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Issue 11 Fall 2013

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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions via email of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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Shrine

We were going to Boyne to ski. Got lost around Indian River and the snow thickening on the road. Robbie says, “We’re not going to make it up there tonight.” He’s tired from all the beers, plus we’ve been passing a little ganja around the car, the four of us. The smoke’s quite thick and the car reeks.

Then, through the windshield, the headlights pick up this sign for the world’s biggest crucifix. “Shit! Let’s check that sucker out,” Robbie says.

We follow the sign. We get to the parking lot and circle around. You can barely see the thing—just a big shaft sticking up through the snow and darkness. You can see some feet on the bottom, though.

That’s when Robbie dares me to climb it. There’s this maintenance ladder that goes up it. With little rungs where you can stick your feet and hold on.

I go, “No way. No way I’m getting up that thing.”

But here I am, right at the top of the world’s biggest crucifix. I can almost see the face, but it’s dark and snowy. The thing is made of some kind of metal—bronze maybe. Shit, not the first time I’ve done something stupid for Robbie.

I yell down, “Hey, there’s somebody already up here.” Robbie and Max, I can hear them laughing way down below, laughing through the wind. Charlotte probably stayed in the car, the little pussy. Even though Charlotte’s sort of a bitch, still, she can be pretty funny. She says all the guys that like me are total jerks. That I’m like a magnet for them because I like to do crazy stuff.

It’s way cold up here. I’m not dressed warmly. Everything seems frozen. My nostrils are doing that thing where they stick together. Where they squinch up. My boots totally suck, and I’m freezing my little butt off.

I can almost see the Jesus face now. It’s metallic and icy and the eyes are way blank, except when snow hisses across the metal, and it almost changes the expression. It totally creeps me out.

It looks like Robbie at his creepiest. Me and Robbie have our creepy little dramas, too. Pretty gloomy, I guess. Sometimes he scares me; sometimes I feel like throwing up, practically; or sometimes I’m just—I don’t know...scared? I, like, don’t know what to say. He has a bad temper. Ohmigod, he goes, like, totally mental sometimes. Or else he’ll just hit me. Charlotte says, “Bad temper? Read my lips: how about asshole?” She says the asshole thing long and loud for effect. And to think I had my tits done for him. Had my lips collagenized. Now my lips are fake, my hair color’s fake, and lots of my body parts are fake, and Robbie says a lobotomy would’ve done me more good.

I look down through a swirl of snow and—ohmigod—a cop car. I can see the flasher turning slowly, sweeping the snowy lot and making everything look blue. Robbie and Max are trying to hide the beer cans, but the inside of the car must reek of weed, plus they left all that shit in plain sight.

A cop gets out, and he’s talking to them. Another one is looking through the car. After a
while they’re all—even Charlotte—shoved into the backseat. The cop car drives off.

Thanks, everybody! What am I doing? It’s not like I even know. It’s like I know where I am, but it’s totally crazy because I feel like I totally don’t. Like I’m here but I’m not here. That sounds so stupid, right? So totally dumb? Everybody forgot I was up here. That’s how much they care. Leave me hanging up here on a ladder. And the wind blowing snow down the back of my neck and this creepy statue—this face.

Could I leer back at him? Could I make like a teenage vampire and drink his blood? My curved fangs would make a wet, slick sound as they slid down from my gums. I’d work my tongue over the fangs, then I’d push out my bristled tongue and begin to lick the statue’s neck, my rough tongue scraping over the smooth, bronze throat. I tell the statue, “I’m so hungry; I need to feed.”

Finally, I pretend it’s real. I go like, “Now that we’re alone, can I tell you some stuff?”

It stares back.

“First of all, I’m preggers. That’s right. I think it was Robbie, but it could’ve been Max. How do you like that?”

No answer—the world’s biggest crucifix has nothing to say.

“Next question. How come you get credit for all the good stuff that goes on—people giving thanks and all—but when things start to go bad, it’s our sinful nature. That gets you off the hook; am I right?”

The world’s biggest crucifix looks back at me blankly, the snow brushing its cheeks.

I’m like, “Shouldn’t you stand up like a man and take the blame for some of the shit? Not just me being preggers, but earthquakes and floods and starving Africans?”

I’m starting to scare myself really good. Maybe I’ll be left up here forever.

The snowflakes of the night continue to fall. I can’t go down the ladder backward. I’m numb with terror. Maybe I’ll see another cop car down in the parking lot to rescue me. Sometime—when? But going down is scarier than coming up.

Anyway, I’m stuck here. Whatever you say, here’s a guy who doesn’t go totally mental or hit you. He has no middle finger. Maybe he’ll shake off the questions I asked him by claiming he doesn’t exist, but that’s a pretty lame excuse, a cop-out, a typical guy thing; I can see right through it.

Now, all of a sudden I’m starting to feel nice—in a dizzy way. Ohmigod! What am I saying? This is like, what? I’m such a freak! Am I? Why am I telling you all this, like blabbing my head off? Right? Ohmigod! But I think about it. I try to think about stuff. I try to think about me as a person, like me skimming over the world. And how am I doing? I’m hanging from a ladder on the world’s biggest crucifix. Days could pass and weeks and maybe years. What more could a girl possibly want?
Passing for Song

Phyllis and I were on a journey. We crossed the strait between the south island and the north. Later came landfall, lunch, hills wrinkled like the haunches of a fetus-positioned sleeper. In the passenger seat, I contemplated our grief. Phyllis had been married to Tobias before I met him. Three years. Then Tobias left her for me. Why I wanted him in the first place, I could no longer remember. That knowledge was gone, though the thought of his face opened a seam in my chest. He had always been morose and gray-skinned. A fan of minimalist music. But his sullenness had an air of honesty to it that made you believe in anything.

A year ago now Tobias died from the malignancy of a tumor we thought he beat before he knew either Phyllis or me, and my grief for this man had taken a shamefully public form. I cried to strangers, made wrong turns on secondary roads. Eventually, I found I did not wish to cook for myself. As for Phyllis, Tobias’s death numbed her, but even so she could still carry on, conduct transactions, note the date on a bill, select unbruised fruit from the market. We did not discuss Tobias. This was our arrangement. And Phyllis never cried in my presence. But as the months passed, she assumed my troubles. When the lease on her apartment ran out, she moved into my spare room, and for over six months now she had been absorbing my pain like ballast.

On the second morning of the journey, I drove. Overnight, the caverns of the sky opened, and the world was green: it grew white houses. I thought of my father, to whose home Phyllis and I were headed. I had told him Phyllis was my closest friend, and that captured something of what was between us. But our relationship was of some other order. She was my mother, perhaps. A lover for whom I felt neither romance nor attraction. We had become partners in mourning, I guess. Phyllis brought order, comfort, a companion. I was less sure what I gave her. Or, rather, I darkly knew.

I gave her Tobias. I was as close as she would ever come.

As I drove, I thought of the current of my father’s talk, whitewater that ran high, that broke and thundered and could whistle at night. Extravagance and loss were his lodestars. Growing up, my brother and I had felt adoration for him. My first love poems were to that man. And why not? He never failed to write back. But my mother’s hair went thin, and after twenty-two years of it, she left, still deeply in love.

I saw that I was saying this aloud—I had not understood I was speaking until I observed Phyllis listening, studying her hands as I went on. There was a strength to this listening that provided for us both. She buoyed me, I weighed her. There were marriages that offered less. During the two years I had dated Tobias, he told me much about his ex-wife, but he seemed to have
missed everything crucial: how she could hold your fear like an insect in a jar or cup your head in her heads while you cried in the afternoon, her two palms steadfast as headlands under your skull.

She was bedrock, and so she went unseen.

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Coming out of the forest into the flats of Poverty Bay, I pulled over, asked Phyllis to drive. She wanted to know if I was all right. I said I was, slammed the door, and walked behind the car to take her seat. I sat there wondering if she knew that I had been thinking of her, and of my father, and of Tobias, and of myself, the four of us bound as if to one body, though one of us was dead, and two of the others had never met. I wondered if she knew what she meant to me, this ex-wife who had been passed-over, and who, in the thickness of her grief, had given succor but not received it. I wondered if she knew how mysterious it felt to me. Our silences.

I wondered how Tobias could ever have left her for me.

Gisborne came and went and the road drew alongside the sea. The sun was hard above us, and I could see the white tongues of sand far out in the harbor. Where they ended the water was tight and silver. I thought of what the horizon was: only the limit of vision, ordinary geometry, a little trick in place of an edge. Then I thought of Tobias, and of him in the hospice on the night he died. I thought of the medication he was on, how it packed him under a ceiling of snow, and how that ceiling had lowered slowly down over all his thoughts.

I recalled the blankness of death that he believed in, the blankness which I, too, sometimes believed in. I thought, too, of the wavering heat that ascended from the surface of the sea, and I knew Tobias would not want me to think of him as *going on*, as persisting in any way. But I knew, too, that memory was a seedling that could be coaxed to a tremendous size, cultivated and nourished until its branches were wide enough to house you. At the same time, memory kept its distance, fled from you like the promise of the horizon, turned out to be a limit, the hand in a mirror you would never hold.

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We followed my father’s directions to the end of the asphalt road, dipped into the birdsong, and felt the shimmering heat of the sea before we smelled it. Stands of lemonwood and rata trees blocked the view. Cabbage trees rose here and there, minarets.

“Second growth,” Phyllis said, “that’s a funny term, isn’t it? As if there was only before and after.” I did not reply. Unsolicited speech from Phyllis was so unexpected that it always took me by surprise. It even made me dubious, as if I had heard a voice issue from a cleft of feldspar.

My father had cabbages in his hands when we saw him. He stood in the dirt beside his car, unloading bags. His clothes were threadbare, his face rising out of whiskers like a sun-darkened bud. The only other house in sight was a rotting villa next door with children on the steps and barking puppies. I saw a woman in a t-shirt at the window.
My father’s home turned out to be a shed set back in the high grass. Here and there the scarlet heads of free-ranging fowl. Otherwise, there was dune. The closed lip of the sea.

I held my father in my arms and then stepped away. He had never meant Phyllis, but because my father understood what Tobias’ death had done to me and what Phyllis had given me, he held open his arms for her. Then she stepped forward, and was received. A second daughter.

