thinks he knows me? I think of what Jimmy do. He wants to kick an' smash stuff an' if there's someit to kick he will, don't matter what. I get out of his way those times. Hide if I have to. There's holes in the walls an' in the doors from where he's smashed his fist too. Once I was in my room when he went off at mum an' she's crying an' he's still shouting at her, kicking something soft it must be cause it sounds that way you know like when you hit a pillow, 'cept every time there's that ooff there's mum whimpering. I'm wanting to do someit but I'm too scared to come out till it stops and there's nothing cept this breathing, his breathing. So I open the door just a bit an I look and see mum lying there on the floor not movin' and Jimmy standing over her with his pants down an rubbing his dick till he groans an sprays an' it goes on mum's face an' then he falls on the sofa an' kinda sobs.

Should've run a knife through him.

What?

Given it him. Finished him.

Guess so.

What stopping you? You ain't got nothin, he says.

How you know? I say.

Hows I know?

Yeah?

Wells, for one thing your not with your mum no more.

So?

So what that mean? You with those people I just seen. Whos they?

I shrug.

It means, he says leaning close. It means you aint got mum by yous no more.

I give it him this time. We fight an' smash an' crack an' it's all there in this hole that's his. I'm givin it the best I can, landin punch after punch, best I can. 'Cept it ain't enough. He's got me, got me's in a neck lock. I'm stuffing it an' I can't breathe. Let me go, I'm saying. Give it up. OK you win. Yeah. I suck in air. I lie back. I wanta go home. I wanta go back to mum. 'Cept I can't. There's nowhere. That's when he says:

I know Snake. I'm same. We're brothers.

It's night now. We've been talking a bit, eating too cause he's got stuff hidden away like nuts an' orange juice in cartons. The juice is warm an' every time I swallow I think I'm about to gag. He's telling me 'bout family he's got around.

How come you've so many family? I asks.

How come you've so few?

I got an aunty, I say quickly. Not that I ever see her.

I got people everywhere but none of them any good. That's why I snuck away. Make better of meself.

What bout yer folks?

Dad's out west somewhere chewing through welfare.

He picks at something caught in his teeth, goes quiet. He don't mention a mum so I think maybe she's not around no more.

See the stars up there?

He points.

They're what guide everything. All the business down here, it comes from them stars. That's what you gotta trust Snake. Them stars.

I'm starring hard, waiting for some sign maybe when all's a sudden I see this kinda flash.

See that? he says.

Yeah.

That's a shooter.

That good?

That's the sign. It's goin' be good. It goin' be good. We goin' be good.

I wake up cold as wonderin' wheres I am. I feel around an' touch someit fleshy. He flinches an' shouts: What're doin yer fucker?

I'm freezin'.

He rolls close an' I feel his body again' mine, his arms wrap tight.

Cuddle up Snake.

I shift an' try and get comf'tab'all. I hear him breathing 'gainst me.

Sleep Snake. I protect you.

I breathe like he breathes. Slow. He starts to make those gurgling noises just like mum. It's then I start sobbing like I'm some poncy baby for no one's said that, that they'll protect me. Not once. Mum always into her shit wouldn't even care. I hope he don't hear me.

I'm woken by these fuckin' noisy birds goin' off at all once but Dusty's not here. I'm stiff and thirsty an' the hole's givin me the creeps. I pull myself out and stand in this forest with the sound of the surf coming. I see the blue line of sea through the black stick trees an' that's where I'm heading. The sun's full out an' the water's goin' be cold but I don't care. I throw my clothes off an tip-toe in. Freezin but if I'm goin' be an astronaut I gotta be tough as. What if I'm on the way to Mars an' the engines suddenly cut out an' I'm told to go into space and fix 'em? It's cold in space, colder than the sea, colder than ice even. I know that cause one day when there's no one at home I put my hands into the freezer and timed how long I could keep 'em there. I started off at ten, then went to twenty, finally twenty five before mum came home and asked the fuck what I was doin', said, If you wanta be an astronaut you'd better learn times tables.

It's all computers, I told her an' she laughed an' said, You should try putting your head in the freezer next cause it's made of wood an' you'd never notice.

Loads of little fish swim 'tween my legs an' I chuck myself in head first as a roller breaks. Woo-eee. This is fun. Down again, turn around, look at the sky an' I'm thinking I'm a million zillion light years away on my own rocket. Cool. I sit on the beach an' throw pebbles,

see if I can make 'em skim. I do that with Jimmy sometimes 'cept he's a shit thrower an' gets angry cause he can't beat mine so he grabs up all these rocks and throws them at the gulls. Once he hit a bird an' I thought all the others were goin' gang up on him, peck out his eyes, eat his flesh. All they did was squak an' circle around a bit, while Jimmy just got madder and madder an' threw more rocks at 'em.

Heh Snake, want a feed?

Dusty's come from nowhere like and he's holding up these two flatheads. I follow him up the beach to where the sand's built up and there's some shelter from the wind. He's gathered driftwood and got a fire going by the time I'm there, hands me a long stick and tells me to thread it through the fish like he's done. He laughs at me 'cause I can't get the fish to stay an' shows me to run the stick through the eyes.

You're a city boy, he says, an' starts to whistle a tune while the fish sizzle.

You got dreams, he says as we eat. Space rocket dreams. I got dreams too. Big dreams. I gonna buy myself a fancy car, a V8, an' drive it cross the country, an' I goin' get me some land out there bush someplace an' have some dogs an all, an be by meself chillin'.

Won't you be lonely?

Don't need people Snake. People are trouble. You can come with me if you like.

He's poking with his stick in the ashes, mixing up the fish bones, the end of the stick glowing red now.

Nah. You got your dream. I've mine. What sort of dogs?

Big ones. Hunting ones. Dobermans.

I'd come an' visit.

If you can find me.

I'd see you from space and I'd make a mark on the map and find you.

I'll camouflage so you can't.

I've got X-ray.

Fuck you have.

I'll find you.

No you won't. As soon as I see someone coming I'll break camp an' move on. No one'll find me.

You'll need water.

Plenty out there Snake.

I'd still rather be up there, going to the stars, I say.

He stretches and kicks sand over the fire pit.

We both want the same eh? Something different from this shit.

I'm still hungry so he says we should head into town.

What's the time? I ask.

He looks at the sun, says it must be about nine. I want to get my bike and find somewhere to fix the tyre but he says we can do it another day.

Besides, he says, we got that plan. We gotta be light on our feet.

I don't think he's got no plan. Not like I mean a real plan, check watches sort of plan. I think all he wants is to smash Jimmy even an' leave him spewing. That's what I want too. But if I'd a wish I'd do more. I'd throw him in a tank with these flesh-eating crocs who'd tear him to bits nice an' easy. Or I'd get this laser beam an' strap him to a chair an' put the laser to his head and burn a fuckin' big hole through it. That's what I'd do, sure I would. Or I'd put these big heavy boots on an' kick him in the balls real hard so he falls an' then I'd kick him in the face an' stamp on his face an' I'd get this knife an' I'd like sit on his chest an' carve out his eyeballs. Yeah. I'd do that.

What you doin' Snake?

I'm thinkin' what I'd do with Jimmy.

Yeah, we'll roast him, eh?

He smiles an' every time he smiles I feel good.

Follow me close, keep up now.

Town's busy an' we stay off Main Street cause we don't wanna be seen. We comes to the skate park an' he tells me wait by this tree while he goes an speaks with someone.

How we gonna find him? I ask.

I got it figured, he says but I don't believe him. I reckon best place to find Jimmy be at mum's. As I'm thinking to call out to Dusty 'bout this, I sees him with these two other kids pushing and arguing. The other kids are bigger but I'm's too far away to hear what they saying but I'm guessing it ain't good 'cause one of them's grabbed him by the arm now an' twisted it behind his back, an' the other's flashing someit in front of his face, a knife or something pointed looking. I hear's him shout: Snake get off! And one of the cunts looks my way. Run, I gotta run, an' I do without looking back though I'm fearing what's happening to

him. He's my mate now, he said he'll protect me an' I should do the same for him. But as I turn this corner, just as I'm turning this corner ready to go back to the park, I'm pulled up, yanked off my feet an' when I look all I see is that nose. I wanna puke.

*

It takes only a moment for a life to be lost.

I write a letter for Zayde and Tanaya. They might read it one day.

Your mum is unwell and needs to find help for herself. She has to do this by herself and it will take a long time. She has tried once but that wasn't enough and she needs to find a way to begin again. That's her journey.

She loves and cares for you but is unable at present to give you what you need – a safe and secure home, regular routines so you know what's happening, and you being able to rely on her to do things with you, help you out when you need support, like at school and what you enjoy doing, such as sport.

You will now need to care for one another and when mum is ready we all hope you will be able to go back to her.

You won't be alone in this – there are caring people who you will get to know – yes, it will take a bit of time but give it a chance – who will be by your side. And it's important you tell them what matters to you, how you feel and what you are thinking. Try not to keep it all inside as that can make you angry – think of shaking up a bottle of Coke and then taking off the cap – the drink sprays everywhere and soaks anyone near. That's not good, and it's not good for you. Speak your mind, and speak it clearly so those who are there to guide you can understand what's going on for you.

I know you have been through things in the past that have not been so good. These things shouldn't happen to children. Your mum has done her best for you but she now has to find ways to get well. Let your mum do that and when you see her, as you will, tell her what you are doing so she has those memories too of when she isn't around.

This is a new start. Be strong and think of the future.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 3:

ON SOCIAL WORK AS INSTRUMENT OF THE STATE

It is rarely comfortable being a social worker. Not only are we faced day by day with pain and struggle, and with the failure of social institutions to meet the needs of so many of its citizens, but our position in society is an uneasy and ambiguous one.

(Turner, 1991, p. 241).

One of the biggest issues I've noticed in the last year is this emphasis on social workers training doing statutory placements, which is where they get socialised into what the government thinks social work is.

(quoted in Bell, 2020, p. 80).

The US social work academic, Laura Epstein, noted in the 1990s (and despite the geographical context this translates to any state-organised welfare society in the Anglophone world) the media's conception of a social worker as '...one who takes care of and manages "the troubled". That means "troublesome," deviant, afflicted with ill-being,' adding that the person being taken care of needs to consent and want this to happen' (Chambon et al., 1999, p. 9)⁴⁹.

Put another way.

How do you define social work? I ask my student. Let me put that another way. How do *you* define it?

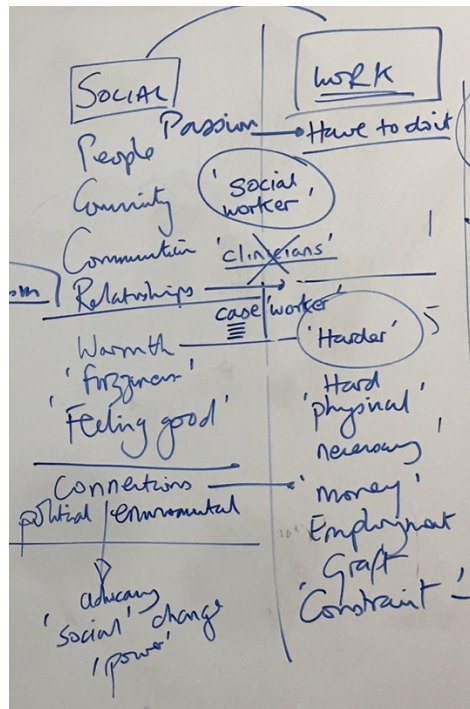
I'm not sure, they reply. It's a funny term really when you think about it.

How do you mean?

Social and work. They are opposites in many ways.

I go to the whiteboard and we work this through.

⁴⁹ Appendix A gives some definitions of social work gleaned from the literature in the course of this research.



Interesting isn't it: social attracts those caring words, while work has that hard edge. What made you want to be a social worker? I ask. And try and steer away from that word help or helper. That catch-all: the 'helping professions'.

Help! My student reacts viscerally.

What's up?

That word help. I hate it.

Why? Why do you hate it?

I don't know.

Think a bit. Your reaction was palpable.

Was it?

Yes. I could feel the room shudder!

My student looks at the whiteboard on which I have written the word large in block caps.

It must be something to do with...

I wait for more but there's none.

A week later we try again.

I have been reflecting why I couldn't say more last time, my student begins. As a social worker helping is what I will be doing one way or the other. Accessing services, writing assessments, advocating for something or someone or listening to someone's story. It is all

to do with helping. What it comes down to for me though, why the word 'help' sticks in my throat, is how my mum used to ask me to *help her* when I was a kid. She'd not so much put it as a *please can you*, making me think it was not something I had to but was wanting to do, sort of without stopping to think. Does that make sense? Instead it came out as, *you will do this because I'm your mum and this is what children do*.

Leave it there, I say, sensing a nerve and not wanting the hour to pass as a counselling session.

(While social workers place great stock on 'critical reflective practice' there is a definite line drawn between this and self-analysis (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Ferguson, 2018; Fook & Askeland, 2007; Morley & O'bree, 2021).)

Let us get back to why did we want to do social work, be a social worker, I say. Perhaps I can help you a bit...

We both share a glance.

Hard to avoid that word isn't it, I say. Anyway, ask me, ask me who I would like to have been when I was a kid.

Who would you like to have been?

Racing driver or astronaut.

That's different.

Flights of fancy! Criminal defence barrister came as a late teen, which is a bit more mainstream. Lots of aspirational middle-class kids have those sort of plans, even though there was no precedent in my family. Not like an eight-year-old who says they want to be a brain surgeon because mum's a doctor. I switched to becoming a writer when I started university the first time around studying English. No writers in the family either as far as I am aware.

When did social worker come into the picture?

Not until November 2012 actually.

What made you turn to social work? my student asks.

That is what this is all about, I say. You and me having this conversation. Why don't we start with: What is social work? How about we consider Foucault?

Who?

French thinker. Academic. Dead. Died 1984, before you were born. Quite famous in his time. Still is. Not heard of him? Not to worry. He wrote, and I'll put it in context in a moment:

‘...what is important is that social work is inscribed within a larger function which for centuries has not ceased to take on new dimensions, which is the function of surveillance-correction. Surveilling individuals, and correcting them, in both sense of the term, that is punishing them or teaching them’ (first published 1972, this edition 1996, p. 89)⁵⁰.

Remember this is stated in the context of France, where social work, or philanthropy, had a different starting point from, for example, England or Australia as acknowledged by another speaker from the same interview (1996, p.91.) Nevertheless, if we accept Foucault’s broad definition of ‘health police’, which he identified arising in the 18th century, as ‘...the ensemble of mechanisms serving to ensure order, the properly channelled growth of wealth and the conditions of preservation of health “in general”’ (from *The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century*, first published 1976, this edition 1980, p. 170) we can start to construct a genealogy⁵¹ of our discipline.

Wasn’t philanthropy an earlier type of social work, before the term social work had even been invented?

It goes back beyond the 19th century, which is when that practice arose, especially in England and then the US. Foucault again notes how the late 18th century led to the rise in London of what he calls ‘experiments’ to deinstitutionalise hospitals and provide specialised services, including one for diseases such as smallpox in 1745 and for children in 1769 (ibid, p.178-181). It wasn’t until the mid-nineteenth century in the UK that charities began to organize social welfare, leading to the formation of the Charity Organisation Society and development of social casework, which focused on the individual rather than social issues at large (Woodroffe, 1962). That’s a bit about Foucault, who wasn’t that much interested in social work as it happens. He was a social historian, among other things, which leads me neatly to...Philosophy.

What?

Philosophy. Love of knowledge.

Yes, I know what it is. But what has this to do with social work?

Everything. Let us start by asking: What is the philosophy of social work?

⁵⁰ This concept of surveillance is discussed in the contemporary context by Ottmann, and is placed within the rise of ‘far-right nationalism from the 1990s’: Noble, C., & Ottmann, G. (eds.) (2020, p135-150). *The Challenge of Right-Wing Nationalist Populism for Social Work: A Human Rights Approach*. Taylor & Francis Group.

⁵¹ In a non-Foucauldian sense, as a search for origins. See: Nietzsche, *Genealogy, History* in Foucault, M. (1986) *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

I've never thought about it.

OK. Let's think about it now.

Do we have to? All I want to do is...

Help people?

If you like.

Which is all well and good. But you need to understand why you want to help.

Sure. I'll go along with that.

Then let us briefly consider the philosophy of social work, starting from the 1970s. In this decade in the UK a series of books under the banner of the *International Library of Welfare and Philosophy* appear. Among them titles such as: *People not cases: a philosophical approach to social work* (Ragg, 1977); *Philosophy in social work* (Timms et al., 1978); *Self-determination in social work* (McDermott, 1975); and *Community and ideology: an essay in applied social philosophy* (Plant, 1974)⁵². Preceding this series by eight years is *Social and Moral Theory in Casework*, also by Raymond Plant, then an assistant lecturer in philosophy at what would become the University of Manchester [UK] (1970)⁵³. Plant's book might be described as a watershed in social work thinking, with one commentator for instance stating, some 38 years later, that: 'He poses the fundamental question for social work – is its moral purpose to facilitate change in the individual or change in society?' (Orme, 2008, p. 826). Such a question is as relevant now as it was back then don't you think?

But can social workers change society?

Hold on to that thought a moment, I just want to finish this bit about philosophy. Starting off by asking: Why this interest in the 1970s in philosophy and social work? I would suggest it was bound up in the search for authenticity as social work sought its credentials as an academic discipline (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2007), and a need for an ontology (Bell, 2012, p. 409). In the UK 'radical social work'⁵⁴ came to the fore as a reaction against the 1960s when social work and social casework were interchangeable terms; when a 'scientific' basis for

⁵² This decade also saw the foundations of 'professional ethics' Reamer, F. G. (2019, pp15-21). *Ethical Theories and Social Work Practice*. London: Routledge.

⁵³ This work was noted by one commentator as having been '...used for the past decade as a basic text in social work'. Clifford, D. (1982). *Philosophy and Social Work. Radical Philosophy*(31), 23.

⁵⁴ It's important to stress that terms such as radical, critical and structural social work had different interpretations across the Anglophone world. See Pease in Gray, M., & Webb, S. (2013, p.24). *The New Politics of Social Work*. Palgrave Macmillan. and Bell, K. (2012) Towards a Post-Conventional Philosophical Base for Social Work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(3), 408-423. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr073> p.409. Critical social work seems to be the dominant discourse in Australian academic circles, with an emphasis on postmodernism, whereas 'radical' social work is seen to be aligned with Marxist ideology. See also McDonald in Lavalette, M., & Ferguson, I. (2007). *International Social Work and the Radical Tradition*. Venture Press.

social work was being explored as a form of validating the discipline within the academy, itself reacting against those who believed intuition of the human condition sufficient. Not that 'casework' has disappeared. It's my own job title after all and differs little from Ragg's analysis some 40 years ago: 'The social worker is an educational rather than a therapeutic agent. He is also committed to the realization of certain moral values in himself and in those with whom he works. Finally, he has the practical task of making available information and advice in the fullest sense' (1977, p. 74). All of this being done, Ragg acknowledges, within the context of society, and from the development of a personal relationship between the social worker and the individual with whom they are working. In fact, Ragg is at pains to restore equality, pulls back from a notion that the social worker exerts power, and underscores how much the worker can 'learn' from the 'client' (ibid, p,120)⁵⁵. He even apologises for using the term 'client', noting: 'It is, in fact, antipathetic to my theme, which develops the idea that social worker and client should endeavour to relate to each other as persons and equals, rather than as professional and client' (ibid, p.viii)⁵⁶.

Radical social work in the UK was about channeling change in society, not standing by because of inadequate housing for instance, and challenging those environmental factors that place people in peril (Ferguson, 2008). Ragg writes: '“Radical casework” involves a socially critical stance based on the concept of social justice. It also involves an endeavour to change society or particular social institutions in so far as they are damaging to certain citizens' (p.140). Not that Ragg himself endorses this view. He argues for 'a personal approach', in which the individual focuses on their personal identity, rather than trying to change society and its institutions. He refers to the 'critical humanism' of Milne (1968): a combination of rational argument, morality and a commitment to social change.

Here in Australia, the radical social work movement is placed fair and square with Whitlam's election in 1972 (Ablett & Morley, 2016; Lavalette et al., 2007; Noble et al., 2017). Drawing on Marxist critique from the UK and US, social work at the time was lambasted, among other things, for posturing and conforming to the governing elite. While this was built upon an academic framework, social workers working directly with the public

⁵⁵ Ragg draws on Friere here, referencing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).

⁵⁶ Not that this has gone away. Gray and Webb, writing in 2013, carefully steer away from using either client or service user to a preference for 'citizen users'. *The New Politics of Social Work*. Palgrave Macmillan. Bear in mind these authors pay allegiance to the shrines of Marx and Badiou.

were motivated to ‘...become institutional subversives and ...bring about basic institutional reform’ while also developing the political consciousness of clients (Pease in Noble et al., 2017, pp. 4-5). During the 1980s, a decade in which neoliberalism flourished, a feminist approach came into focus, (Dominelli, 1989), followed in the 1990s by postmodernist debates (Fook & Pease, 1999) during the time of New Public Management (NPM for short) broadly defined as the implementation of business and private sector ideas into the public sector⁵⁷. It had three key pillars: incentivisation, competition and disaggregation. The first is straight-forward enough: that people are rewarded when they make changes, for example, that reduce costs and improve outcomes; the second ensures that tenders for projects in the public sector are awarded on the basis of open competition and go to the organisation that quotes low or gives informed reasons why they are best suited; while the last breaks up departments into smaller units, a means of decentralisation so much liked by conservative or right-leaning governments. However, it was a Labour government in the UK, led by Tony Blair, that was in the bandwagon of this movement with its Clinton-esque doctrine of ‘The Third Way’⁵⁸. I was living in London at the time and remember the euphoria that greeted Blair’s 2 May 1997 victory over the, by then, discredited Conservative prime minister John Major, euphoria that turned to anger in 2003 when Blair followed the US and President Bush by invading Iraq on what turned out to be false claims that the country was building its own nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction. But you also have to recall these were transformative years after the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, years that reshaped the world, created global hysteria, made everyone wary and vulnerable. It was the beginning of the surveillance machine, even though the internet was still fairly primitive compared to what we know today – no facial recognition, no AI. This is what I wrote in my diary the day following the attack: ‘It was a vision of unimaginable horror – beyond any belief. The twin towers in NY disintegrating, and seen live on tv. I watched stunned, shocked, without words – and still I watch the repeats on tv of the 2 planes, hijacked, containing passengers screaming, dead, dying, about to die, smash into the towers – a fireball – debris raining down on Manhattan – a Manhattan that we visited last October

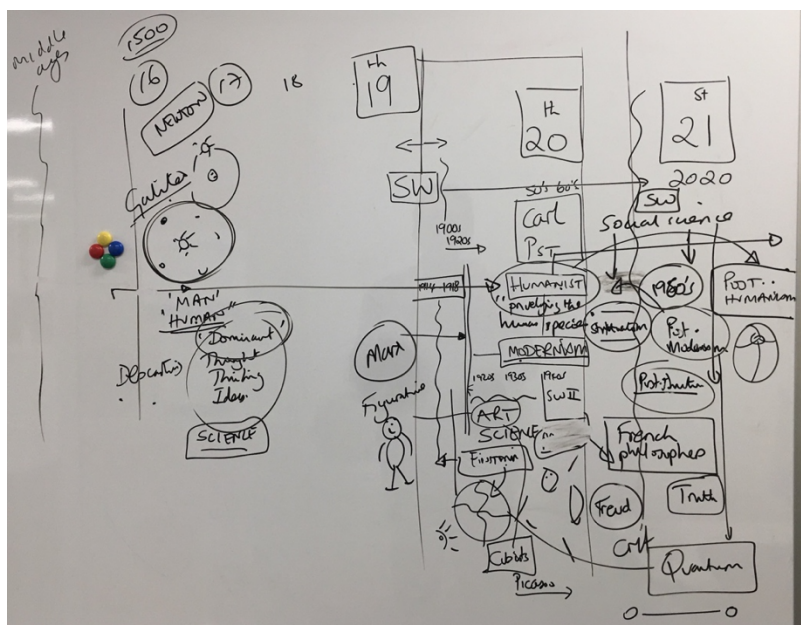
⁵⁷ See for example, <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research/has-new-public-management-improved-public-services/>

⁵⁸ Anthony Giddens was an intellectual force behind this project: there’s a concise review here <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/feb/10/labour.uk1>

– taking the fast lift to the top of the Observation deck on a day crystal clear, much like yesterday. Now those towers are no more and probably thousands have died, murdered, perished and 100,000s mourn loved ones. I know no words. I would like to pray – but to what end. Silence is better. Yet we watch the replays again and again and still it hasn't sunk in. In shock. In shock. Traumatized.' Now we are well and truly in the context of politics, bringing us back to your question: Can social workers change society, and if they can, how? In attempting to answer that, however, brings us full-square to current social work thinking, or, if you prefer, the post-conventional or, indeed, 'social work beyond the anthropocene' (Pease & Bozalek, 2020), even a nod to posthumanism (Webb, 2020). Clear?

I'm confused.

Let me draw it for you.



So where we are now, my student struggles, is... post-humanism? What's that?

It's a theoretical position that challenges 'human exceptionalism...disrupting the anthropocentrism in social work which positions humans as an elite species at the centre of world history' (Pease & Bozalek, 2020, p. 2)⁵⁹.

That is all very well, but what about child protection? my student asks. I don't see how you can apply something so theoretical as that to the work you do with children and families.

⁵⁹ There's a fracture in progressive social work thinking at the present time between those situating the practice firmly as a response to the ecological crisis – eco or green social work (Panagiotaras, C. V., Boddy, J., Gray, T., & Ife, J. (2022). (Re-)Imagining Social Work in the Anthropocene. *The British Journal of Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac075> and those who see a more radical response that disrupts the binary, human and non-human, as in the Pease & Bozalek collection of edited essays (2020).

You are 'scared' of theory?

Not exactly scared. Just confused, not sure how it relates to the doing of social work, to the doing of child protection.

That takes us back to Foucault for, while he may not have paid a great deal of attention to social work as a practice, he had a lot to say about power and how this is active through the way society, and by that I mean institutions of government, which after all are at the apex of the inverted pyramid of power, labels others. He called this *discourse*, of which social work is one, and it is through this that power is administered. Consider this from the man himself, in a rare interview he gave on our work: 'What is important is that social work is inscribed within a larger social function that has been taking on new dimensions for centuries, the function of surveillance-and-correction: to surveil individuals and to redress them, in the two meanings of the word, alternatively as punishment and as pedagogy' (Chambon et al., 1999, p. 92). Child protection is administered by the state. I am employed by the state. Therefore, it can be argued, I am none other than a branch of the state police, my role to ensure normalisation of state control – those who err will be punished, which, in this context, means children will come into state care to be 'normalised'.

That's taking it a bit far isn't it? You sound like Big Brother.

I am glad you mentioned that – George Orwell and *1984*. Did you know research has suggested that book is the most quoted reference in social science⁶⁰? Anyhow. Child protection has become the all-seeing-eye by default, policing the individual, doing risk analysis, our work '...shaped by increasing managerialist demands for information' and performance indicators (Powell & Khan, 2012, p. 136), overlain by a culture of audit and 'where need is understood through a risk lens' (Featherstone et al., 2018, p. 12). We knock on people's doors, ask intimate questions about their lives. We step into children's bedrooms, look inside the fridge, check for a bong hidden in a cupboard. Sometimes we take their children away because we judge them to be unsafe (Muzicant & Peled, 2018). Back at the office we sit in front of our computers and write about what we've seen and heard, protected by 24/7 CCTV surveillance, our work pressured by time and workload,

⁶⁰ See Yazell et al, 2021, The role of literary fiction in facilitating social science research. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-021-00939-y>

shortage of workers and managers, sometimes due to burn-out or mental illness, compounded by frustration at the lack of available resources to deliver change in the lives of children and families because the state has cut services, transferring the onus back to the individual – that’s neoliberalism for you in action (Brydon, 2006; Butler-Warke et al., 2020; Saltiel, 2016; Wallace & Pease, 2011). Our work is reduced to that of a technical, administrative function with people’s ‘identities being constructed in terms of their mental health diagnoses’ (Morley & O’bree, 2021, p. 11), which means they are de-individualised, placed in a category of need that is strictly defined by a so-called expert, be they GP, psychologist or psychiatrist. Once social work was radical. It seems to have diminished its aspirations over the decades (Hanssen et al., 2015).

Wow, you really don’t want me to work in child protection after I graduate, do you?

It is not that. I need you to be aware of the pressures, conflicts, stresses of this work; the perpetual tension between your aspirations to promote change set against the deadening weight of the organisation. Social work’s hidden nature I call it.

It might be helpful here to introduce the work of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, particularly as his work, in general, introduces the idea of ‘reflexive sociology’ which draws a connection between both social work and autoethnography. Bourdieu recognised that the researcher could not be objective and had to be aware of their own biases on who or what they were studying, needed to be reflective, although he described this as auto-social analysis. While this is not dissimilar to an autoethnographic approach, there are differences and Bourdieu was certainly not one to introduce his personal life story into his work, far from it⁶¹. Nevertheless, there are threads of similarity, especially on how the researcher influences the relational space. It is his concept of habitus, including what are called fields and capital, that I really want to focus on. For this I will draw on interpretations by Houston and Swords (2022) and Garrett (2007), who have written on this approach in the context of social work⁶². Habitus may be broadly defined as the way people behave in the community or society in which they live, so much so that they do not recognise how they are acting because they consider this to

⁶¹ Bourdieu called this ‘objectivation’ and was at pains to emphasise this was not the same as ‘observation’. He was also dismissive of navel-gazing or ‘narcissistic entertainment’ – see Roew, E, 2018, in *Bourdieu’s Field Theory and the Social Sciences*, Albright, J et al (eds), Singapore, Springer.

⁶² I also have to rely on translations of Bourdieu as I am not proficient in French! This means I will be drawing on secondary analysis, unless there is a quotation, in English, from the original text.

be 'common sense' or 'second nature', even habitual⁶³. As one writer puts it: 'Through the use of habitus in social practice, history, as past experience, becomes projected into the future' (quoted in Garrett, p.357}. I find that a powerful concept since we are all born into a time and place not of our choosing, quite clearly, and as we grow both physically and consciously, as our understanding of our place in the world matures, so we take on practices that enable us to function successfully, and we are acculturated in to those practices. Bourdieu believed habitus is embodied in all we do, from how we walk and gesture, to what we eat and drink. In other words, habitus might be said to represent our character as enacted in social space. His collaborator, Loïc Wacquant, noted that Bourdieu did not invent this concept, but rather refeashioned it from the work of Aristotle and others (2016, p. 64). Wacquant also observed that habitus '...is never the replica of a single social structure since it is a *multilayered and dynamic set of schemata* that records, stores, and prolongs the influence of the diverse environments successively transversed during one's existence' (italics in original, p. 68).

While habitus is over-arching (and 'society' itself may be considered a 'meta-habitus') the 'field' is a social and relational place where individuals locate themselves and work within. For example, social workers might occupy either the welfare field or the bureaucratic field depending on their specific occupational role (a community homeless service, for instance, or a government policy unit), while lawyers are positioned very much in the legal field and doctors and nurses within the medical field, and so on. These fields each have their defined rules, regulations and codes that are understood by those who work within them. For example, social work has a code of ethics and there is a pathway to becoming a 'qualified' worker through accredited university courses. This gives them legitimacy. However, there is a wider concept operating at the macro level. As Weigmann (2017) writes: 'In Bourdieusian terms, the field of social work lies under the control of the state, which itself is not a single monolithic entity, but a collection of sub-fields "vying over the definition and distribution of public goods". Within this collective, social work represents the "left hand of the state" – the "feminine," "spendthrift," in charge of "social functions" such as education, health, housing, welfare and offering protection and relief to the poor. In contrast, the "right hand" or "masculine" side of the state is orientated toward economic discipline and law and order' (p. 101).

⁶³ Referred to in the literature as 'doxa'.

That has an echo to what we spoke of earlier about the softer side of 'social' and the harder side of 'work'.