My father’s house smelled of bread, and at once I remembered everything. With this smell of bread came a centering, as if the world had begun to array itself around me, strands of meaning and anticipation fanning out from my body, the vast structure of a child’s security, a web spun purely of my father’s presence. For the rest of that day, I moved in the confines of this space. My father’s recipes returned to me, the sound of his jazz circulated. When passing by each other, we danced. That day I felt light, and life seemed simpler than it had since before Tobias had died.

There was to be a family reunion the day after tomorrow, lost uncles and cousins and some hangers-on pouring into this far-off niche where my father now found himself. In forty-eight hours, my mother and brother would be under the same roof with my father and me. The first time since Tobias’s funeral. And a scandal was afoot. My father had withdrawn a tremendous sum from the account he still shared with his wife, my mother. Most of their life savings, she had told me. Pressed, he refused to explain. Said he would only talk in person. So the reunion would end up being a stand-off, it seemed. Another step in our family’s drawn-out process of decline. But for the whole of that day none of this mattered. Until evening, which came later than it did on the South Island, we baked and ate, snipped garlic from garlands, plucked tomatoes, mowed the little square of ropey grass with children chattering and puppies at our heels.

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At some point we stopped, not out of fatigue—my father had many weaknesses, but a lack of vigour had never been among them. We simply had hacked, fried, processed, froze, or consumed every scrap of food on the premises. Tomorrow, my father said, we would go to Tologa Bay and buy more. Tomorrow we would really cook.

“But tonight,” he said, “we drink.”

Phyllis did not drink. In fact, she scorned it. While they were married, she had abused Tobias for this habit, and from what he told me she had been merciless. Phyllis had become so close to my own consciousness of late that when my father handed me a glass of red wine, I held it in my hand, perplexed. Then Phyllis took the glass he offered her and put it to her lips, and my paralysis lifted.

My father’s monologue careened and took flight, sometimes hovering in a patch of silence. Outside the horizon—whatever it was—bleached away, and the stars burnt through the daylight that had buried them. Without interrupting his stories, my father lit candles and poured more wine. He slid plates of relish and pita onto our laps. All the while, his voice held us. He spoke of my mother often, and it was obvious that his love for her was as robust as it had always been. During the four years of their separation, it even seemed as if his feelings had found purchase and through the easy work of idealisation had grown profound. He spoke adoringly of my brother Liam, with whom I knew he had had a falling out.
“What bothers me is that he’s not the least bit misguided,” my father said. “How can anyone be so young and know so much. It’s unnerving.”

Later we made our way to the beach, stood awhile in the stiff breeze. It was not until we turned again toward the house that I really saw where we were: an escarpment of forest met the stars. The dunes were blue with grass, and a crumbly ridge of graystone rode north out into the sea like a man upon a dragon. There was one light. The lit window of the villa beside my father’s place.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I’ve put this place beside many points of comparison,” my father said, “and it always holds its own.”

In the darkness of the dunes we spoke of the world, of our travels. How, in spite of the cornucopia of travel literature, there was nothing really new to say about other places. My father claimed years of wandering had only convinced him how much every place was alike, ingrained in him the commonality of the wider human family.

“But the discovery of how much is shared has also been disappointing,” he said. He turned to me now, reached out for my hands, and I offered them up. “And it isn’t round, either. This Earth, I mean, our home. It’s wider on the bottom.”

“Pear-shaped,” said Phyllis. I heard her laugh, softly. She was standing apart, and when she spoke again, she did not seem to be addressing us.

Out of nowhere, I said, “When I was a child it always seemed like what was best was waiting somewhere ahead. That’s what the future was—the better thing coming.”

“And now,” said my father. It didn’t seem like a question, and so I didn’t bother to answer.

Now and again that night the roof shuddered with the wind that fell out of the second-growth forest. Second growth was religious, it came to me. *To be born again.* As if the bounds of one life had been exceeded, the horizons expanded afresh. But there I was again with my horizons, with the illusion of possibility and Tobias scowling at me in my mind.

I did not want to break down. Not lying there in my father’s house on the brink of the trouble I knew would descend when my mother arrived. Still, I had drank three glasses of wine, and I felt I could not keep control. As this occurred to me, I felt the mattress below me sinking. In the dark, I saw Phyllis’s nightgown: bright gray, a column of lowering mist. I felt her hand on my forehead, my shoulder. She listened to the whole recitation of my grief. She knew all the names, and how every story of mine ended, and yet she listened. After I was finished, I let her tell me I would be all right. Let me comb back my hair. I took her comfort. Like a child, I drank it.

I did not say, *What about you?*
In the morning I awoke to a voice. I sat up, listened. Next door, a woman was scolding a child. I found my father in the kitchen. He told me Phyllis was already gone when he woke. After we ate breakfast my father helped me unload our things from the car. Backpacks and bags and wooden crates from which the sides could be removed. A roll of tarpaper. Canister of motor oil.

“What is this stuff?”
“For sand sculpting,” I said. “You mix oil with sand. Helps it keep its shape, apparently.”
“Sand sculpture? How long have you been at that?”
“Not me. Phyllis. She’s very good.”

We left a note for Phyllis and set off to buy supplies. Before the driveway turned under the pines, there was an enormous mailbox with two little doors on it, and standing beside it were children. A boy about eight or nine. A girl several years younger. Both barefoot, both blocking the road.

“Where you going?” the children wanted to know.
“To town for the party,” my father said.
“We’re coming,” the boy said.
“Haraia,” my father said, the tone of his voice approximating stern. I knew the tone from my own childhood. It had been no more convincing then. With Haraia and his little sister Jenny in the backseat, we drove to Tologa Bay. After my father emptied the little store of what produce it had, he said he had to drive out of town. Had a friend who had some peaches for him. A leg of goat and some spare blankets.

“How far?” Haraia said.
“Half hour, little more.”
Haraia shook his head. “No, we got to get home. Mom don’t know we’re with you.”
It was forty minutes back. The round trip would be half the day. My father started the engine and turned onto the main road. It took me a moment to understand.

“You’re not taking them back first?”
“Turn around,” Haraia said. “I told you.”
My father smiled into the rearview. A hard look on his face. “And I told you not to come with me.”
“No you didn’t.”
My father drove us out of town. Jenny started to get weepy, and I handed an apple back to her. It brightened her, and so I tried another, but the returns had diminished. As we climbed the switchbacks of a gorge, it occurred to me that the girl should have been in a car seat. On the far side of the water, she began to cry.

I said, “Don’t you think we should turn around?”
My father didn’t answer me. He took a hairpin at full speed and the back tires fishtailed. After that no one spoke. Even Jenny kept her whimpering to herself. My father’s friend’s place was twenty minutes on gravel roads. Another shack in a clearing of grass. The children and I were not introduced.

On the way back to my father’s house, I thought of my mother. Christ, I thought, she had waited too long to leave him. And now most of the savings were gone. Yes, my father could talk. Could tell you about the Earth and tie it up with the ribbon of humanity, but he could be quiet, too. Could close his ears when it suited him.
When we got home Haraia and his sister ran out of the car, but I saw from the corner of my eye that they did not climb the steps to their place. Only lingered on their side of the property line. Phyllis’s sculpting gear was gone, so I let my father unpack the car himself and headed off to find her. I saw someone walking toward me out of the shimmering distance. While I was watching this figure, I recalled a night during my affair with Tobias. This memory came from the first days while he was still living with Phyllis, and we would often meet secretly on a college campus at night.

What I remembered as I stood on the beach was waiting for Tobias under a roof and staring out across an open concourse. It was night, I recalled, and there were bright lights, the neon of vending machines through glass. The glare of a library’s large windows gone all hazy in the rain. The concourse was paved in squares of yellow stone, and they shone, golden and sharp. I remembered several figures milling about on the far side of the concourse. Now and again their voices would reach me, but I couldn’t make out a word. As I watched, one shape began moving toward me, though I was standing in the darkness and could not have been seen. I remembered the feeling in my chest as the figure neared. My eyeglasses were smeared, the rain was falling hard, and I could not see who approached, could not make out the gait or recognise the clothing.

It was Tobias. Somehow I had known this, and what I recalled as I stood on the beach was that feeling of anticipation I had experienced standing in a darkened porch on a university campus. As soon as Tobias reached me, I knew everything would be better. I had come to the campus that night in a panic, but with each step that this figure took my tensions dissolved until, when at last I could see for certain that it was Tobias, I had felt the powerful sensation of having been cleansed, of having been saved, though before that moment I had not known I was in need of saving.

The figure on the beach, I saw now, was a child. A teenager, at least. An older girl from the place next door, no one I knew. I headed back across the dry estuary. I was worried about Phyllis, but I wouldn’t let on. To worry about her would be to turn the tables on everything, to upset our equilibrium. But even as I thought that, I knew that the equilibrium was at the root of the problem. The equilibrium was, in fact, a stagnancy, and I was the only one who could change it. At the same time, I knew I had not the least intention of changing a thing.

My father was chopping potatoes when I returned. Onions and peppers fried in a pan. Once again, the smell of bread was in the air.

“Turn that off, will you?” he said. “Can you start on a pie pastry?”

I turned off the stove, crossed to the table where he sat.

“Where’s the money?”

“Not you, too.”

“She has a right to know.”

“And I’ll tell her.”

“After forcing her to see you. After forcing your fantasy of reuniting on her. If you think after all these years—”
My father dropped his knife. “What I think is my business.” He nodded over his shoulder in the direction of the villa. “Those two got a good chewing out. I heard it all.”

“It’s your fault.”

My father took up his knife. “Theme of the day, isn’t it?”

Without saying much, my father and I cooked. We baked bread and simmered goat curry. Made pies. A plastic bucket of coleslaw. Double-layered chocolate cake. After we cleaned up, we ate tuna fish from cans and set off to look for Phyllis. The sun was hidden by a band of cloud, but the sky was acid blue. Past the surf I saw acres of silver.

We walked on the hard sand in time. I knew Phyllis enjoyed her own company. She was sculpting, and we would round a dune to find her beside a sleeping beast or a humpback, mid-dive. Nonetheless, there was an urgency to my pace, and my father’s pace matched mine. There was something biological in this walking, a sudden mechanical speed that brought to mind our human meagerness. I thought of my DNA, that militant engine that ate generations of flesh, boring its way toward the open future.

A black bird, an oystercatcher, raced before us, crying out, and we began to jog, as if we meant to catch it. The cloud light shifted in platelets of gray and black, a single fissure of sun opened, and then almost immediately closed. We were winded, and I saw now that the oystercatcher was behind us. When had we overtaken it? I thought of how people said they enjoyed the music of birds. But mostly what you heard were cries of warning. Sounds of alarm passing for song.

We found Phyllis in the next bay. On hands and knees between what looked to be two mounds of sand. As we approached, we saw one mound was, in fact, the pile of her equipment, crates and spades and lengths of P. V. C. The other shape was something else, something we could not discern.

Twenty feet away, she held out her hand for us to stop. My father and I stood our ground. We watched her working. She was smoothing away the sand around the base of what we saw was a sculpture. By degrees, the features of this sculpture resolved. A base of rock—sand darkened with motor oil, I knew, but it struck me as rock nonetheless. The upper portions of its sides were encased with what looked like walls. Tapered buttresses held them in place.

When Phyllis was finished, my father and I moved beside her. From this proximity, the detail of what she had made came into view. A paved tableland. Atop it a ruin. Columns with triangular pediments.

“Looks just like the Parthenon,” my father said.

The detail defied belief. Had I not known Phyllis as well as I did, I would have refused to believe that these broken columns and the flowing expanse of steps had all been shaped from sand.
Phyllis loaded her tools into a wheelbarrow, and the surf broke along the beach. We waited together. There were still last-minutes details of cooking to be attended to back at my father’s place, and the breeze coming off the water was growing colder, but we did not move from where we stood. The sun dropped out of cloud, cast the shadows of columns at our feet. Slowly, the sea climbed the stone base of the Acropolis. It broke loose the buttresses and pulled down the sharp corners of stairs. One by one, the pediments fell.

In the twilight, we saw we were now gathered around a formless lump.

. . .

On the way back my father and I fell behind. The wind was sharpening, but he wanted to say something. He started off with an apology. By the way he ran his fingers through his hair, I could tell he was circling something else.

“It’s the money,” he said at last. “My money and your mother’s. It’s here.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ahead of us, Phyllis was already halfway across the estuary. A shape trundling in the direction of the villa’s light.

“This place, this property. Twenty acres of beach-front”, he said. “It’s mine. Ours.”

So here it was: my father’s last and grandest mistake. Something to take my mother’s breath away. If it did not kill her, she would destroy him for it. A lifetime of myopia had run its course, and she would take him for everything. No one could blame her, either. Still, my father’s misstep was so miraculous it could not help but to endear him to me. I put my arm around him then, let him lead the two of us across the dark shapes of the beach.

“You just want her to be pleased, don’t you? You think this place will bring her back.”

“Anything’s possible”, my father said. “That’s how I raised you.”

“You’ve destroyed everything once and for all, and you have no idea.”

My father laughed this response away, but I understood what had happened. Even how. Alone in this bright place of children, my father had wandered across that line that was meant to keep your fantasies separated from the rest of your thinking. Left to his own devices, instinct had drawn him toward one last, glorious catastrophe.

. . .

That night I went to Phyllis’s bed and sat beside her, as she had so often done with me. I listened to her sleeping in the dark. The rise and fall and clipped whimper of her breathing. I touched her bare collarbone, warm, but not as warm as I thought it would be. At once I understood how long she had been falling. Since before Tobias had died, since before he had met me. To hear this woman breathing in the dark and to feel her collarbone against my finger was to understand. I thought of a bird flying in a pipe. I wondered which was the way that led back, but then I saw I had this wrong. There was no way that led back.
Later, I thought of making bread. It occurred to me that I had always hated making bread. There was a frustrating repetition to it, a maddening ephemerality. My father’s perfect labor. The smell was home and its comforts. And yet it wasn’t. This was only the impression, the illusion that would last only so long as the smell hung in the air.

In the morning my father, Phyllis, and I set off across the grassy dunes to the mailbox. My father had blown up a handful of balloons, and he meant to tie them to the mailbox. A reunion was a party, after all, and he would make it festive. What happened after that was up to everyone else.

As we neared the mailbox, children from next door came out to meet us. There were Haraia and Jenny, the teenager on the beach, and two more besides. Three puppies followed them, breaking around our feet like surf. The scent of salt and pine moved past us, flowing like a current I could almost see. One moment, the children were singing. The next, they were running, all silent, the balloons now in Haraia’s fist. My father had handed them over without a word.

My father, Phyllis and I walked together. Haraia would tie the balloons for us, so there was no reason to continue on to the mailbox now, but we kept going. We turned to one another, some quiet and sly look on our faces. It didn’t seem as if we were headed to the mailbox now. There was some destination awaiting us, some secret each of us believed was waiting not too far ahead.
A Boy Called Cloud
(or In Praise of Cloud Zealots, Time-Travelers, Polyglots and Positive Labels Befriended)

In the days when my son began primary school in Auckland, New Zealand, he loved to stare at clouds floating freely above the entrapment of his classroom. At the siren of the three o’clock bell, he led me to Tahuna-Torea Nature Reserve, which was located in the eastern suburbs close to school. There a playground containing a cymbiform climbing frame afforded him expansive views across waters nearby, the Tamaki Estuary. The terns, stilts, godwits and white-faced herons schooled at water’s edge; the nautical comings-and-goings of vessels with berths at the local Half Moon Bay marina; the million dollar mansions teetering at precipice along the rocky outcrop of the neighbourhood known as Bucklands Beach; the distant pinch of the Hunua Ranges which encircle the east of Auckland: all this and more my son’s alert eyes witnessed. But it was the sky, its mimicries and metamorphoses, which captivated him most. During winter, as we made for his fraught classroom, morning tides rolled in grey fogs, magicians’ cloaks, which veiled firmament, inlet and earth. My son aloft the climbing frame disappeared. Echoing and ancient, his voice called through mist, “Mummy, I’m inside the belly of a cloud!” During spring and autumn, gales up and tides choppy, he watched the Estuary dance with cumuli humilis and dozens of Day-Glo sailboards like many excitable butterflies. At weekends, the tide out, my son used the climbing frame to hunt down dragons. The raggedy beast-smoke of altocumuli nearby told him they lived in a cave hollowed into the clay headlands below our cold, rundown in-zone rental. Most afternoons, while an impatience of children, freed from the classroom coop and sticky afternoons of studying geniuses like Van Gogh and Einstein, played tag, swung or slid about us, their parents huddled in jabber closeby, my son and I lay atop the climbing frame, stared up at families of clouds sitting in the stretched canopy of sky, and played his favorite game.

“They’re like boats,” he began. “No, birds wearing police hats. Or Christmas trees walking. Or Cloudmother holding her Cloudboy’s hand.”

In New Zealand, 40,000 people have Autism Spectrum Disorder.¹ Combining ailments like Autism, Aspergers and ADHD, people with ASD have differing combinations and differing degrees of severity of these symptoms. For all, ASD is a life-long developmental disability affecting social, communication, concentration and learning skills. Often sufferers, especially those with moderate ASD, are also Gifted and Talented Learners, their superior intelligence masking sociable and attention difficulties. Consequently, for children, growing as they are, it may take some time
before a full diagnosis of their condition is reached. This was the case for my son who, aged four, was only classified as Gifted.

What I failed to perceive in my son’s cryptography of clouds was that his fixation turned him (an axiom true of most hobbyists, fans and fixators) into something akin to that which most beguiled him. In the sentient, nephological companionship he found close to the mouth of the Tamaki Estuary, where stratus, cumulus, stratocumulus and nimostratus formed near to or in the humid air above Auckland’s central waterway, the Waitemata Harbour, and were then funnelled down river, my son became a cloud—detached from the conventional and everyday, isolated, peripheral and obscure in others’ eyes, even, in that first year of schooling, those of his teacher.

Fresh from an English education college, she reported that during her doctrinaire hour of mat-time when her small, effervescent charges were expected to sit still, arms and legs crossed, my son was possessed, St. Vitus Dance-like. At other times, she said, he ignored her instructions in favour of drifting off, his body and mind turned towards the window and the sky above.

Cloudboy, my private nickname for him, was born.

When the teacher asked Cloudboy why he didn’t listen to her instructions, he said her repetitiveness shaped his boredom. He understood, he explained, what she wanted the first time she mentioned it; everything thereafter carried him into the clouds. Consequently, during mat-time he sat at his desk occupied by a book, and only came to the mat when instructions were re-emphasised for the final time.

Within months, though, my son’s teacher was afluster again. This time, her concern centred upon Cloudboy’s self-portrait. Having lectured me about how a 5-year-old’s ability to conventionally represent himself was an educational and developmental milestone, she conjured Cloudboy’s self-portrait from her bottom drawer as though it was a difficult trick. It bore a white, puffy face and body, wings, black beady eyes, marble wisps for legs and claws instead of toes. He was, he told his teacher, a cloud. In spite of Cloudboy’s diagnosis as Gifted, the teacher viewed his explanation and self-representation as willful rejections of rules others had followed and thus potential signs of mental retardation.

“You should get him checked out again,” she chided me.

As if the air emanated the teacher’s unsettlement, students’ attitudes towards Cloudboy hardened. Play-dates and birthday-party invitations dried up. When his birthday arrived, his invitations were scrunched up in front of him or, later, declined or ignored by parents.
Then, towards the end of the school year, Cloudboy completed a project on New Zealand birds with a discourse upon the extinct, giant ratite, the Moa. These were birds his teacher (from England) was ignorant of and so dismissed as dinosaurs. When she made him repeat the exercise, derision from his peers ensued. Words like ‘strange’ and ‘weird’ rained from their mouths.

ASD children are codes waiting to be broken.

Like a cloud interpreted and reinterpreted, Cloudboy was retested a year after his identification as a Gifted and Talented Learner. This time, the Educational Psychologist expanded her diagnosis. Aspergers, ADHD and Overexcitabilities had solidified more evidently in Cloudboy. In this, he became officially categorised as “Disabled,” enabling him to receive a weekly government allowance. A course of Ritalin was prescribed to help temper his ADHD. During her reassessment of Cloudboy, the Educational Psychologist also noted his self-esteem had plummeted to a point where he believed the labels others applied to him at school. This, the Educational Psychologist worried, might reap irreparable damage if it continued.