Exactly. But I find this interpretation of fields too narrow, since individuals can and do have fluidity and move between them, rather than being constrained within a single one. Take myself for example. I might be recognised as a social worker by my place of work, although strictly speaking I am a 'caseworker', which might be, and justifiably, considered another 'field'. Yet within my frame of reference, the world I perceive, as opposed to the world projected on me by 'others', be that co-workers, friends, unseen statisticians at the Australian Bureau of Statistics who keep a score on workforce trends, is far more nuanced. My 'fields' are also journalism, creative writing, art and sculpture in particular, academia as a postgraduate, and even 'transitioning to retirement'. These overlap and co-mingle, resulting in what might be described as 'fuzzy fields' that are mixed together or spread like different coloured paints dropped on to a bath of water which is then gently stirred. What this means is that individuals are moving in and out of 'fields' and adopting the various 'codes' or ways of behaviour suited to each one. Now, within each field – and more you use or hear the word the more you are reminded of a contest or a game perhaps – individuals are continuously seeking to assert themselves by acquiring and consolidating what Bourdieu termed 'capital', of which he identified four: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Capital might be described as the way people obtain prestige or acquire social mobility. Obvious signs of capital are wealth, authority and power, as demonstrated by objects (expensive cars or watches), or cultural and symbolic such as membership of professional organisations enabling people to add prefixes or suffixes to their names on correspondence⁶⁴. I am in one right now as I complete this thesis so I can graduate with a postgraduate qualification that allows me to add a recognised title to my name that can act as entry point to the field of academia. In fact, without a doctorate it is extremely difficult to advance a career within this field, and this is true of other fields where capital has to be accrued and can also be lost. For example, if a solicitor contravenes the ethical code of that 'field' they can be debarred from practice. Looking at our field, social work, Garrett makes this observation regarding cultural capital, which is extremely relevant in the context of worker/client relations: '...the body is "an instrument of cultural capital" and...This might be reflected...in middle-class people's

⁶⁴ To this might be added economic capital since membership of these groups, and promotion within, increases an individual's spending power.

demeanour in, say, child protection conferences' (2007, p. 359). What this looks like, and I can speak to this, is the manner projected through your body and facial expressions in which you, a person from the educated field, so-to-speak, feels comfortable and adopts a certain attitude in such meetings because you are accustomed to them. They are part of your capital, as are assessments, reports, and all the other bureaucratic apparatus that accompanies such events afterwards. And this leads me on to another dimension of Bourdieu's habitus – that of the 'client' or 'service user', which needs to be assessed within the habitus of the worker. Is that ever possible I wonder? How can we begin to comprehend the life of another?

It's like trying to get inside another person's thoughts, having empathy.

That's right. But why don't you consider your field and the capital you have accumulated up to this stage in your life for, as Houston and Swords observe, '...professionals must build a prescient awareness of how their habitus has been shaped by their social class, the education and cultural fields in which they have participated and the privileges or disadvantages embedded in their social positioning' (2022, p. 1945).

May I come back to you on that?

Of course.

To return to the discussion we had before: Why do we become, want to become, social workers? Perhaps because it is not simply a job but responds to our ethical duty and sense of identity (Bell, 2020, p. 43). In child protection, though, you face a daily struggle to maintain your balance on that tightrope.

I hear, says my student, that some believe the whole system, the child protection system, is broken⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ The most recent, an ABC News investigation that interviewed 700 people from all walks of life: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-20/hundreds-of-people-speak-out-against-child-protection-system/101094220>. This led to the National Children's Commissioner stating that the system 'desperately needs reform' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-20/ag-concerned-by-child-protection-investigation-findings/101160674>

It probably is. What is needed, some say, is a national system that is non-partisan⁶⁶.

Is that possible?

Ask the legislators.

I am asking you.

Anything is possible if there is the political and emotional will to change. Un-fortunately, while the responsibility for raising children rests with their parents, and broader family network – how does that saying go? ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ – when that network starts to unravel and the child faces neglect or abuse, the community delegates or defers to the state. And the state, as manifest in the 2020s, wants to delegate back to community. Ultimately it is the children who suffer. This all brings me back to that question earlier: what is the moral purpose of social work? Can a social worker change an individual or create change in society? And should they?

I think that when you work individually you can bring about change in another. Isn't that what you try and do when you are working with a family?

We try and enable them to make the changes and guide them to raise those questions themselves. In that short extract I gave about Courtney and her son Lukas...

When she told you to leave her alone, get out of her space?

Exactly. That was the first knock on the door, so to speak, and very often that is the scenario that occurs. Certainly it would be unusual for a parent to say: *Why yes, you are absolutely right. I do need to make changes and I will start straight away. Just tell me what to do.* That doesn't happen. So you go back, or you phone and send text messages and try to establish some form of communication.

But Courtney can just refuse to see you, speak with you.

Of course. And that is when we become an instrument of the state.

What might be Courtney's habitus, her fields and her capital? Houston and Swords suggest that while social workers will be unable to precisely articulate the habitus of those with whom they work, 'they must develop discerning propositions about them.'

⁶⁶ As an example for reforming the statutory system see this article in The Conversation first published 23 March 2023: <https://theconversation.com/our-child-protection-system-is-clearly-broken-is-it-time-to-abolish-it-for-a-better-model-200716>

They should reflect on how habitus shapes the service user's viewpoints, reactions, emotional expression and action' (2022, p. 1944). Let's speculate.

Courtney is (or may be) a single mum with two children: Lukas and his older sister, Ava. Ava is 16 and lives with her 19-year-old boyfriend, who has a steady job as an apprentice car mechanic. Ava has dropped out of school but would like to get a job to do with animals and works on Friday and Saturday at a veterinary practice. She has little to do with Courtney but sees her maternal grandmother, Ruby, once a week, but only when she knows her mum will not be visiting. Lukas also sees his sister and nan and he goes to stay with her when life at the flat becomes too hectic or mum is having one of her 'turns' or her friend Martin has invited himself to stay. Ruby would like Lukas to come and live with her permanently and she has told him he is welcome – there is plenty of room after her husband died last year. She has a three-bedroomed house in the suburbs on the edge of town and works at the private hospital as a registered nurse. She is worried he is getting into trouble at school and associating with kids older than him who have, in her words, 'questionable habits'. Neither Lukas nor Ava have any contact with their father, who took off soon after Lukas was born. However, in the past few months Ava has become more curious to know who he is and knows his name because she now has her birth certificate. She has asked Ruby about him but all her nan will say is 'he's best forgotten about, much like that new fella she's got herself mixed up with'.

Having been through this exercise, Courtney is now objectified and become data. As Rowe notes: 'Rather than denying the inherent subjectivity in our research – from selecting the research space, the participants and what we publish – we must recognise how we are complicit within the field, our role as researcher, and also how we are complicit in objectifying the field and the participants. As scholars, as observers, interviewers and participant observers, we are objectifying the participants as "data", rationalising and representing' (2018, pps. 108-109). It is necessary to remember though that Courtney exists only through these electronic marks and the image created can become fixed in the mind so that it becomes nothing more than a caricature. This is as far from my intention as possible, and it is my skills as writer/novelist/autoethnographer to draw out her 'character' so that just enough is known to the reader to avoid reductionism. That is why I chose to avoid telling her story, instead orbiting around her so she remains slightly out of focus. I also chose not to be specific about identifying her habitus, since each of us will come to our own interpretations, influenced by our own.

But what if you had read this instead, from her point of view:

When he texted to say can he come over to watch the race my first reaction was no way Jose. At first I heard nothin'. Then I thought maybe he got no credit. After I'd had a couple of smokes an' a cup of coffee an' still he hadn't texted back, I got to wonderin' why not. I gave my girlfriend a call an' she said I was fuckin' lunatic. Course I get it, I told her. I'm not completely stupid.

It's noon an' I still don't know if he's coming. I've done my best to pretty myself up, brushed out my hair an' put on some scent I pulled from under the bed, rubbish scent he gave me. I got the telly ready, gave the screen a wipe so it's crystal clear, made the sofa neat so there's room to sit without being crowded out by shit. I even got a bottle of Jim Beam. All I can do is wait I guess, wait an' see.

To pass the time I've opened a book. Since the kid's been gone I've started reading a bit. I found this paperback of Gatsby, the school name stamped on the front. When I saw that I got to day-dream, how I never see any of 'em any mores 'cept for Martin of course, how they've all just kinda vanished. I do run across them, Centrelink, the shops, that kind of thing, but never to talk to. I feel like I've been put out in the dark where the wild, untamed things are.

I don't understand much in the book, it's old-fashioned like newspapers, yet sort of nice an' comforting. And though I have to read things through a few times, or just skim those that're too hard, I came across this bit which could be me: I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.

It's summer now, an' that's what I want to tell him. It doesn't always have to be this. We can change, we don't have to be stuck in this blow-fly town for ever. That's why I want him to come so's I can tell him, make him understand. Me an' him an' the kid making a new start where no one's heard of us. Just like sis did.

Then he's here. Not a word. Let's himself in. Straight to the fridge to get ice, breaks open the bourbon an' pours a full glass.

Nice seeing you too, I says.

Turn the sound up.

He throws the book over the back as he sits an' offers me a ciggie automatically, eyes locked on the screen, scanning the latest odds. He's in shorts an' a tank top an' smells of shit with a whiff of deodorant like he sprayed before coming in.

Fuck that, he says, pointing at the screen. I put \$50 each way an' now look. It's sweatin' all over.

Who put you on to that one? Your're mate with the cars?

He don't answer. He's leaning forward, one hand with the bourbon, the other rubbin' my thigh, ciggie hanging from lower lip.

How you been, he says.

Oh, thanks for asking. That a new tat?

He don't answer and pulls a small, square purple box from his trousers.

I got you this, he says.

What is it?

Fuckin' open it an' you'll see.

Alright, drop your attitude.

It ain't wrapped or anything, an' I'm guessing I know what it is an' workin' out what I'm goin' say.

It's beautiful.

It's not beautiful at all but I gotta say that. I slide it on my ring finger. it's silver, silver coloured, with little bits of crystal, I don't think diamond, round the edge.

How'd you know it'd a fit?

He shrugs and goes for a refill.

Get me one too, love, while you're there.

He slams himself back down on the sofa, hands me my drink, puts his arm around an' pulls me closer. I'm lookin' at the ring thinking, I gotta tell him, gotta tell him now.

Martin.

He's on his phone, texting someone about the race.

We need to talk Martin. Can you listen for once.

It's the race for fuck's sake.

He pulls his arm away, shifts to one side so we're not touching, still on his phone. I grab the remote, kill the sound.

What the...

He chucks the mobile aside, leans in, face to face, eyes red and steaming, breath fogged with drink. I know he's had a few before he got here.

What's there to talk about, eh? I got you the ring what else you want?

I want a change Martin.

Want a what?

Move on, get a life, a real life. Start again. You, me, the kid.

I can tell he's not getting it. He's slouched now, legs kicked out. He's searching for his phone.

Don't you want more than this? I say.

You gone fucked weird.

He's up, texting. He's walking away. He's out the door, slams it. I hear him crashing down the stairs, bellowing on the phone. I pull the ring off and bury it down the side of the sofa.

*

I wanna cry.

I wanna pull something over my head to suck all the air out.

I wanna dig a hole and bury myself.

I wanna die.

I can die.

I'm lying on the bed dressed nice. I got the bourbon, I got the pills, I got Gatsby an' I'm starting to write on the empty page at the end. It's enough space. I haven't much to say. Just look after the kid for me. Tell him mum tried. Tell him I love you.

That's what I started.

I get as far as writing Just look after the kid when I stop.

I won't die. Not yet.

Changes everything. Habitus. Field. Capital. Courtney is revealed as having aspirations and dreams of an alternative life. This scene adds depth to her characterisation and provides a base from which social work students might discuss and explore their perceptions of her psycho-social domain. Courtney's voice is acutely articulated with its rhythms and idiosyncracies accentuated, while her inner torment, living with a man she despises but to whom she is nevertheless being controlled – at least for now – is allowed to show itself, no more than in her statement: *I feel like I've been put out in the dark where the wild, untamed things are*. There is also an indication she wants to continue her education, as in her efforts to re-read *The Great Gatsby*. The use of a short piece

of fictional writing, such as this, in the context of pedagogy could assist in drawing out students' prejudices and assumptions, while being an opportunity to explore possible real-life responses. I believe this is an as yet untapped field of social work and provides opportunities for development in a creative writing program aimed at social workers and others in allied health.

What if you weren't a statutory child protection social worker?

Then why would I be in her life? I am only there because of a child protection concern, probably a worry Lukas's school has raised about his attendance or appearance, lack of food or he is always tired and mum never answers her phone when they try and contact her, and he never has money to go on school outings, and his behaviours towards his peers and teaching staff have noticeably changed since the start of term. In other words, he does not match up to 'normal' social expectations and the Education Department, another blunt state instrument if you like, also has its mandate to ensure compliance.

I suppose that is one reason parents chose to teach their kids at home.

Exactly. They opt out of the system and make a moral decision not to follow the dictums of the state or of 'society'. So when I ask, is it a social worker's responsibility to ensure people maintain to the codes of the state narrative, I am really making an argument for individual choice.

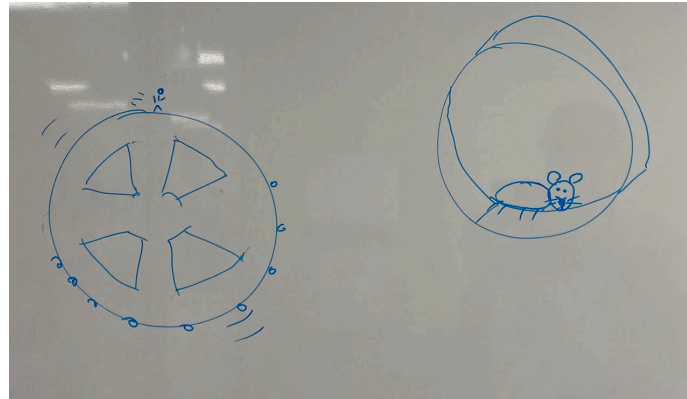
Even when that choice is harmful? If Courtney continues to take drugs and neglects her children then she may die and her children may starve or worse. That doesn't seem to be a path worth taking.

Agreed. However, how about seeking to put in place social and environmental conditions that may address the circumstances Courtney finds herself in?

How do you mean?

Why is Courtney taking drugs? When did she start? What might have been her motivation? What is the housing like, I will make an assumption she lives in social or public housing, and how might there be changes that prevent drug dealers preying on single parent families? These are just a few of the questions one needs to ask. Hundreds more will follow. In short, what I am saying is that there needs to be structural reform to prevent families falling into the cycle of abuse and neglect. It cannot be left to the individual.

I've just had a thought, my student says. While you were talking. It just popped into my head, about the meaning of social work. Social is about movement, it's everywhere and is about human activity. Whereas work, work is about tasks and providing guidance, 'a helping hand' to others so to speak. Let me draw it for you.



Looks like a treadmill, I say. The mouse sits stationary while the social worker is going round and around, trying to keep up with all their allocated tasks and, once in a while, the two connect up, if only for a moment.

And may be that's the dilemma of social work: it is so multifaceted that it defies definition, and draws on various bodies of knowledge to ensure values of equity and social justice are maintained.

That seems to be a good place to finish for today.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1976 TO 1982

PROLOGUE TO 1976

The first half of the year is spent in the Berkshire city of Windsor, home of the Castle and a Royal residence. I work at a Youth Hostel and have many spare hours during the day, my hours of duty being early morning and then late afternoon to close at around 10pm. While there I fall in love with a young woman, slightly older, (called Kathleen in Episode 2 that follows) who is also doing a summer stint at the hostel. These entries about our relationship are omitted, though I should add that I spend much of the following year, and several years after, trying to reconnect with her, and failing.

The summer of 1976 is remembered as being one of the hottest on record in the UK.

In October I matriculate at the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, to study English Literature and Classics.

I start a parallel series of Notebooks or Journals to the Diary. Entries from these are identified in italic.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1976

5 March: I shall be thirty by 2000 and then established maybe as a writer.

19 March: As I hammer my thoughts into unity so the diary becomes a receptacle for any ideas beaten out of my mind. This is very useful and shall be useful later when I come to look through the entries with more care than I give now. It may show the development of an indecisive adolescent to an artistic man: perhaps in its own way it is 'The Portrait of an Artist'⁶⁷. My whole life will be the continuous reappraisal and assessment of ideas I now hold, as well as the rejection of some and development of mature, more thorough beliefs. So, the journal will always in the large part be the evolution of the artistic spirit; yet I hope not to the exclusion of all else. Much is gained by reflection on modern topics of interest, for the artist does live in a world and is not of a world on his own...

⁶⁷ A reference to James Joyce, a book by which I was much influenced.

May: ...I accept whatever the future of my life has to give me; it is very probable that I shall fail in my endeavour to trim and cut the sails of my imagination into pieces fit for others to read; already I have some little comprehension of the agony of placing words in a beautiful, correct and subtle sequence so as to make the word just an extension of the mind.

26 December: thought on my life - how I had not committed myself. Considered a ball of string tied into knots, and I manage to untangle a piece at a time, then become stuck. Work out this image.

PROLOGUE TO 1977

I turn 20 and the year falls neatly in two halves. Until mid-year I am in Newcastle, living in the seaside resort of Whitley Bay, a short train ride from the city centre and university. At this point, I quit my studies and return to live with my parents, while searching for a job as a journalist. In November I am finally offered a job as an office boy on a start-up magazine in London, as I come to the realisation that I will need to support my creative writing through paid employment (October 30).

During the year I pass comment on what I describe as, in the literary fashion I then adopted, 'melancholia' (August 14), better known as depression. This has shaded my adult life and is incorporated into a scene in part three of the fiction.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1977

[Note - Italic entries from journal]

Jan 23: I'm a little tired of English studies. Do not know what my future is – whether to take Law. To write I know I must.

Mar 1: Old woman walking down the street in her stocking feet and carrying her shoes in her hands. She drops one and picks it up and as I pass says, Can't afford to lose them, too expensive.

Mar 10: What I fear most is wasting the time of my life. That's why I wish to move into law just in case my writing fails.

Mar 29: *Memories of childhood – swimming, undressing in a cubicle for two, coach to swimming baths, drowning, learnt to swim, being pulled from water by hair.*

[Note – from this date all entries are from the journal]

Apr 22: The layer like quality of life... It is the unexpected twists of life; the turning up of unexpected people in unfamiliar places; the chance meeting of an acquaintance long lost heard of; the shifting sands which unearth a colourful though often undesired collection of people who one once knew. Or it is the catching sight of a face in the crowd which has the lines of familiarity but before one is able to challenge, the face has disappeared and you are left wondering if it really was who you thought.

May 26: Sign seen above a shop: 'Deceased and emigrating? Then sell your unwanted furniture to us. Good rates paid.'

June 12: One day, who knows, this journal will be read by people not of my family; by critics and commentators, students and pedants, money makers and churls. Whoever comes to read this candid disclosure of myself in words will be surprised at how hard I tried to drive myself towards art. It was not a born gift; no art is born, it is made with extreme difficulty. The trouble is that I have not suffered enough.

June 19: [Inserted into journal]



Aug 14: An hour of darkness, an afternoon of rainfall. I have noted times of melancholia before, but never have I suffered such a prolonged attack or felt less disposed to composition. It is when I am unable to concentrate or to write that I dream of distractions which are fantastic and often obscene. Berlioz calls melancholia the spleen - a more picturesque word for this feeling.

August Bank Holiday: Bright, a little wind and the prospect of a warm day. The author must breathe the air that his characters breathe, must know them as intimately as he knows his best friend ... He must dream dreams with them and play their games: only then will he be accomplished and able to write about them so that they sing out to the reader and move them as much as they have moved him.

Sept 2: Seen on a church noticeboard: The resources of civilisation are not yet exhausted.

Sept 6: A rose when it has flowered turns soft and its green stem bends and the petals turn bacon brown.

Sept 15: Scientists have concluded that the universe was created in approximately 3 minutes and that it will end in slightly more than four. Who is God?

Sept 20: The idea that the universe is finite and only man's ineptitude makes him desire Infinity.

I have often felt the wilful determination to pursue certain quests which I know are impossible but nevertheless tempt me to recklessness. This I have felt, but never have I acted upon the determination. It can be compared to a man who, thinking that he would like to climb a dangerous mountain, is yet too timid to try. However, if he is a man of dreams he can create for himself marvellous fancies in which he surmounts the obstacle and wins for himself glory and immortality. We have all indulged in this 'castle building' I am sure. This is a kind of the Fury, an impulse of the will to break the bondage of our everyday lives and perform acts which, in our dreams, we know we can do, but in our waking state, believe to be dangerous and inhuman. This I will call the Fury of Dreams, and it is not uncommon.

The other Fury is less common and haunts, I believe, the artist... the Fury of the artist is his search for a perfect artistry and sublime style. But what he dreams he soon forgets and his style becomes ... pedestrian. The artist is more than a writer or stylist: he is pre-eminently a thinker. He does not only imagine but he also proposes schemes for improvement. It is when the schemes he thinks become incompatible with the world in which he lives that the Fury shakes him from tip to toe...It is the Fury of every artist and is therefore an archetype.

Oct 4: This will be my last day in Newcastle as I leave tomorrow. I am not continuing the course. I saw [my professor]. He was considerate and urbane and expressed the opinion that ...I was a misfit. I thought that expression accurate and not at all derogatory. I admitted my desire to write...he said that I would have a hard 2 or 3 years ahead of me, to which I agreed.

Oct 6: This morning went to labour exchange⁶⁸. Open plan office with hardboard sheets in front of desks to give a little privacy. Woman I spoke with was about 30, had a slight moustache, had thick fatty white arms and wore blue trousers. She smoked. Public service today is not sympathetic to the public and regards them rather as intrusive and wearisome.

Oct 22: I have had 67 replies from newspapers and not one has offered me a job.

Oct 30: I am old enough to realise that writing alone, for the next years, is not sufficient to support my life. I have also the choice to make now whether I earn a great deal of money in a short time so that I may figure independent or to take small remuneration. At least I know my writing, because unpopular, will never give me great riches or even small fame.

Undated: not for nothing, I now realise, did Fitzgerald write full histories of his characters so that he might know them, without including any of this in the novel. Furthermore, as in drama, each chapter must be considered as a scene, with its part in the full sequence of things. Therefore, a plan of each chapter, summarising action, development etc, must be written before starting to write; and the development of the book, including chapter notes, must be completed before the work is begun.

⁶⁸ A government office where unemployed went to sign on to receive State benefit.

Nov 14: A young man in a London street asks me where Old Bailey is. I notice that his teeth are streaked with veins of blood.

(In early November, I accept a job working for a start-up magazine near Fleet Street, London.)

Dec 3: I was shown about Fleet Street by a colleague at work. He has been in this business for 20 years and what he told me during this day was what he had learned, not through books, but through cold experience... I understood him when he said that he would rather finish work early and be home with his children and wife. When I talked about ideals he said that young men were an 'old man's pain in the neck'... he talked about how, when he was a boy, he had been a messenger for a daily newspaper, then had gone into the army for national service. When one came out of the army one was recognised to be a man - there was a line, a very clear line, drawn between boyhood and manhood which there no longer is. But the most interesting thing he told me was this - that everyone has a price and can be bought.

Dec 31: Herewith ends this journal. May it peacefully acquire eternity and be a sourcebook of great amusement to myself when I am older.

*Note: completed in June 1977, the events described occurred in the summer of 1976.
Formatting and punctuation as in typed original.*

Note: [...] indicates a section that has been cut.

During the summer prior to his going to a university he was working in Windsor⁶⁹. He enjoyed the work and the opportunity it offered him to meet and talk with people, both young and old, who stayed overnight at the hostel⁷⁰. His work in the hostel allowed him the daytime free, for he worked in the early morning and late at night. In the afternoon he often went for a walk by the river or in the Great Park⁷¹, there among the fields and trees. Often he was accompanied by a young woman. He trusted her, and, one afternoon, he talked to her of his choices of life as they walked away from the statue of the Mad King⁷² towards the waters.

It was a warm afternoon, and, because it was not yet high summer and being midweek they met few people. They walked slowly, as one does when the hours ahead seem endless, she folding her arms across her chest and her eyes tracing the path they followed, and he looking at the sky and the trees, which were heavy with green leaves.

“Can you hear the clouds moving through the air?” he said, turning to her. She raised her head. “Yes. I'm so happy we don't have to work during the day.”

He ran in front, to where there was an oak tree, and sat down by its roots; from where he rested he could just make out the Castle. She came and knelt near him. They remained silent for a little while, enjoying the quietness which had seemed to drop over them as soon as they had entered under the overhanging branches of the tree.

“I feel pleasantly at ease,” he said, rather to himself than with any desire to be heard.

“What's that you said?”

“I was saying how strange life can be.”

Then he said suddenly: “Do you know what I hope to do after I've finished here and after I've been to university?”

⁶⁹ Town west of London and known for its Castle, one of the Royal residences.

⁷⁰ Youth Hostel, where I was employed in a gap year between High School and university.

⁷¹ A public park of some 2000ha.

⁷² George III.

“What?” she asked lazily, plucking the grass around her and knotting the ends together. But, seeing that she was barely interested and that this was probably not the best time to say something too serious, he mumbled softly, “No no, I won't tell you, not just yet.” He rose hurriedly and walked round the tree to the other side, where he leant against the trunk. “Now come on, what is it you were going to say?” she persisted from where she knelt on the warm grass. He did not answer but looked at the trees nearby and thought that through the wood he could see the blue water of the lake shining like ice in the hot afternoon sun. He felt the warmth of the sun on his face and the bark through his back and, for a while, closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes he saw that Kathleen had walked to the edge of the wood, where she was picking some flowers. He felt tired and wished he had not fallen asleep in the sun. For a moment he found it difficult to focus his eyes and the colours of the trees and of the sky seemed mixed together; when he looked to the sky the clouds appeared to be still and, he thought, the earth was moving. Instinctively, in fear that he might fall, he held onto the tree trunk and closed his eyes. Opening them once more he felt the giddiness had passed and he began to walk to the edge of the wood, where Kathleen waited.

“I saw you were asleep. I wanted to pick some of these daffodils,” she said as he came to her side. He looked wistfully at the flowers and said that now she had picked them they would die. “But if they were left they would die. Don't you think they would look beautiful in my room?”

“They are beautiful under that tree,” he answered, but not crossly for he understood why she had taken them.

They walked through the woods and came to the water. But first they stopped to look at the totem pole⁷³.

“It looks as though it needs painting,” he said.

She read the notice which told what the carvings represented; then they walked to the bridge, which spanned the narrowest channel of the water. From one side the water ran and fell down a waterfall built just in front of the bridge. They sat on the wall of the bridge and watched the water foaming as it helter-skeltered over the rocks, and saw the bubbles

⁷³ Erected in 1958, a gift from Canada, and 30m tall.

that were made. A small boy, he could not have been much older than seven, joined them; his parents were looking at the totem pole; and resting his hands on the wall, peeped his head over the top.

“Can you see?” Kathleen asked.

The little boy shook his head sideways. Kathleen jumped down and sat the boy on the wall so that his legs hung over the edge, and held him tightly around the waist in case he should fall. Seeing the flowers which rested on the wall he asked where she had found them. She wondered whether he would like one. She gave the largest to him and told him to take it to his mother. But he remained where he was, gazing at the water, and at the twigs and other objects which were sent bobbing down the fall: perhaps he imagined they were canoes shooting rapids. Kathleen, seeing his parents were coming, took him from the wall and told him to run back to his mother. He left the flower. Kathleen smiled to herself when the little boy had gone and asked why children were so innocent.

“Why,” he queried, “aren't you innocent?”

They walked slowly round the water's edge; it was, in fact, an artificial lake⁷⁴, egg shaped, being longer than it was wide. It had long ago been bordered with trees and had a large population of waterfowl. They stopped when they had reached the far end and looked down towards the bridge where they had sat earlier with the little boy. A flight of birds, their wings tipping the water, flew from one side to the other; one of the birds broke away from the rest and circled a while above the lake, as though it enjoyed the company of the water. Light from the sun moved across the water, making colourful patterns as the surface of the lake trembled in a soft wind. Picking a flat stone from the path and crouching low, with his knees bent, near the lake's edge, he flicked the missile so that it bounced several times over the water.

“Can you do that?” he asked, looking for a suitable stone. “Here's one. Have a try. Take it between your thumb and forefinger, that's it; now balance it with the second finger.”

He demonstrated how she should toss the stone so that it flew just an inch above the water before striking it and sent skimming along its surface. She tried, but was unsuccessful, the stone not coming off the water but sinking where it had been thrown.

⁷⁴ Known as Virginia Water, created in 1753.

“No that's not it. You have no speed and it's too high. There,” he gave her another stone, as thin and as shiny as a new penny. “Try again.” They continued the game until she had a little success, managing to skim the water four times with a stone.

Because it was becoming late they began to make their way home. They walked across the polo pitches, deserted now, the flag poles throwing long shadows down the turf which was green and succulent. Soon the polo ponies would arrive - those small but very strong and agile horses, bred to gallop quickly and to respond accurately to their riders' commands. They sat down for a while in a seat which had been made by cutting an L-shaped section from the length of what must have been a very old tree.

They talked about their work. He said that he hoped to visit Italy in June, when they had a short holiday. But their conversation was lingering. He wished to talk, but found his heart begin to beat loudly when he tried to speak about what bothered him most. He felt exhausted too; they had walked a considerable distance that afternoon; and he stretched his arms. Then, realising that it is often wiser to act quickly than to forestall the moment, he said: “I mentioned to you, back at the oak tree, that I knew what I was going to do after I finished university.”

“Yes. I've been wondering why you broke off suddenly.”

“Well I think you know as much about me as anyone, probably more.” He paused. “Do you remember how we've talked the nights through about what is to be our choice of life after we finished with this work? I've said that people who pursue worthwhile interests in life are those with a passion: an excitement about a particular study or discipline. Once you have this passion it urges you on, you cannot fail to respond, you are led, and your life becomes meaningful. Not everyone knows what interests them most - far be it good if everyone did.” She listened to him thoughtfully, interested by what he said, at the speed with which he spoke, so that sometimes he slurred several words together.

“What is your passion?” she asked.

“To write,” he answered quickly...

[...]

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1978

Entries are transcribed from the Journal, an A5 notebook in narrow feint.

In January I begin work on a small, weekly provincial newspaper, what was then called a 'free-sheet' distributed to people's homes and dominated by advertising; indeed the editorial content was small and always at the whim of the advertising manager. In December I resigned.

Jan 8: Must keep in mind that a novel can and must be orchestrated much like a symphony.

Jan 18: The possibility of failure gnaws at my conscience all the time. When there are weeks or days when I cannot or will not make myself write I believe that my pursuit is foolish and can only be morally and mentally futile.

Mar 29: I have been searching for a voice; searching for a creative identity... My illness is that I crave for perpetuity... I know that my voice has to be the voice of today, the clamour of the ugly, licentious tongue, the Babel of the marketplace.

Apr 30: Talked yesterday afternoon with MN⁷⁵. He was as virulent as ever and I had a good dose of his conversation... I had given him a story to read which I had written last year... 'It's rather morbid,' he said.

May 22: ...some of the themes for books I hope to write.

Guilt - the guilt of not doing what one had intended. The guilt of betrayal.

Betrayal - of one soul to what one knows is evil, that betrayal of one's talent, one's ideas, one's passion. The betrayal of one's friends - love of ones enemies?

Love - love that is not reciprocal, love that is passionless.

Religion - through religion comes wonder, comes grace, can be sought the sublime.

June 15: What I miss out from all the little schemes for stories that I create is the larger, broader more mysterious framework of life in which people are seen as tiny and

⁷⁵ An English teacher at my high school.

insignificant, powerless against the forces of dark and fate that make history over and above the action of individuals.

July 2: Prose can tame the spreading eagle within the shell of the writer's head. Stupid technicalities cut to shreds the intent of the author who in his vision sees the genius of the story but at his desk watches that dream evaporate like morning mist.

ARTEFACT: DIARY: 1979

Having resigned from the free sheet at the end of 1978, I re-join the staff in January. I reflect on this decision in Episode three. I leave that paper in early May and start at its rival, a paid-for-weekly two months later. In October, after having been living in bed-sits and share houses, I move into a three-bedroom terrace that my dad's purchased. I will pay the mortgage back over time.

*

Jan 18: ... I think I shall always be disappointed with what I write. I will always look at the spaces between the words and wonder what better words I could have written.

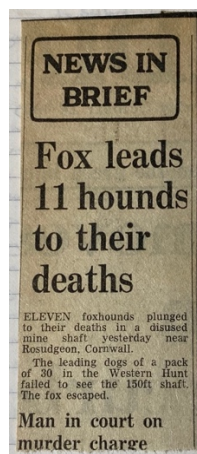
May 4: General election means Tory win and Thatcher as Prime Minister. Much talk of how a woman will cope with such high office. But she will not fail: it will be her deputies who will fail her.