Whatever the environment, words are electric. Positive or negative, each word carries a charge, its meaning, which attracts other words and their meanings to it. Abusive labels like “strange” attract others, equally offensive, like “weird,” “freak,” “queer” and so on. In regimented, conformist settings like schools, these stigmatic words are at their most galvanic, the single remark powerful enough to have a lasting impact. That schools’ cohorts are our most vulnerable, impressionable and intense members of society means their uber-orthodox, uber-regulated settings, where words have enduring effect, inevitably—even if not intentionally—molds divisive landscapes in which the vast majority (the conventional) belong and a minority (the unconventional) are outcasts. Such divisiveness is normalized through labeling, the use of the word and its power to archetype individuals. Once voiced, once reinforced through repeated utterances, the word—“strange,” “queer,” “freak”—is worn, a piece of clothing, a cloud cap, by their owners for the duration of their time at school.

I wish I could say that the year Cloudboy became an ardent nephologist was the year things started going badly for him at school, because then I could understand why he found conventional education troublesome, and I could originate solutions to liberate him from further ostracism. In truth, however, long before Cloudboy became a zealot of clouds, he found formal learning, self-discipline, and socializing as fraught and damaging as a stormy supercell.
When, aged two, Cloudboy attended Playcentre, there were fitful bursts of clay-making, dough-craft and dress-ups. Always friendless, he found only woodwork, a hammer, nails and searing noise sustained his attention. Those were the years when he short-circuited the electricity by sticking his fingers into a toaster, broke his clavicle falling from his bed, banged his head against bench-top and matai-floor whenever he didn’t get his way, and snatched at and sought to taste everything, including cat feces.

Later, after Cloudboy began Kindergarten, the Principal called me to a meeting about, what she called, his abnormal interaction with other children. She told me stories about how he spent days lost in various personae, including cats called Sergeant Tibbs, Tricksy and Jasper, dogs Copper and Chief, and a prosaically-named Tiger. Throughout he crawled upon all fours and answered his teachers’ questions with barks, mews, or growls.

When, where, and why did this all begin?

Did Cloudboy’s cognitive differences and social and educational difficulties form hereditarily in me, a child frozen to the edge of the playground each day at primary school because she was unable to use words or movements to reach out to friends? Did they start life in Auckland 2003 at the moment of Cloudboy’s conception? Or that warm January night in 2004 when I first dreamt Cloudboy into existence, moisture solidified into mist, a visitation of a boy and his name? Were his troubles birthed during those soulless months of his first year when, tired from four feeds per night and feeling my thirst for knowledge stifled by early motherhood, I talked voraciously to him whether I was changing his nappy or pushing him in a pram around the undulating streets of our deserted neighborhood? Or did they originate the day I took four-year-old Cloudboy to Auckland Museum where an exhibition, Wonderland: The Mystery of the Orchid, enticed him to ravenously read about the titular flowers and their importance in shaping Darwin’s theory of evolution, then open a notebook and intricately transpose the miracle of each bloom onto white paper?

Clouds. Papery orchids.

For Gifted ASD children like Cloudboy, obsessions are persistent, advanced, and, as if genera, take multiple forms. Not for them, the fixations of most children framed by age, peer interest, cultural and gender expectations, and consumer trends. Not them, the two-year-old fascinated by Handy Manny or Mickey Mouse Clubhouse who evolves into the four-year-old devoted to Little Einsteins into the six-year-old interested in Lego into the eight-year-old taken with sports.

No. At two, Cloudboy’s expandable preoccupations included Spot the Dog, Blue’s Clues, Maisie, Duplo, and books which stretched his imagination towards escapism such as Oliver Jeffers’ Lost and Found, Eric Carle’s “Slowly, Slowly, Slowly,” Said the Sloth, and David McKee’s Elmer’s New
At four, he advanced into Egyptology, deciphering hieroglyphics, their translations and meanings, learning a smattering of Sanskrit and Aeolic and Homeric Greek, and, like a character in a Jeffers story, devouring books by Herge, Goscinny, Mazarello and Wick, Tan, Seuss, Allen, and Dahl. At five, Cloudboy let clouds roll in and with them the greedy consumption of Gulliver’s Travels, Moby Dick, Black Beauty, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, and The Time Machine. Aged seven, his fixations were complemented by fervours for Einstein, Rutherford, Psychics, Mineralogy, Chess, Super Mario, Heraldry, Poetry, and teen-fiction such as The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time.

Though Cloudboy occasionally lost the thread of a passion that began years before as it burned up in his mind like a comet or dissipating cloud, each obsession was extreme, the stuff of conversation, questions, reading, and associated activities like drawing, lexicography, and computer games. Collectively they clamored for his attention, a class of students hungry for knowledge.

Bruises: a few at first; then more and more. Soon a collection of contusions flowered like scud upon Cloudboy’s back.

Asked about them, he reluctantly confessed they were inflicted by a group of popular boys in his class. At lunchtime that day, he admitted, he’d been surrounded by his tormentors, his shorts were pulled down, his shirt was lifted over his head, and then he was displayed for entertainment before a group of well-liked girls.

When I gave Cloudboy’s second year teacher the names of the culprits and witnesses, she promised an investigation. The following day, however, Cloudboy returned home to tell me he was a liar because the bullying never occurred. Tears floated in his eyes.

“It didn’t happen?” I asked, bewildered.

“It did happen.” Cloudboy’s fists were bunched as he spoke.

“Then why are you saying it didn’t?”

“Because my teacher told me that the boys I said are bullies are good boys and that I’m naughty for telling fibs about them.”

Naughty; the naughty boy; even, in his second year teacher’s misdirected attempt to use her charges’ trendy lexicon, Horrid Henry: these were the new labels which beset Cloudboy at school.

At home, an invented language, Xeplos, arrived as if from nowhere. Daily, a world of words and meanings, adjectives, nouns, tenses and verbs tumbled, like stardust, from Cloudboy’s tongue.

“Eno is ‘no’; ess is ‘yes’; ans is ‘can’; Mesas is ‘Mummy’ …”
Cloudboy brought it upon himself, his teacher and Deputy Principal suggested. There was no evidence of bullying, they said. The children Cloudboy complained of were good children from good homes; it was, these kids said, Cloudboy who was the aggressor. Two conflicting stories.

“Who knows which one is true?” the teacher ruminated.

I reminded the teacher and Deputy Principal that Cloudboy was disabled and consequently ill-equipped to understand social interaction or take appropriate action to end harm done to him. But they were more concerned by his continued cloud-watching and the recent, noticeable elevation in the extent and intensity of his Overexcitabilities.

“He’s becoming almost unmanageable,” the Deputy Principal concluded.

The intricate tapestry of life-affirming stories spun out across the centuries and space like so many molecules, all duplication, interconnection and twist. The elevenfold metamorphic manifestations. The fragile companionships with outsiders like Susan Foreman, Jamie McCrimmon, Leela, Peri, Rose, and Amy Pond. The intrusions into the lives of creative eccentrics such as Van Gogh, Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, and Marilyn Monroe.

Another obsession, Doctor Who, landed in Cloudboy’s world. He took to sporting a long, rainbow scarf and floppy, wide-brimmed hat, wore a watch on the underside of his wrist, built an electronic screwdriver from cardboard, and consumed legends about the Doctor’s macrocosm and trickery of time and space.

As labels replaced Cloudboy’s real personality with their composite illusion of him, sweets secreted in the teacher’s desk, shoes safe in students’ backpacks and stationery kept in a classroom cupboard marked “Private” disappeared.

The teacher immediately interrogated Cloudboy, threatening him with evidence of his pilfering taken from non-existent, closed-circuit cameras. When he didn’t buckle, the teacher’s belief that he was an innate liar was reinforced and her punishment of him escalated. Thereafter, whenever he failed to complete his work, listen, or follow instructions, he was sent to another class where he sat at a desk facing the wall. Though this enabled the labels used against Cloudboy to spread, a contagion, throughout the school, it didn’t remedy his behavior. So the teacher circled a small area of the classroom floor with white rope. She labeled it “The naughty circle,” then ordered him to sit in it during mat-time, morning tea, and lunch.

My complaints to the teacher about this draconian punishment elicited no response. The next day, and the next, Cloudboy remained in rope. By then I was issuing distraught emails and phone-calls to the Principal. Eventually the Deputy Principal replied declaring that the rope was a temporary measure brought about by Cloudboy’s poor choices and inattention. The matter was so trivial I was told to return to the teacher and debate it with her. When I did so, the teacher glared.
at me and said, “I don’t have to defend my actions to you. In future, if you want to discuss your son or his behavior speak to the Principal, not me.”

The next morning, the white rope vaporized.

During the last week of the school year, a girl in Cloudboy’s class apologized to classmates for her thieving, her swag discovered by her parents beneath her bed. As punishment, she spent a lunchtime sitting outside the Principal’s office.

Later that week, as Cloudboy and I walked to Tahuna-Torea, one of the teacher’s good boys ran passed us. He thumped Cloudboy’s back. When the boy turned and sneered, he found me staring at him. His face froze. He ran away. The following lunchtime, he sat outside the Principal’s office.

Portals: I see now this is what nephology, Doctor Who, and Xeplos offered Cloudboy. In companioning clouds, Time Lords, and an invented language, his famished imagination was sated with codes, identities and idioms. Wormholes, his obsessions, were gaps in time through which he traveled to the ancient, present, and future as his brain and tongue ordained. So unlike the limited realm of the label where binary opposition (good-bad) prevailed, each fixation reflected back at Cloudboy worlds where inventiveness, vividness and complexity, all those attributes of his mind, were valued and vindicated. The topography of clouds, the Time Lord’s visits to Apalapucia or Raxacoricofallapatoruis, and the dictionary of alien words like clivvagh and saafagh made him less a constrained audience member of reality than a protagonist in fantastic soap-operas whose plots proposed the possibility of manifold states of being and of alternate dimensions held in perfect, beautiful equilibrium.¹²

Polyglot. Doublespeak.

At the start of Cloudboy’s third year at school, I turned to New Zealand’s Ministry of Education for help. Their Special Education Team outlined the wide-ranging assistance provided to children with severe ASD, behavioral problems, or learning difficulties.

Was my son harming himself, his teacher, or other children?
No.
Was he damaging school property?
No.
Was his behavior resulting in academic failure?
No.

Then Cloudboy didn’t qualify for assistance. I countered with his disability and his receipt of Disability Allowance. Unmoved, the Special Education Team sent me Nurturing Gifted and Talented Children: A Parent-Teacher Partnership.¹³
Rich in photographs depicting smiling children, parents, and educators problem-solving, this 168-page document offered a Ministerial introduction which declared “we can help our most talented students to maximise their potential by providing appropriate support and guidance,” outlined the multiple learning and support options available to Gifted and Talented Learners, and highlighted the importance of the National Administrative Guidelines (NAG)1 (iii) c (2005) in requiring teachers to identify Gifted students so that their needs could be provided for.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, it cited numerous publications, online resources, and policy directives issued by the Ministry in the last fifteen years, including \textit{Te Whariki} which advised educators to give children an “opportunity to create and act on their own ideas, to develop knowledge and skills in areas that interest them”\textsuperscript{15} and \textit{Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools} which discussed how to “support schools and teachers in assisting Gifted and Talented students to reach their full potential academically, emotionally, and socially... in response to the growing awareness that many of our Gifted and Talented students go unrecognised, and that those who are identified often do not take part in an educational programme appropriate to their needs.”\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, \textit{Initiatives for Gifted and Talented Learners} listed a raft of support workers available to assist Gifted and Talented Learners, including Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB), and teacher aides. Finally I discovered \textit{Te Kete Ipurangi, The Ministry’s Online Learning Centre}, a website of resources for Gifted and Talented Learners.

The more I read, the more concerned I became. All these statements of intent. All these documents and directives issued across two decades of space and time. Yet the only concrete policy I encountered was one the Ministry called ‘Differentation’:

“Differentation involves providing learning experiences to suit the needs of each individual student within an environment that accepts diversity. Differentation does not just apply to developing cognitive abilities but also to the development of qualities, culturally valued abilities, skills, learning dispositions, self-esteem, perseverance, creativity and risk taking.

In practice, differentiation affects:
* content;
* processes;
* products of learning;
* environment;

Differentiation can occur in the centre of classroom, in the wider school environment, or in the community.

Teaching gifted students using this approach might involve enrichment (depth and breadth) or acceleration (a faster pace of presenting the material, or covering content in less time than normal, or introducing advanced concepts earlier)”\textsuperscript{17}.

When I read this out to the Deputy Principal, she said the school already embraced diversity, enrichment and acceleration through such initiatives as student-led units of inquiry. I pointed out that ‘Differentation’ targeted Gifted and Talented students like Cloudboy, especially those with ASD whose focus would be helped by varying the pattern of their learning, At this the Deputy Principal scoffed that such a policy was impractical for my son because he lacked the
maturity to self-direct his learning and so would require extra monitoring by his teacher, which would draw her attention away from the other 30 students in her class.

“Could he have a teacher aide or RTLB worker?” I enquired.

“No,” she responded. “Funding for both is restricted to those with dyslexia, dyspraxia and severe learning difficulties.”

“But what about all the directives outlined in this document?” I asked.

“Just recommendations,” the Deputy Principal smiled. “There’s no obligation for schools to introduce these policies.”


If words, positively or negatively used, are acts of association, entities forming relationships in the same way an outcast child befriends the clouds, the policies of discipline forced upon Cloudboy (white rope, a desk in another class) were secretly joined by another. Devised by the Deputy Principal, this new policy involved the issuing of a red-card every time my son cloud-watched, disrupted class or was complained of by another child. A red-card resulted in instant expulsion from the classroom. Soon Cloudboy was being expelled seven times a day. Sent to the Deputy Principal’s office, he was made to write 100 times: I will not be naughty again. As an ASD child with ADHD and poor motor-skills, his slow, untidy handwriting meant he always failed to complete this punishment within the allotted time, and so was made to finish it during lunchtime. Failure to complete 100 lines by the end of lunch led to an additional 100 lines.

I will not be naughty again.
I will not be naughty again.
I will not be naughty again.
I will not be naughty again.


I will not be naughty again.

When I castigated the Principal, Deputy Principal and Cloudboy’s third year teacher for the secretive, arbitrary introduction of the red-card and 100 lines, the headmistress summoned me to a meeting. There, her deputy besides her, the Principal lectured me about how such policies were introduced to stop Cloudboy from disrupting others’ education and to force him to conform. Of course, she added, school was aware of Cloudboy’s issues and had spent three years devising solutions to correct these. But, she declared, school’s solutions had failed because, through his willfulness, unwillingness to listen or learn, and cloud-watching, Cloudboy had deliberately obstructed them. The matter at hand was one of choice: his choice to be the way he was; his choice to disturb others. If only he chose to behave, then everything would be alright. Of course, she continued, there was another problem, and that problem was me. My son, she scolded, was willful and inattentive because I indulged him. If I supported instead of disagreed with school’s disciplining of him, school would be able to end his disruptive behavior once and for all.
My son was the problem.  
I was the problem.  

Again I searched for solutions. I turned to the New Zealand Association of Gifted Children’s online forum “Parenting” where parents of Gifted and Talented Learners, ASD or otherwise, shared stories with and sought advice from each other. Here I expected to find innumerable, inspirational, tear-jerking examples of the ways in which the education system was meeting the needs of such kids, all of which would illustrate where I’d gone wrong.  

What I found was tear-jerking indeed.  

“We held our breath for the start of the new school year,” authored by Dinglemouse, for example, told of the deep anxiety, frustration, and perplexity the author, a mother of a Gifted ASD thirteen-year-old felt after her son’s teacher labeled him a failure, and how in spite of his diagnosis by an Education Psychologist and the recommendation that “Differentation” be introduced to meet his needs, the school sidelined this qualified report as “only one piece of the data” and chose instead to institute policies which removed him from class whenever he was deemed disruptive. When Dinglemouse’s son was bullied and the teacher used the label ‘Gifted’ to belittle him, his parents’ advocacy of him was met with teacherly gibes that they were being “pushy.” There were over twenty responses to this story, all narrating similar experiences.  

In “the right thing to do” by Meand3, a school branded a Gifted ASD child’s behavior a “problem” and drew up solutions which sought “exclusion from school.” Meanwhile, the widespread negative labeling of and consequent disengagement from learning by Gifted ASD children and schools’ oppressive responses were voiced in posts like “5 year old disruptive in class” by Char, “11 year old behaviour issues” by Joanna, and “Daughter Lost Motivation” by Ruby.  

Huge, icy tears fell like hailstones as I read and reread these and other stories. Throughout, a deeper glassiness sat in my heart, making me both mother of a Gifted ASD child and refracted other, the parent present in all these stinging tales.  

In total, there were 5,000 parallel narratives. They composed a pattern, a weather system, climactic, ongoing and inescapable, of Gifted ASD children stigmatized and isolated by schools across New Zealand.  

That summer, I became a nephologist, Cloudmother to Cloudboy.  

My transformation occurred a few days after I enrolled Cloudboy in a new school. He and I bathed and fossicked at Karaka Bay at the mouth of the Tamaki Estuary close to Tahuna-Torea. In the blue sky above us, two cumuli nestled next to each other. Seeing them, their proximity and isolation in the firmament, I was visited by an inner certainty that they were looking down at us. Previously, whenever I had cloud-watched with Cloudboy, I had viewed his behavior as a game, unique like his persona, but childish and invented nevertheless. But that warm day at Karaka Bay, I realized the two clouds observing my child and I were living evidence of what Cloudboy saw each
time he peered up at the heavens in search of meaning, symbol, and cipher. Looking at the sky and everything in and below it afresh, I knew Cloudboy would be alright because he had me at his side to watch over and protect him, and I had him at my side to teach me the special insights and perspectives he carried inside him. I knew then, too, that, freed from white rope and 100 lines, Cloudboy would attend his new school and, there, he’d resurrect himself—time-traveler, cloud-drifter—and find welcome and belonging; and the years ahead, though far from conventional, would offer a far more peaceful advance than those which had gone before.

NOTES

1. Number provided by Autism New Zealand: http://www.autismnz.org.nz/about_autism
2. Polish psychiatrist and psychologists Dabrowski first diagnosed the concept of Overexcitabilities in Gifted individuals. He observed that overexcitabilities appear in five forms – a surplus of energy; a heightened sensory awareness; advanced learning problem solving; vivid imagination; creative and inventive imagination. Piechowski, who worked with Dabrowski, explains Overexcitabilities as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy. Overexcitabilities are believed to be an innate predisposition to respond more intensely to life’s stimuli;
4. Eric Carle’s “Slowly, Slowly, Slowly,” said the Sloth, Puffin, 2002;
5. David McKee’s Elmer’s New Friend, Andersen, 2002;
8. Anna Sewell, Black Beauty, Children’s Classics, 1994;
9. Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Vintage Children’s Classics, 2012;
12. Xeplos dictionary translations: clivvagh trans.: cloud; saafagh trans.: boy;
18. Dinglemouse “We hold our breaths for the start of the new school year” http://www.giftedchildren.org.nz/forum/read.php?f=7&i=5482&t=5482
19. ibid;
20. Meand3 “the right thing to do”
21. “5 year old disruptive in class” by Char
22. “11 year old behaviour issues” by Joanna
23. “Daughter Lost Motivation” by Ruby
Sarah Jane Barnett

Rescue Story

Two men stand in a bush clearing, one in a bright orange cycling vest. His whistle swings on a red string—a divining rod. The other tilts his face to the gash of blue through the dominant and co-dominant trees of the canopy, which he also knows as the overstory.

His skin pulls tight across his jaw. They should have called the authorities. There's three hours until sunset, says the older man—her father—who drops to his haunches to rub the cold campfire ash to a smear between two soft fingers. He sighs and looks around. He is an accountant and his lover a barrister, and they'd been too long—too achingly selfish, and now the trees are starting to darken.