May 30: ... met MN last night...MN lights his cigar and behind the smoke laughs at my talk especially when I let go on education. We talk for three hours, about education and the uses of literacy... About art and artists ('Dickins was quite mad - a more mixed up, unhappy, morose writer there's never been'); and about my future ('I've no time for this writing business. All writers are conceited.')

June 21: Choices between what one considers good and what one considers beneficial have always to be made; the most difficult, however, are those moral choices - the choice between what is good for one's career but bad for one's purpose in life.

Aug 9: There are times when I feel that I give confidence to other people to tell me their problems. They find reassurance in me and lay bare their souls. This is a disquieting gift, for I am exhausted by so much exposure.

Aug 12: I thought, not so long ago, that happiness could be attained in the act of creation, in the lucid translation of thoughts onto paper. In creation I believed was peace, honour and reward. The artist as a man above others, was my belief. The artist as a searcher, a striver, a hero even; a man not given to the easy luxuries and false sentiments of the world. He would be someone apart from others and from his vantage point would direct and guide, console and chastise. If I read my earlier notebooks and papers I'm sure I would find these sentiments reoccurring. I am only a little older but now my focus has altered. The artist is a worker like anyone else. He has no right, however, to pontificate and those who do are merely charlatans and not artists at all. He has no office to make himself self-important, though he must be self-critical and honest. He lives, works and is sustained by the society in which he was born and must participate in the world and not stand from the gallery. I suffer no delusions. Though I write I do it not from a sense of duty but because it is born in me to do so.



26 June

The choice he now had to make was between the gratification of other people's wishes - his parents especially - and his own belief in himself. Writing was never easy; and a dedication to one's craft required a strength of character and single mindedness he had always lacked. The decision he was about to make made him fearful of his own abilities - but there was no one better able to judge than himself how good a writer he was. Caution was about to trip him up again and his life so far had been full of false starts because he had never been able to fully justify to himself his own vocation. Doubts were never far from his mind as he wrote; and this was worse than a cancer for it persistently and irrevocably gnawed away at his conscience. He doubted that he could write at all: yet when he was at work on a story he experienced the creative delight known by those who use their imagination. Yes, there was no doubt but that he could write - only his restless mind gave him problems.

You're a hypocrite, a girl had said to him when he told her he had been offered a job on a newspaper.

He had known she would say this for he had explained everything to her: his desire to write: to be liberated from the daily drudge of provincial journalism: to give himself time to devote himself to writing.

I believed in you, she said.

He looked at her closely and though others at the table laughed he knew she had meant it seriously. He could not answer and averted his eyes from hers and played with his drink.

If someone else had that belief in him why did he lack it and why was he always submitting, when he knew to do so would be to thwart him once more from his true vocation?

The difficulty was compounded in his mind because he had left his last job on a newspaper to pursue his career as a writer. He had consciously given up his job, aware of the consequences, because he felt it the proper decision: he would then be freed from guilt and reproach.

1980

There is much about relationships with women I know or had known and still haunt my memory; short stories I am writing or hope to write; plans for travel as the First Gulf War starts and Ronald Reagan is elected US president in November.

I write on June 15: ...a sadly uncreative year.

On December 24 I write of an elderly lady I lodged with for a few months earlier in the year who died and whose funeral I attended: We went to the grave and her coffin was lowered. I imagined how thin and light she must have been when she died. No heavier than a child. It was a cold, chilly, windy but dry afternoon, four days before Christmas, as we left along the gravel path, trying to think of things to say, but failing. She died from tuberculosis. I have been to a doctor, had a chest X-ray. It is strange to think that she may have left us this.

1981

April 17: It has been such a long time since I wrote anything fictional that I think I will have to relearn the writing art.

May 27: Come to a creative crisis and trying to work out the purpose of my writing so far and its potential development. I suppose I conceive a novel like *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Juan* (the latter never read in entirety) and Evelyn Waugh et cetera. But it's not good enough. I seem to miss the essential ingredients. I don't want to be pedantic and dull and literary and to try and intellectualise.... Finished K. [Katherine] Mansfield's journal. Exquisite, indulgent and self-pitying throughout.

July 31: ... memory cannot so easily be discarded, and those young, yes adolescent ideals grow richer as years go on. You see many sad faces among old men. Are they not the faces of men who gave up when the forces of distraction became too great?

Oct 1: it is not a sense of failing I have, but one of indiscipline and wasted time and effort. There was a time I know when I saw my life spread in front, and each part was distinct and

purposeful. Now it has become blurred to me and I struggle to fight my way forward... It is my writing, or rather lack of it recently, that stirs storms in my mind, as I know were it not for other obsessions or chores I would have the time and peace. Continually I'm fighting myself, and as a result nothing truly whole is finished. I am littered with bits of this, and parts of that never rounded or mastered; always have I evaded that final tape. And not by a whisker either; more like a mile.

1982

Jan 24: All these words and still no farther forward. The difficulty is that I know too well what has happened, know the association of thought and feeling, the development of the story, the very innuendos and hints. Who else will read this but myself, so why worry? Why write at all? ... Trying to portray development of a man and his mind and therefore necessary not to conceal or distort or blur the truth... some say they would like to go back in time. I would not. Nor would I like to travel into the future. Like the actor I need my script and I'm helpless without.... Being in love. Falling in love. Out of love. Love at first sight. Unrequited love. The fifth and most vile. The one that torments and grieves the mind and heart and sends one into mad depression. Yet so common. The man unrequited. The man out of love. He might as well die. To know a woman. To want to see her again and to take her to places familiar to you. To walk and to eat and to listen together to music and to laugh together and share the fun of the world. But that woman is the friend of a friend of yours. There is the exquisite problem. Yet no problem, for love is of its own making and persuasion. It is no respecter of friends.

Jan 31: A week now and the last of the month. A week, and yet so long. So long my dear friend. Never to know the touch of hands, the moisture on lips, the caress and deep, deep longing. Farewell my friend. Who be she? Archaic phrase out of place. Not now the time for recrimination; but time, if ever there was, for truthfulness. A week past [or is it passed] and still no nearer. A memory, and therefore fallible and deceitful, unable to be coloured, like a child's book, in whatever manner, depending on the assortment of crayons. Let it be grey and white; in that shade and contrast is more expression than the rainbow... To carry around this thought for a week, like soiled baggage, or a case that does not belong to you

which bears no address. What does it contain? Reluctantly spring the locks and inside? The face; the sound of a voice; the meaningful and unambiguous look; open and inviting and appealing. Close it quickly.

Mar 7: How often have I spoken, or thought aloud in these journals, of travelling, of going to different countries and spending my time there?... Yet, and this is the very core of the matter, what I wish for most is not constant travel, is not a fling around the world, but peace and ease in a place I know and like; with my books; with my music; and be granted, with my wife and children. When I am honest with myself I am happiest when resting, with nothing on my mind and no worries.... I do not, I'm not a creature that has to have constant entertainment and movement in order to live. A fixed point around which I can get my bearings is enough.

May 31: Discovered some old notebooks last night in a pile of papers I was sorting.... It's like finding something one had wished to bury, protruding from the earth, and being once again filled with the memory of its burial and reasons why it should remain hidden. Yet these pieces of juvenilia are, I suppose, remarkable for showing something of the development of my mind. And that, after all is a single reason why I continue to write these journals ... [apart] from my insatiable need to write. One day, and it may be far off, years indeed, I shall go through all this stuff, and collate it and put it into huge tomes for posterity and have it guarded behind fireproof doors. And why? Because I fear oblivion and I fear that my body, my mind, my name shall be forgotten. Which of course is naive and self-possessed and lunatic but I can think of no other reason.

Aug 23: ...decided that a fourth episode was demanded. Let this episode, when written, stand as testimony of my present unsettled and unsettling mind.

Oct 22: ... I like habits, I like ritual, I like the sense of England as it has been, I have no time for novelty.

[29. 8. 82]

Fiat.

The word is obscure. Yet it seems appropriate and a just statement. Commanding and dogmatic. *Let it be done*. Let what be done? The answer cannot be squeezed into such a nicety. Rather it demands a chapter of such length that the writer must fail in his task, not through tiredness but cramp. That is the problem. Of beginning to understand the nature of things in the mind and then to find words to clothe that statement so that others may perceive the thought. An arduous and possibly impossible self-examination; since the mind is itself a seething bed of contradictory ideas; and the art of the writer in making a coherent confession wastes through neglect.

[...]

...his mind wanders. Wonders because he cannot hold that there is importance in what he wants to say. But wonders also for fear that the task is too much and he will not complete it. Again it fastens on the unimportant because the effort of concentration is too great, and in any case who wants to sit and write about themselves?

[...]

What is the purpose of writing? Why do men write? To put the question in the abstract is once again denying the purpose of this statement or confession.

[...]

That feeling of living not so much in the present as for the future tempers his attitude towards the discipline of writing. It is not to be regarded as a toy. It is too important to be left for the last hours of the day when the mind and body is tired.

[30. 8. 82]

Always searching for an explanation of what he does and a justification. Many years since that day when he had felt the need to write and since then hours spent not wisely in the craft. Reading authors whose work seemed an echo of his own; he could not write that way. And a love of the very idea of writing, together with mad and blissful thoughts of when he had completed some vast and great work that would be the envy of others. Men write because they wish to share an experience, because they like the telling of tales, because

people live through their imagination, or because they want to change society or point out its crass stupidity and the folly of mankind.

[...]

He was just 25 and already he was cynical. Yet the salvation was that he did not turn away from facing this dread future. He could not turn his head and cry pitifully. He was no longer a child who cried with frustration when the puzzle he was making would not fall into place. At times he came near to tears, for he often had these thoughts and felt the stranglehold of convention. He had come to the place others before had come, and now he looked ahead and could see what they too had seen ... Many years ago he had said that those are happiest who know what they want to do and have the gifts to do so. They are possessed with equanimity - their spirit and their mind are as one. He could now add that those who seemed to suffer are the ones who, while knowing what they want to do, yet do not aspire to its achievement. There was yet another. Those who have glimpsed at something but not knowing it was for them turn away.

[...]

[2. 9. 82]

[...]

The decision he had to take was this: leave journalism and wander around for a few years trying to write and doing any sort of job; or go to university, study and continue to write, and... well, see.

[...]

He had taken a walk to sort this one out.

[24.10. 82]

[...]

The walk had taken him across a field rising to a wood through which he had passed. At the end of the wood he came to a track and following this found himself on high ground, overlooking fields and stretching to a far horizon. From where he stood the hills rose and then fell into valleys and he could see dark clouds coming towards him. And as he watched he saw the clouds begin to rain, and soon the far landscape was screened by the curtain of water. The dark clouds moved above him and he had to seek shelter beneath a tree. Despite

the heavy fall of rain there was an unnerving stillness, and no sound of animals or birds. So heavy was the rain that he lost sight of a house he had noticed in the middle distance a few moments earlier. Then the dark clouds passed and light ones came and the rain ceased. And as it did birds started to sing. He stood there by his tree marvelling at what he had seen and absorbed in the changing pattern of the sky. But within minutes dark clouds returned, and there was more rain, with that same stillness. It too passed and he moved, unwillingly, from the tree and along the track, hardly noticing where he was going but watching the sky to his left.

It was strange weather that afternoon; for when he had left that track and climbed another hill he looked again and saw the heavy rain falling where he had been; but where he now stood he was dry.

The statement was at once of obvious. His life had been introspective and monotonous, since he had been to earnestly seeking his way with writing. There was no shame in turning to something different, and no reason why his commitment should not be total. He had no need to fear reproach and his gift for writing could and would continue. He had not had the courage to realise this simple fact before, and the clouds had taught him the lesson. It was unnecessary to burden oneself with guilt, or to strive at something that was reluctant to come. It was important not to spread one's ideas too thin, or to take a partial interest in many things without mastering any. On his return home he found a Greek word - he had discovered it before his walk, it now became far more relevant than he had ever imagined and copied it large. It would direct his future, and be some sort of mark to the time he had grown again and emerged from his isolation.

ΑΠΤΑΙΘΡΙΑΖΩ : I drive away the clouds and make fair weather.

[25. 10. 82]

This much he now saw. That there was no conflict of reason for taking a course of study at university. He did not have that single minded purpose which would allow him to write, and nothing else besides.

What he realised that day was that he had irrevocably shaken off the creative mask that had gripped his mind and imagination for years. This mask had only served to make him short-sighted, as if he was created with most unusual powers. His way was not yet to see; he

had not seen anything and his will was weak and unsteady. Having acknowledged that much he was now free to march once more. His mind undisciplined could now be made strong; his body also. Deficient in love he would find that source and become responsible for those things he had dreams upon but yet never touched.

AFTERWORD 1983

[2 Jan 1983]

What was I trying to say in episode four? I now know that the effort failed, perhaps through trying too hard and to appear selfless. [...] As if through enormous concentration I was showing myself naked to the world.... Its value is possibly not of the present. [...] Given a decade or more, and taken with those episodes preceding and those, I hope which will follow, may it not settle the argument and reveal a mind transient? A plague on those who write autobiography. However, these episodes are only experiments in that cruel fashion.

If I admit that these pieces come about when I am more than usually preoccupied with myself should I not at least try to be honest about my present attitudes, troubles, misgivings, pains and the multitude of other sores, and not dissemble? That were to be wise. Instead, I am as ignorant, as cliché-shot in my attempt to describe the emotions I feel, and as inadequate as those who do not think and make no pretence of thinking.

What I said in episode four was that I had thrown off the mask of imagination, and like one given sight had understood what it was to have eyes. Through many years I had been borne along with a pleasant dream that soon my book would be ready. But this dream acted like an intoxicant. The book never came. Yet still I dreamt, and kidded myself...

My complaint is that I dream not of what is or can be, but of what might, if only I did this or did that. My life, therefore, has been marred by self-consciousness, by misunderstanding my own nature, by not accepting what I am, by guilt for what did not come about, and by too often backward glance. Once I recall my motto was 'onward'. I recall also the plans I held of careers I was to follow. My nature has been easily deceived. I thought I was possessed of an extraordinary amount of originality. I now discover those ideas to be based on moving waters. As inconsequential as summer snow. My will has been weak and therefore I have let slip opportunities. Instead of wondering on my nervous nature perhaps I

should strike a different chord and spend more time giving something to others.... The impression... I hope is not of resignation; neither of despair. I make a positive call and intend to step purposely 'onward'.

'A plague on those who write autobiography. However, these episodes are only experiments in that cruel fashion... perhaps I should strike a different chord and spend more time giving something to others....' (Afterword, 1983)

An autoethnographer tatters between disclosure and closure, revelation and censure. I have remarked on this elsewhere, in particular how I have edited the diaries and journals, made the exclusions and been silent on another aspect of maturity – sexual maturity. Chatham-Carpenter writes: 'Controlling the image one presents is also a common experience of researchers in general – deciding which "face" to show in the process of writing and publishing' (2010, p. 10). The face I choose to show reveals an inkling of my intellectual and social-psychological development within the cultural context that was England of the mid 1970s to mid 1980s when Thatcher reshaped physical and non-physical landscapes. (Think of English Midland towns and those who lived in those towns dependent on coal mines that wasted away for want of work; of the 'loads-of-money' nouveau riche that worked and played hard in the changing hyper-reality of the London money markets then becoming global⁷⁶.) This foregrounds my present exterior self, the one who presents as a social worker, yet nurtures the interior self, as one might a fragile antique, riven by fault lines unseen to the naked eye but resonating with its maker's intent, its maker's vision held within. To myself, what McAdams calls the 'imago', or idealised personification of self (2001, p.106), I am a writer.

When I encounter my 25-year-old self at a temporal/linear distance of four decades I feel no strangeness, no otherness, for I have become what that young man foretold – I am his future, the one to whom he was writing, though I could never have known that I would meet an Australian, fall in love, have two children and move to the other side of the world in 2004. However, those empirical details do not matter. What does is that by 1982 I had chosen not to pursue the pseudo-romantic ideal of the 'writer-as-hermit', shielded from the world, dedicated to a misguided ideal of writing drawn from a reading of 19th century

⁷⁶ In the late 1980s I was a journalist on the *Financial Times*, a national and international daily newspaper read by these same young men, mostly men, who made and lost millions during the day, spent plentifully and gave little thought to those who were not doing it, as they thought, so well. This was before the first dot-com boom of the early 90s, followed soon after by the bust.

classics, even early 20th century such as James Joyce, whose *Portrait of the Artist* and *Stephen Dedalus* acted as a lightning rod to my even younger self.

Instead I chose, as Robert Frost writes in *The Road Not Taken* (1936, p. 175), not the 'one less traveled by' but the other.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
....
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*⁷⁷

That I took the other path, the well-travelled route consisting of a career, or careers, family, mortgages, brought me to that moment in 2011 when I decided to study social work. On 24 December 2013, following graduation and due to start employment as a statutory child protection worker in a couple of weeks, I wrote: 'Where that leads I have no idea. Rest assured – I continue to write and create – I am a Maker'.

I do feel a hint of nostalgia for my younger self, for he and I are one, as all of us are with our previous selves. We look back while they look forward. As such, I am continually in a soundless dialogue with that self, recollecting how my life was being rehearsed in those first three episodes. I stood in the wings, looking on at the actors, already on stage, performing their parts, and awaited my cue to enter. But as who, but as what? I was a ghostly figure, moving unseen backstage, a fringe dweller, never in the spotlight. On occasion I was almost caught out: as a journalist, never content as it wasn't 'real' writing; as a printer of fine letterpress books and stonemason, but never accepted by those in the fraternity; as an archaeologist, but only as a whim and still I clung, without acknowledging it,

⁷⁷ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

to the colonial exploitation story at a university well versed in that; as a child protection social worker, but only by chance and never comfortable because I was now part of a system I found conflicted with my values, as well as being the 'proxy police'. (A realisation that I was an 'instrument of the state' only came much later.). My life has been one of contradictions, yet writing has always been at the still centre.

Now I have arrived at the time where I can express my self, what McAdams calls the 'postmythic', a time when I evaluate and review but not a time to end, rather to set down a legacy. I have kept diaries and journals since I was a teenager and had an expectation they would be read later in my life, perhaps be the base of a sociological narrative. This meditation, this 're-search', this search of me, my culture(s) and times, is my testament, not only for academics who may wish to dig into those artefacts at some point in the future, but as a catalogue of one who lived, dreamed, failed and carried on between the 1960s (my first unwritten, narrative memories) and whenever I pass from this life.

I follow the footsteps of Michel de Montaigne, writing four centuries ago, who placed himself at the centre of his *Essays*, stating at the opening: 'This is a sincere book...I intended it solely for the solace of my kinsfolk and friends: that when they have lost me (as they must do before long), they may recover in it some lines of my character and humours, and by this means more fully and vividly cherish me in their memory.' (ibid, vol. 1, p. 1). Much later he wondered, if no one read him, would 'I have wasted my time,' only to answer that: 'In portraying myself for others I have portrayed myself in more distinct colours than were mine originally. I have no more made my book than my book has made me; a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with me alone, a part of my life...' (1935, vol, 2, p.116).

However, this is not a valediction for the completion, examination and final approval of this thesis will bring fresh openings. I am inspired to do more and have the intention to make a further contribution by advocating for creative writing and, more broadly, creative practice, within the teaching of social work and the professional development of practitioner.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 4

ON BEING WHITE, PRIVILEGED AND COLONIAL

White privilege is pervasive and insidious. One of the most challenging and hard to change aspects of white privilege is how easily it infiltrates our everyday work and personal lives – operating silently, out of sight, at the perimeter of consciousness, often unspoken yet potent and poisonous.
(Tedmanson & Fejo-King, 2016, p. 149.).

The colonialist project, from the 18th century onwards, has resulted in the colonial privileging of white people, and the subjugation and exploitation of people of colour.
(Ife & Tascón, 2019, p. 1.).

Before we consider the question still out there - can social workers be agents of social change, therefore political? - what did you notice about the sources I quoted last time we met?

There were a lot of names, my student says.

A lot of European white men.

Does that bother you?

Good question. I selected the names, which acknowledges my intellectual antecedents as embedded in the predominantly white, Western educational system, particularly of the late 1970s to mid 1980s. This is all very well but it is essential to hear and pay attention to different voices, non-colonial, Indigenous voices. Consider this sentence within the definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Work: 'Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work'⁷⁸. Where is diversity if we only listen to these men?

Totally agree. So where are those other voices?

Everywhere. It's just a matter of looking, being receptive and it goes back at the very least to a piece written by Peggy McIntosh in 1989 when she speaks of the 'invisible backpack of white privilege' (2020, p. 42). And, yes, to pre-empt you, I acknowledge male privilege too in this context.

It is interesting you say that, given how few male social workers there are.

⁷⁸ <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

A relevant point given that social work can be seen as gendered practice – females on the frontline and males calling the shots from the executive suite (Christie, 1998, 2001; Dominelli, 1997; McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011; Sheppard & Charles, 2017). But let us focus on colonialism since there is a case, summarised by Zufferey (2013), that social work is racist on account of it being pre-dominantly narrated by white, Western academics and professionals or, as Sousa Santos would prefer, the ‘global North’ (2012)⁷⁹. Put by two First Nations academics: ‘Most Euro-Australian social workers and social work academics are unlikely to “know” Indigenous people except as clients, data sources, or a specific client group that must be covered within the curriculum’ (Walker and Baltra-Ulloa in Bennett & Green, 2019, p. 73). This is also referenced by Tedmanson and Fejo-King speaking from the point of view of Indigenous women in a patriarchal world (2016).

So right. I have just done a semester on First Nations.

And what did you learn?

For example, that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples advocates in article 24 that ‘Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health’⁸⁰.

And that when the Declaration was adopted in 2007, Australia was one of only four nations that voted against.

Yes, and it wasn’t until the Rudd government four years later that this decision was overturned.

The Declaration has 46 sections. I am interested on why you zoomed in on that one?

Because the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are desperately poor. Absolutely and that is where the Closing the Gap National Agreement⁸¹ has its part to play. But let us step back a little and consider a statement by Tascon that ‘Social work was born white,’ (2019, p. 9). It is undeniable when you consider its place within the colonialist period, its origins in Australia from the Charitable Organisation Societies transplanted from England (though very much London-centred) in 1887 (Ablett & Morley, 2016, p. 8), embedding ‘social control of the poor and rescuing children’ (Green in Bennett & Green,

⁷⁹ Also see Ife, J., & Tascón, S. (2019). *Disrupting Whiteness in Social Work*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429284182>

⁸⁰ <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>

⁸¹ Data is collected here <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard>

2019, p. 87)⁸². This is where we cannot help but be entangled within the political, especially if we surmise that these early workers were inspired by Socialism and the tenets of social reform. For instance, Clement Atlee, Labour prime minister between 1945-1951 and an architect of the National Health Service, began his career as a social worker (1907-1914) and even wrote a book on the subject (1920)⁸³. Many others who volunteered, though, were middle-class 'lady's' who were 'on holiday all summer and sick all winter' (Burnham, 2011, p. 8)⁸⁴. In Australia, social work has '...drawn its traditional base and thus informed its practices through colonialism' (Green in Bennett & Green, 2019, p. 86). This is called 'settler colonialism' and comes within the domain of postcolonial theory (Dittfeld, 2020). Consider me for example, and in the context of habitus we considered last time, I am a white, English-born man from an aspiring middle-class family who was brought up in the suburbs of south London. My upbringing was conventional and, what these days, would be considered strictly gendered: dad went to work and mum stayed home. Born in 1957 in London, my parents had both grown from adolescence to young adults during the Second World War. While both came from working-class families, their parents were factory workers, they were upwardly mobile, though mum ceased to work after I was born, and were also assisted by the improvement in economic conditions during the 1960s. Implicit rules were to be respectful to elders, parents, grandparents, adults in general; not to speak unless spoken to. Dad worked long hours as I was growing up, often travelling. He was a 'distant' figure right through my school years and I only really got to know him when I become a dad myself. Consequently, I was much closer to mum and would be fearful of any misdemeanours she might report to him. There was no physical violence, unless you call smacking a form of abuse (which it now is). I suspect I was smacked as a child if I did wrong, since that was part of the cultural norm in 1960s England. Nevertheless, I recall my childhood as good, whatever that means or conceals. I am reasonably intelligent and, as a child protection caseworker employed by a state government, my job is to determine if a child is safe or at

⁸² A history of Australian social work remains to be written from this viewpoint as students, if taught about origins at all, still rely on Lawrence's skewed version that now dates back more than half-a-century: Lawrence, R. J. (2016). *Professional Social Work in Australia*. Canberra: ANU Press. https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_610990.

⁸³ He writes: 'In all social work there is a great danger that must be avoided of treating people as cases and grouping them in categories and statistical tables, so that one forgets that all the time one is dealing with individuals' (p. 134).

⁸⁴ Burnham (2011) also has some interesting observations on the history of English social work (or the 'foundation myth'), as written from an elitist perspective, which I do not have room to explore in greater detail here.

risk and, if so determined, I can sign a piece of paper to declare that this child, for these reasons, must come into the care of the state, give that to the parents and walk out the door with the child. That is social control and it is linked to what has been called 'White habitus', drawing on those ideas from Bourdieu, which is 'predominantly the habitus of the White middle class' (Walter et al., 2011, p. 11). This is especially true if that child is Indigenous. In this case another agenda also comes into play linked to the 'stolen generation' when white welfare workers, including social workers, forcibly removed children from their families and placed them in white homes and settlements between 1910 to the 1970s. That's history⁸⁵. The worry is whether that is still happening in the 21st century, so giving rise to further inter-generational and cultural trauma.

Do you think it is?

Look at the statistics. Indigenous children are over-represented in our care system (Davis, 2019; Krakouer et al., 2021). In 2018-2019 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids were eight times more likely to have had a visit from child protection as non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2020), while a recent report suggests that '...our projections confirm, yet again, that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care will more than triple over the forward 20 years if we don't act now' (SNAIC, 2018, p. 3). And why so many Indigenous children? Partly because of the socio-economic conditions in which they live: public housing, segregated communities on the outskirts of towns, and psychological/spiritual distress and trauma at having been displaced from country. While it certainly helps having more Aboriginal child protection workers, they too face resistance from within their own communities as being seen as part of 'the system' (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003, p. 65; Oates, 2020).

What's the answer?

I am the wrong person to ask. But the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care has reiterated the call for self-determination as one of the key building blocks for change: 'We know that when our families enjoy equitable access to high quality, culturally safe supports, our children will thrive. We know that when our communities have control over decisions, our children will thrive. We also know that for this to happen it requires laws, policies and practices that are culturally safe and responsive to our needs, and

⁸⁵ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

governments and services that are accountable to our communities. We know that at the very heart of effective systems is our right to self-determination – the right of our communities to determine their own futures’ (Liddle & Gray, 2022, p. 3)⁸⁶.

A ‘Voice to Parliament’ will also help, my student adds.

Absolutely⁸⁷. There is also a wider philosophical question about the Indigenous worldview, and this connects with posthumanism we were discussing last time.

That’s giving equal voice to the non-human?

Pretty much. With Indigenous thinking, from wherever on the planet, it seems to me there is acknowledgement that we, all who live and depend on the earth for sustenance and support, are linked, which contrasts with the nature/culture dualism of orthodox Western thought (Blackstock et al., 2020)⁸⁸. For instance, Green writes: ‘...our well-being is interconnected with all else. We get sick if we don’t have clean water, if the land is not healthy and our food is affected, if the air is polluted, and also if we are not looking after our bodies’ (in Bennett & Green, 2019a, p. 94). However, she is very clear this knowledge cannot be appropriated, doing so being another case of colonisation: ‘In order to Indigenise your social work practice, you need to go on a journey that starts with decolonising yourself and grounding yourself in the Country on which you are on’ (ibid, p. 97)⁸⁹. However, there’s a counter-current to this as well that needs to be stated. While Ife, a white social worker, for instance, urges Western social workers to play a role in decolonising the practice (2019, p. 27), one to which I heartily subscribe, where does this leave me as a white male? I also need focus, a pivot point if you will, where I can morally centre my life. Where’s my centre? How do I settle myself in this shifting space? I acknowledge guilt for the past, remorse at the treatment of Indigenous peoples by those of my birth nation, England. Yet though I have chosen to live in Australia for the last 20 years, I am off-country as much as my Aboriginal neighbour, albeit through my own choosing.

Isn’t that exceptionalising? What makes you different and why should I care?

⁸⁶ See also <https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2021/05/Make-Healing-Happen-Report-FINAL-May-2021.pdf>

⁸⁷ This was written before the date of the referendum had been set and the result declared, expected to be late 2023.

⁸⁸ Social work internationally also acknowledges the African notion of ubuntu, commonly translated as ‘I am because you are’. Mugumbate, J. (2013). Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work. *The African Journal of Social Work.*, 3(1), 82.

⁸⁹ See also Bennett, B., Zubrzycki, J., & Bacon, V. (2011). What Do We Know? The Experiences of Social Workers Working Alongside Aboriginal People. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 20-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2010.511677>

You don't have to and I not asking for your sympathy. However, I feel as disconnected as an Aboriginal person who lives 'off Country'. Some of my Aboriginal colleagues say to me it is healing for an Aboriginal person to step on Country, feel the earth through the soles of their feet. I connect with that – it is called attunement to place⁹⁰. For me, I am out of tune and I sometimes wonder: When I die where will I rest? Not that I personally care in any here-and-after religious sense (I am atheist) but from a purely embodied (or should that be disembodied?) perspective and, having given this some thought, I have concluded I would like some of my ashes scattered in England. Why? Connection to Country, implying how tightly knit we are to place, as well as one another.

You sound like a neo-colonialist. Someone who has never given up on their privilege of being English, somehow in a different league to the rest of us.

Perhaps that is my torment – never to know where I belong. My youth (very late 1960s to mid-1970s) in the UK was male and extremely sexist. This has not been completely eradicated in the following decades but is far less brutal. However, I do not remember the 'flower-power' generation; I was not caught up in Beatlemania; my interests then were quite different from that of the majority of my acquaintances. I felt an 'outsider'. In many respects I still do. London became an increasingly multi-cultural society during my adolescence and early adulthood. It was a tough place for non-whites. Discrimination bubbled both below and, later, above the surface. I still remember some comments made by my parents and grandparents (men who had fought in the First World War and lived through the Second) about 'blacks' and 'wogs', comments that made me, make me, squirm as a 'politically-correct' individual of the 21st century. My upbringing was exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant – I was even christened, my mum being a Methodist. My school had few non-whites: 'Blacks', that is what they were called, drove buses or swept the streets, menial work. This was the age of Enoch Powell and 'rivers of blood'. When I worked on a local paper in 1981 there were race riots in the High Street on several nights running. In Brixton and Liverpool suburbs were gutted. (UK Cabinet papers about this period have now been released under the 30-year rule⁹¹.) I was reporting on the Community Relations

⁹⁰ Also connected to Dadirri, or 'deep listening'. See for instance Atkinson, J. (2002). *Trauma trails, recreating song lines the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*. Spinifex Press.

⁹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/30/thatcher-government-liverpool-riots-1981>

Council, had friends who were Indian, West Indian, from Pakistan ('Pakies' as they were smeared). I was disgusted at the far-right thugs and neo-Fascists who smashed up shops, set light to cars and abused anyone who looked 'different', wasn't white. Maybe it was because I felt 'different' that I took the side of the under-dog, the disadvantaged. It may too have come from those readings of Marx as a 15 year old – the dreams I had of 'workers of the world unite' still run through me. What about you? Where's your belonging?

To use your words, Before we consider that question, it seems to me we have come a long way from where we started this conversation. It is now all about you, and not about colonialism or post-colonialism or whatever -ism. Is this autoethnography again?

I believe that when you are 'doing', or more precisely, writing autoethnography it does sometimes seem like that because you are at the centre of your research and you are reflecting on questions that may appear to be self-absorbed about your personal narrative, your emotions, your experiences as an individual with a specific cultural and/or sexual dimension, grounded in a lifespan that is constantly in movement. That is one of the many criticisms levelled against the method, as we have discussed. I defend it thus: Every life is vital, every life has a story

to tell, and this life, my life, is the only one I can write about with full knowledge. Hence the auto bit of autoethnography. The latter bit of the work – ethnography – refers to how I view my life within the context of the cultural experiences I have had and the choices I have or haven't made along the way. That's why this is

not autobiography. There is a lovely piece written by Elaine Campbell⁹² in which she looks at how autoethnographers are 'trolled' on social media, in particular Twitter (now X) (2017).