They beat through the layers of wet undergrowth with old ski poles, looking for the outline of his daughter’s tiny boots. We move with them, with desire for an ending, but they cannot see the sun, and whether it will set this way or that, and the younger man's cellphone reception has dropped to one bar, but the car park is that way—right—behind—right?
Lamb

The wool is as soft as a girl's hair. The teeth scaled white. The mouth open to welcome visitors. That morning he'd carved the mannequin to shape: a rounded barrel with legs curled under its breast, the head like an oil can. The gentle lamb at rest. Without familiar sheep features—the heart nose and velvet spoon ears, the quiet watery eyes—it could be anything. A shetland pony or a donkey. He pulls its dark fleece from the bath with two long tongs and starts to scrape away the fat. The sun streams through the high window of his workshop, heavy with smoke and tanning chemicals. He begins to shape the skin. With every animal he tries to help it become its best. He polishes until he sees himself in their eyes. It's all about how you sew the mouth shut, his father used to say. The animal must look like it's smiling.
Statues

The petite Grecian woman bent over the well is to stand beside the front door; the matching Grecian man sits opposite; a gift from her husband.
I don't like him: he is badly cast and his white pockmarked hands pour a bucket of nothing into nowhere.
Perhaps from a distance the pair seem graceful.

I imagine water, and the woman watching continents of clouds slide across the well's surface. The man, if he were kind, would look to the curve of his wife's back, see her hand's small efforts, before hauling his own bucket to the fields where only that morning he'd planted radishes, and carefully soak the tilled earth to black.

For their sake, I hope they are labouring in the mild evening, out of the heat of the day, that they're able to talk of family business in a language that only the two of them know.

Is this what my neighbour sees from her kitchen window? A man and a woman, their deep comings and goings. Or does she see two figures frozen in a moment of emptying and emptying?
The divorce decree arrives a day before Valentine’s, a stamp from the court signed and dated, thick, exhausted sheaf of absolution from your mask and dreams. How well I know those dreams in which you slice me open, how well everything’s now gone cordial, like a nauseating sweet drink, how well you made clear your preference for control of me over love, but we never talked about it, never truly talking. In the silence of the moment after I open the envelope from the court, I need to remind myself of the disaster we were, a highway pileup, how I’m wary of cuts from any papers associated with you because there are always two versions of why we came not to want one another any more. Because so many of us lie for a living, how I needed to repeat for years that I didn’t want you, until I believed it.
Still Life with Failed Marriage

I lied, promised I would learn to drive stick, which you couldn’t do—otherwise, you wouldn’t fly to Oslo with me. When the green VW Bug stalled, then stalled again at the airport car rental lot with the likes of me at the stick, I cajoled you, shamelessly, into trying to drive it, then lied and promised I would love you forever. I got away with all of it because lying was habit, the sex was good, and you wanted to believe me, though you already suspected I couldn’t possibly mean it. You hadn’t yet fully learned how unreliable cars and women could be. Together, we marveled at fjords, read pamphlets on ice flow, skerries, visited medieval post and lintel wooden churches before that neo-Nazi rock musician started arsoning them down.

You wrestled that damn little car north because I dreamed of seeing reindeer, because you still wanted to please me. I lied and promised this was the best vacation ever, that when we got home, I would finally quiet down. Though I never did learn to drive stick, I did figure out that, for me, going smoothly was the tricky part. It didn’t require as much skill to come to a safe stop: just depress the clutch, firmly hit the brake.
Sean Howard

shadowgraph 133: avalanche and drift

(poetry detected in Georges Charpak’s Nobel physics lecture, 1992)

‘the appeal of science?’ at will, starting & stopping the avalanche; ‘fine art’ in the chambers; after dachau, my need for total absorption. (long & winding: ‘milestones in the building…’) the wired west. (dissolving; electronic souls…) angel-wings nite. (variety whores.) something still missing? day after day, ‘ anxiously scanning the lists…’ minors trapped above ground. (modernity: memory loss/the great gain?) ‘objective,’ yes; but what lies beneath! ‘postwar transformation,’ looking in through the wire! ‘up close,’ the drift in fact… the useful suspects. saturation

comedy. ‘abyss’: the grand canon… exams – old hands. (the dead ringers.) the nazis efficiently eliminating themselves! (the yugoslavian atom.) panhandle; change in the grail… guernica – the reduction of space to planes. scenes on the journey ‘from magic to science’: lab, make-up counters; spell check – ‘a slice of rat’s kidney, tritium-dipped…’; men, computers repressing their memory; too late! – ‘demonstrations in the chambers…’
library cards
(taken from Cape Breton University)

**i. analysis of kinetic data**

- mean
- times. dead

- space? figures approaching the square… (the check-
  ed void.) framed;
- freedom’s de-

- gree

**ii. biostatistics**

- lab
- brats. (brains

- on a tray…) the colonial university. fr-

- ozen hearts;
- raw da-

- ta

**iii. a field guide to the butterflies**

- two minds; prose, the und-
  ersided. (sad sprawl, mo-

- dern blues, sky look-
  ing for the field…)

- characteristic
- compound

- eyes

**iv. an introduction to social psychology**

- my thoughts? watching the trains from the window…(end

- result? the same old sane
- old!) model patient;

- superintend-
  ing my

- self
endpaper epigrams

(graffiti from a cultural nervous breakdown)

history’s
hard drive…

*

the
dot
age

*

capital appreciating
the world?

*

(dick
traces)

*

war –
mug
shot…
Barbara Maloutas

Theory

So I bring them lunch, the three of them. They are not men, just boys. It’s kind of a picnic lunch at their place. One of them looks like a man with smooth golden skin and tattoos in another language running off his shoulder and muscles in that upper arm area with dark hair under his arms. I’m supposed to be like his second mother, but his arms make me think that I’m not his mother. He lisps. His lisp is perfect. It makes me come back from the edge, the edge that he makes for me.

So the boys eat in a rush because ants will find the food sooner than later. As soon as we finish I pack the leftovers in the refrigerator and leave them the paper plates and forks and knives since they don’t have any forks and knives or real plates. It’s like a bachelor pad, and I’m welcome because I’m the mother. Although one of the three is my son, I try not to act like a mother. I stay until late. Later my son talks to the girl we wish he’d married, but I don’t say anything, or I won’t say anything because he might get spooked. So he talks softly and keeps saying I thought you’d be asleep because it’s so late where you are. She’s way back where he doesn’t want to live.

The boy who lisps is always very business-like. He likes to talk about business and makes me think he could make a lot of money until he speaks, and then I think it’s all theory for him and he’s all theory for me. So in a way that’s how I get out of it. Like an artist I heard talk this week that said what she tries to do is make things that are not really her taste. Somehow I realize that he is not my taste although he really is.
Crossing

It’s night and I’m driving west from downtown. There’s a guy in the crosswalk that rolls on a deep shoe at the end of his short leg as if there were no difference in the length of his legs. It looks heavy. And white. Like he could knock someone out with it or toss it in a game. If I didn’t look at his deep foot and just looked at his shoulders, I wouldn’t know he had a short leg.

When my son was a baby I thought he might have that problem. I was playing with him on the bed. I was playing with the baby’s legs. I’d pull them down by his heels and they’d boing right back like babies’ legs do. Somehow he didn’t seem perfect. Right away, I thought it was my fault and didn’t say a word but rushed to a doctor. As a man was the baby going to have to wear one of those big deep shoes that never match the other shoe? It was a good question. Even my neighbor couldn’t answer, but I asked her anyway so I could hear her say, “Don’t worry. Don’t be silly.”
The Mother of the Baby Reading

The baby is a little under six months old, so he is not the one reading.
His head is large and his eyes blue. He does not look like her baby, but he
finds what he wants only in her, so I must be wrong.
To help calm him he can be rocked in his little seat. The grandfather does
that mostly. He does it super-fast with no fear that the baby may fly out of the seat.
He is buckled in. The grandfather is talking to a young woman beside him as the
baby is furiously rocked. I want to pick him up, but he is quiet so there is
no reason to.
When the mother starts reading he starts fussing, and she is reading that her
father is off snorkeling with a new girlfriend. Or if she didn’t read that then, I read
it in her book later at home, but this is not important.
She nursed the baby behind a jacket just before she started reading, so
hunger is not an issue. She is pretty much bursting out of that red dress for him. A
friend of hers takes the baby in her arms and walks him to another room as the
mother continues to read her poems.
He is a stiff little baby. He doesn’t lean in to the bodies of those who try to
comfort him.
How Nubs

How far can a mother go? I remember vividly. The photographic image is vivid and tasty. A male child with light curls stands in a diaper on the heating grate between dining room studio and living room bedroom. He has a large paintbrush in his hands, ready to suck on the brush at the top. Red stemmed, it extends from his mouth to below his naval. He’s grasping it with both hands. It is not a house painter’s brush, but an artist’s brush. I remember vividly because it is a photograph. It was one from that age. I don’t know where it is now. It is part of a series of children stopped cold. Children are always moving. There is no way to keep them in memory. I was happy that we didn’t have more than one bedroom; that one, kept for children. My husband and I slept on a home-crafted bed-to-couch of wood and foam of a Scandinavian design. We upholstered it ourselves. The fabric was textured with exquisite nubs laid in stripes of orange and white and brown. Men do travel to other cities, less tied to house and home. Was there ever a periodical called House & Home? In any case, I never subscribed to it.
On Not Visiting a Friend

Although I thought I would have the chance to visit my old friend this weekend, I decided not to, or I decided not to walk the ten blocks to her house and not to see her little baby, Ruby, who must be beautiful with a name like Ruby. I’m not quite sure why I decided not to visit her and her baby. It really wasn’t the walk although I haven’t gotten back into my walking routine and I can see the weather is perfect through the front screen door. I’m dozing on the couch and reading a book I purchased today but didn’t purchase before when I was browsing in one of the few independent bookstores around town that has since closed. That’s where I first saw it, and I’m sorry I didn’t pick it up there, although one book does not break a bookstore. The book is interviews and essays on a writer who died too soon in a car crash, although dying may be always too soon. It is soothing reading and easy to doze between paragraphs. When I doze in front of a TV I might miss something important, not important for me but important for a story. It is not a sleepwalking kind of media unless it’s late at night and I’ve already seen the re-run many times even if this time it’s in Spanish. With reading I can pick up a line of thought between times when I’m dozing on a couch. I don’t have to be constantly alert. A mutual friend says that if I hold Ruby I will have to hold on tight and stay constantly alert since she moves around a lot. Babies have few memories. Babies have few things that they are afraid to hold on to. The people the writer writes about are afraid of memories, of their participation in their memories. I remember well the bookstore that is now closed, and I will miss its choo-choo train of rooms around an open courtyard out there under palm trees and other shrubs, in the open sun.
The triumph of poetry, said Wallace Stevens, is to obscure and reveal the heart of things almost successfully.

The pity of Bubba, her cousin, says Amanda, is that the heart of things is withheld from him.

The triumph.

The pity.
Haunts of the Collective Subconscious

Selves disguised as common persons,
alone in their heads, fully eroticized,
bearing documents and bargains,
advance through the foreground,

facets of actuality glinting in the available light,

into their own distances,
peering out of the quotidian
as if things intelligible have been decided,
some whose stories are suspect,

present fading into past seeping into present,

whose alter egos lack courage,
some who cannot keep the possible waiting,
some who squint at the their discontents,
inventing perversions, wrong to others,

everything being implicated with everything.
Hello, Freud

Among the charges to the neurons, they say,
is the perpetual attendance upon memory,
the quantity and quality of its data —
intaking,
evaluating,
assigning,
enhancing,
revising,
comparing,
alerting the network as appropriate.

This must be devitalizing.

Dreaming, then, may be their recreation.
John Henry Allenby

I forget.
I may have conversed with metropolitan men,
with aborigines who ate missionaries in 1956,
with a tailor’s dummy facing the moon.
I may have consulted eye-witness accounts
or traveled immense distances on a schooner.

Such rumors among the nomads, the refugees!
What psychodramas in Cairo’s alleys!

The trees are reviving
where the British bombed the Burmese plains.

How time equivocates in its convictions.

I believe I have said, I must have said,
the great thing is to configure a portable world,
a gestalt without eccentric localisms,
valid in Florence or Calcutta.

In Berlin in 1919, Anita Berger danced the coitus.

I see an image of myself
in a mural of the Buddhist hell.

History and myth must not be confused.

How contrary, thus, one might declare,
is Montaigne in his reclusive tower,
is Petrarch in solitude at Vaucluse,
is Beckett, secluded, manic at the cottage by Ussy.

As if one did not already,
in the I Ching, in the Etruscan tombs,
in the crevices of modernity,
feel the dark agendas of the mind.

So are some faces metaphysically bruised.

Still, I am street smart in Babylon.
Or Comes a Knowing Sensual as Blood

They brought her into the studio,
the ancient diva,

given Earth, given the probabilities,

hobbling on a cane with a curved handle,
giggling, rolling her eyes,

eroticized by the sun and the moon,

seated her in an armchair with a high back,
trained the lights and the cinecameras on her,

mortal candors obscurely stirring,

and turned on her recording of Vise d’Arte
from her prime,

fables of grandeur loitering in the DNA.
Dear Wife

In the morning there’s an ocean here
that hasn’t yet mattered much
to me
dories
buoyant on the convex sky
and certain dories too filled
with rigging & fishy evangelism
Typically there is tea growing legs in a jar
on my table
under a sun
which matters in a way
art can
to even those
who fortify against it
There is a potted Aji
that I have never watered
outside my door
where a neighbor’s hound
marks the distance between us
my oratory banging
or filtering
through the laurel fence
that pickets the width
of this dusty yard
Withdrawal

For there is unlimited reward in withdrawal
    I have learned to nod
    and in such

am done expertly adjudicating between $x$ and $y$
    Let starling and earthworm
    earwig and coreopsis

negotiate their own backyard détente
    Let each cicada imagine
    this its year of welcomed return

Weeds shall cause me no consternation
    The immutable is dumb
    What is worthwhile follows

and defies the arrogance of opinion
    I shall neither pronounce
    the rye grass defunct

nor
    the creeping Charlie
    without requisite mercy
Revival

And even through this
the ongoing
tumult
and keen urban
choir:
Morse Ave
past curfew
blocks beyond the El
North Water Market
Jewel
the Charles Variety
In Spanglish
Assyrian
in pidgin
and gargled patois
in default English
under subsidy light
and a capella moon
crooned to
panhandled
assayed
let by
or stuck up
sold as if to Bedouins
one shekel at a time
Even through this:
linden
and flowering dogwood
trellised yards
window jars
Napa
& Chinese broccoli
a sower’s revival
running
Greenleaf
from East Jonquil to Juneway
And in our alley
the usual pigeons
& tonight
a masked raccoon
stalking
where one is
yes
so customarily
stalked
Yeah, you are obsessed: with your
yellowish skin, you are forever lost in your
meditation within the shape of
a wishbone, inside the broken wing
of an oriental bird strayed, or
in a larger sense, you look like
the surfacing tail of a pacific whale
who yells low, but whose voice reaches afar
far beyond a whole continent, to a remote village
near the yellow river, where you used to sunbathe
rice stems, reed leaves, cotton skeletons
with a fork made of a single horn-shaped twig
before you fled the village, tightly yoked
with the imbalance between yin and yang
on the other side of this new world
Sarah Jane Barnett

Sarah Jane Barnett is a writer, tutor, and book reviewer who lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Her first collection of poems, A Man Runs into a Woman, was published by Hue & Cry Press in 2012 and was a finalist in the 2013 New Zealand Post Book Awards. Her work has appeared in various publications including Sport, Landfall, Best New Zealand Poems, JAMM, Trout, and Southerly (Aus). Sarah is currently completing a creative Ph.D. in the field of ecopoetics at Massey University, New Zealand.

About the Work

These poems are part of my doctoral thesis, which looks at how we imagine (and write) about the non-human world. I'm interested in how poets use the non-human world in their poems as symbols for human concerns, so that is what the work stemmed from. The hardest part in writing these poems was to avoid becoming polemic. I wanted them to highlight the way we internalize stories about the non-human world, for example nature as something to be saved, or nature as wilderness, and how that changes the way we interact with the natural world. I resolved the challenges I had with these poems through a feedback process with my doctoral supervisors and through dogged revision. While not everyone has a supervisor at her disposal, I think the process of feedback from other writers is essential in growing as a writer.

I am not sure that I can sum up what the craft of poetry is for me. It certainly has to do with making language spark and feel like it's new. I want my poems to make readers confront something in themselves. I want them to surprise me with what language can do. While writing is a solitary activity, poetry is always in dialogue with poets and poetry that has come before or poetry that is happening right now. In this sense I want the poems to be in dialogue with (to respond to or bounce off of) the work of other poets working today.

Sarah Jane Barnett on the Web

theredroom.org/

hucandcry.org.nz/index.html
Dick Bentley

Dick Bentley's books, Post-Freudian Dreaming and A General Theory of Desire, are available on Amazon and at Powell's. He has published more than 200 works of fiction and poetry in the U.S., the U.K., France, Canada, and Brazil. He taught at the University of Massachusetts and has served on the Board of the Modern Poetry Association (now called the Poetry Foundation). He won the Paris Review/Paris Writers Workshop International Fiction Award for his story “Crawl Space,” and his short story "Promised Land" was selected for Best Fiction & Nonfiction of 2012 in the C.E. Lukather and Paul Garson anthology. His third book, All Rise, is due out in early 2014.

Dick Bentley on the Web

www.dickbentley.com

www.facebook.com/BooksbyDickBentley
Susana Case

Susana H. Case is a Professor and Program Coordinator at the New York Institute of Technology. Her photos have appeared in Blue Hour Magazine, pacificREVIEW, and San Pedro River Review, among others. She is the author of several chapbooks. Her Slapering Hol Press chapbook, The Scottish Café, was published in a dual-language version, Kawiarnia Szkocka, by Poland’s Opole University Press. She authored the books, Salem In Séance (WordTech Editions), Elvis Presley’s Hips & Mick Jagger’s Lips (Anaphora Literary Press), and Earth and Below (Anaphora Literary Press). 4 Rms w Vu is forthcoming from Mayapple Press in 2014.

About the Work

Although I also enjoy writing poetry based upon historical documents, I also mine my own life for material. In a way, the two poems published in Segue fall into a confessional mode. But, ultimately the poems are not detailed logs of real life. A lot of change may take place in the service of the poem, and some aspects of life may need to be written about in a masked way, simply because yes, I am a writer, but I am also a private person. The challenge involves taking biography, but transforming it into art.

“Still Live with Failed Marriage,” for example, is a poem that was generated from the memory of a vacation taken during my first marriage. It was a contentious relationship and though I had the yen to travel, my then-husband didn’t. The agreement that I would learn to drive a stick shift was real, and my failure at learning to do so was also real, but from there, imagination took over.

One thing I was trying to do in this poem is to look at the marriage from my ex-husband’s point of view. I hadn’t done that so much before in the poems that I had written about the relationship. I also wanted to play with the extended metaphor of the car as a representation of the marriage.

“Post-romantic” was another attempt to acknowledge differing points of view. Basically, I started to play with that in these two poems because I was tired of writing solely from my own point of view of the former marriage. My divorce decree really did arrive right before Valentine’s Day. I thought, well, that had to be made useful in some manner.

Susana Case on the Web

iris.nyit.edu/~shcase/PoetrySet.html

www.cortlandreview.com/issue/58/case.php

terrain.org/2013/poetry/one-poem-by-susana-h-case/

dialogist.org/v1i2-susanahcase/

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc3nxuWCLJs
Thom Conroy


About the Work

The short story “Passing for Song” is grounded in the rural seascape of the East Coast district of New Zealand, and it belongs to an unfinished collection of linked short fiction about a group of New Zealanders who, for various reasons, are experiencing displacement, alienation, or emotional disconnect. As it always the case, the story is closely tied to my own experience as a New Zealand immigrant forming relationships with a new country and culture. The unfinished collection is currently on hold as I complete a historical novel, The Naturalist (due to be published with Random House in 2014), which is also closely tied my own emotional experience as an immigrant in a new culture. Some people have asked how a historical novel can be personal, but I think any work of fiction represents a configuration of our interests in some way, and is, therefore, always a priori personal.

Initially, I often conceive of narratives not in strictly linear terms—that is, first this happened and then that happened—but in spatial terms which, by the necessity of grammar, must become linear in telling. I tend to approach early drafts, then, as one might imagine beginning to assemble a mosaic. I start with the colorful and separate bits and arrange them, put one beside the other to gauge its possible effect. A central contrast or “arrangement” in “Passing for Song” is one that emerges from placing the somewhat fraught—possibly even self-absorbed—emotions of a character beside the insensate beauty of the natural world.