There is one comment that raises a wry smile: 'The Twitter brigade light up. "Look, here's a new research method. It's called going through your yearbooks and making up stuff," says one. "You've hit the nail on the head there. Its called 'auto-ethnography'. Its how idiots get PhDs" [sic]. Spurred on, others clamor to tell each other about the idiocy of the creative methodology that I love. Some are mild: "man, autoethnography is the gift that keeps on giving, isn't it?" Some are a little more aggressive: "Here's a definition of autoethnography for you. 'Creating a bunch of bullshit from something I did'." Campbell looked objectively at how tweeters wrote about the topic – and these were from academics mostly – concluding

⁹² A UK-based legal academic.

there were three lines of attack: 'narcissism, lack of scientific prowess and dullness'. Considering the first of these, she questions whether any research can be objective, without any trace of authorship. 'Our challenge,' she states, 'is to champion deep and complex reflection which links to socio-cultural contexts and advances our understanding of the world. This should be how autoethnography is judged. Dismissing written self-portraiture outright is a disappointingly one-dimensional reaction that neglects to see the value in reflective scholarship.'⁹³ I think she is spot on there and from my position I am embedded in the middle-class, I have never known want, never had someone spit at me or accuse me of not belonging, never been without food or shelter or money. I understand the construct of White privilege as a cis-gendered man now living in a country that marginalizes a significant part of its community, those whose land this is and who have been excluded for centuries from having a voice. All this is true and self-evident. However, the other story, the other my-story⁹⁴, is that I am an immigrant, one who comes from the very same nation that claimed this place for its own as being *terra nullius*. I am fractured, have a fault-line down my inside. Who am I? I have left the land of my birth and come to a land where I have no history. My partner is Australian and she speaks of people and places she remembers as a child. She speaks of townships being lost in bushfires or floods she visited as a child. Means nothing to me. A few years in from when I arrived here in 2004 I was still tuning to the BBC and listening to the debates in the House of Commons. At least I don't do that any more and 20 years on I no longer have any desire to return permanently to the UK. While I have not become Australian, despite taking citizenship and having a passport, I am much more at ease. What about you, where do you belong?

Most definitely here.

And most definitely every where too. What I mean by that is we are all part of the human species (hardly a radical or reactionary thought), all passing through within an infinitesimal small amount of what we call 'time'. To make the most of this 'time' we need to work and

⁹³ The humanities, in general, come under frequent barrage of attack as not having 'worth' in academia, where the emphasis is very much on equipping students for employment. Postmodernism is another frequent butt of insult, and was put under the spotlight in the 2003 book *Intellectual Imposters* by Sokal and Bricmont who asserted that postmodernism led areas of research in the humanities and social sciences down a dead end and 'No research, whether on the natural or social world, can progress on the basis that is both conceptually confused and radically detached from empirical evidence' (p. 195; London, Profile Books).

⁹⁴ Denzin writes of my-story: 'The mystory is a montage text, cinematic and multimedia in shape, filled with sounds, music, poetry, and images taken from the writer's personal history. This personal narrative is grafted into discourses from popular culture. It locates itself against the specialised knowledges that circulate in the larger society. The audience co-performs the text, and the writer, as narrator, functions as a guide, commentator, co-performer' (*Interpretive autoethnography* (Second edition), 2014, Los Angeles, SAGE).

co-operate in union with one another. I spend some of my hours at work with Aboriginal families and I relate to them as human beings, not as 'Aboriginal people'. We can get tongue-tied too easily, scarred of talking with one another for fear of saying the 'wrong' thing, of 'making a mistake', being politically incorrect. We become precious, in essence we over-intellectualise. Perhaps I can quote Fanon here: 'I, a man of colour, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be' (1968, p. 231).

Doesn't sound very posthuman!

From another generation. The sentiment remains though. You have to remember that the academy, an altogether Western and white concept, is always charging forward. New ideas, new names, new iconoclasts. Barely time to draw breath and take stock. The intellectual is restless, pacing around their study. Perhaps that is a bit romantic as nowadays it is likely to be a windowless, white-washed office with a laptop and Wi-Fi connection. Whatever the setting, the way ideas are germinated is through constant debate and argument, whether face-to-face, via email or Zoom. Yet sometimes in this haste the wisdom of past generations can be either overlooked or forgotten. In this context I wonder how long it will be before Australia, white Australia, moves on from the shame of possession, ceases to apologise, articulates a different narrative of inclusiveness? Small steps are being taken, yet for this to be fully resolved do we not need to first renounce Capitalism, that ceaseless quest for economic growth that denudes the planet, makes for disillusionment and promotes injustice? This generation, this world if you prefer, is the most connected it has ever been, with news circulating instantaneously. And for that comment I need no research evidence only my own eyes. I was at Sydney airport recently and almost everyone I observed was connected through their phone or device. Even on the aircraft the passengers continued to be connected through Qantas's marvellous wi-fi. It made me ask: Could 9/11 happen again? Unlikely given the surveillance measures and security systems in place, and with AI scanning faces and so on. Yet though we are so connected we are also disconnected and can choose to be, I suggest, as isolated as someone living in the 19th century who did not live in a metropolis. What do I mean by that? Take as an example this scenario. I text my daughter about whether she plans to take part in a nationwide, perhaps, worldwide 'strike' in support of efforts to change climate policy in this country and elsewhere. She says she has a

business exam and can't. I text back: *It's for your children and future generations*. I receive no reply. I think back to when I was my daughter's age, when I was 17 in 1974. I was politically involved, motivated and active and that was in the pre-internet era. My daughter, and my son as well who is in his mid-twenties, don't seem to worry, do not even watch or listen to or read the news. In that we have the dilemma, at least from my point of view. I cannot extrapolate an entire generation from my daughter's comments, and I hope hers are in the minority. Yet while we are the most connected generations in history, we, the world, cannot find a consensus on the most pressing challenge in that history.

It's a generation thing.

Maybe you should write about it – you could write an autoethnography on being supervised by an old, white man locked in to his past! I'm being facetious. Sorry!

Tell me about being a man? my student asks, ignoring this suggestion.

You mean as a minority in the child protection workplace?

Aren't you?

Sure. Currently I am the only male worker in an office of about 30. Look at any of the statistics and women make up about 80 per cent of the workforce (Russ et al., 2022, p. 33).

It is just the way it is.

Why?

Why are there so few men in childcare or nursing? I respond.

And why so many men as doctors and consultants and police officers? In positions of authority.

You tell me.

Because women have children and men don't?

Patriarchy⁹⁵. And that is why women have been paid less, despite having the same qualifications and doing the same work in many professions. The political again.

Do you really want me to give up social work for politics?

Of course not.

⁹⁵ Pease notes that: 'Ascribing caring to women and femininity reproduces patriarchal discourses by devaluing women's practices in social work and legitimating men's avoidance of caring' Pease, B. (2011). Men in Social Work: Challenging or Reproducing an Unequal Gender Regime? *Affilia*, 26(4), 406-418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109911428207>

We are from different generations, my student asserts, as you have said many times. Your understanding of politics is, can I say this? based on a world apart from mine. Yours came from newspapers and a 30 minute nightly news report on the TV. Am I right?

Yes.

Whereas mine is 24/7. It is Twitter and Facebook and any other social media outlet I choose to look at or am invited to click on. I am in control. You weren't. You had to listen. We have the opportunity to choose.

Good point. Are you going to use this influence wisely? Are you going to choose who you trust and respect and weed out the 'fake news'?

That's a strange question. We aren't living in classical Athens any more, we don't have lengthy meetings in a town square.

No, although I note that 'Town Hall' meetings have been cropping up on the socials as a setting where you can Zoom in and think you are in a forum, even though you might be sitting on your bed or on a couch in your pyjamas and just half-listening. This is an age of ever-changing mirrors where decisions are made at the click of a mouse or a finger-swipe across a screen. Decision making no longer requires physical effort, taking a bus or a train to a bricks-and-mortar location where you communicate one-on-one with other people.

Decision making has been transformed into an electronic and sterile process. I can sign every petition on the planet without having to move from my keyboard.

But we are all connected, as you've said, and like you never were. Together my generation can make change. It will be different from what you know but it is still change. We are just using what is available to us and if that is the keyboard then that is what we will do. We don't have time to go places, to sit in rooms and listen to people when we can do that online. This way we can gather opinions, lots of them, and come to a rationale in moments whereas your generation took weeks. We are connected for a purpose and can do the same in seconds.

I hope so. There's not much time left, as far as I see it. But I may be wrong. Let us return for the moment to gender identity. You have to remember I was raised in a society and in a culture where one was born male or female, and medicine had not come up with the techniques to change a person's sex. Why, I can recall the sensation the first heart transplant made in December 1967 and now that procedure is common-place. But talking about masculinity as I do and claiming, as I do, to ascribe to a feminist agenda, or being pro-

feminist, can open up a Pandora's box of argument and counter-argument. Nevertheless, since becoming a 'social worker' (which in itself is another opened box I will come to when I discuss my narrative identity in a later part of the exigesis) I am conscious of how my assumptions and stereotypes around gender influence my conscious regard for the needs of men to access services. Such stereotypes include, but are by no means limited to: Individualism, competitiveness, mistrust of other men, belief that men should be able to sort out their own problems, the man as hero, an unwillingness to reveal vulnerabilities and men as 'hypoemotional', in other words, unable or unwilling to express their emotions. Acknowledging that men do have power and privilege, which is balanced (though not always evenly) against power and privilege that women too have, I am critically aware of the need to ensure a balance and a dialogue in my practice with whoever, regardless of gender, otherwise there is a danger of chasing ourselves in ever decreasing circles and of men in social work feeling disempowered and even disengaged. This is a debate that continues and will continue until such a time as gender equality becomes commonplace. And until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have a Voice, a Treaty and Truth telling.

ARTEFACT: FICTION: THE BOY WHO STOLE THE MOON

ACT THREE

SEVEN

I don't stay with the Jesus jerks. After wart nose finds me in town an' drags me back to their place I starts arcing up an' by the next arvo they've called Welfare saying they can't 'cope' an' saying 'take him off us, he's too much trouble. You's didn't tell us he was like this', and so on. Course they couldn't handle me. People like that want some ordin'ry kid. An I ain't an ordin'ry kid. So's I starts punching holes in walls an' throwing stuff, an' in my room, my room they call it, even put my name on the door to make it like it's my room. Shit. I jump up an' down on the fucking bed an' make my head hit the ceiling till there's blood an' the Jesus woman's kneelin' an prayin', like an' wart nose is wondering if he should deal with her or deal with me. Go on, I shout, till the bed busts an' I crash like it's a space rocket that's smashin' in the desert an' there's no survivors. The old guy he's besides himself. He's got two to deal with an' the thing is who's he deal with first. Me, the kid, or his wife? Check that out. I make it easier for him. I gets up an' does a dive so he can't get me an' head to the kitchen where I knows there's matches. I'm there before he can say Jesus an' I've got this bottle of oil too. I know if I pour the oil an' throws the match I'll have what I want. Don't do it son, he says. I look at him an' I throw the match. Ka-boom! I didn't know the gas was on. You's should have seen him jump.

These two fat old bitches from Welfare come an' take me to their office while's they sort out what to do with me. They put me in this room same as last and check it out in case there's anything I can use as a weapon, which means clearing out all the baby toys and shit. I'm laughing at them as they pack up the bouncy balls an' the soft toys, dancin' around them which makes them angry as. An what about someit to eat? I say. Those peoples never gave me anything. They starved me. I sees them looking at each other but they don't answer an' then this younger woman comes in with a water bottle an' says would I like to do some drawing. I give her a look an' say, why can't I go back to mum? an' she says, I don't know, cause she ain't a clue who I am, just some other fucked about kid she's been told to look after I'm guessing. I tell her, go find out then, an' she says she can't leave me alone but

someone be coming soon an I can ask them. She doesn't know what to do with me so I make it simple an' say I'm goin' have a sleep on the sofa.

It's dark by the time they ready to take me somewhere. It's only for tonight, they say. An' they put me in the back of this white Toyota, my clothes in a bin bag on the seat next, an' I ask how far's this place an' they say about two hours. Can we stop at Macca's? I say and they say, Yes, Ok, Zayde. I make sure I get the most biggest meal at the drive-through, eat it slow, looking out the window at the lights of all the other cars and trucks heading somewhere good. Where's we goin'? I ask. Somewhere nice, they say. They turn on the radio but I can still hear them talking about work stuff an' the one who's not driving she's on her phone saying she'll be late cause she's taking this kid south.

You got a boyfriend? I say.

She turns smiling.

You've lots of questions Zayde, she says.

What's your name?

Mel, she says.

Why can't I go home Mel, I say. It's my birthday tomorrow.

How old will you be Zayde?

Thirteen.

A teenager!

Happy birthday for tomorrow, says the one driving, looking at me in the mirror.

So why can't I go home?

You'll have to ask tomorrow Zayde, says Mel. We're just the taxi service. We don't have the answers Zayde, and that's the truth. We were just told to take you to this place tonight. Ask the caseworker who comes to pick you up in the morning. She'll know more.

And who's this you're taking me to?

Her name's Barbara, says Mel, reading from some notes on her lap. But she prefers Barb.

Old or young?

Depends what you mean by old!

Does it matter? says the one driving.

Are you old? I says.

They look at each other, then laugh.

Older than you, says Mel.

Old enough to know better! says the one driving.

Turn the music up, I says. I like this one.

I don't really but it's better than hearing them talking.

When we get to the place, Barb's place, it's nearly ten. I know cause I ask. She's out the front waiting.

Is this *all* your stuff? she says, leaning in the car.

She *is* old. I reckon she must be eighty, maybe more cause she got wrinkles over her face an' spots too. There's some talking, the car turns round and goes, an' I climb these wooden stairs to her front room. It smells of damp. She shows me my bed.

You'll be good here tonight, she says. I got the heater on and there's plenty of blankets.

She puts the bin bag on the floor an' says, It's late, do you want to go straight to sleep? You'll feel better after a good night's rest.

I'm thirsty, I say.

I'll make you a hot drink.

You got juice?

You sure you want juice this late?

You got apple juice?

Whatever you want Zayde. Sit down. Are you warm enough?

I'm roasting like it's when you're heading back to Earth in the rocket ship an' outside everything's red hot an' the sweats pouring off you. Then all of a sudden this cat jumps on me. It's orange kind of an' soon as it's on me it starts making a purring noise like Jin an' wanting me to scratch it under the chin.

She likes you, says the old woman.

What's her name? I says.

Jojo. You like cats Zayde?

Jojo's up in my face wantin' me to tickle her. She looks at me an' I look at her an' I feel sad.

She likes you. Cats have got this instinct. Jojo thinks you're good, she thinks you're a kind boy.

Then Jojo starts to go psycho, trying to spew over me.

Furballs, says Barb.

An' I throw her off me.

Barb makes a clicking noise in her throat, snaps her fingers for Jojo but Jojo disappears through the flap in the door, still coughing her guts up.
I'll get you your juice, she says.

It must be midnight an' I'm in bed with the light still on. I can't sleep. It's fucking boiling an' I'm in these clothes that aren't mine. I never wear anything in bed. Ain't nothing to wear. Barb made me put them on. Keep you cosy, she said. But I'm taking them off. Besides, I can't sleep 'cause my brain's goin' demented. I'm thinking 'bout Dusty an' what's he up to. I hears him calling me. Run he's yelling me. I hoping you be right, is what he'd say if he was here, an' he'd be cadging off the old woman all he could. Then Jojo jumps me. She's warm an' she's making those purring sounds just like Jin an' pushing her face in mine. That's when I gets real shitty. How come's this cat's got it right an' Jin never had a chance? That's when I start thinking this is my fault.
I'm hardly asleep when Barb's in the room throwing open the curtains, fully blinding me.
Happy birthday Zayde, she's saying.

She's got this big tray with breakfast laid out, even a boiled egg with a smiley face an' a bun with a candle.
I didn't know what you like so I did everything! Eat up now. The people'll be here soon to take you back.

When the car backs out to go Barb's standing at the top of the stairs holding JoJo. I think about waving but don't.

It's Mel driving an' me in the passenger seat cause it's only Mel and me. She asks if I remember her from last night and says someone else was meant to come but they got sick so it's her. I don't care. What's one worker from the next? They're all shit anyhow.
What you want for your birthday Zayde? she says after we been to the drive-through an' I got loaded up with fries an' a frosty.

A mobile.

Gosh, that's awesome.

Can't you get me one? An iPhone? You earn lots of money.

No I don't! Where'd you get that idea?

You's all earn millions.

If only!

I put me feet up on the dash an' turn the music up loud an' start singing to the beats I know just to make her drive fast so she can get rid of me to someone else. It's like a game with them. They pass you around so quick you'd think you got nits or something rotten contagious.

*

Tiff's adamant, firm, uncompromising.

If you try and put me back with her I'll gouge her eyes out then kill myself.

I shift in my chair and look at the Scrabble board, then at my tiles. I see a word I can make, decide against it. I don't think *addiction* would be suitable just now, even though it would get my score up. She's good at the game and since we started to play a couple of weeks back has always won. (And that's not because I let her either.)

Who are these friends? I ask, putting down my word. Five letters, a safe *house*.

There's a girl I met in here. She's down the coast. Her mum says I can go and stay there.

That's nice. Can you give me her mum's details so I can call her up and ask if that would be OK?

Tiff broods.

Why do you need to know?

It's how it is Tiff. I'm your caseworker.

I'm 16.

Not yet. And even when you are you will still need to get permission from an adult.

It's all shit.

But she doesn't upset the board. She retreats into herself, puts down a word – *respect*.

Nice score, I say. That keeps you in the lead.

She's always ahead of us. She believes she's in charge.

Except I know that next week a decision has to be made. If she's determined not to go back to her parents – her 'middle-class', 'professional', 'educated', worrying parents - and as the hospital wants her out because her weight is stable, we are left with little alternative but to take her into our care. That throws up a whole lot of new questions.

*

At the front desk there's a woman shouting. It's Sam demanding to see someone about her kids. Jimmy's with her and they're both angry. They're both wearing hoodies, partly because it's the middle of winter, partly so they can choose how much of their faces to reveal. Where's my kids? she starts. It's his birthday yesterday and I didn't get to see him. You think that's right? And why's my little girl not with him. That ain't right neither, splitting 'em up.

Her tone gives no illusion this will be easy. With me is one of our newest recruits. Her name's Toni and her job to take notes, not speak. I filled her in best I could before we started but clearly she wasn't listening.

How old? she asks.

He's a teenager, Jimmy barks.

How lovely.

I look at a spot on the wall above Sam's head.

They're both little kids and they need their mum. They need me. You get that?

Sam glares at Toni.

They're both safe, she says.

Where? Where's this place? You's tell me now 'cause I'm goin' go there an' get 'em, take 'em back home.

Now, Sam, that's not possible, I interject.

Why's it not possible?

I pause. I look at Toni. I see she's writing everything verbatim.

Toni, could you go and get some water please.

She makes no effort to move, stares at her notepad.

Toni. Please. Some water.

She grudgingly gets up and exits. I place my hands flat on the table, my wedding band catching the electric light overhead. Jimmy's wearing gold too, a chain round his neck but Sam's bare of any jewellery, make-up, any effort to present as other than who she is this moment – a grieving mother. She's scratching her arms under the sleeves of the jacket and, like Jimmy, finds it difficult to sit still, feet tapping, torso twisting. She coughs from time to time. I push a box of tissues nearer.

Have you a solicitor? I ask.

What the fuck!

You need to see one. They can help you through this. It will be going to court.

Why'd you come? she shouts. Why'd you have to come? What makes you do that to kids, snatch 'em? Take 'em someplace and let them rot.

I look at Jimmy. He's starring at his hands, set tight in fists. I draw a deep breath, the distress button where I can reach it.

You're scum, you know that? he says, then smashes his knuckles against the table, leans forward, rage on the edge of being released. Sam's rocking like a pendulum until she puts a hand on his arm, steadies and says, Not here Jimmy.

No! He got to learn. He needs to fuckin' know what's like havin' your kids taken.

I play with my ring, twisting it round and round, a thought that I must have lost weight for it to be so loose going through my mind. There's a buzz, the door swings open. Toni's back holding a tray with a jug and four plastic cups. She carefully puts it on the table as if she's at a party. She pours, sits, takes up her pen and notepad.

Have I missed anything? she asks.

You got kids? Jimmy yells.

I feel Toni flinch. She wasn't prepared for that. He's working out what to do next is my hunch. He can crack us open, by which I mean get physical, or he can tell his story. I prefer the latter.

What about your kids? I ask him.

He leans back, rubs his head through the hood. He cracks his knuckles, bending the fingers deliberately. I sense I've got him. It's like boxing: you land a punch, you defend, you strike again. The main thing is to keep on going, don't give a chance for a counter-attack or a signal you might be weakening. Any crack in your defence will be ruthlessly exploited.

Tell me about your kids Jimmy, I repeat. My voice is steady, my tone curious to make him believe I actually care, that I want to hear his story, that his story is important. I take a sip of water. Wait. I can wait all day if necessary. There's no need to talk. Let silence speak for us. Unfortunately this is not a point of view understood by Toni. She has a pressing need to fill the void.

How many children do you have Jimmy? she asks. Her question, and her sight, is directed not at him but at her notepad.

He snarls, hunches forward, grips the table making it rock, his eyes just visible beneath the hood.

What gets me about you's lot is all your fucking questions. What do you do's before you come in here, eh? Do you's sit at your desk an's write out all the fuckin' questions you can think? D' you's know what it's like, question after fuckin' question coming at you's? It's like bein' with the fuckin' dogs, bein' interrogated. That's what it's like. 'Cept you too fuckin' polite. You's don't hit us. All you do's instead is take the kids away an' mess with 'em, an' leave family's smashed. You gettin' all that down on your paper, miss?

Toni doesn't look up, her pen still flying across the sheet.

I ain't sittin' heres no mores, he shouts, pushing the chair hard against the wall. I needs a smoke. You's fuckers gives me the shits.

Sam's jiggering. It's the only word I can find to describe her movements that moment as if her body is being manipulated by a puppeteer who's pulling the strings erratically. I know it's the drugs, or the absence of drugs, making her react that way but there's a kind of poetry in that image, a throwback to the story of Pinocchio. If only Sam can be so transformed I wonder.

Have some water, I suggest.

She does.

Would you like to have a smoke too?

She sits holding the cup to her chin.

You can if you'd like. No one's keeping you here.

She doesn't move.

OK. Let's take a moment, I say.

I look to my left. Toni's silently reading through her notes, underlining certain bits, correcting a spelling here and there.

Toni, I say. Would you give us a few minutes?

She looks at me, processing this request. I read her expression as: you want me to leave you and her alone together?

Jimmy's an angry man, I say when she has left.

You's know nothing about him. Nothin'.

Put me right. All I'm going on is what I just saw.

That ain't him. He's messed up cause what you lot did with him when he was a kid.

And you?

What you think!

She's unsure what to do but really there are just two possibilities: she can get up and leave or she can reveal.

I'd like to know what you think, I say.

You care what I think?

Yes I do.

She blows her nose, screws the tissue into a ball and lets it fall on the table. She hunts for her mobile, scans the texts, keys in some responses, stares at the screen. Time passes. I wait.

Then she pushes back her hood and I see her face for the first time in the unflattering stark fluorescent light. I see the scar, the left eye with blackness half closed. I feel her need to communicate, yet her reluctance, her fear, to admit to me that she is scared.

Can I tell you a story Sam? I begin. I was about 15. I'm living with my mum and her partner, my step-dad, and things aren't good between them. Mum was doing her best. She was keeping it all together but dad, step-dad, was all over the place. He'd been fired from work. He was depressed. He was drinking. He was a brute. I hated him and I stood up for mum all the time. One morning he came back about 11. It was the holidays, January, and I was out in the yard with my sister larking about. I can't quite remember but I heard mum yelling at him and I went inside and there he was standing over her by the fridge with his hand raised in a fist and ready to fly. I shouted at him and he looked across at me and landed a blow on her. I went berserk. I threw myself at him, grappled him, punched him all over in my puny sort of way. He was a big bloke. I was no match for him. He threw me out into the yard and slammed the door. My sister was crying and I was in no state to do anything more. I think I passed out. Don't remember to be honest. Anyhow the police came and you know what mum said? She said it was Ok. She said there was no problem. She said dad was just a bit stressed and told the police go away and solve some proper crimes.

Think I cares about your stories? she says. Fuck you's.

She leaves the room. On the CCTV monitor I watch her go outside and join Jimmy. He shares his cigarette and she wraps her arms around him. A passer-by might think they were a couple in love.

*

You'll enjoy this place Zayde. It's like being on a farm. Got animals too. They've even got a horse. You could learn to ride. How cool's that?

This place they're talkin' about is 2k's out of town but you'd think you're in a different country 'cause it's all hills and trees and the houses spread on big blocks not squeezed together. An' there's no flats, not anywhere. Just these big full-on houses. I remember coming out this way once with mum an' Jimmy. That's when he was driving, before he got busted. Palaces mum call'd 'em and start goin' off about how these rich people have servants. Maids and butlers she says, and there's 20 bedrooms, each with its own bathroom an' a movie room and indoor swimming pool and space for a dozen cars, all of 'em Ferraris. Jimmy blew the horn and stuck his fingers up at someone behind who thought he was going too slow. It weren't a Ferrari but it was red. Jimmy flashed his lights an' I thought they were going to stop. But they just fingered him and raced away like it was a V8. Jimmy was real pissed cause our motor was blowing smoke and he reckoned it was on the way out. He said he'd paid good money from a mate and when he sees him he'll get the money back. Mum's not listening to any of this. She's got her head out the window checking the palaces.

How many TV's do'yer think they'd have? she'd say, and, They probably got a helicopter too or private jet.

I never saw neither and Jimmy said she's makin' it up and fanatasising or somit. She got real pissed with him on the way back and said next time he should get a mate who knows something about cars. He shouted at her and said what the fuck she knows about cars and when we got back he kicked the driver's door real hard so it never shut again. Didn't matter anyhow. Next day someone torched it.

Are they million-airs? I say to the worker as we go up this long dusty drive heading to the top of a hill, grass everywhere and fences an' over there cows.

Look Zayde. There's the horse. Isn't it cute?

What they don't tell me is there's two other kids here and I make the third. They're in the kitchen, sittin' on high stools eating toasties, staring at me, boy an' girl, bit older I'm guessing. They say nothin'. Boy's wearing a baseball cap with *Boss* written on the front. Girl's wrapped in a towel like she's been swimming even though it's winter. They both got mobiles they're starring at.

Hi Zayde. Like a toastie? says this woman.

I'd rather check out my room and see what else is goin' on. She smiles and says that's fine. Her hair's pink coloured and she's not that old either. The other two kids don't shift. It's like I'm not there.

This is your room, she says taking me through some other rooms and along a passageway.

It's massive. Got a bunk bed and a window looking on a garden with grass. There's a cupboard and a desk, an' everything's shit clean, even the carpet.

You haven't got many clothes have you, she says. We'll sort that out tomorrow. Call me Kate. I don't know anything about you Zayde. The people just said you're here because things didn't work out at the other place. No worries. There's no rush. Would you like to see outside?

Are you a million-air?

What's that? No. No way!

She laughs but I'm thinkin' how can you not be a million-air and have all this?

Let me show you outside.

Do you have a pool?

Yes. Heated. You can still swim in it.

The sun's high in the sky and the pool's sparkling like a crystal, mum would have said. She likes crystals, says they got powers. She sometimes takes me to these fairs and has her palm read. Once I had my hand looked at and they said I'd be famous one day. Said it was the lines. I didn't understand but mum was real pleased. She asked the woman how I'd be famous but the woman wouldn't say. Don't matter, says mum, he'll find a way, don't you worry.

Do you want to swim Zayde? Kate says. I can find you some swimmers.

I lie on my back in the pool thinkin' this ain't real. Then I think of Dusty an' wonder what he's doin' right now. He'd be thinkin' I done Ok is what I reckon.

Is your name really Zayde?

It's the girl. She's sitting with her legs in the water sucking an ice block. She's dark with black spots for eyes.

Yeah. What's yours?

Angel.

Angel?

Yeah. Angel.

That's...

What?

I never met anyone called Angel.

I never met anyone called Zayde. You staying here long?

How I know.

Didn't they say nothing?

No.

She gets in an' starts splashing around.

Can you swim? I says.

Nah. There's not much water where I'm from. You bring any stuff?

Smokes?

Yeah. Anything else?

Nah.

She'll search your bags.

I hid it.

She'll find it.

I hid it, I say again.

She'll still find it. But it's good mostly. I've been a month. You get money as long as you do chores an' the like. There's a board on the fridge with our names and what we've earnt. You get paid on Friday after school.

Ok.

You going to school?

Don't know yet. Haven't been for a while.

You come with me. We can catch the same bus.

She climbs out and shakes her head like a puppy. On her thigh she's scratched in the skin *I hate me*.

Just watch out for Nathan, she says.

Kid in the cap?

Yeah. He steals stuff. Don't tell him I told you.

I think I might like Angel.

I'm in my room after we've eaten, sorting stuff, when Nathan rocks in.

What did the girl tell you? he says.

Angel?

Yeah. What did she say? I saw you twos talking out there.

He's taller than me, thin, and got a mean look. If he wants a fight I'll give him one.

Was she telling stuff about me?

I a'nt answering and next he's shoulder barging and swearing so I barge him back and then he's got hold of my clothes, thrown 'em all about. He turns and I choose my moment to grab him round the neck and with my knee groins him like Jimmy taught. He screams loud and there's Angel at the door seeing what's happening. Then Kate's there too and this other tall bloke in a singlet. He pulls me away, tells Nathan and Angel get to their rooms, tugs me out with Kate going on at him about not being rough, he's only a little kid. We go to the kitchen and the man goes off somewhere and Kate says let's go outside. It's already getting' dark but she takes me down the gravel road a bit and calls out a name and then this horse comes out of nowhere and starts to lick her hand. Yuck. It ain't fuckin' licking me, no ways.

You like animals? she says.

I had a cat once.

That's nice. Cats are nice.

She got killed.

Oh. Was it a car or something?

Something like that.

That's awful. You must have been so upset.

She tries to put her arms round me, hug me. It's weird, a stranger doing that. I push her away.

This is Rustin, she says. Say hello to Zayde, Rustin. You can touch him. He won't bite. I promise.

I ain't touching no stinking horse.

I hope you'll like it here Zayde. You can be happy here. I'll do my best to make it Ok for you.

Who's that bloke?

That's Joe. He's my partner. He works away a lot. You won't see much of him. He's tired tonight, a bit grumpy.

We go back to the house. It's getting cold and there are lights on. It looks friendly and warm like it's a happy place. I wanna go to my room and sleep. Kate says that's fine. It's my first night and I can do what I like. I guess Kate's Ok but I don't care much for Joe and I gotta sort out that Nathan kid.

*

The psychiatrist is pushing hard for Tiff to be discharged. She gives us a deadline – three days. We negotiate, get it up to five. It's an institutional stand-off with a young girl trapped between two bureaucracies in a paper fight with odds stacked in favour of the hospital. We scramble together a plan to pay an agency tens of thousands of dollars a week for round-the-clock care in a house that's more a fortress than a home, stripped of anything that can be used as a weapon. Or so we think. A document is prepared to ensure the safety of staff, emailed to all, signed and put somewhere. We agree the day and time for discharge, my job being to transport her. It all goes without a hitch.

It's that night the trouble starts.

The report, when it comes through the following lunchtime, tells how the night staff, two young women, followed procedure by taking Tiff small meals at set times, as advised by the medical team. Tiff's having none of it. She throws the food across the room, abuses the women, pushes one so she falls. The police come which only makes matters worse. The police call the paramedics and both agree she's unsafe to be left in the house. She is scheduled and taken back to the hospital.

By the time I'm aware of this the psychiatrist has already been on to management, telling them there's no medical reason Tiff needs to be in the unit. Another agency worker picks her up, takes her back to her room at the house.

In a text, she says she wants to be left alone but no one is listening. I reply: I'm coming. See you soon.

When I arrive she's in her room. The workers are in another, on their mobiles. I'll try and speak with her, I say.

As I sit outside her room I think I've been in this place before. With another teenage girl who wouldn't speak with anyone and kept running. She had a 'boyfriend', who in the end decided it was better to try and throw himself off a bridge.

Tiff. You can hear me Tiff, I know that. Will you let me come in.

Go away.

I can't.

Fuck off, and tell those ... tell those fuckers they can fuck off too.

I say nothing. I can hear nothing.

Tiff?

There's a sound. A scratching sound perhaps.

Tiff? Tiff, what are you doing?

Fuck you.

There's a sound now of banging. The soft sound of flesh against something hard.

Tiff. I'm going to come in. OK?

I push the door. She can't lock it but she's wedged something up against. I'm in the room. I see her against a wall. Her forehead bruised where she's been knocking it against the wall. She's got a shard of glass in her hand. Where from? She's drawing it across her wrist. On the wood floor blood.

Tiff. Don't.

I shout to the workers on their mobiles to get the ambulance. I look around the room and see a picture frame with the glass shattered. How was this left behind?

Four armed police officers and two paramedics come at the same time. I stand in the background, standing in the doorway of Tiff's bedroom. She's holding the shard of glass, points it at the lead cop. He's wearing body armour.

What are you all doing here? Why can't you just leave me alone? she screams

I want to say to the police: Heh, move aside, give her some space, let me talk with her.

Instead they point tazers and if she doesn't comply 'I'll roll you on your back – and I will,' says the lead cop.

When it's over and she's been taken back to the hospital I sit in my car, notice two men, neighbours, observing me from their front lawn.

I drive home and wonder what colour bin to put out tonight for collection. I think it's red.

Red.

Colour of ...

Anger ...

Retribution ...

Annihilation.

I'm covered in ...

EIGHT

Kate takes me and Angel to town, says we can look around while she's shopping. She tells Angel to keep her phone on so she can ring when she's finished and pick us up - And don't get in any trouble. Then she drives off, waving out the window.

Angel says we should look out for old cigarette ends in the street and wants to know what I wanna do. She's got \$10 an' wants to go to Macca's.

I'll get you a frosty, she says.

I'm thinkin' maybe Dusty be there so I nod and we drift about a bit, duck into shops just 'cause we can an' she pretends she's got this fuckin' bad cough and lets it out so people get the shits when she's behind them. One old bloke nearly falls over. It cracks me. She's funny. We go's to the Salvos after and mess about with the clothes, she tryin this an' that. She pulls on a hat with a big long shinny green feather and looks at herself in a mirror. You think I'm beautiful? she says.

I dunna what to say.

I am, she says, an' does a crazy wild dance before some old woman with knittin' in her hands comes and says we gotta go cause we are making too much racket.

I can pay, says Angel. I got money.

She shakes the \$10 in the air but the old woman just mouths at us, so I gives her the finger and we run out, Angel still with the hat laughing. She don't care. She's a bird swooping so all the people on the street have to dodge out her way. 'Cept for Hogman in his electric buggy who's coming straight at her who's got her back to him, throwing the hat up in the air like a ball. I shout, Get out the way. But Hogman's spewing and hits her square.

She falls, cries. Hogman don't stop, yells Fucking kids.

You hurt, I says to her.

She's holding her ankle but shakes her head.

It's nothing. Where's my hat?

I look around. I don't see it. Then I sees it floating above the road when this lorry comes an' it gets caught in the hood. Gone.

Pull me up, she says.

Her hand's warm. It's the first time I held a girl's hand. She says: Do you wanna kiss me?

I pull away sharp.

You gone red, she says.

No I ain't.

You ever kissed?

Yeah. Course.

No you ain't.

Yes I 'ave.

No you fuck ain't.

She's up close. So close I can see her skin freckles. She pokes my nose with hers. How's 'bout it? she says. You wanna kiss me on the lips?

I turn away. I see the Macca's sign down the road. I start running.

I's only teasing, she says catching up.

I ain't talking but she going to buy me that frigin frosty like she says. There's loads other kids out the front sittin' there cause it's the place. No one I know but Angel knows some and leaves me kickin' my trainers.

Heh, Zayde.

It's the kid Nathan with a bunch others an' skateboards. He wants me to come over, pointing like he's the boss. Yeah, just like his fuckin' stupid cap. I reckon it's time to show him.

You got a new girlfriend? he says.

No. Why?

You an' Angel.

What 'bout it?

Saw's you an' her.

An'?

An' looks like you's ...

He makes a wank with his hand an' I blow.

You fuckin' cunt.

I smash his face. He falls back. I jumps him, pins him to the ground. I'm belting him hard when some other kid grabs me, throws me off, kicks me. Soon I'm getting' kicked all over an' I roll small, put my arms over my head. Protection. I tries gets to my feet but Nathan's standin' there in front an' he's got this blade spinning.

I'll stick you, he says.

Angel's pushed her way through the circle, is opposite Nathan.

What you doing? she yells.

What you doin'?

Piss you.

Piss yourself.

She slams him full in the chest, hands out, pumped. Nathan got no chance. He drops the blade an' he's tellin' her stop but she ain't listening. He grabs his board an' pushes off, followed by three or four of the other kids.

Fuck off you loser, she shouts after. Come on, she says to me, I'll get you that frosty.

She picks up the blade an' stuffs it somewhere. I can't see an' I don't care. I'm feelin' like that Nathan kid's never goin' leave me alone, goin' slag me off 'cause Angel smashed him proper when it should've been me. I feel everyone lookin' at us. Feel they're talking about us, talkin' 'bout me and how he can't look after himself and has to get a girl do it. I'm 13. I should've done it. I should 'ave done him.

You got brothers, sisters? she asks when we're sitting.

Yeah. I don't know where she is. They won't say. Say I can see her sometime soon.

Then I remember Dusty too. He says we're brothers. Not like real or anythin' but close sort of. I start telling her about him, how I've not seen him around and maybe she's knows him. She says she's not from these parts but maybe we can go looking. That sounds great I'm thinkin' before I start wondering if I want to be seen round town with her all the time. Everyone start believing what Nathan was believing.

Nah. It's alright, I say. Forget it.

I lean back and right above me's the Moon. No kidding. Hanging right above us full on. How crazy's that? I point it out to Angel but she ain't interested.

You heard of astronauts? I say.

What they?

People who go to the Moon.

I put out my thumb and cover the Moon up. Angel asks what I'm doin' and I tell her, I'm Master of the Universe. I just stole the Moon.

Your mad, she says. We going or what?

Going where?

Going. We can't sit here all day.

I'm not sure.

Don't worry. If we see Nathan I'll protect you.

She thinks I'm weak. Stuff her.

I can look after myself, I say not looking.

Yeah. Sure.

She's already walking off but I'm staying. She turns and says, See yers.

I don't say nothin', just stare at the Moon. I think it's got special powers, moonbeam powers, and if you stare long enough you'll see yourself reflected, as if you're inside, if you knows what I'm saying. Like being inside a balloon maybe. It sounds crazy but once I was looking at the Moon for what was ages and I got this buzzing in my head and I thought I heard the Moon talking to me. Weird. Can't remember what it said but I got shit scared and didn't do it again. At least for a time. I prefer lying on my back and looking so I'm goin' head down the beach and lie on the sand. I'm thinking I might see if Dusty's in his secret place too.

*

I'm planning to meet Alice for fish and chips down by the river. Our daughter's got a sleepover and the young fella (well, he's 18 but still young in my eyes) is out with his mates, who knows where. He doesn't bother to tell us anymore. So it's just Alice and me. Frankly I'd rather go home, put something in the microwave, see what's on telly, fall into bed. I'm not really in the mood but Alice insists. It's the start of our two-week break, she reminded me on the phone. Let's start it like we intend to continue.

It's Friday and I've had a busy week too, she says.

I back off, there's no need for an argument.

When I arrive she's already set up a blanket on the grass like a picnic. The evening's warm with a hint of a breeze, the sun on its descent, the first star visible overhead. She smiles and waves as I approach. I've stopped off on the way and bought a bottle of New Zealand sparkling, a sort of peace token. I raise it in the air and she smiles again.

If I'd known I'd've brought flutes, she says.

If I'd've known that I'd have bought Moet, I say.

She laughs and I pop the cork. It arcs into the river.

You going to get that? she asks.

It's organic.

Like hell, she says. Once it gets into the eco...Stop! Don't spill!

You have to know this about Alice - she's the organised one, the one who keeps us all in line, the one who brings in the money too, proper money, serious money that pays for the overseas holiday once a year. She's in marketing, an executive, almost on the board, I forget what. She travels a lot, overseas too, which I don't mind, not now the kids are older. She loves what she does, is good at it; also makes sure there's meals in the freezer. She'd be called Superwoman if this were the eighties. When we first got together she knew she was the leader, the one who had a plan from A to Z. I just hung in there.

How's your week? she asks.

OK, I say in my I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it tone. Yours?

Great. Landed a new client and got rid of an old one. Magic happens.

She passes me crackers and cheese. She looks happy, sexy, an invitation is being offered. I look away. A pack of gulls is eyeing us off, eager for any crumbs. I prepare ammunition, a few sticks and a discarded paper cup.

You want to get fish and chips or just go home? she asks.

I refill her glass and mine.

There's no rush, I say.

Speak for yourself.

She giggles and I launch my first counter-offensive against the gulls.

Tell me something new about you? she asks.

Something new? I repeat.

Why not?

There's nothing new.

You're on holiday, she says. We're on holiday more to the point. That's new.

The champagne's having its effect on an empty stomach. I lie down. She waves a cracker in front of my mouth and I push it away like it's an irritating fly.

You're not much fun, she says.

Tired.

Work's out. It's time to play.

I'm concentrating on a section of sky when there's an instantaneous streak of light passing diagonally. A shooting star. Alice has seen it too.

Quick, make a wish, then closes her eyes and concentrates. What you wish for?

Fish and chips.

Later back at home we fumble to undress, both tipsy, me thinking this is unnecessary, Alice still doing her best to arouse me but it isn't working.

What's the matter with you? she sighs. Don't you want to?

She moves to her side of the bed, her body still available but I'm not interested. It's been that way for a while.

Get some sleep honey, she says. Perhaps in the morning. You might have more energy then.

She strokes my arm, rolls over, draws up a sheet, within a few minutes is asleep, a low murmur soon turning into a rattle. I get up and go to the living room, turn on the TV, watch something about people building their dream homes in the English countryside. My mind's on other things though. I'm thinking about Tiff. What will become of her?

*

Snake.

I've been walkin' a while when I hears his voice. I look around but can't see him at first.

Here. Down here.

There's an alley and I see his teeth first.

Come here Snake.

He's whispering, sounds different. And he's got my bike.

Sweet as, I say, taking it. Looks new.

Yeah, I fixed it. Polished it. Got a new tyre.

He's resting 'gainst the wall.

What you been doin' Snake? he says breathing hard.

Not much.

Yeah?

Got a new carer.

What 'bout that Jimmy cunt?

Nah.

We going get him. Ain't that what we goin' do?

If you says.

I'm sittin' on my bike wantin' to shoot off and pull some wheelies and shit. I ain't real interested in this Jimmy crap he's goin' on 'bout. That's all past.

Heh Snake. You got any money? Whata 'bout smokes?

I got nothin'.

He looks as if watchin' out for someit.

You's Ok? I says. You look different.

It nothin'. I just need smokes.

I see if I can find some.

Come to the place later.

Sure.

I'm half out in the street now and he's still standin' there like he can't move. Then this police wagon pulls up.

This your bike?

As much as I'm tellin' them they got radios goin' and making notes in their books like it's some big deal. It's just a bike, I'm sayin'.

Where's the kid you were with?

I ain't telling them anything but when it's safe I take a sneak and see he's not there any more.

Where you live son?

The other one's checking the alley so I take my chance and burn but I'm only a few hundred metres up the road when the wagon's on me again and I'm havin' to answer loads more of their shitty questions. Like what's my name, and how old, and where's the bike come from? They don't believe it's mine. They put me in the back, the bike too, say they'll

take me to the carer's place. One of them says she knows her. Starts going on 'bout how good she is, how lucky I'm to be there. Says I gotta keep out of trouble if I wanna make someit of myself. The bloke driving looks me in the mirror and his eyes say loser.

Kate's out front when we drive in. I see Angel inside on a stool. She's combing her hair. Kate tells me go to my room, she'll see me in a minute after she's spoken with the officers. I hear her offering tea but they say they can't. I don't look at Angel as I pass, but she says someit' like, You're in big fuck trouble. I dun'o what she means.

What's going on Zayde? Kate says.

I'm sittin' on the bed. I can tell she's angry.

It's my bike.

Not what the police say.

It is.

Ok. We'll talk about that some other time. But what about this?

She pulls a plastic bag from her pocket and holds it up in front of me. I know what's inside.

Where'd you get this?

It ain't mine.

I found it in your bags.

Why you in my bags?

You're in my house Zayde. These are house rule. No smokes and no drugs. You know that.

It ain't mine.

Well, how'd it get there then?

I don't fuckin' know.

Don't use that language at me Zayde.

Fuck off.

I dodge her. Angel calls as I pass, Told you she'd find it.

I get out the house quick, run down the drive, see the horse gallopin' in the field. I want to run as fast I can away from this shit. I knows it was Angel putting the weed there. They're all a bunch of fuckers, her and Nathan and Kate and her bloke Joe. They're all out to get me and I ain't stayin' no more. Not here. Not anywhere. They can't make me. They can't control me. I'm by myself. It's just me. Maybe this is what being famous means. Going on

the run and never being found. Like they put up posters everywhere with your face on it. That's a kinda famous. Like an outlaw.

NINE

The holiday didn't go as planned. Alice organised a 10 day all-in to Bali, booked it ages ago. Then on the day we're due to fly a volcano erupts out in the ocean some place. We're stuck at the airport for twenty-four hours waiting for the cloud of dust to decide which way it's going. Our daughter Zoe stays sane until the charge runs out on her mobile and she can't find a spare socket to plug in to. Staff start giving out free water and sandwiches, which causes a near riot, so much so an elderly lady almost gets crushed to death as she bends down to retrieve a cheese and ham wrap that's fallen to the floor in the melee. Paramedics rush to the scene and get mobbed themselves because someone thinks they're jumping the queue for the food! There's young kids running everywhere, fighting, yelling, parents nowhere to be seen, toilets stink and, just when I think we've found a place to camp, this drunk comes up and starts abusing me for taking *his* spot. Worse than work I'm thinking.

Meanwhile, Alice is on her phone trying to get hold of anyone she knows who might be able to get us out of this living hell. Finally she gives the thumbs up, tells us to grab our bags and it's back to the car and off to this beach house in Byron owned by one of her colleagues.

She describes it as all glass and marble, with its own private beach access and every conceivable gadget, plus there's super-fast Wi-Fi. (Knowledge of which causes Zoe to smile for the first time.)

Wonderful, swoons Alice, collapsing on to one of the lavish, white leather sofas with an uninterrupted view of the Pacific.

But we're in Byron, I protest. We can come to Byron any time.

But do we? she asks.

Well, no, I reply.

So, there you are. It's like a home away from home and it's all ours. At least, she adds quickly, until the weekend.

And what happens at the weekend? I ask.

Oh, Dominic and his kids will be up. But don't worry, she says, there's plenty of space. He's really looking forward to catching up with you again, she adds.

I wish that was mutual, I think, while putting on my 'that will be lovely' smile. Dominic! I should have known this was his place. Transparent and hard at the same time, just like glass and marble! Last time we met was the company's Christmas dinner when he insisted on lecturing me on why the social services were a drain on the economy while extolling the 'end of the age of entitlement' line. Dominic and I sit at opposite ends of the political spectrum, so far apart it's like we represent the difference between rationalism and idealism. Apart from which he's got a crush on Alice. She doesn't believe it but to me it's obvious. Such as making his beach 'shack' available, knowing he'd have the opportunity to spend time with her on and off. He's divorced, which shouldn't come as a surprise.

When we and Alice first met I was full of idealism, full of what a lunatic American once called 'shock and awe', in a completely different context of course. But that's history and I was always one for looking back rather than forward, taking cues from the past and getting angry that no one else saw the connections. Alice was sympathetic back then, saying I'm the dreamer, her the realist, that opposites attract an' all that bullshit, which of course I took in. Her parents were, are, hugely successful. They look at me as if I'm some parasite which'd crawled into their well-manicured domain. Her brother, Sebastian, despised me from the first, shut me out of any conversation, called me a 'turnip' (whatever that means) and let me suffer his disdain on our wedding day by not even attending. Sends a present though. A very expensive one. A very practical one. A kitchen machine that bakes, slow cooks, tenderises and bloody well rules your life if you'll let it. Snap! I put it in a cupboard still in its box. If he thinks he's in control, well, no way.

How do I see myself in ten years? That bloke standing at the traffic lights waiting patiently for them to change as others run across the road oblivious to traffic, buses, trucks, cars, bicycles even. I'm there waiting because that's what the sensible people do. Sense of safety, sense of loss, sense of mortality I guess.

*

For me there will be no end to Tiff's story, yet another one I will not know the ending. Like Sam's. The difference being that Tiff is a child though she refuses to acknowledge.

For Tiff I will go the extra mile. After yet another inconclusive teleconference with clinicians and administrators I take matters into my own hands. One late Tuesday afternoon,

with the office nearly empty, I write an email to the Minister, in which I express my frustration and anger at the inability of departments to work together for the benefit of this young person, concluding 'we seem to be stuck in an endless loop of system abuse that is negating the care for this 15-year-old'.

For this I am admonished.

*

I wait 'till it goes dark then sneak back to get my bike where the cops left it. I ain't got lights but there's plenty of Moon, better than a torch an' it makes everything sort of spooky glow. I dun' know how to put it but when the Moon's shinning full on I get a good feeling inside, like when you run hard or when you pull the dunna tight under your chin when it's freckin' cold.

I carry the bike so it makes no sound, keep to the grass 'till I get to the top of the drive when I push off and go for it, zigging an' zagging an' dodgin' my Moon shadow all the way to the road, full on. I'm sweating and wish I had water cause I'm thinkin' it'll be about an hour before I get to Dusty's hole. I see the town below, all lights shining an' shimmering, and where the sea starts an' the line where it meets the sky. It all seems fuckin' huge an' out of control. How can anyone keep all that in their heads? How can they know this stuff about 'lectricity and ships and planes an' all sorts? How'd it all get made? How'd we get invented? Where'd it all come, planets and stars, the universe and all. Out of nowhere or out of somewhere? Perhaps Dusty will know.

I step hard on the pedals, wanna see if I can reach 100k's, the Moon glow guiding me into town and I don't stop 'til I reach the scrub.

You bring any smokes? says Dusty coming from out the dark.

I guess he's been waiting. I lay the bike down and put out my hands.

You bring anything? he says starring at my palms.

I didn't get a chance. I had to get out and the bitch she found things. She searched my stuff.

You put it in your stuff? What, you dumb? You keep it on you, hides it in places she won't wanna touch. Don't you know nothin'?

It wasn't mine. Someone put it there. One of the other kids. The girl.

Who cares Snake. You gotta learn or you gonna fall. No one cares 'bout you, got it? It's that simple.

He turns.

Why you tailing me Snake?

You said come see you.

Yeah. Come with smokes. You got none so piss off back where you came from.

I'm by his side pushing through the bushes. It's dark but not dark dark cause of the Moonshine.

You know stories 'bout the Moon? I says trying to be friendly.

What?

Stories and that shit.

I know nothin'. Get that Snake? Nothin'.

I nod. He scares me. What's up with him? Don't he want to be my friend?

You still following?

I'm trying to keep quiet and on me toes, not break any sticks.

Fuck you Snake. You messed up real.

He pushes me in the bushes and starts running back to town the way we come.

Don't follow, he says.

All I hear is waves and the sea, white with Moon. I go to the edge of the sand, stand alone, no one in the world anywhere, waves comin' an' still I don't move. I feel the sea 'round my legs and still I don't move. I feel the space, the wide space with the Moon glow an' it makes me think of being up there, going round the Moon in a rocketship, looking down on this small stinking hole. It's like I see myself standing here but I'm up there at the same time.

The water's up to my knees and still I don't move.

What if I was alone and up there, and what if I couldn't get back here. Where'd I be? Would I live forever, would I live forever in space?

The water's cold and still I don't move 'till this wave knocks me and I go under and see the white glow over me. I push myself up to the Moon 'cause I'm not going be sinking deep.

I breathe and lay on the wet sand.

It's the Moon I see right above me. So bright in the dark. It's as if the Moon's guiding me or someit. The waves keep coming an' I'm going to get up and going find the hole and goin' make myself safe in Dusty's hole. I'm still his friend.

I dun' know how I got to the hole, how I got in, how I find a sleep place 'cause I wake sudden and I can't remember. I'm wet and shivering and hungry as. That's when I hear voices and think it's the police come to get me again.

What you doin'? says Dusty bending in besides me.

He's got two others with him, older kids. They're all laughin' an' kickin'. There ain't room so one of them he stands, back to the sides. His knee's got this big red puss oozing.

You ever done cookies? he says.

Wanna try? says the other.

I look at Dusty. He's that close our legs cross one another an' I can touch his face if I want. He's nodding.

What's the time? I say.

Who cares about the fuckin' time, says the boy standing.

Roll him, says the other.

Dusty's got to giggling now, scratchin' his head an' whistling too. The other kid, he lights this smoke and takes a draw, coughs and shakes his head and hands it to me. I don't want it but the boy standing he's got his foot on my head an' pushing down an' he says: Take it kid.

I put the smoke to my lips. It's burnin' an' I smell the stuff before I suck it in. I'm thinking this ain't nothing, when all at once I get this whoosh come through me an' I start to spew over Dusty.

Fuck, he says and jumps, hitting the other kid who's tryin' to get the smoke out of my hands.

Fuck, says the one standin' and that's the last I hear.

I wake by sunlight. It's killing my eyes. My head's shitting too. My throat's got like stones or someit' stuck and all I smell is stink. I climbs out the hole. I crawls to the beach. I pull my clothes off. I gets on my feet an' make myself run. I dive in under. I come up and spit out the salt water, look about and see standin' on the sand this man with his dog.

You mind the sharks young lad, he says, laughs, throws a ball for the dog, walks away.

The bikes gone. I dun' know if Dusty took it or someone else pinched it seeing it lying there all night. Anyhow it's not where I left it an' I searched good. My belly's rumbling 'cause I ain't had nothin' to eat since that frosty and that's not food. I need water bad too 'cause my throat's like sandpaper. I stick to the shady side of the street taking the long way too, not any where's near the skate park even though it's got toilets and water an' all. If

Dusty's there I don't want him to spot me. I don't wanna see him ever. I think he's gone mad what with his mates forcing me to take that shit. I feel like everybody's gone now.

*

I run the nail of the right thumb across my upper lip. It's an old habit from when I had a moustache. I'd enjoy the sensation of the bristles, similar to running your hand across a brush. Alice always hated me with a tash and when we were on holiday I decided after a pretty full-on night out to shave it off. She didn't even notice until a week after we returned.

She's in WA on a business trip and last night she called me on Skype, or more correctly spoke at me, about how she no longer feels the relationship has a future; how she believes we've been moving in different directions for years; how she supports me but can no longer support me, by which she means, I'm guessing, financially, though the sub-text is emotionally.

Are you with Dominic? I ask.

Why do you say that?

Just an instinct. The holiday house that so suddenly materialized and he there too.

We work closely together if that's what you're on about. And, yes, he is here if you must know.

Are you having an affair?

The words spring from me, released from long confinement. I watch her reactive response, a look of amazed disgust, a physical repulsion to my statement.

What are you talking about?

She hunches forward as if wanting to grab me through the screen.

Are you fucking serious? Are you actually being fucking serious Edward?

She only ever calls me that when livid with anger.

There's more I want to say but, before I get the chance, she tells me: I'm back Friday. I'll text and we'll meet. Ok?

When she says meet I'm taken back to when and how we first met. It was pre-internet, before mobile phones. Talk to the kids and they can't imagine such a time. What did you do? How did you possibly get in touch with anyone? Weren't you bored? Strangely enough we managed pretty well. Letters, remember those? Handwritten with deliberation,

the paper carefully folded and creased, placed in an envelope, an address written on the front, a stamp licked and stuck on the top right hand corner, a walk to the nearest post box, a wait for a reply, if it ever came.

I met Alice through a small ad in a magazine. Lonely hearts the section was called. Nowadays there's Tinder, then it was the weekly wait for the next issue, a thorough read of each entry, always more males than females. This one caught my attention though: *Bright and gifted I am. Are you the one who can thrill my senses?* Short and succinct (you paid by the line so economy was essential), with the emphasis on the last three words. It was brilliant and I think I might even have had an erection as I wrote my considered yet witty response. I'd never seen an ad like it, an ad that called out to me, me alone. Yes, I was much younger, and yes, I'd not had much experience with women before Alice. Well, to tell the truth I'd never slept with anyone, a fumbled kiss the closest I'd been to physical contact. When a letter arrived a couple of weeks later in return (knowing it was from the writer of the ad, the envelope distinguished by a pastel shade, my name and address written in pink ink) I could barely bring myself to tear it open. I left it unopened for days. I don't know why. It could only be good news since back then people never bothered to reply unless they wanted to meet, completely at odds to now when texts ping back and forth day and night and there's no limit on disclosure or the addition of revealing selfies. When I watch Zoe on her mobile, her expression transfigured by what she's reading, fingers flying across the virtual keyboard, I have to stop myself from a challenging remark that will elicit a response such as: Dad, butt out, you're from another planet. You don't understand.

We were so different it should never have lasted more than a few weeks. Our first meeting was in a popular and busy south London public park. It was a Sunday and I arrived late having forgotten trains and buses follow a different and less frequent timetable on weekends. Alice, of course, had been waiting patiently for ages and was on the point of giving up. Though we'd agreed how we'd identify each other, she had no difficulty as I was a heaving, panting, sweating mess after running the last few hundred metres. She laughed, offered me a tissue, suggested I sit awhile to regain my composure and told me putting my head between my legs might be helpful. I thought she was a nurse. She knew where to go for an inexpensive meal; knew how to make small talk when my conversation faltered; even knew the times of the return train I needed to catch. And it was Alice who suggested we

meet up later in the week to see a movie. That's Alice. Organised, efficient. She always knows her place. Knows too I've never found mine.

Her career took priority and I never challenged this, never stood in the way. I was always playing at working, more in love with the idea than the intent, whereas her entire family was possessed of the instinct to succeed. I was the first in mine to go to university, the first to gain access to another level of society, to mix in uncharted territory. My parents were a little frightened of her actually, the only time they ever met her family was at the wedding. It was a disaster and dad never got over the sense of rejection, a working man with no idea how to hold a champagne flute.

*

I go to the shopping centre 'cause I gotta get someit to eat and it's easy to grab some stuff from the supermarket and run. I swing down the aisles trying not to look like I'm starvin' but my clothes they're all dirty and smell fucked as. This old guy filling shelves stares at me an' I can tell he's thinkin' I ain't got a dollar on me.

Looking for something? he says.

I move away. I gotta be quick so I grab a bottle of water and a big bag of honey soy crisps and as I get near the checkouts I snatch a couple bars of chocolate from those stands they have there. The woman on the checkouts is chatting to a customer so I dodge by an' out.

Hey, you haven't paid, she says.

I'm stuffin' the bars in my pockets and runnin' fast as, not going to stop 'till I'm out of here. Down the escalator, into the car park when this car comes screamin' at me, pulls up hard making me drop the water and crisps.

Fuckin' wanker, watch where you's going, I says loud and smash my hand 'gainst the hood. Then I'm off again. Two choco bars all I got. Still, better than nothing.

TEN

Alice decides it's more convenient to meet at the airport as she has a connecting flight, so I drive to Brisbane for a 7am rendezvous, a struggle as I'm not a regular observer of early mornings and have to be on the road by 5. Although mid-winter the temperature is already

beginning to creep up by the time I arrive with a high expected of 24c. The majority love the all-round summer: this is Queensland where the words *climate* and *change* don't often appear next to one another in the same sentence.

She's gained me access to the Qantas lounge where I'm offered a full English and coffee on demand. I decline the breakfast but gratefully accept a latte.

How was the flight?

Tolerable. You look dreadful, she says, sinking into a high-backed armchair and re-arranging a cushion to her liking.

That wasn't the first thing I expected you to say.

Have you not been sleeping?

Barely.

She nods and places her cup on the low table between us.

I won't make this difficult Ed. I've given it a lot of thought and my mind is made.

She proceeds to deliver a well-rehearsed speech, at the end asking: You understand? It will be a separation. I'll still contribute financially, for the kids' sake.

I have my fingers inter-laced as I lean slightly forward. Though the room only has a few occupants, and these scattered a distance away, I still find it necessary to speak softly. Was Dominic with you in Perth?

She sighs.

Yes Ed. We were both attending an emergency meeting. He was fired. I've been appointed in his place. I'm a director now

You deserve it.

Are you being funny?

Not in the least. I always knew you'd shimmy your way to the top of the greasy pole.

You could just say congratulations.

Congrats.

Now don't start getting nasty.

Me!

You're beginning to sound that way.

Surely not? Why would I? My wife flits off to the other side of the country at the drop of a hat without telling anyone where she's going then calls me to say we're finished, drops in to the transit lounge en-route to who knows where and delivers her ultimatum. All the time

denying she's been having an affair with her boss so she can plunge the knife between his shoulder blades like the ruthless assassin she really is. How does that sound? Have I caught the essence?

You're a tosser Edward.

But I never deceived did I?

You know what, there was once a time when you were happy, fun to be around, made me laugh. Then you became disillusioned, realized you couldn't change the world. Couldn't change anything. I supported you, remember, when you said you were going to re-train as a social worker? I thought, maybe this is what he's been looking for all this while. He'll find his rightful place, be connected for once with a purpose. Yet it never really happened, did it? You became just as cynical, just as withdrawn as before. What exactly are you searching for Ed, for whatever it is I don't know if you'll find it in this lifetime.

She drains the rest of her coffee and stands.

I'll speak to the children. Take care of yourself Ed.

*

As I'm driving back to the office I get a call. They need me to check on Zayde. He's been missing overnight and the carer is worried.

I drive around the town before heading to the shopping centre where most kids hang out some of the time and as I'm searching for a place to park this kid comes dashing out of the shadows right in front of me. I slam the brakes and he jumps to one side just in time. There's a second or two as I'm leaning over the steering wheel, momentum having carried me forward, heart thumping, when I recognize it's Zayde. He slams his hand on the bonnet, yells out, Fuckin' wanker, watch where you's going, then races off.

Zayde, you want a lift? I call through the open passenger window.

He's moving fast, almost running, head down, focused. I park quickly and follow on foot.

Zayde, I call again. I want to talk with you, that's all.

Instead of slowing he speeds up. I have to redouble my step.

Zayde. Come on mate. Not so quick.

Now he's running and I'm having to run to keep up. It's a flat, straight road with a grass strip either side heading out of town with cars and trucks passing but just far enough

away to be safe. That's until Zayde decides he's going to dodge to the other side in between two semi-trailers coming in opposite directions. With a vivid picture flashing through my mind of him being scythed into a thousand bloody pieces by the combined force of these metal monsters, I involuntarily cry out, Zayde! followed by the shrill shriek of air horns.

I wait for the trucks to pass, buffeted by the draught of passing air, and as I refocus see him on the other side catching his breath. The road's clear, I dart across. He's heard me and started off but I'm close, so close I can touch. I grab one of his arms above the elbow, pull him back. He resists. I get his other arm. He's twisting and turning, trying to shake me off, then does something with his feet, trips me. We fall to the ground. I don't want to wrestle but he's punching.

Zayde, I cry.

That's all I manage. He's got me pinned, I don't know how, he's only a kid but he's got this raw force. He raises a fist, hits me once on the side of the face. That's all it takes. Once. Enough to sting but not break anything. As I react he's uncoiled and running again. I let him. I've a good idea where he's going.

*

I just stuffed the last bit of chocolate when I hear this voice calling. It's like he knows me but I ain't going to stop and find out. Fuckin' pervert I think and start to move. I hear my name again, then again, though by now I'm running. Why's he following? What's his business? I think maybe it's Jimmy but the voice ain't his. I'd know Jimmy's voice. It's kinda squeaky, like he's got someit stuck in his throat. But this voice it's different. This voice it's telling me something. It's telling me I need you. So I gotta get away, gotta get far away and back to Kate. Yeah her. Where else do I go so I keep running.

Where you been?

It's Angel. I thought I'd sussed no one was about yet she's come from out the blue. You're in so much trouble, she says. Kate's been on to the police and Welfare and everyone. We thought you'd run away.

I grab some cheese from the fridge, pour a glass of milk, take a banana from the fruit bowl.

Where you going?

I'm saying nothing. I go to my room, ditch my gear, climb under the doona, pretend

to sleep.

*

Kate hasn't been back long when I park up. We've spoken by phone a few times but I don't think she remembers, certainly no look of recognition when I show my ID. She thinks I've responded to her call last night. That was quick, her initial reaction, changing to, Oh I see, as I explain what happened earlier at the shopping mall.

He's only just got back, she continues. I was out looking. Couldn't find him anywhere. I just assumed...

I nod and ask if she's spoken with Zayde.

No, she says. He's in his room.

She knocks gently, asks: Are you there Zayde? Can I come in? There's someone here to see you.

She waits, looks to me for instructions. I gesture to her to open the door.

*

There's this little knock.

There's someone here to see you.

Who? Who's here? What she mean? Is it police? Is it Dusty? I'm half waking an' I forget where I am. I'm confused. What's this? What's this place I'm in? Where's my little sis? Why'm I here? The sun it's killing me. It's frying me. I wanna jump, an' the door I see, the door I see it's open.

Hi Zayde.

No response.

Hi Zayde. Do you remember? I'm Ed.

It's that voice again. I know that voice from somewheres. It's comin' at me. It's that voice.

You fuckin' pervert, I says.

You best go, says Kate.

Everyone's gone now.

ELEVEN

On clear nights, whenever I have the chance, I like to look at the sky. At stars whose names I know not; the Southern Cross whose location continues to perplex; at planets whose orbits remain a mystery to me. To look with thrilling hope I may spot a shooting star or, and for this I have an app, the International Space Station blinking as it chases through the blackness. The disorder of the night sky with its clumps of what I suppose are galaxies seems to mirror the state of my mind, even though I know there is a beautiful symmetry to it all, a mathematical code so simple it has eluded us for centuries.

When the Moon is bright and full, or nearly so, I reflect on those who have travelled there, walked the surface, left mementos of home. Yet the one I think of most is the one who never landed. I think of Michael Collins who, as his companions cavorted for the first time on lunar soil [no woman's ever been] was the loneliest person in the world as he flew round the dark side.

What's it like to be truly alone? I was seven when Armstrong and Aldrin walked the Moon like it was a Sunday stroll. I remember being at school, herded to come and watch a TV that had been set up outside under cover on a warm concrete floor. I was transfixed, unable to look away even though others near were bored, fidgeting, being told to shush by the teachers, some of whom, too, were impatient to return to their lunch. I, though, was drawn to the picture box with its doors opened wide, the first time a TV had been switched on at school, even though the pictures it displayed were like shadows.

Perhaps Zayde's like me: we're both chasing shadows.

He's here with me now. We've been sitting in this motel room for a few hours after his placement with Kate broke down, pretending it's normal, pretending we do this all the time, pretending to pretend. How did we get here? You've come with me this far in my story so, in thanks for your patience, allow Zayde to explain.

Kate was on the phone this morning, ringing the caseworker saying she can't have me no more, not after what happened yesterday.

He's poisoned the pony, she's yelling. [Which ain't true. I threw stones at it.]

Him and Nathan are on each others backs, I can't leave them alone five minutes without

them fighting. [What you 'spect? He's been goin' for me hard ever since I came here. Every time I sees him I'm lookin' hard for some blade he might have.]

Then she starts goin' off 'bout me not being at school What they goin' do 'bout it? she's asking, tellin' 'em they better be here this arvo otherwise she'll be ringing the minister or something else I didn't hear. I heard her speak to her Joe after, saying she can't control me, says they should never have put me here 'cause it was going to fail and they never told her what a fucked up kid I was.

I ducked out the back cause I heard them coming.

*

As soon as he sees me it's: What's he doing here? What's the perve doing here? I ain't goin' with him.

Kate's also surprised to see me.

You'll need body armour, she suggests, only half joking.

He's out the front near my white Camry. Kate's got his bags but is keeping her distance. I sense her wanting to get this done as quickly as possible, to get him away, out of her life.

You should see the damage he's done in his room, she tells me. I'll be sending you the bill for repairs. It won't be cheap.

She drops the bags on the ground and heads back inside, saying she's got to start preparing dinner for the others.

Zayde's picked up some stones from the garden, tossing them at a target he's picked out in the distance, or maybe it's the pet cat I now see darting away. I go up to him, trying to be as quiet as possible yet acutely aware of each crunch of my shoes on the gravel.

Zayde. You need to come with me. We have to leave.

He spins round, chucks a stone at the car which pings off the bodywork. He aims another, then another, each time they ricochet with greater and greater velocity.

How you goin' make me?

I'll just have to be patient I guess.

Can't someone else take me?

There's no one else. I'm it.

Where you taking me?

There's a residential house. They've got a room.

I ain't goin' to no resi place.

He's arming himself with more rocks as I put a call through to my manager. She's unsympathetic, tells me it's either that or a motel for the night, and if it's the latter I'll be the one staying with him.

What's he doing now? she wants to know.

Throwing rocks at the car.

Tell him if he breaks anything he'll have to pay.

I don't think that's going to work, I say, but she's already hung up.

*

I'm smashing his car. Not that it's his. It's just a fuckin' Welfare car. I'd slash the tyres if I could or torch it, even better. Thing is he ain't doin' nothing 'bout it. He's tellin' me now that if I don't go to this place then it's a motel. I'll take the motel I tell him. And while you about it get me a mobile.

*

The motel is on one of the main roads into town, often used by tourists passing through needing somewhere cheap and reasonably convenient for the night. You park your car outside your room, but our slot has been taken by a 4WD heaving under the weight of several kayaks on the roof rack and a couple of mountain bikes strapped to the back. In the office the receptionist, a young Chinese man, tells Zayde to be patient, as he struggles to find our booking.

How many nights? he asks.

I really don't know, I say.

Just one, I'm thinking but who knows?

The room is small, a double and single bed taking up much of the space. Zayde jumps on the double and switches on the TV, surfing the channels.

Can we get pizza? he asks.

Sure. We'll order in. Have an early night.

I go and take a leak and when I come back there's Zayde going through my jacket, which I'd left hanging over a chair. There's nothing in it I'm pretty sure apart from a couple

of biros and a business card or two. Yet he's looking at something intently, looks like a newspaper cutting. It's the first time he's settled since we arrived.

What you got there? I ask.

He screws it up and tosses it aside. It's only later, when he's in bed half asleep watching some movie, the leftovers of the pizza still on the covers, that I go and retrieve it, smooth it out, see it's an article about the first men on the Moon, which I must have torn out years ago, put in an inside pocket then forgotten.

That thing, he says wearily, exhaustion overtaken him at last.

You still awake? This you mean, I say waving the piece of paper. It's about landing on the Moon. The first people to go there.

Are they still there? he asks.

No. They came back.

Be cool to go to the Moon, he says.

Yeah. Wouldn't it.

He settles into sleep. I watch him turn and get comfortable, hands on top of one another under the pillow right below his ear. He's just a little kid wanting to be loved.

*

Zayde's arcing up. Been that way since 6.30 when he woke wanting to know what's happening. He wants food too. Order something in, he says looking at the room menu. Then: It's all shit food. Let's go get something.

He's out of bed and at the door before I've time to speak. He's dressed because he never undressed. The door is locked. He shakes the handle, testing its strength, pulls it back and forth, starts beating it with his fists, kicks out.

You'll break something, I say stating the obvious. Just give me a moment and we'll head out.

He scrutinises me, one hand still gripping the door handle, the other clenched, examines me as if working out whether he's going to give me a chance or give one final, almighty yank.

Come on, I say. Let's go feed the wolves.

It's still only seven, traffic is light. It's warm already and the temperature is forecast to push the high 20s by afternoon. Zayde wants Macca's but I've another idea. A café overlooking the sea. Smart, modern, whitewashed walls decorated with bright, cheerful

paintings of the surf and sea, and, at this time of day, tables occupied mostly by locals in colour co-ordinated sportswear who've been for a jog, or retirees reading the papers. No kids. They'd be on their way to school.

At first Zayde's fidgety, out of place. Then he grabs the menu and quickly decides what he's going to have. The All Day Breakfast with a side of potato wedges and a chocolate shake.

Anything else? I ask, ordering a pot of tea.

If I'm still hungry after, sure.

We wait. I observe Zayde looking around, checking out the territory, playing with the salt and pepper. He hasn't once looked at the view.

What you think? I ask.

He scrutinises me as if I'm asking him to recite the 12 times table.

You can follow the horizon from here, see the curve of the Earth.

I trace the line where sky meets sea with my finger.

Have you seen those photographs of the Earth from space? I ask.

He's distracted by the arrival of breakfast, a plate piled high with scrambled eggs, tomatoes, bacon, sausages, mushrooms and fried bread. His eyes dilate in anticipation of the pleasure to come. The wedges are a meal in themselves, thick and golden skinned sparkling with a crust of sea salt, while the milkshake is topped with a deep layer of ice cream pierced by a long-handled spoon.

Enjoy, I say.

I text my manager to let her know what's going on, ask when I'm likely to hear about a placement for tonight. Though it's still early she replies immediately: Working on it. Don't rush breakfast. And by the way we need to talk about that other thing.

The other thing is the email I sent to the Minister about Tiff. It's caused a stir at Head Office and there's talk of me being disciplined. I've told my manager I have a clear conscience, acted in support of Tiff, advocated 100 per cent for her.

I pick up a copy of the daily paper on a nearby table and scan the headlines. Nothing good is happening anywhere it seems.

What sports do you like? I ask.

D' know. Not really in to sport. I watch it though. Jimmy liked wrestling.

But not you?

Not much. He wrestles me sometimes.

Does he hurt?

Not really. Not on purpose.

Maybe sometimes he goes a bit far?

Like what?

He's mopping up the last of the egg with a potato wedge. I need to ask another question but fear he may shut down on me.

He's fuckin' mad.

The café is starting to fill up, the tables to either side now occupied.

In what way Zayde?

He killed my cat.

That's ...

I wanted to kill him. Me and Dusty we had a plan to kill him.

Who's Dusty?

Some kid I met down the beach. Jimmy didn't like him either. Beat him up once. That's why we were going to get him back.

Violence isn't always the best way to react though.

It is with him. That's all he does. He hits mum too. He ain't my dad you know.

Yes, I know.

I don't know who my dad is.

Maybe I can help you find out.

He doesn't answer. He licks the spoon clean, settles back, his appetite sated for now. I regret having made the offer as it might not be possible for me to follow through. Who knows, next week I'll have been suspended or sacked.

I wanna go.

Before I can respond he's jumped up and bolted out the door. I'm up too, leaving cash on the table, more than enough to cover the cost, scanning the street until I spot him about a hundred metres away. I feel like we've been here before: me chasing, him running. I resist the urge to shout and start off after. The road comes to an end but I notice a path leading into scrublands that run parallel to the beach. The cover is low and I struggle to make progress, my shoes snagging in roots, my face whipped by branches that seem as if

made from elastic. I stop, call out: Zayde, Zayde, where are you? Then I wait, alert for movement, any sound, any little stir in the air that will reveal his whereabouts.

There it is. Ahead and to the left.

Zayde. Is that you?

I'm standing near where I think I heard the sound. I can see no trace of him, yet I have this sense he's very close.

Zayde, where are you? I need you to show yourself. There's no point hiding.

Again I wait motionless, smelling the salt of the sea.

*

I run not to get away but make him follow. I run slow to make sure he's behind me and hasn't gone the wrong way, that his old legs have the energy. I run to the hole. I'm not expecting Dusty to be there but if he is I'll tell him police are after me and he better go. I hold the green plastic by a corner and lift it so I can slip in. But the hole it's different. It's empty, empty like no one cares, like it's been abandoned. All that's there is a plastic water bottle and the stub of a cigarette. It's still my rocketship though. I whistle to Ed, let him know where I am.

*

Why you showing me this Zayde?

I've climbed in, first removing shoes and socks. He's standing opposite, hands against the sand. If I stretch out my arms I can touch both sides and my head's nearly at the surface. I pull the green sheet halfway across and make myself as small as I can. There's a wet smell, and my bare feet press against the dampness.

I had to show someone, prove it's real, he says. Otherwise it could all be make-believe, couldn't it, and no one would believe me.

As my eyes adjust he watches me intently, working out my reaction.

What's it for? Is it a den?

Don't you know? I thought you'd know. Look up.

He pulls the sheet away, blinding me for a second, then there's the heart-warming expanse of sky and the just still visible speck of a planet I know to be Venus.

It's space, I say.

It's my way to space, he says. This is my rocketship.

It's wonderful. It's more than wonderful. It's beautiful Zayde.

I can go anywhere in this.

His face is alight with joy, his enthusiasm infectious.

Of course, I say. We can go anywhere. If you'd like?

He goes silent.

It's only made for one, he says.

I look into his eyes.

I know Zayde. This is your rocketship. Yours and yours alone. Forever.

He smiles. It's the first time I've seen him smile.

TWELVE

I dropped Zayde at resi a few hours ago. I don't know how it's going to go. Badly most likely.

Yet there's always a chance. A slim chance. By the skin of your teeth chance.

No. I'd be stupid to think he'll last. I was surprised he went to be honest. But today has been full of surprises. Like when we were in the hole, I mean his rocketship, and he says to me:

Those astronauts who walked on the Moon.

Yes. There were 12 men who walked on the Moon.

That's cool.

Very.

So they'd see the Earth?

Yes.

I wonder what they thought about the Earth?

I don't know Zayde. What do you think?

Why so much shit happens here.

I think you're right.

Yeah. And, why can't we all be happy.

That's right.

I'm gunna go there sometime.

Why's that?

I made a promise.

And you want to keep your promise?

Yeah.

Who did you make your promise to?

Me.

*

Ed's just gone. He says he'll come and see me in the morning. This place ain't like Kate's. It's not someone's home, just a place they've rented for kids like me. There's a supervisor all the time and I'm the only one she's got to supervise. I said I'd come because I'm by myself, but that'll change.

I told Ed he'd better come tomorrow to see me an' he said he'd try and get me a mobile. A good one not a cheapie from BigW.

The supervisor wants to know why I need to go outside.

There's nothing to see, she says. It's night.

She probably thinks I'm gunna run.

No, I say. I promise.

You know better than that, she says. Look out the window.

It's not the same.

Look out the window.

I push my face close up to the glass.

What you looking for? she says.

I wanna see the Moon, I say. We've been there you know. One day I wanna go there and be history. Be famous.

Sure, she says.

I place my hand against the glass and make a wish.

He says you can see the Moon in daytime.

I see if he's right tomorrow.

*

I'm waiting at traffic lights near the office to cross the road. Sam comes out of nowhere, riding a bike, a kid's bike.

How'dé, she says.

Hi.

Not seen you in months, she says.

No.

How you doing?

OK. You?

Yeah. Going with the flow.

She gives me a hug.

What. After all we've been through!

She looks away.

How the kids? I ask

Great. Saw them yesterday. She's really grown. I want to give this to Zayde.

You should. What about yourself? You got good people in your life now?

Some.

What you been doing?

Painting. What about you?

Working.

You OK?

Not really.

What you'd rather be doing? she asks.

Come on Sam. I can't answer that.

OK. See yays.

She glides away into the late afternoon sun.

I raise a hand to shield my eyes against the brightness as I try and follow her passage, waiting until the lights change to red.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 5

ON THE POLITICAL IN THE ART OF SOCIAL WORK

Your job is not to write beautiful reports and lovely essays. It is to make life different for children (Munro quoted in Lillis et al., 2017, p. 46).

Against a system that promotes increasing reliance on metrics and outcomes, one participant offers advice for daily practice in the context of neoliberalism: “stick to your values. Challenge anything that goes against that” (Butler-Warke et al., 2020, p. 73).

My student is absent today. A head cold brought on, I speculate, through exhaustion at doing 500 hours of placement while holding down a job at night and weekends to pay the rent and live (Cox et al., 2022; Gair & Baglow, 2018; Hodge et al., 2021)⁹⁶. I use the time we would have spent together not catching up on case notes (as my manager would prefer) but reflecting on social work as art practice or social science. This is what I would have been speaking about during this hour (though my student half-humourously chastises me for pontificating), leaving the political to one side. Leaving it there as we both silently acknowledge it is a given, one of social work’s stated aims being the promotion of social justice (IFSW, 2014)⁹⁷. And how is that achieved without being, or being seen to be, political!⁹⁸

Nevertheless, my mind is reluctant to move away from this topic, dwelling on a conversation we had recently in which I asked the question, simple I thought: Do you know who your Federal MP is? There was a shake of the head. What about your State MP? I continued. Another blank expression. Look, I said, I don’t really care if you don’t know their names, but do you know which party they represent? Still nothing.

Now politics is more than just party organisation, the machinery, yet it is a start. I have been immersed in the political since I was 16. During the sixth form (equivalent to years 11-12 in Australia) I studied, among other subjects, sociology with a ‘radical’ Glaswegian teacher; started to read Marx; initiated a school council, joined the Young

⁹⁶ Social work students complete 1000 hours over two years. By comparison, student nurses do 800 hours over three years: <https://anmj.org.au/enhancing-nursing-and-midwifery-students-clinical-placements-development-of-the-national-placement-evaluation-centre/>

⁹⁷ Appendix B provides a non-comprehensive list of definitions gleaned through research on this thesis.

⁹⁸ The peak body for social workers, the Australian Association for Social Workers, makes representations to the Commonwealth: see <https://www.aasw.asn.au/social-policy-advocacy/policy-positions>

Liberals (a left-leaning party unlike the Liberal Party in Australia) and was momentarily 'expelled' by the headteacher, a reactionary conservative who was also a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Territorial Army. But between then and now I have only infrequently been a card-carrying member of any political party⁹⁹. I am temperamentally not a joiner. I am not, as they used to say, 'clubbable'. Having lived in the UK through the Thatcher decade, shed tears when Neil Kinnock failed to defeat John Major¹⁰⁰, rejoiced and stayed up all night to hear Tony Blair, at dawn, declare a Labour victory on 2 May 1997, disillusionment set in as New Labour took sides with George Bush in 2001.

In 2004 I left the UK for Australia (but not because of politics), only to find a country divided and uncertain of its future. John Howard was prime minister and Labor had a man in charge called Mark Latham. I was unable to vote until 2007, when my citizenship was conferred, and immediately cast a ballot for Labor. Rudd, I quickly came to conclude, was like Blair: show and little substance. My belief in party politics wilted from that moment.

But moving on. What is politics if its intent isn't to create difference, or, as Foucault, stated: 'For me politics is everything connected to the struggle for power' (Foucault & Lotringer, 1996, p. 87). Not only that: for a social worker this struggle is expressed by seeking social change through social action, a view that can be traced to Simon Patten, an American economist prominent during the first two decades of the twentieth century¹⁰¹ (French, 1971). Patten, writes Popp, 'criticized charity work for attacking the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty, and called for a new program of "social work" to replace it' (2017, p. 54). This has been pushed to the sidelines during the decades of neo-liberalism leading to the sometimes 'repressive apparatus of governmentality' (Gray & Webb, 2013, p. 16) as seen in the Brexit debates in the UK when prime minister Boris Johnson acted unconstitutionally in suspending Parliament, and got away with it.

Writing nearly a decade ago, Gray and Webb hitched a lift with French philosopher, Alain Badiou, calling for a 'new politics of social work' at a time when it was felt the edifice of capitalism was shifting due to the Global Financial Crisis (2013, p. 211). Austerity then, as

⁹⁹ I was briefly part of Rudd's *Kevin 07* campaign movement.

¹⁰⁰ The election, on 9 April 1992, was predicted to be a Labour landslide, with Neil Kinnock hailed as the next prime minister. Instead John Major, once famously pictured wooing crowds on, literally, a soap-box, came back as leader of the Conservatives with a majority of 21 and a fourth term in office for the party.

¹⁰¹ Patten (1852-1922) is described in the literature as 'inventing' the term social work, which he used in his 1899 book *The Development of English Thought*. He was a professor of economics at the University of Pennsylvania and founded the Wharton School.

now, was the call, and citizens were prepared by politicians of whatever political hue to expect 'hard times': rising interest rates, wage cuts or wage freezes, and a blowout in household debt. Then as now, capitalism with its insistence on economic growth has been a major, if not the major, contributing factor in climate change; and then as now Gray and Webb's call for '...militant intervention' with a focus on 'managerialism, marketization and regulatory practices' needs to be heard, and heard even more urgently (2013, p. 213)¹⁰². This is a role, at least in theory, social workers can play in the transformation to a non-capitalist agenda, a political role, a role that I assert needs more than ever to be articulated. Returning to Gray and Webb, writing in another place (2009), they rail against postmodernism, suggest that '...the new politics of a transformative social work will be post-Marxist and not postmodern' (p. 114) and attack 'calculating reason and the manner in which it is ideologically mobilised in the name of managerialism, racism, scientism, neoliberalism, globalisation, advanced capitalism and so forth' (p. 115). In fact, these two academics incite nothing less than a revolution (2009, p. 115), though they fail to produce a manifesto for radical social workers to rally around and raise their flag. That this call to arms did not materialise is not necessarily due to the absence of a treatise, however, more to the *laissez-faire* of the discipline in subsequent decades in which gaining a qualification is seen as the priority and necessity to securing a job. Furthermore, 'it is likely that social workers are so embedded in the systems in which they operate that they cannot recognise the impact that these systems have on them in determining what they do, how they do it and in what capacity' (Brady et al, 2019, p. 321).

From a personal perspective, this is exactly what has happened during the last decade in statutory child protection in Australia. Examining that quotation bit by bit: what I do is primarily to follow a system whereby I document a child's safety, followed by another that considers the likelihood of future risk if that child stays in the current home; this is done through a home visit following on from which documents, called assessments, are written that identify if the child is safe to stay where they are living and if there is likelihood of any future risk if they do; and, finally, the capacity in which this is done is as 'an instrument of the state' as an investigator who has the legal right to enter another's

¹⁰² The authors' suggest that communism, as proposed by Badiou, is a way forward. In a non-party political sense this has merit, a way of redistribution and how best to live a life.

personal space and, if necessary, to leave with their son or daughter. As an employee of the government I might also be considered as bureaucrat operating at street-level (2010).

Henry Ferguson, a social work academic based in the UK, conducted ethnographic studies of child protection workers in the 2010s and concluded that in some instances a worker would become so immersed in administrative and documenting tasks they would enter a 'bureaucratically preoccupied state' (2017, p. 1019).

Given that social workers in this country are not predisposed to direct political action, by which I take a call to 'revolution' implies taking to the streets in protest, chaining oneself to, or lying down, in front of inanimate objects, another way might be through writing, following the dictum *The pen is mightier than the sword*¹⁰³. (In other parts of the world, however, where human rights are abused by dictatorships, social workers have indeed taken direct action, such as in Chile during the Pinochet regime and again in late 2019.)

This leads back to where I began, and to the decades old debate in academic circles as to whether social work is art or social science. With the rise of evidence-based practice (EBP) from the 1990s (its origins in medicine (see Sheridan, 2016)) and the perpetuation of managerialism through centre-right government policies, both here and other English-speaking countries, the latter often predominates (Barber, 1996; Bent-Goodley, 2015; Damianakis, 2007; Gitterman & Knight, 2013; Goldstein, 1992; Goldstein, 1999; Gray, 2002; Gray & Webb, 2008; Graybeal, 2007; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019; Ken, 2009; Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 1998; K. Moffatt, 2009; K. Moffatt, Chambon, A, Grassau, P, 2009; Munro & Hardie, 2018; Nissen, 2019; Rapoport, 1975; Sheldon, 2001). That it does references back to the discipline seeking credibility, although drawing on evidence of best practice, established techniques or methods that have a documented history of 'results' can improve the outcomes for families. Critics of EBP suggest reliance on scientific rationality, a dominant discourse in Western teaching, stifles creativity and put forward the alternate view that: 'Social work education also must teach students to not just tolerate ambiguity, but embrace it' (Gitterman and Knight, 2013, p.75).

¹⁰³ Upon writing this I was reminded of a book with much the same title, *The Pen and the Sword* (1957) by Michael Foot, a former leader of the UK Labour Party (1913-2010). In the foreword he writes: '...the test of a political writer is, as it must be, what he actually achieves in shaping public opinion and helping to determine political affairs'. The book is about Jonathan Swift and the Duke of Marlborough.

At this point in my reflections, I have a flash back to Jacob Bronowski and The Ascent of Man (1973). I recall this BBC TV series from the 1970s and remember the book of the series I still have on my bookshelves. It is inscribed at top left in blue ink J R PITT, followed by the date, March 1976. This makes me 19. But looking at when Bronowski died (1974) the TV series must have been broadcast in 1973, making me 16¹⁰⁴.

I remember vividly a scene with Bronowski (Polish Jew by birth, mathematician by profession) crouching, and incongruously elegantly suited, literally in ‘the pond of Auschwitz prison camp’, a place where, he writes: ‘Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people’ (p.374). He continues, and I am still shaken by his simple yet profound language (Bronowski, aside from his day job, was a scholar of English, particularly the poet William Blake): ‘And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance...This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods’¹⁰⁵.

Bronowski influenced me as a teenager, a young man interested in science but without the academic capability, (I flunked physics and chemistry at elementary level, and just scrapped through in maths), as by the fact that The Ascent of Man, both the TV series and, later, the book, combined science with art, containing images and illustrations from all forms of art practice. Indeed, Bronowski wrote elsewhere: ‘It has been one of the most destructive modern prejudices that art and science are different and somehow incompatible interests’ (1960, p. 9). I continue my reading: ‘We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people’ (1973, p. 374).

For many years I held that same position, largely the result of my education (my habitus again) in the humanities and, as is evident when reading the Episodes, my passion (still my passion) to write creatively. It was also due to ignorance of the word science for, as Bronowski reminds us, it means knowledge, while the word scientist is an invention of the late nineteenth century (1960, p. 11)¹⁰⁶. Another who grappled with this debate, David Bohm¹⁰⁷ (American by birth, physicist by profession) considered the connecting factor as beauty: ‘For to the scientist, both the universe and his theory of it are beautiful, in much the same sense that a work of art can be regarded as beautiful – in effect, that it is a

¹⁰⁴ The first episode of *The Ascent of Man* was broadcast on 5 May 1973.

¹⁰⁵ Watch Bronowski step into the pond here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltjl3BXKBgY>

¹⁰⁶ Back to William Whewell in 1840, according to the OED.

¹⁰⁷ Bohm’s philosophy was, simply put, guided by interconnectedness, what he termed Implicate Order. See <https://www.davidbohmsociety.org>

coherent totality...’ (1998, p. 40). *Beauty is a word unbounded by strict definition (Keats saw it in a Grecian urn), but I would like to think we can all agree that, however rare it is to ‘capture’ beauty, the human mind does feel its essence and spirit. Bohm gives the example of Einstein who saw beauty in the laws of the universe.*

It may be argued, therefore, that there is more in common between the arts and sciences when it comes to imaginative creation and interpretation. This point is discussed by Margaret Vickers in a paper titled The Creation of Fiction to Share Other Truths and Different Viewpoints (2010). Vickers, a professor of management, suggests there is very little difference since ‘...both fiction writers and social scientists discover things, make things up, observe reality, and invent alternative realities. In terms of process, fiction writers also do what social scientists do: they test ideas against evidence; they generalize; they pose questions about the social world; and they try to remain faithful to details of external experience. Concurrently, social scientists do what fiction writers do: they create rather than just discover; they focus on the unique and the individual; and they use illusion and rhetoric to make their case ’ (p. 561).

So, as a physicist who works on a mathematical model, constructing it in the mind, examining it from all dimensions, alone with the thought, so too I am alone with my thoughts and must examine them from all dimensions, not to find the truth (there is no single truth) but to sketch patterns that may lead to a glimpse of something different, something new, something extraordinarily human that connects with you, the reader.

*A more recent philosopher/sociologist, Bruno Latour, has another take. He believes that when science and art come together they ‘always fail’, unless each participant has no idea what they are going to make¹⁰⁸. This is perhaps an interpretation of that much derided concept, inspiration, the creative impulse to make in whatever form some thing that has hitherto not been seen, read or heard. (Latour also puts himself in the mix, not just as a theoretician, but by collaborating with scientists and artists, most notably Peter Weibel, in, for example, *Reset Modernity!* of 2016 and *Critical Zones*, which ran from 2020-2022.) Inspiration may not get much good press in our world, and in social work very little, yet those moments when an idea is born provide the same inner glow as hearing a child laugh.*

¹⁰⁸ See <https://bifrostonline.org/what-are-the-obligations-of-science-and-art-to-each-other/>

Imagination, I suggest, can transcend disciplines, has no frontiers, and is born out of simplicity. This connects with Goldstein, who admitting the links between science and art in social work, states: ‘...without artistry and talent, the helping experience would prove to be an exercise in professional pretense, a quasi-scientific approach to the study and control of human conditions’ (1999, p. 395).

What I propose through this thesis is not an either/or, art or science, creative writing practice or professional writing, but an enabling within social work of the opportunities the development of writing skills outside of an academic stricture can present. I will return to this in the concluding section. But finally, and turning back to the theme of this section, the political within the art of social work, my exploration of [novel] autoethnography is as a contribution to our knowledge and our understanding of injustice, systemic failure and lack of political will within the contemporary Australian statutory child protection system.

As far as Courtney goes, her ending is a phase of her life in which she has begun to explore a future that highlights her growing political maturity:

My friend Jode it was who saved me. She looked in on her way from the club where she'd seen Martin. He was goin' off at everyone, getting in people's faces, then started a fight with this black English guy who was there to watch the horse race with his girlfriend. Martin didn't want him there, said he was stinkin' the place out, then tried to grab his girl an' kiss her, but he was so full of booze he slipped and fell. Jode says people were laughing at him 'cause he was so far gone he was just acting stupid. The English guy was trying to help him up, Jode says, when Martin sprung on him raging, laid in to him, 'till some others dragged him off an' took him outside and the police came and threw him in the back of the wagon.

She came to check I was OK cause she knew I'd been thinking of seeing him, saw me lying on the bed with the pills and Bourbon, the book with some writing in it. She says I looked as though I'd finally done it. Truth is I was asleep, out with the fairies. She got freaked, called triple zero. The paramedics knew I was fine but saw I had history so they ran me to the psych ward to be on the safe side. Better safe than dead, one of them said. She gave me a wink like she knew.

One of the things they ask when you get here is: Who's important in your life? I always say Lukas 'cause that's the truth. Then they might ask: What's one thing your son doesn't know about you? That's a good question. He knows shit about me, not his fault. It's mine.

Like he wants to know who his dad is an' I won't tell him. It's not because I don't know. I might have been called a slut when I was 16 but I sure know who his dad is. It's that his dad don't know, wouldn't wanna know. That's why I pretend to myself his dad's Gatsby. Every man I ever loved is Gatsby.

*

I've started to pack. I'm not taking much, just one bag, the one that's like a shopping trolley 'cause it got wheels. I don't need much. I want to be like I can be free. Free to go wherever I want.

I looked at that book, the Gatsby book, thinking if I'd take it. Then I decided I'd take my own book instead, a notebook, to write what I want to write.

I'll write about me, so Lukas and bub know something 'bout me. True story, not fiction.

EXEGESIS: SCENE 6

FINISHING UP

The role of the social worker has itself become increasingly technicist and managerial with practitioners assessing need and then coordinating the work of others as opposed to engaging in direct work with service users (Harlow et al., 2013, p. 541).

I think policy makers, university lecturers, and workers at placement are so far removed from living week-to-week on two minute noodles and having to choose between tampons or the gas bill that they simply don't get it (On social work students on placement in Gair & Baglow, 2018, p. 54).

It's your last day on placement. Finally!

People always say it goes so quick.

Has it?

In parts.

Like the Curate's egg.

What's that?

Just an expression. Too many hours do you think?

Why yes! It's not like I'm training to be a nurse or doctor or something. One thousand hours over two placements – it's a marathon, it wears you out both physically and mentally.

But has it been purposeful?

It has served a purpose. I'm qualified. I've completed everything uni has asked me. All I need is for you to give me a pass.

You think?

Oh stop it! I just need you to sign this.

OK, done. Now for the hard bit.

I knew there'd be something else.

Naturally, so here it is.

Can I phone a friend?

It probably won't be much help.

Go on, ask away.

Once upon a time.

What?

Once upon a time. You're familiar with the words?

It's a fairy tale? Right?

It can be whatever you want it to be. In this case though: Once upon a time there was a social worker and a student. They met one day in a forest full of darkness and howling wolves. This is their story. Take it from there.

You're joking?

Me? No. Give it a try. Improvise.

However, the student decides this isn't a great place to be, not being particularly fond of wolves or the dark, and says emphatically: Let's get out of here. I know somewhere we can get a coffee.

Is it far? I ask.

Not if you run.

I stop with a pain in my side and, drawing breath, notice we're outside a building, more a shed than a house.

Remember this place?

I hid behind a fridge.

That's right.

Whatever happened to them?

The three girls? They came into care.

Are they OK?

Not really. It has been a challenge to find a placement for three sisters who don't get on with one another, fight between themselves, sit around with headphones glued to their ears, eyes on their screens not listening to what they are being told. The first placement didn't last a week and the second isn't doing much better.

Aren't there family?

No one's come forward.

Their father?

He's presently staying with his pregnant girlfriend down south, says he's got too much going on.

And mum?

She's angry, says it's all a mistake. But the girls begged to leave. Wouldn't go home from school that afternoon. It was a long time coming.

I always meant to ask, my student says. When you remove children what happens to the parents? Do they get support, like a social worker or something?

Get support! Are you joking. If anything is black and white in this business it's that. We take the kids, give mum or dad a bit of paper explaining on what grounds we have brought them into care and, if they're lucky, a sheet of paper with telephone numbers for legal aid. That's it.

We turn a corner and daylight floods the view.

That's where Sam lived isn't it?

Yes.

Do you think about her much?

I think about the kids.

How are they?

Tanaya's fine. She's thriving. Zayde's another story.

Do you want to talk about it?

Not really.

I stand on the roadside looking at the empty house. There's a skip on the grass and a couple of utes parked up, the sound of machinery coming from inside.

Where is she?

I've no idea.

You sound upset.

Do I? I suppose I am. I probably went overboard, tried too hard to make Sam change when she wasn't ready, holding her hand and guiding her, so to speak, and it didn't work. I thought I was the one to make the difference where others had failed. There's the curse of social work, of the worker. You think you are the one, the change agent, this will make all the difference. Wasn't to be. The result? Moral anguish.

Are you saying Tanaya and Zayde should have stayed with her?

No. What I'm saying is I became too involved with her story. I lost sight of the kids.

I remember that conversation we had in the car when I was looking after Tanaya in the garden. It stuck in my mind because you spoke about the risk you take on and how it leaves you hurt, scarred you said.

It does. You never forget moments like those, and I am the one who's been talking to you about boundaries!

I guess it's hard though to maintain a distance when you're soaking up the suffering.

Suffering? Reminds me of Bourdieu again¹⁰⁹ on the social suffering we, as workers, take on because we are frustrated and angry at the inequality we see around us and yet, in my case at any rate, are very much part of the system that seeks to control people, put them in neat boxes, orderly and conformist, not to step outside the line of the state's agenda. It's a marriage made in hell¹¹⁰.

I smell coffee in the air. Shall we?

As we follow the aroma the sun drops behind a tower, grey clouds appear and there's a burst of rain, making us scurry to find shelter under a canopy to avoid a drenching.

What's this place?

It's a hospital, I say. I came here once a week to visit Tiff.

Are you still working with her?

No. They said I broke the rules, brought in another worker.

What happened?

I'm not sure I can say.

Or don't want to?

I was told not to speak about it. The tables were turned.

What do you mean?

I was now the one facing the rules of the State, being brought to account by my superiors. I got to know what it's like having no power.

I've finished my placement so you can tell me. Shall we sit until the shower passes?

The scene alters to a courtyard enclosed by brick walls trimmed with razor wire. Over to our left a giant chess board is marked out on the tarmac, metre high plastic pieces scattered, a white king prone, a black castle upended, a conclave of pawns in a corner conspiring.

Do you play? I ask.

¹⁰⁹ Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Oxford: Polity.

¹¹⁰ Featherstone, B., Morris, K., & White, S. (2014). A Marriage Made in Hell: Early Intervention Meets Child Protection. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1735-1749. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct052>

No.

That's what Tiff said when I tried to find a way to connect.

You asked her to play chess?

Why not? It's there. I said I would teach her.

I'm sure she thought, *This guy's weird*.

Probably. Tiff wasn't much for talking. She enjoyed Scrabble though. We used to play a lot when she was locked up in the ward.

Locked up?

There was a security guard always present after she attacked a nurse, found a nail file from somewhere and started to cut herself before threatening the staff with it.

What did you do to break the rules?

Nothing, other than advocating for her to the Minister. I don't call that rule breaking. It's at the heart of what we do. It's our moral and ethical responsibility. There's something called covert activism¹¹¹, though what I did was very overt, in plain view.

They challenged you for speaking up?

Pretty much. They cited some clauses from a departmental regulation and the Code of Conduct. I was told to explain myself, told I could be fired. I made no apology for what I did, stressed the lack of communication between agencies, the back-and-forward emails that were an excuse to shift responsibility, never to own it. I felt at peace within myself for what I had done yet tortured by the conversations I overheard between the new worker and my manager which revealed nothing had changed.

Did you get a chance to say goodbye?

I spoke to her by phone one afternoon, introduced my colleague, lied about why I was moving on. You look shocked. What else could I do? Explain everything? It wasn't necessary. What I did was in my court, it was meant to facilitate action. In the end, months later, she was finally moved to where she should have been all along – a city hospital with a specialist team. I take no credit for that, and I wish it had happened sooner, much sooner.

And you, what happened to you?

I was given a reprimand. Told not to do anything as stupid ever again!

¹¹¹ Greenslade, L., McAuliffe, D., & Chenoweth, L. (2015). Social Workers' Experiences of Covert Workplace Activism. *Australian Social Work*, 68(4), 422-437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2014.940360>

Why do you stay, put up with this oppressive system?

I look around. The walls have gone, the view across a sun-drenched sandy beach that leads to a gentle surf rising from the Pacific. I see Sam dancing in the sea before plunging into the rollers like a dolphin.

Because people are amazing, I respond.

*

That is a lie, I think. Not that people are amazing. They are. But in my social work world it is far more disappointing. Sam wasn't dancing for me but for herself. Sam wasn't dancing for either Tanaya or Zayde. She'd put them behind her. I'm told she's expecting a baby. Therefore, when I exercise my institutional power, when I choose to take matters into my own hands, as I did with Tiff, and with Sam, am I not in a similar position? Am I not doing it for my-self, as in neither instance did I have a conversation with them, explain why I would do this, receive their consent? Is there not some egoism at play, that age old David and Goliath struggle, me the worker hammering at the closed doors of authority determined to have my voice heard? And to be able to do that I, as a social worker, have access to and know how to navigate the corridors and levels within the hierarchy of power. In both cases I wrote a tightly argued email to my 'superiors'/senior management/the Minister that concluded with a rationale offering some solutions, knowing the latter is necessary for an appeal to have any success.

I remember Sam showed me a letter she had written to social services seeking back payment on a claim. It covered nearly a dozen A5 lined notebook pages, beginning in red ink before turning to blue a third of the way through. It was stream of consciousness, including recollections from childhood, observations about her life now, appeals to her spiritual healers. 'You want to send this?' I asked. 'Can you, please?' And I did, knowing the reader, a bureaucrat hemmed in by inflexible rules, would toss it aside, at best comment on a sticky note that 'it was incomprehensible, possibly written while under the influence of narcotics'.

That it was not, that it was written by a woman abused during childhood, removed from her family and having lived with a man who beat her, punched her, kicked her, raped her, demeaned her week in, week out, was unacknowledged. Though written from the heart it was not written from the privilege of a university education, an understanding of critical analysis, logical construction and, implicit in this, expertise in what the system expects – clear, rational, ordered, concise argument. The social worker has all of these, is entitled to

sit among the professional cohort who assess and ultimately pass judgement on the lives of Tiff and of Sam and of all those others given voice in this thesis, itself an artefact of the elite.

*

Before you go, have you had a chance to read *The Boy who Stole the Moon*? I ask.

I have and I was wondering: Is this what you mean by 'creative courage', to write a story like that?

I'm not sure it takes courage to write as such. It certainly requires patience and application, as does any long work. It is all very well to have an idea, quite another to follow that through into a completed piece and to maintain the focus and the energy throughout. But I understand where you are coming from, in the sense that I have attempted to prise open that closed world of social work and offer some limited insights from my perspective. Maybe that takes courage, although the readership, so far, is very limited meaning its potential influence on debate is very limited also.

When you spoke of creative courage a while ago, you mentioned how it connects with our values as social workers.

Yes, and by writing this novel I am channeling that ethical principle which states that: '...every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth' (AASW, 2020, p. 9). By identifying Sam as an individual with a story to tell, I allow her voice to be on the same footing as any others. She is given a presence.

I was wondering, though, how you are able to write from so many different viewpoints, especially that of Zayde, a teenage boy?

That is a standard technique, if I can put it that way, in fictional writing – the way a writer is able to have this grandstand view but also able to enter the inner world of their participants or characters from their point of view, their vision if you will, like seeing their world through a camera lens. Some novelists keep a distance and write in the third person, whereas I prefer to actualise. I believe that it makes for a much more intimate read. I also use dialogue a lot, which has two functions: firstly, it gives a very real articulation to the various voices and how you, as reader, hear them; and secondly, in the 'real' social world our interactions are informed through speech and we draw assumptions from the way people talk, their tone, the vocabulary they use and so on. How do I put myself in the shoes of a teenage boy? I have observed quite a number in my work and from that I extrapolate certain themes and

idiosyncracies to create a composite. Zayde is a multiplier, as is Sam, and all the other characters.

What about Ed?

I think I've already answered that question.

Now you're being coy. Surely there's a lot about Ed in you?

I will take the fifth and leave that for you to work out! One thing I can tell you is that I do not have a partner like Alice.

Well, that's a relief! I didn't relate to her one bit. And all that about young people in out of home care, is that like it is?

Again, a collage of stories. But, yes. I wanted to show how children in care suffer abuse and how messed up the system is with kids moving from place to place, and how when kids are placed together, like Zayde with Angel and Nathan, they spar off one another. Yet my intent was also to leave the reader with some optimism at the end, as far as Zayde goes.

I did get that. I was filled with hope he might pull through, one day get to the Moon.

Metaphorically, of course.

Sure. But Ed's another story.

How do you mean?

Well, you have this piece of introspection in chapter nine which ends with him speculating on where he thinks he might be in 10 years' time. He's standing at the lights waiting for them to change and I had this deep feeling that he is lost, both in his career and in his emotional life, after all his marriage is at an end. And that's emphasised by the final sentence when he's just bumped into Sam and she asks him how he is and he replies 'I can't answer that', and he's at the lights again waiting for them to change.

Ed's a complicated person, and that is what fictional writing does: reveals layers in the human psyche without necessarily analysing them in the manner of a psychoanalyst. This is why I believe [novel] autoethnography in the context of social work, in the context of any discipline actually, can be a valid educational tool. You have to understand that what I am seeking to achieve in *The Boy...* is to highlight '...issues, nuances, social exchanges, and phenomena that may be unfamiliar, out of reach, or in some other way unseen, enabling us new ways of seeing and from new perspectives' (Vickers, 2010, p, 562. In this way: 'Writing fiction is a form of social research that provides access to a particular kind of truth' (Rolfe, 2002, p101). And it can do this in ways which take you to the heart of the human condition.

You remember that example of a meeting with parents I told you about [see *Social Work as Writing*] in which the narrator has to tell them a new social worker is taking over?

The one with the feisty mum?

Yes. Well, consider that against this from an academic article with the magnificent title *From Snapshots of Practice to a Movie: Researching Long-Term Social Work and Child Protection by Getting as Close as Possible to Practice and Organisational Life*:

Adele (mum) opens the door and smiles at seeing Davina (caseworker). As we enter the room Adele goes and sits on her bed while both social workers sit on the floor, Davina closer to Adele. The baby is five weeks old now and asleep in the Moses basket. After they settle in, Davina asks Adele how she feels about attending the [domestic abuse survivors] programme and she says she isn't keen... Davina talks to the baby, she is so warm and friendly, she sounds genuinely delighted to see him. She makes appreciative sounds and says 'he gets more beautiful every time I see him!' Adele beams at this. She says how well she gets on with Mary the family support worker and how easy it is to talk to her. Davina reminds Adele that Mary will soon be leaving and she looks a little sad. The two workers she has built relationships with are both leaving. Davina asks the new social worker if she has anything further to add and she says she just wanted to meet Adele and smiles. It is a nice moment and Davina wraps up the visit (2020, p. 1715-1716).

Where is the emotion in that, compared with the reaction in my story in which the woman lambasts the workers for yet another change in personnel? Or how about this: 'By the end of the visit there were four professional helpers sitting in the front room, watching mum changing the nappy on her seven-month-old son on the floor. The irony was not lost on mum who oodles to bub: "You've got an audience watching you have your poo-poo done". The audience chuckles nervously in acknowledgement of the absurdity. Not really a chuckle, more a ...how do you describe a sound that's situated between nervous laughter and embarrassment?' (original by Pitt, 2019). Social work is filled with raw emotion, and statutory social work even more as families find themselves confronted, often at a moments notice, by the state apparatus. There are very few 'nice moments'.

You make it sound like we are living under a regime where rights are denied.

Rights *are* suspended.

For the wellbeing of children, though.

Exactly. Now you are thinking like a child protection worker!

Or a street-level bureaucrat. Let's not go there. I want to stay on topic for once and I'm inspired to write! I just don't know where to begin.

It is a much used phrase that 'you write what you know'. I think I've already given you a couple of suggestions!

I am definitely *not* writing about being supervised by you! That would be too weird.

I would hope that by now you have a sense that autoethnography might be described as 'weird' in that it seeks to disrupt the academic norm. If you did write about that, however, it would, in my opinion, have as much validity as anything else you might write from a more 'orthodox' perspective, such as a piece in which you might conduct a literature review on a student's view of supervision practice in social work. But I find it disappointing that even in the 2020s this methodology remains on the outer, is still considered to be 'marginal', though there is now a *Journal of Autoethnography* (<https://online.ucpress.edu/joae>) and a Facebook group for Critical Autoethnography. Yet it is extremely difficult to find those who might be able to teach at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels in this country, regardless of discipline. As the academic world is constrained more and more by cuts and the need to prove relevance, I fear autoethnography may become just too difficult to admit at the bachelor level, let alone in higher research. I hope I am proved to be wrong. However, I have given you a few insights into this fascinating and compelling topic and I wish you well in your future endeavours.

*

What else can I say to my student as they depart? This is what I rehearse in my mind but leave unspoken.

Child protection is a hidden world, though you have witnessed some of its darker corners. It is messy, unpredictable, disorganised, often chaotic, constantly posing ethical questions that require instant and, sometimes, knee-jerk responses. While the numbers of children receiving child protection continue to rise, and the proportion of those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures remains about eight times that of non-

Indigenous children, at the heart of our practice is their safety and wellbeing. To achieve that end it's necessary to remain focused on a child's intrinsic human right to have the opportunity to be nurtured, supported and educated, as well as being able to access the best possible public health services.

I came into child protection as a late-life career change with the intent to make a difference, and many times I am challenged by administrative burdens and the lack of social services and resources to whom I can refer families. One of the skills a new caseworker needs to nurture is how and when to advocate, and how to do that within a bureaucratic system that demands a written report, rationale, assessment. One thing you learn quickly in this work is there has to be a paper-trail; that if something is not recorded then, in the eyes of management, it has never happened. Caseworkers have to be efficient in time management as much as they need to draw on those micro-counselling skills learnt during their academic coursework and placements, for every home visit to speak with children we are there to protect results in screen time that vastly exceeds that spent with the family.

As you become more adept and self-confident in your practice, so you learn how to prioritise demands placed by the weight of the system against building trust and rapport with children and families. You sustain yourself by the small triumphs that happen, the silent acknowledgement that change can happen.

That's a start. But there is more.

*

One strand of this thesis has been to demonstrate that social work is a narrative: human experience captured through storytelling¹¹². Like all academic and professional disciplines, social work benefits from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and it really does not matter whether one chooses to view it either as an art or social science since that binary is a Renaissance legacy. Nevertheless, social work is an individual pursuit, the social worker embodying a style of practice (England, 1986, p. 193), with style here used not in the sense of a fashion ('that style is so last year'), nor of dogma ('their style is so offensive, don't you think?') but in the broader way an individual presents outwardly to another, combining

¹¹² There is an obvious connection here with narrative theory as developed by Michael White and David Epston in the 1980s: White, M., & Epston, D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: Norton. My methodology of 'novel' autoethnography acknowledges the priority of storytelling in human agency, as has been stated elsewhere.

attributes such as demeanour, inflection of voice and those instinctual cadences humans pick up through the senses.

Little has been written about practitioner style in social work. (One rare example is Siporin, 1993, p. 262 who speaks of '...the way we use our selves to relate to the world and to other people as an individual person'). Style is difficult to capture, though one way is through the written record, as has been discussed, and is related to a narrative format, as in the use of metaphor and other constructs. I speak of style as a way of writing and communicating how others, those whose lives are very dissimilar to ours, can be measured in words.

To bring this together: How does a social worker, beset by time pressures, demands for objectivity, forensic evidence and policy constraints, affect a narrative that is coherent and, to use the current jargon, 'authentic'? I have argued there can be much learnt from the way a novelist constructs a story with plot, characterisation and dialogue, among other ways, and have made a case for [novel] autoethnography as a way forward. Yet this will only work if social workers are introduced to creative writing techniques during their undergraduate (or qualifying Masters) programs. And they are not. There is plenty of time given to theory but very little to creative practice that includes writing. For example, Healy and Mulholland note that: 'You should always try to represent yourself in your writing as thoughtful, and your approach to the information incorporated in your written work should be fair, truthful and comprehensive' (2012, p. 8), though they also acknowledge a need to develop what they call 'personal flair' to 'engage your audience' (ibid, p.205). That's a start and settles well with what I am presenting in this thesis. But it is not enough. Through the use of creative writing and an acceptance that everything depends on point of view, why not allow students the opportunity to express themselves, as best they can and with support and guidance, without the need for analysis and the formula of learning plans?

I believe the challenge for social work educators is to enable students to find a style of writing that is not derived from a textbook or from notes copied from their lecturers. (The increasing use of artificial intelligence programs and online study makes this priority greater.) The next challenge is to instruct placement supervisors to be imaginative and accept that storytelling is a prerequisite, not simply an adherence to theory or the abstract of social justice. If you chose social work as your profession, political activism and social equality should be a given, although I admit it is often dormant and needs to be stirred to

the surface during those undergraduate years. In addition, students need to be given the opportunity during study, be it four or two years, to develop their writing so they can, in Bronowski's words, 'touch people' (1973) and touch people through listening to their stories and writing those stories so they are not lost.

As academics respond to the never ceasing demands of a technocratic global economy intent on squeezing the last cent from every grant dollar; ever resisting the call for research that pays, that builds the reputational base of the institutions for whom they work; fighting fatigue from the relentless demand of scholarly output that helps to lift them and the university higher in the competitive world of 'league tables', it is well to remember that imagination, creativity and storytelling cannot be bought.

*

A few weeks later I receive an email from my student, newly qualified and preparing job applications. Then they write:

I can't deny it - I had plenty of assumptions about what child protection was going to be like before I came here. I thought it would be clinical and focused on meeting targets for intervention and removal. Sure, there are targets to meet. Sure, everyone's time-poor and the paperwork is huge. However, what has impressed me is how caseworkers and managers regularly express their discomfort with targets, and how statistics do not capture the work actually being done day-in, day-out with children and families. I realise too how unpredictable, fast moving and fluid this work is. Caseworkers are routinely called to meetings or have to go out to meet parents and children unexpectedly, which throws their time management skills out the window, and means they regularly work long, anti-social hours. But throughout all this, their focus is firmly on how to keep families together, what needs to be done to achieve that, what supports may be needed, while also taking into account a child's safety and protection. They are out there in the community most days to work with families in order to ensure their safety, and perhaps even make a difference. It's gruelling and thankless. Sure, I assisted caseworkers with their admin tasks, made phone calls and sent emails, but it was all part of a holistic support - teamwork. I enjoyed the lively discussions among the team on the floor and in more formal situations and the way in which the team assessed each case thoroughly and passionately. By the time the placement was coming to an end, I even started to

wonder whether I could work in child protection. But this all came into sharp focus in my last week when I sat in on a meeting late one afternoon with a dad, a single parent, and his two young children. He was covered in dirt, wore flip flops, a singlet, and shorts. His two kids, older boy and his younger sister, sat nearby smiling meekly at us like we were teachers or something, both still in their school uniforms, tidy but looking tired and afraid. Dad told us he had nowhere to live, his ute had broken and he couldn't do his job – he does mowing. He said he felt stuck, unsure what to do next. 'You know how hard I've worked to keep the kids,' he said, and started to cry. I passed across a box of tissues, then his kids started crying too. It was gut-wrenching. I went out to get a jug of water and I had to dash to the toilets and hide myself for a moment as I was crying too. When I returned the caseworker was going through some options but dad said he'd tried them all, and Centrelink won't help, he finished up. The meeting came to an end with no resolution except he was staying with his mum again, but her welcome would soon run out, he said. Then he left, thanking us for the time, and my colleague told him he's doing all the right things. His kids followed him, asking if they could go to Macca's and he telling them he had no money. I felt incredibly sad and thought, If this is the best we can do then it's not good enough. We're meant to be a compassionate society, a wealthy country, and people are struggling, really struggling. 'But what else can we do?' my colleague asked as we went back to our desks, before she was pulled aside by her manager about another case that was flaring up and that's the last I heard about it. It was then I started to reflect on whether I could do this job day in day out. Would being a statutory worker be fulfilling and in alignment with my personal and professional values? How long before I grew that hard skin and said, 'But what else can I do?' I wrote this later. It's a kind of a poem:

I read about substance abuse, mental health, trauma.

I read about how cycles carry on from generation to generation.

I read about how parents, those who are supposed to protect their children, abuse them in terrible ways.

I see victims of domestic violence, women, downplay the abuse from their partners.

I look into the haunted eyes of children.

I feel sad like there will never be a 'good enough'.

I see carers doing their very best and caseworkers trying to make a difference.

I see dedication and good intentions everywhere.

I see why child protection is necessary and the heart behind the decisions.

I see hope but I am not hopeful.

APPENDICES

A: DIARY 1973 AND 1974: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RECORD

These diary selections were edited out from the extracts included in the thesis and reveal some of the social and cultural events playing out around me at the time. (Note: all press cuttings are from my collection and were inserted contemporaneously in the diary.)

1973

[The diary opens with acknowledgement that on Monday, 1 January 1973, the UK officially became a member of what was then called the European Economic Community [EEC]. On 1 January 2020, the UK exited what is now the European Union [EU], a process plainly described as Brexit, which began with a referendum in 2016.]

January 3: I think that the EEC is a great idea. It is one large step in achieving that ultimate goal, the unification of the world.

Feb 15: Gas strike has begun. Admittedly they have the right to ask for more pay and the government should cough up. Anyway as a result it is bitterly cold in the house. (We are on gas central heating.)

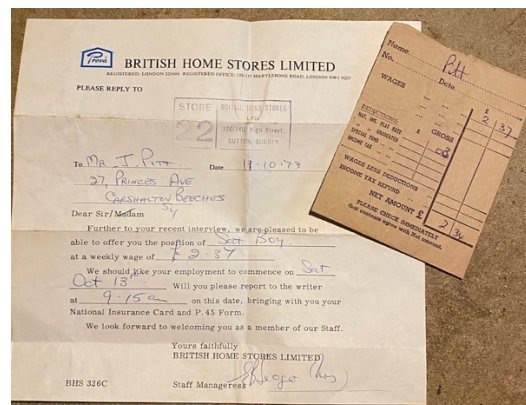
May 5: FA Cup final today. Sunderland win 1-0, beating Leeds. Highly interesting. If people take more interest in football than they do in the future of the world, can there be any hope for the future of civilization. The trouble is that people do take more interest in football ...

27 August: During the past week there have been numerous bomb attacks in, and around, the City of London. The police force have been tracking down the many leads which have arisen. Unfortunately many people have been seriously injured, many have had their external limbs blown off. Now we have come to the conclusion that the IRA are behind these attacks, basically because the letters have been posted in Northern Ireland. Why are the IRA causing this disturbance? Well they are trying to persuade the British government to withdraw their troops from Northern Ireland and make Northern Ireland a part of the Republic of Ireland. Will they succeed? I very much doubt it. The British are stubborn creatures and have survived two world wars. I highly feel that they will [not] be persuaded into surrender by such inhumane methods as are being used here.

24 September: Saw an extremely moving programme in the 'World in Action' series tonight¹¹³. Showed how poorly paid Brooke Bond/Oxo workers are paid in Ceylon. (They pick the tea.) Some in fact only earn 16p a month; and of course they are suffering from malnutrition. Naturally the boss of Brooke Bond who is getting fat on the profits, denies any knowledge of the fact that his employees are underpaid. 'The unacceptable face of capitalism'.

1 October: It is possible, because of the oil shortage, that future world dominance could be transferred to the Arab states. They hold the trump card. Without oil the western world cannot survive. Therefore the Arab leaders can literally demand anything and everything in exchange for oil. Unless the western world comes up with an alternative to oil we could see the decline of the USA as THE world power and see her replaced by Libya, Egypt or Persia. However regardless of this the world supply of oil is going to run out sooner or later, more likely sooner. Therefore we should now be investing all available man-power into the development of atomic power. As I keep saying, if we fail to act now then it will be too late.

13 October: [I begin my first Saturday job.]



4 November: [Watergate year - this cartoon from the London Observer¹¹⁴.]

¹¹³ World in Action was an investigative, current affairs show that aired between 1963-1998 on ITV, the UK's independent broadcaster.

¹¹⁴ The Observer is a Sunday newspaper, now part of the Guardian Media group. Its first publication was in 1791. Trog, or Wally Fawkes, was one of the paper's cartoonists and caricaturists: https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/cartoonist-biographies/s-t/WallyFawkes_Trog.html



Click [here](#) for Nixon's address to the US on 8 November in which he states he has no intention of 'walking away' from his job.

5 November: [Nixon] is doing everything wrong. Why the hell then doesn't he resign?

Probably because he is too proud and doesn't want to be remembered as a president who resigned in the face of mounting pressure. But surely resignation is the best thing he can do in the present situation. Precious time and money is being spent on various committees, important legislation is being held up in the Congress. However Watergate has exposed the inner bureaucratic machinery, the rotten wood. It must be destroyed. Watergate has shown us just how bad the capitalist system is. Because of Watergate we may be able to produce a better system, a better environment. If we don't then the world will become just like Orwell visualised - Big Brother watching over the little men.

18 November: [The UK, meanwhile, has its own difficulties, though the fuel crisis was a global phenomenon.] A state of emergency was declared last week by the Prime Minister. At last we, that is the public, are coming to our senses. We now know what it's like to have a fuel shortage. Heaven only knows what will happen when the real crunch comes! it is surprising how quickly our utopia has crumbled. 100 years ago we had a seemingly brilliant future, having an abundance of everything. It has taken a mere 70 years since the introduction of the motor car before the crash. Our Empire has crumbled. We have been to the moon etc. etc. but what does the future hold for Mankind? 70 years, from grandeur to destruction.

20 November: Enough of international affairs. Let us turn our attention, or let me turn my attention towards the school for a change. The school I attend is one of the so-called secondary modern - notice the word secondary which applies that it is of a sub-standard. Anyway it was once a girl's school until the 1960s, that is the early years of that decade.

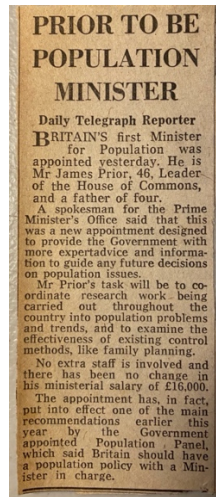
That school [is] composed of two buildings which were isolated from one another. During the transition from girls to boys the two blocks were linked by a semi-circular piece of architecture two storey's in height. A hall was also attached to this. This semi-circular block houses the headmaster's office. A canteen was also added. The school was originally designed for 500 pupils, now there are more than 1000. A new sixth form block is in the process of construction, although whether it will be completed in my lifetime (that is school lifetime) is open to debate. That then is a history of the school, further details are little importance. What interests me is the quality of life.

21 November: As I mentioned yesterday the school was built for a population of 500. Now the number of pupils exceeds a thousand. Because of this something's got to give, and I am afraid to say that what has given is a quality of life we can enjoy. Pupils are chosen from all the types of families - middle class, working class, skilled, unskilled labourers. We naturally get our fair share of that type of child who persists in making trouble. Regrettably the number of such boys has increased. What with more pupils and more of these disturbing influences the school is visibly showing signs of cracking up. Pupils no longer have respect for teachers, they teach them as they please [excuse the expression]. One example will suffice. Because of behaviour on 157 buses the busmen are not going to allow pupils from our school on in future. When I began schooling this would never have happened. In today's lax atmosphere of home and school anything can, and does, happen.

4 December: I am slowly losing my patience with the Government over their negative policy towards the fuel crisis. All well and good they are issuing fuel coupons, which I hope is a sign that rationing will be introduced shortly, but what are they doing in the meantime? They have not banned Sunday motoring, oh no, instead they place petty adverts in the daily press urging the public to conserve fuel. Unfortunately, the public will not conserve fuel voluntarily. I fear the Government may be leaving things too late.



19 December: [Population control was a burning issue.]

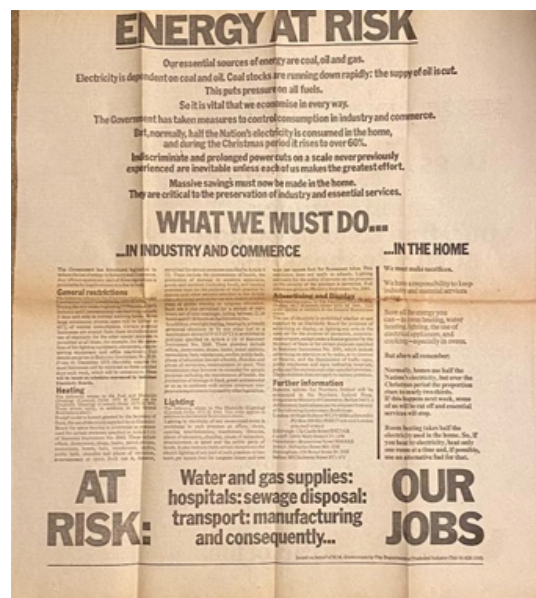


21 December: [Another press cutting from the Government.]



22 December: Because the television now shows only a blank screen after 10.30 the birth rate will SOAR!

23 December: [And another.]



27 December: It won't be long before we see widespread power cuts and an overall increase in gas, oil and petrol supplies. How things have changed from the beginning of this year when the outlook seemed good. What is needed now is concerted action on the part of the human race. The organ is there in the United Nations [what a false name]. The League didn't work, and so far the UN hasn't, but there is now a golden opportunity to utilise its resources. Too many are under the impression that we live on individual planets. I feel very few have come to the conclusion that this is "One hunk of ground, water, air, clouds floating around in space. From here it really is one earth." I believe that we must Unite. Yes, I have said this before, at the beginning of this Journal, then it was only an ideal for the future. The major difference between then and now is that word 'future'. It's still an ideal [not in my mind]. The UN should alter its constitution and thus enable every country of the world to join. When that has been achieved we may be in a better position to survey the remains of this dying planet. But how easily I say "when that has been achieved". It would take years - such are the complexities of international law. Fair enough, let the diplomats start to work in that direction and in the meantime let each country carry on as they are - to greater disaster. I can't see the EEC working. The general consensus of opinion over here seems to be "I'm alright Jack, I've got North Sea gas and oil. Why should I share it with the French is, who I ardently detest anyway". That is why it will be so difficult to form this utopian ideal of

a world government. First we must have equality all over the world - Communism, yet another utopian idea. I can see that I will have to explore this further, in next year's Journal, after all I, and others like me, are to inherit this earth. I HOPE.

1974

January: Purchase a suit (£19)¹¹⁵.

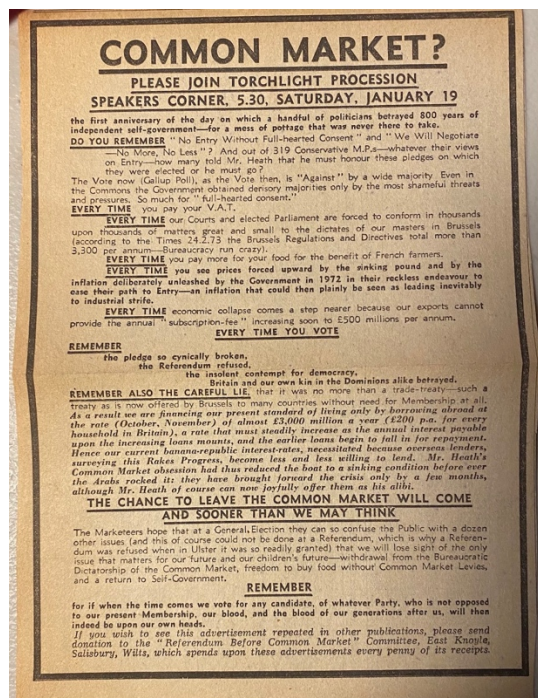
Jan 6: people assume that this crisis will be quickly over, in fact by the spring. Who will tell them that the days of cheap you are over for ever? We are at an interesting stage not evolution. We aren't yet advanced enough in order that we can colonise planets near us or in other systems yet neither can we "start again" – we cannot go backwards. Television detector vans – are they the first subtle signs of the day of BIG BROTHER?

(During January, many of the diary entries concern an attempt to establish a school council. In 1972 the National Union of School Students had been set up, which itself had followed the formation of the more radical Schools Action Union, the latter organising school strikes on 9 May and 17 May 1972.

Jan 11: The pupils have a great deal of power, if they walked out of school there would be nothing [the headmaster] could do about it, bar expelling the "leaders" and that would end him up in a great deal, great deal of trouble. The very fact is that the pupils are apathetic. The power is there, but it needs someone to tell them that they have this power. I am more determined than ever, the trouble is that I'm not sure whether I can count on the continual support of those who are backing me up – they number three. The six form generally is for it, and I believe the school is for it, but they are not prepared to put anything in to getting the thing established. It means nothing to them at the moment. However when it is off the ground then Support will come in torrents - I believe. Someone with determination & patience & tolerance & perseverance upfront is needed – I think that is me – I know it is me but I have no deputies.

¹¹⁵ Equivalent of £183 in 2020.

Jan 13: Anti-European sentiment continued, as shown by this advert in *The Observer*. This went on until a referendum on 5 June 1975.



(During January the three-day week remains in force.)

Feb 5: ...went to the Houses of Parliament. Unfortunately the Commons was packed out so we went to the Lords. Stayed there until 3:30. Then ...went to Tate Gallery. By the time we had finished it was rush hour time so we decided to try our luck in the Commons. Revisited Lords first then went to Commons. Commons was empty except for 20 or so MP's. ...Picked out ...Barbara Castle¹¹⁶...I have got to be honest here and say that I was knocked over by the Majesty of the Palace of Westminster. Any historic buildings cause me to become slightly (slightly?) exasperated. I lap everything up...After the Commons we¹¹⁷ wanted to go to Victoria. Now if I had been on my own I would have walked ...but no, we got a taxi. That trip cost us 30p! He paid. Giving the driver 50p and telling him to keep the change....Must join Young Socialists otherwise I will get nowhere.

¹¹⁶ Barbara Castle was a Labour MP, and Cabinet minister during the 1960s and 1970s. She firmly believed in rights for women and that one day there would be a woman prime minister. She probably didn't expect the first to be Margaret Thatcher however.

¹¹⁷ I was with a school friend, who I observed 'no idea of value of money'.

Feb 8: General election called by Heath¹¹⁸ to settle once and for all the question of who really governs this country. Already the political broadcasts have started. Tonight Wilson has condemned the Tory administration and stated that it is time the country was united again. The miners have decided to carry on with their strike although all the leaders of the parties have tried to prevent strike action taking place during electioneering. He's had to call an election - there can be no doubt about that but will any election do any good. Whatever party is returned will be faced with the continuing fuel crisis, miners crisis. Regrettably attention will be taken off the problems facing the country. The fuel will continue to rundown, the population will continue to expand, the economy will continue to collapse and Britain will continue to sink. A coalition is what we want OR A DICTATORSHIP.

Feb 9: speculation as to who will win the election is already taking place . Betting shops have taken large bets on Labour to win. What do I think? Although I have socialist leanings I hope that the Conservatives will win. They have shown that they are not willing to kowtow to the whims of the trade unions. For once a party has stood its ground. The unions need to be crushed into the ground. They have grown too Almighty and power has made them into pseudo-Dictators. They believe that they can hold the country to ransom. They haven't a hope. The people will unite behind the Conservatives and the unions will be pulverised. What if Labour win? If Labour win then the unions will get what they want and the country will head for economic disaster.

Feb 11: So Solzhenitsyn has been arrested. He has achieved all that he wanted. But as to his future!?

(During the election the school allows pupils to stand for a 'mock election'. I chose to stand as the Populist candidate – one who 'represents the People'. On Feb 17 I write: 'I will launch a mammoth publicity campaign swamping the school with posters. The winner will win on personality appeal alone.')

¹¹⁸ Edward [Ted] Heath was Conservative prime minister from 1970-1974. The rivalry between Heath and his Labour counterpart, Harold Wilson, was often compared with that between Gladstone and Disraeli in the 19th century. Butler, D., & Kavanagh, D. (1975). *The British General Election of October 1974*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-02539-8>

Feb 19: what the hell is happening to Solzhenitsyn? ... He seems a very strange man - personally I think he will fade out of the public eye very quickly ...and very few remember his name in 20 yrs time...Anyway it's done a good turn for Penguin and Fontana¹¹⁹.

(Feb 20: the school election is heating up. I give away sweets to capture votes. I deliver a 'rousing speech' and write that I give gesticulations 'in the manner of Hitler'. As for the real election: I feel there will be a low turnout - apathy. Lower than normal.)

[One of the sports I do competitively, outside of school, is fencing, which seems on reflection to be unusual at a comprehensive school at the time.]

Feb 28: the school elects a Liberal and I receive 88 votes. I write that the Liberal candidate won because of the party not because of his personality.¹²⁰

March 3: The country is in a constitutional crisis and an economic mess. God knows how we will resolve these problems but undoubtedly we will, eventually. Thorpe has been offered a senior cabinet post if he will enter into a coalition with the Conservatives. On principle he should refuse. Heath knows all the tricks and he is trying to bribe Thorpe in order to save the Conservative party from collapse and to safeguard his own political future. If the party goes down then Heath will go down with it. But will Thorpe refuse? I doubt it. He is a moderate, he knows the country needs a government - any government and he will give in. Perhaps he wants to get ministerial experience so that when he becomes PM he will also know the tricks of the trade. At any rate it looks as though we are in for a further election -
The NATION MUST DECIDE OR PERISH.

March 4: On 'The Constitutional Crisis'. 7.55pm. As I write it is apparent that the Prime Minister, Mr Heath, is to resign in favour of Mr Wilson, the Labour leader. He has gone to the Palace to hand in his seal of office and Wilson has been granted an audience. (Oh! How petty it all is.) So the grand alliance idea put forward by the Liberal Party to the Conservatives and Labourites has been rejected. The idea is for a NATIONAL government - a government of all parties. I agree with the idea and the intention, noble intention, behind it

¹¹⁹ Publishers of his books in the UK.

¹²⁰ Hung Parliament but Wilson forms government until September 1974. First time since 1910 there were two elections in same year and first, since 1929, of a 'hung parliament'.

BUT it could never work, I say this time as a realist in peacetime. BUT are we in peacetime - we are at war with ourselves. We need a united country, a united government. Labour cannot give us that -it will be defeated very shortly, either on the Queen's speech or the budget. Heath's career is ended - I believe he will resign as leader. Oh! How petty.

March 6: ...went to parliament where I was invited by Lord Crook¹²¹. Paid a visit to Commons also where they were electing a speaker. Harold and Ted there. I was astonished to see our MPs, honourable MPs, shouting, clapping, jeering and acting like kids when we are in the middle of an economic crisis. Quite remarkable. Commons was full - atmosphere thus created. Also visited number 10 Downing Street where I saw Wilson leaving for the Commons.

March 19: Should we continue with Concorde? Should it be done away with quickly or should it be phased out? Wedgy-Benn¹²² (trade minister, or is it industry?) has no option but to destroy the project. Fair enough Concorde is a great technological achievement but at £2 million a day it is a farce. However let us forget economics for the moment. If Concorde was suddenly abandoned hundreds, if not thousands of highly skilled technicians would lose their jobs - thousands of men are dependent on Concorde for their welfare. One cannot just abolish a project without taking into consideration the possible effects that terminating it will have on the local environment. There is more at stake here than just money. In addition what would France think if we suddenly opted out? Or does France herself think that the monster should be done away with? One will only find an answer to that question by asking France.

March 30: Tonight it occurred to me that our entertainment is just as crude as the Romans. They had their gladiator fights and we have our football matches - both were competitive and both catered for the mass enjoyment of the eager public. It is also interesting how the

¹²¹ 1st Baron, created 1947 by the Labour Party for 'political and public services'. As this was an hereditary period his grandson now has the title as 3rd Baron Crook. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/37977/supplement/2571/data.pdf>

¹²² Anthony [Tony] Wedgewood-Benn [1925-2014]: renounced his title to become plain Tony Benn. He was a Labour Cabinet Minister until 1979 and throughout kept diaries which have been published and provide a wealth of information to political historians, albeit with characteristic immodesty on the writer's part. Benn often thought he would one day be prime minister – but he lacked the support of the grassroots and was viewed as too much a political liability by many in the Labour movement. He never shock off his aristocratic upbringing.

finished product that we see on the TV screen is so polished, so refined. We are only shown the Superman fighting it out - we never see the bloodshed that accompanies this. We must have our entertainment and I expect the football, in one form or another, will stay for some considerable time before passing away as did its counterpart many thousands of years before.

[During the Easter school holiday I work at a café in Worthing on the south coast of England, where my grandparents lived. I had worked there the previous year too. On 19 April I note that I received my pay packet for the week, which came to 19p an hour. 'The fact is that as the law stands kids under fourteen cannot earn more than £2 a week.']

April 29: [Make a decision to join the Liberal Party.] The Liberals appeal to me for a number of reasons. They are the party very much for the radical outlet of the population. They are concerned about environmental matters and their entire policy is directed towards the individual. Possibly this is because they are still grasping for power.

May 27: International Speedway championships. The stadium was full to capacity (75p to get in). A tremendous atmosphere was created by the end of the evening. Even I was compelled to join in although I have only a vague interest in the sport. Enthusiasts wore, proudly, their team and individual drivers colours and came equipped with clipboard and biro. The lights were dimmed at the commencement of each heat - a technique which helped to create the unique atmosphere. The dirt from the track and distinctive smell of the bikes fuel soon wafted over to where we were sitting. The crowd was good humoured and not one fight broke out (such incidents are common at football matches). At the end of each race music was piped through the loud speakers and there was the occasional advert by the sponsors. The scene reminded me of the Roman gladiatorial contests. People then shouted for death - the similarity is striking.

May 29: Meeting of the local young Socialists (a party which I was going to join, after tonight's events I'm glad I did not) and was concerned with the problem of Turkish labour in Britain. In fact a Turkish community leader in London was invited along and he gave a very informative talk on the problems facing workers in this country. Course there was talk of brotherly love and friendship between fellow workers. The conclusion was drawn by one of

the older members (in his 40s). He said that the workers must crush the capitalists etc, that the unions were being held to ransom by the government (previous government that is). That I could not stomach although I kept quiet. I attended as a Liberal representative....I felt apprehensive leaving my moped believing it would be tampered with. A middle class attitude.

June 1: Yesterday the head of Laker Airways said that he could make Concorde pay. This followed the announcement by British Airways that they would suffer a £25m loss by operating the plane. Concorde is a great technological achievement but it is an economic disaster. Surely it would be of far greater benefit to the nation if the millions which is spent on Concorde were spent instead on housing and education. It is an environmentalists nightmare. Regardless it will be put, pushed into service for the sole reason that it will be seen as a symbol of British craftsmanship (regardless of the fact that France helped us build the thing). it will represent Britain - a Britain that is heading for economic disaster and SOCIAL REVOLUTION.

June 2: Have been reading Solzhenitsyn's 'August 1914' ... like Tolstoy, indeed like any great writer, he has the depth of vision to penetrate into the lives of even the lowest ranked soldier. He is able to build a vocabulary of music. He is in complete control. The men, the actors, dance to his tune. The book is Solzhenitsyn.

June 4: An Irishman, whose name I cannot at the moment recall, has just (yesterday) committed suicide whilst in jail....¹²³ The particular gentleman refused to eat any form of nourishment for in excess of 60 days. He was literally reduced to a living corpse. He has become a martyr in the eyes of the IRA ...obviously retaliation will follow; perhaps they may even try to blow up Westminster. The Price sisters, again Irish, again supporters of the IRA, who are in Pankhurst are also melting away¹²⁴.

¹²³ This was Michael Gaughan, who refused food for 64 days, although British policy at this time was to force-feed. He was 24.

¹²⁴ Dolours and Marian were part of a Provisional IRA unit that bombed London's Old Bailey in March 1973. Their hunger strike lasted more than 200 days, including forced feeding through a tube. They were transferred to a prison in Northern Ireland in 1975 and released in 1980. Dolours died in 2013.

[The IRA's bombing campaign on mainland Britain started in 1973, but intensified during this year. The Houses of Parliament was bombed on 17 June. See below.]

June 15: Riots in London. Left wing v National Front. One student killed 'murdered'¹²⁵.

June 17: This morning a 15-20lb bomb was thrown at the Palace of Westminster and exploded some six minutes later fortunately not killing anyone but severely injuring a number of Parliament officials. Not having seen the news I have come to the conclusion that it was the IRA who planned and carried out the manoeuvre. Anarchists who believe that by destroying or partial [sic] destroying the mother of all parliaments will bring down morale in this country need to think again. By God we believe in Democracy and what we do is done through normal although bureaucratic channels. Parliament exists for us all - let it be used.

June 24: Solzhenitsyn is... in my opinion, possibly the most gifted and talented writer that Russia has produced in the 20th century and possibly the number one writer living in the world today. He has immense and exhilarating power which is typical, indeed symbolic, of so many Russian artists, whether in music (Shostakovich) arts or literature. It is at times poetic and metaphysical and surrealist and mystical all at the same time yet he manages, within a book of some 500 pages, to keep the many and varied characters alive and to maintain the readers interest. As the book progresses, I find that I become the book, I become the characters because, I become Solzhenitsyn!

July 1: Jo Grimond¹²⁶ today, speaking in the Guardian, a pro-liberal paper, set out the case for a radical national government. This government would be composed of radical party men of all parties and would implement numerous policies to curb the inflationary problems and to bring economic and social stability once more to this green and pleasant land. He suggested various proposals...[including] devolution of power for Scotland and Wales...I believe in national government for the time being, until the country becomes bored, and radical nationalism is far better than soft hearted conservative nationalism.

¹²⁵ This was Kevin Gately, 21, and the riot happened in London's Red Lion Square. He was an innocent bystander who paid with his life. See <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jun/17/archive-dead-student-fell-under-the-crowd-1974> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Kevin_Gately

¹²⁶ Actually Jo Grimond. He was leader of the Liberal Party, 1956-1967. <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/history/grimond-jo-lord-grimond/>

July 18: [Open night at school when prospective parents come to view the place.] Open night was a chaotic affair. It did not present a true reflection of the school ...it is not the school as it should be: the school is abusive language, fights, teachers losing control of classes, 4th years overrunning the playground, staff enjoying themselves in the staff room and sixth formers dozing and smoking in the common room - that is school that is what they should see.

July 21: No wonder we will never achieve any European Community and perhaps never world community unless we shake off our nationalistic tendencies. We British (and proud of it) are stubborn and insular and will not tolerate foreign interference...We hang on to our customs and conventions and still honour our Queen – yes sir the Queen! Long may she live and prosper. To achieve European Community we must give up visions of empire building and go full hearted into Europe - to do that Europe needs a President - to do that the Queen must go - and long live the revolution.

July 29: A nation must be built that is founded upon genius not inheritance. A nation ruled by liberalism. A dream? It must not become a dream. It is possible but through effort. I am against the monarchy but I am prepared to accept that we will never get rid of that institution until public, mass public opinion, turns against it. It will need a weak monarch to do that. So let it stay if the country wills it; it will be better to save a nation than fight a long and tedious battle to rid a heritage. The army would need to be on our side anyway and that would only lead us to a totalitarian state. Britain does, and never has, liked revolution - Is a bloody way to get changed. Do it through accepted means. A Bill. Abolition of Titles (Monarchy) Bill.

August 2: Many labels will be applied to this age, the most usual one I should imagine being the ATOMIC AGE. But does that really sum up the type of environment that we live in today? I would think not. Surely a better title would be The Age of Automation, The Age of the Car/Machine, the Age of Speed, the Age of Pollution and Population strain. But put these all under one broad heading please - The AGE OF DECADENCE.

August 9: [Nixon resigns. I write this at 2am GMT while watching the broadcast live.]
Watching ITV¹²⁷ waiting for this dramatic and historical announcement. Too much build-up which spoils it. Recorded highlights of his career as president before he has even officially announced his resignation, with special interviews with very special men, senators, old friends, mistresses, cleaner woman etc. I wonder if he will announce shortly that he does not intend to - no he will but it is an interesting point. Four minutes to go - we wait attentively. Resign - noon tomorrow [American time]. He's breaking down – understandable. pleading for peace worldwide. Emphasising what he has done in past. I can't see him getting through it without breaking up. 'May the grace of God be with you in all the days ahead' - last words. Now we have breakdown of speech for next two hours¹²⁸.

August 19: ...United World will come only through action on the part of one country - that country could be China.

Sept 21: ...Go out canvassing with our prospective Parliamentary candidate Hester Smallbone¹²⁹... Most people were pensioners and had become completely disillusioned with party politics. They said that they weren't going to vote for no party this time as they were all the same and were only after their own ends. They said that they didn't care about the people, they never had to live on a pension. It will be a very low turnout this time as I have already said. People have lost interest in politics and especially Wilson and Heath, two men who the country knows have tricked them.

[Oct 10: The general election was won by Labour, which increased its number of seats by 18 to 319; the Conservatives losing 20 to 277; while the Liberal Party slipped one to 13. Labour's overall majority, however, was just three. Turnout was slightly down on the February election, at 72.8% (78.1%). In the constituency I campaigned in the Conservatives retained the seat, with the Liberals third, losing voter share to Labour.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carshalton_\(UK_Parliament_constituency\)#Elections_in_the_1970s](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carshalton_(UK_Parliament_constituency)#Elections_in_the_1970s)

¹²⁷ Commercial channel in UK – with adverts.

¹²⁸ Watch it here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPEVzr7qSRk>

¹²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/may/23/hester-smallbone-obituary>

Dec 17: Petrol prices increased again today; the fourth time this year. Two-star petrol is now likely to cost 72p a gallon. It will not be long before it reaches £1 a gallon...

FUTOLETTER.

Written by : JOHN RICHARD PITT.

ON : SUNDAY JULY 8th 1973.

To whom ever it may concern, It has come to my notice that truly great diarists concern themselves with issues of the day. Obviously this is of the greatest interest to future historians and interested bodies. Obviously this is what "you" want from me. It is of little point in me trying to define what life will be like in your time. I believe I have done this in earlier letters, which are of only little worth. I see my mistakes and will make every endeavour to correct them in later editions. In fact I will make a start now.

I feel that I am privileged to be living in the nineteen seventies. What a fantastic era to be in. Now is the time for reform in every department. Reform which will, probably, benefit "your" children. At the present period in "time" there is widespread discussion about arms limitations and nuclear disarmament. The S.A.L.T talks have taken place. A long first step towards total world disarmament. It will come, it must come. What is the necessity for nuclear, atomic arms? When this question is closely analysed the only answer appears to be as a

deterrent. Countries are afraid of one another. What happened after the first European war? France wasn't prepared to disarm because she was afraid of German strength. The League of Nations was a brave attempt that failed for plainly obvious reasons: It was linked to other treaties, especially Versailles, it had no army and no common policy between nations. It couldn't act quick enough. With the refusal of the United States to join and the exclusion of Russia and Germany it looked more like an Anglo (French alliance) when Germany, Italy and Japan left it strengthened Britain and France's hold over affairs at Geneva. This list can be extended almost indefinitely. After the honeymoon period from 1919-1923 nations became as self-seeking and nationalistic as before. That is the brunt of it, self-seeking and nationalistic. We tried to learn by our mistakes.

The United Nations does have an army. It does have a two-thirds majority instead of unanimity at voting time, but there is still the power of veto. We do of course have U.N.E.S.C.O. and the International Court "United" Nations? I fear not at the present time. So what has gone wrong? Let us be honest immediately. The U.N. is not working effectively, nor for that matter is N.A.T.O., but they are in existence that needs to be done so to revise and all working. We cannot just dismiss them as

unqualified failures. They aren't failures. Some parts of their administration do a wonderful job, such as U.N.E.S.C.O, but other parts are a hindrance to the rest of the machine. One word can describe the modern administrative system - red-tape. That is where everything is going wrong. That is the crux, heart of the matter. What is the need for documents in triplicate, asking for permission to go "home" for six hours? I am no administrator but I can see that that is hopelessly out of date in today's atomic age. What is the solution then? There can be no one answer to this question but in the preceding lines I have given some indication as to what is wrong. There is a definite lack of balance. Red-tape must go to a great extent, although I have no doubt that it will disappear completely. Many institutions which comprise the whole must be closely analysed to see if they are efficient. The basic framework must stay but that framework must be strengthened. On the question of atomic disarmament. How can "it" be limited? There is only one answer. The world must unite. But here we are venturing into the world of idealism. That is fatal. We must at all times be realistic. A world Government will come but not in my, or your, lifetime. There are too many problems to be solved initially. Watergate is the talking point "today". It does not concern the United States of America but the entire world. If undercover work, supervised by the President, can

occur in America, then why can it occur in Britain or any of the European countries? The fact is that it probably is occurring. Britain has the "Poulson Affair" in which a top parliamentary man has been involved. In Germany there has occurred another "Watergate." Here again is time for change, constitutional change, or governmental change. Democracy is the best system but if it is abused it is worse than its opposite system. Britain has taken a step in righting this wrong. Members of Parliament are being asked to list their sources of income. But it is not being made compulsory! Come on Britain, pull your proverbial socks up.

To conclude part 'A'. Population is the "in" word today. Not only are more people jumping on the bandwagon but nothing is being done. The Government have recently refused to make contraceptive free under the National Health Service. The Lords we beaten, whereas if this issue had taken place last century, they would have won! Look what the Parliament Act 1911, did! If no action is taken in my generation then there can be little hope for yours. We will only begin to sit up and take notice when the world is overflowing with unwanted or wanted babies. That is always the case. Action is not taken until it is too late. I hope I am wrong, for your children's sake.

SIGNED

R Pitt

(This section is a compilation of Anglophone 'definitions' I have come across in my research. It does not pretend to be exhaustive and acknowledges that, due to the disparate fields in which social workers are employed, there is unlikely to be one that suits all. As England put it more than 35 years ago: 'It may not be possible to say what social work is, but clearly it is substantial and pervasive' (1986, p. 11)).

'...even though our profession is now almost a century old, it is still in search of a unified definition to clarify its identity' (Hill et al., 2017, p. 266).

1. The following definition was approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014:

'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.'

<https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

2. 'The role of social workers in social protection systems is to facilitate community solidarity and engagement in the development of systems that will be inclusive for all people and treat them with dignity and respect, and ensuring human rights and social justice. Social workers will bring their skills, knowledge and expertise not only of individuals who are marginalised and excluded, but also of groups and communities to advocate that systems positive address structural, social and cultural barriers.'

<https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-work-in-social-protection-systems-the-universal-right-to-social-protection/>

3. 'By social work is meant any form of persistent and deliberate effort to improve living or working conditions in the community, or to relieve, diminish, or prevent distress, whether due to weakness of character or to pressure of external circumstances' (First published in 1915, Flexner, 2001, p. 160).

4. 'Social Work is the business of producing, changing or adjusting social organization and procedure in the interests of human welfare according to scientific standards... The phrase "according to scientific standards" is used in order to exclude things which are meant well but do not really do any good and may even do harm. Its effect is to exclude quacks' (Halbert, 1923, p. 29).

5. 'The aim of social work is and will continue to be the maintenance and the raising of standards of economic, social and civic life' (Ernest Burgess, 1923, quoted in Shaw, 2009, p. 1250).
6. 'The whole purpose of the social worker, whether social case worker, social group worker, or community organiser, the whole reason for the development of his skill, is to make *some* social purpose, as manifest in the function of *some* social agency' (Smalley quoted in Weaver, 2016, p. 106 first published 1959).
7. 'Social work's goals may be achieved in a number of ways: by helping individuals and their families; by helping groups of people with personal and social problems; by helping social agencies to work together; by influencing the community's social policies; by administering social welfare programmes; by undertaking social welfare research; and by teaching people who will perform these tasks' (First edition 1965, Lawrence, 2016, p. xii.).
8. Social work is 'a disciplined and informed intervention in the lives of people in the community...' (Hunt in Timms et al., 1978, p. 7).
9. 'Social work is vulnerable enterprise. It is undertaken on behalf of society which often regards it ambivalently as a regrettable necessity; What I mean is that its authority lacks wholehearted community sanction and approval. Moreover, the clientele of social work are, with some exceptions, reluctant recipients, frequently in conflict with the authority of social work, whether in itself or as it represents the wider society' (Hunt in Timms et al., 1978, p. 11).
10. 'Social work is the attempt to assist those who do not command the means to human subsistence in acquiring them and in attaining the highest possible degree of independence' (Crouch, 1979, p. 46).
11. The practice of social work is to enable social control that has been prescribed by the political elite: '...procedures of normalisation exercised in the name of the power of the state' (Foucault quoted in Rabinow 1986, p. 48).
12. 'The objective of social work is to help people make use of social resources – family members, friends, neighbours, community organisations, social service agencies, and so forth – to solve their problems' (Specht, 1995, p. 23).
13. 'Rather than our lamenting the lack of a durable definition of the profession, its practice and its boundaries, the periodic re-examination of such definitions should be seen as a positive reflection of a changing profession responsive to its environment' (Gibelman, 1999, p. 308).

14. 'Social work is sited in a social space where people address problems in living their own and other people's problems. ... social work has been instrumental in turning therapy into social policy' (Laura Epstein in Chambon et al., 1999, pp. 10-11).
15. 'Social Work is a discipline and a practice where the imagination has a role as important as that of the empiricism of the social sciences' (Allan Irving in Chambon et al., 1999, p. 47).
16. [Social work] '...fulfils an essentially mediating role between those who are actually or potentially excluded and the mainstream of society' (Parton, 1999, p. 111).
17. 'Social work is a discourse that defines what a client is and what a social worker is. It also lays down rules for how they are to interact' (Fook et al., 1999, p. 14).
18. 'Promoting social justice and human development in an unequal world provides the *raison d'être* of social work practice, and is a key way of discharging society's contract in assisting vulnerable people in its midst' (Dominelli, 2002, p. 4).
19. '...social work is a key instrumental expression of collective responsibility for individual citizens within a welfare regime authorised and legitimised by a liberal democratic regime of governance' (McDonald et al., 2003, p. 196).
20. 'Social work is a human activity about people working with people. Both the people who do the working [the social workers] and the people with whom they work display the human frailties, contradictions, weaknesses and imperfections that are a part of the human condition: they do not fit a single stereotype, and steadfastly refuse to fit neatly into any of the categories that theoreticians, policy makers and managers try to create for them' (Ife, 2005, p. 9).
21. 'Social work has always been concerned with political activity focused on the pursuit of social justice and the relief of human suffering' (Brydon, 2006, p. 32).
22. '...social work as art first, as artistic attunement, and second, as an art in the service of the politics of liberation' (Gray & Webb, 2008, p. 182).
23. '...social work is a field of production and circulation for struggles associated with redistribution and recognition. As a field, it is constituted as a complex hierarchy of material and symbolic power relations' (Webb, 2010, p. 2372).

24. 'Social work is ...a set of practices that involves both human and non-human actors, and moreover, the practices of social work are organised through particular sets of associations between and across these networks....the various documents, assessments and reports located and used in child protection work exposes the powerful way non-human actors organise, shape or possibly inhibit particular responses by social workers who work in the field of child protection' (Stanley et al., 2011, p. 63).
25. 'There are many continuities in social work, which is constructed in a shared language of concepts about its nature, contained in a discourse among three views of it: therapeutic, social order and transformational views. Social workers construct their own social work practice by following pathways towards, through, and sometimes away from , a nexus of ideas and debate that is the centre of social work' (Malcolm Payne quoted in Cree, 2011, p. 14).
26. 'Social work's role critically as a powerful agent in institutional and structural change and social reform' Rapoport, in Schubert and Gray (2015, p. 1350).
27. 'Social work practice is a public service that is delivered in private places. Perhaps in part as a result of this we know remarkably little about how social workers talk with parents, children and families' (Westlake in Hardwick et al., 2016, p. 59).
28. In the United States, '...the profession has yet to agree to a single definition of social work. In the absence of a unifying definition, 51 different statutory definitions of social work have been created by each state and the District of Columbia' (Hill et al., 2017, p. 266).
29. Pithouse quoted by Ferguson (2018) speaks of social work being 'an invisible trade' [p.66]. This refers to much of the work being done 'behind closed doors, primarily within the privacy of the service users' home' [p.66].
30. Ferguson [2018] writes of social work 'as a mobile embodied practice' [p.78]. This in the context of 'home visits' – the subject of the article.
31. 'Social work is already an integrative profession that struggles with splits between multiple sources of knowledge that social workers have to negotiate in intense situations' (Huss & Bos, 2018, p. 1).
32. '...practice or action involving people with various social problems is usually seen as a central issue for social work...in many ways social work is about both caring and controlling' (Bell, 2020, pp. 4-5).

'Literature matters to social work because it treats life whole: it expresses human nature in its complexity and unique variations and comments on its social world; it is an implicit reproof of attempts to place people in crude categories; to define, explain, predict or manipulate them.'
(Turner, 1991, p. 233).

A slim booklet of just 22 pages titled *Literature and the Social Worker: A reading list for practitioners, teachers, students and voluntary workers* offers resources from creative literature '...to humanise the knowledge derived from the behavioural sciences' (Morris, 1975, p. 5). For example, Monica Dickens's *Kate and Emma* is cited to '...illustrate the "cycle of deprivation", a phrase recently coined to describe the situation where a problem child becomes a problem parent who, in turn, has a problem child' (p. 12). Of course, the list is very dated, Anglocentric and many other novels and plays describing the contemporary world would replace those quoted. However, its value still is in establishing connections between what social workers (and others) do and what academic literature portrays.

The Case Worker (1975) by Gregory Konrad – set in Hungary, and first published in 1969 as a critique of that country's Communist regime¹³⁰.

Every Day is Mother's Day (1985) by Hilary Mantel – the first novel from this twice Booker Prize winner set in the UK. It was set around Mantel's experiences as a social worker at a geriatric hospital.

Vacant Possession (1986) by Hilary Mantel – a sequel to the previous book.

The Absolution Game (1996) by Paul Sayer – is set in the UK by a former mental health nurse.

The Casual Vacancy (2002) J.K Rowling – the *Harry Potter* author changes genre with this novel on UK child protection.

Rise and Shine (2006) by Anna Quindlen – the backdrop is New York.

The Believers (2008) by Zoe Heller – based in the US.

Three Little Words: A Memoir (2009) by Ashley Rhodes-Courter - describes her time in the US foster care system.

¹³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/07/gyorgy-konrad-obituary>

The Social Worker (2011) by Michael Ungar, who also wrote a journal article on his process of composition (2011).

Unprotected (2012) by Kristin Lee Johnson – written by a former child protection worker and set in Minnesota.

Fourth of July Creek (2014) by Smith Henderson. – set in the US.

All Our Names (2015) by Dinaw Mengestu – a Ugandan refugee ends up in US Midwest, where he meets a social worker.

Known to Social Services (2015) by Freya Barrington - details the work of social worker Diane Foster, on a fictional UK housing estate.

Days in the Lives of Social Workers: 62 Professionals Tell "Real-Life" Stories from Social Work Practice (2019, 5th edition).

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