Toward the end of “Passing for Song” the narrator and her father are walking on a desolate beach: “The sun was hidden by a band of cloud, but the sky was acid blue. Past the surf I saw acres of silver.” The stark and impersonal glimpse of beauty immediately returns the narrator to the biological reality of her own existence, and this thought allows her to reflect on a perspective that contrasts with her own somewhat indulgent emotional experience: “There was something biological in this walking, a sudden mechanical speed that brought to mind our human meagerness. I thought of my DNA, that militant engine that ate generations of flesh, boring its way toward the open future.”

“Passing for Song” is about grief, but it’s also about living one’s grief in a world that is largely oblivious to us. We mourn or laugh, and the sun rises. We dance or fret, and the sun sets. The reality of human experience is that it is always endured or enjoyed in a specific, utterly indifferent, and often shockingly beautiful landscape. I think recognizing this fact can lead us to a kind of consolation and healing, and I think this largely happens for the protagonist in “Passing for Song”. What interests me as a writer in “Passing for Song” is how this thematic knowledge arose out the conception of writing as a kind of linguistic mosaicing.
Another lesson I’ve learned from writing fiction for a number of years now is something I’ll call the mutability of experience. “Passing for Song” serves as a useful example of this aspect of composition. As I mentioned above, the central emotion of the story is grief over the passing of a loved one. While I was not recovering from the grief of loved one while writing the story, the emotional center nonetheless belongs entirely to my experience as an immigrant in New Zealand. I have always identified the alienation of living on the other side of the globe from your home with grief, and here the core feeling has simply been mutated to adapt to the fictional situation. While the name of the emotion has changed, the emotional urgency has not.

Another issue related to the mutability of experience in fiction composition is that of writing from the point-of-view of another gender. The protagonist of “Passing for Song” is a woman, and sometimes people ask if I find it challenging to write from the point of view of another gender. While there are complications involving in stepping outside of your gender, I think that these complications are intrinsic to the mutability of experience in fiction composition. The short story writer Andre Debus once said that “the jump from one heart to another is of equal distance whether from man to man or man to woman.” While I think Debus might be simplifying the challenge of writing from the point-of-view of another gender, there is certainly truth in the fact that the fundamental experience of fiction writing is the exploration of the consciousness of someone else—even if that someone else is another version of yourself.

Thom Conroy on the Web

www.bu.edu/agni/fiction/online/2008/gough.html

www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2009-summer/selections/lost-water/

www.conjunctions.com/webcon/gough10.htm

willowsprings.ewu.edu/archives/gough.pdf

www.stuff.co.nz/sunday-star-times/features/3192689/The-Open-Well
Siobhan Harvey

Siobhan Harvey is a poet and nonfiction author whose works include the poetry collection, Lost Relatives (Steele Roberts, 2011), the work of literary criticism, Words Chosen Carefully: New Zealand Writers In Conversation (Cape Catley, 2010) and the anthology, Our Own Kind: 100 New Zealand Poems about Animals (Random House NZ, 2009). Her creative non-fiction has been published in Landfall, was Highly Commended in the 2013 Landfall Essay Prize and runner up in the 2011 Landfall Essay Competition. Recently, her poetry manuscript, Nephology for Beginners, won 2013 Kathleen Grattan Poetry Award (and will be published in 2014 by Otago University Press). Recently also, her Poet’s Page was launched on The Poetry Archive (UK), co-directed by Sir Andrew Motion.

About the Work

To parent a child with autism, Aspergers or autism spectrum disorder is a journey through an often frightening, perplexing yet miraculous hinterland. My son was eight years old before he received a clear diagnosis. Until then, his fixations with the esoteric such as with Nephology and his inability to conventionally assimilate amongst his peers were treated as willfulness and/or weirdness, even by some of his school teachers, even in the supposed enlightened times in which we live. As his parents, my partner and I have felt (continue to feel) infinitely protective of our son and frustrated by the paucity of assistance and recognition for children like him.

“A Boy Called Cloud” began, partly, because of this medley of the emotional, social, reactionary and insightful. Of the many other influences and inspiration, these are charted in this piece of creative non-fiction. The easiest part of developing the work was writing it out. The manner in which children with Autism, Aspergers or ASD are treated is a subject I remain passionate about. And, as an author, my modus operandi for examining issues which motivate me is to explore them through my writings. I am a staunch proponent of the notion that writers should be motivated by a political raison d’etre.

Thereafter, the hardest part of developing “A Boy Called Cloud” was to maintain authorial impartiality—to write about Autism Spectrum Disorder objectively by utilizing the experiences of a protagonist, my son, for whom I have a long history of advocating. It would have been all too easy for me to compose a piece of work about my boy which was overtly saccharine in content and tone. But, as an author, I’ve long understood I need to write with detachment; and so I had to work from a dispassionate standpoint when approaching even this most subjective of subjects.

I find the craft of creative nonfiction thoroughly liberating. I lecture and tutor creative writing, and have introduced the subject of creative nonfiction to my Third Year students. Always, I tell them that, unlike fiction or poetry, creative nonfiction leaves the author with nowhere to hide. When writing creative nonfiction, you are saying to the world, this happened to me! To expose yourself in this manner can be frightening. Yet, I argue, it can also be invigorating, because you can write about topics which reach deeply into your readers’ hearts and souls, generating empathy and raising awareness of matters which might otherwise have remained unspoken, overlooked, or ignored.
Siobhan Harvey on the Web

www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Harvey.%20Siobhan

www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=15762

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Sean Howard

Sean Howard is the author of two collections of poetry, *Local Calls* (Cape Breton University Press, 2009) and *Incitements* (Gaspereau Press, 2011). His poetry has been widely published in Canadian and international magazines, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and anthologized in *The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2011* (Tightrope Books). Sean is adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University, researching nuclear disarmament issues and the political history of twentieth century physics.

About the Work

Two of the three pieces—“shadowgraph 133” and “library cards”—form part of book-length experimental projects I allot regular time for. Each shadowgraph—and the project encompasses all 150 Nobel Physics lectures delivered (149 by men!) in the twentieth century—takes on average a week to write (allowing 3 hours or so per day), so it’s really a part-time job.

The “library cards” are far less onerous and time-consuming: I simply choose a book at random each time I visit the library at Cape Breton University, and see what poems emerge from a skim-reading. (It can take from minutes to hours for something to happen!)

And the “endpaper epigrams” were pretty much a spontaneous (and therapeutic) response to acute political depression!

I should perhaps say something about the basic experimental method and process behind the Shadowgraphs Project, as these poems are by far both the hardest and easiest pieces I’ve ever worked on. I recently explained it as follows in a web feature in the Canadian poetry magazine *Arc*:

“The procedure—which I call ‘downlining’—is simple: hand writing the text (of the lecture) onto a series of 10-word x 10-word grids, jotting down any images or associations spontaneously occurring, then carefully and slowly reading down each of the lines (diagonally, too, if I want to; any way but linear). While I happily pocket any ‘free’ images or other gifts that appear, I also treat the scrambled text as material to meditate, transform and work freely on. The aim of the method is to combine the systematic rigor of William Burroughs’ cut-up technique with the free-flow of C.G. Jung’s deliberately unmethodical ‘method’ of active imagination, a kind of induced reverie comparable in some ways to Keats’s exercise of ‘negative capability.’ In this way (in theory, and in my own experience) the writer gains access to two hitherto unconscious levels (repressed, latent, unsuspected) of expression: his or her own and the text’s.”

One possible trap of working on a long series of poems using the same technique is an emerging “sameness” of voice and style: each poem has to be not only vibrant and alive in its own right but differently vital to the rest. With the Shadowgraphs, though, there was an extreme range of voices and styles—as physics moved through its twentieth century triumphs and torments—in play, and the main “trick” was using the technique to get inside the text to explore the spirit and usually unstated tensions of each lecture. And this is, I guess, a more generally applicable “rule:” let the words tell you what to say; don’t expect (or desire) to control them. As the British World War II poet Keith Douglas wrote: “Words are my instruments, not my servants.”

I love Joyce, who loved Blake, so I like poetic craft to be crafty, riddling, tricky. And, of course, intoxicating—a “drunken boat,” as Rimbaud said. And, when the ride gets scary, I try to remember Lorca’s confession: “I have lost myself in the sea many times.” You have to…
Sean Howard on the Web

robmclennan.blogspot.ca/search?q=Sean+Howard

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Barbara Maloutas

Barbara Maloutas is the 2008 Sawtooth Poetry Prize winner for The Whole Marie, (Ahsahta Press). Her books and chapbooks include In a Combination of Practices (New Issues Press), of which anything consists (Diagram/New Michigan Press), Coffee Hazilly (Beard of Bees), Practices (Diagram/New Michigan Press) and Her Not Blessed (Les Figes Press). Her work is included in two anthologies: Intersections: Innovative Poets of Southern California (Green Integer) and The L.A. Telephone Book, Vol. 1. Her work has appeared in journals including Aufgabe, FreeVerse, Tarpaulin Sky, Segue, Good Foot, The New Review of Literature, bird dog, dusie, elimae, Interbirth Books, Greatcoat, OR, kadar koli, Octopus and Puerto del Sol.

About the Work

The prose poems in the final section of the unpublished manuscript entitled Field Studies in an Infinite Universe, are thematically similar but were made and collected over time. The section title, Not Even Their Mother, could imply a missing word or words like—Knew, Cared, Could Help, Survived or another word or word combination. The choices seem endless. Even suggests something surprising or unlikely. The states of motherhood and poetry expect and look for interruption and a jagged response. The poems in Not Even Their Mother are dialogic directly and indirectly. The second poem, “Crossing,” ends with the words of a neighbor in answer to a mother’s question. It is what the mother wanted to hear, “Don’t worry. Don’t be silly.” There is no resolution to questions raised. The poems are small investigations, tending slightly toward subversion, since they consider things or incidents not usually worthy of attention in a poetic text.

Each of the poems follows the movement of consciousness itself and exists so that the text can exist. Although I call them prose poems and not stories, there are elements of the made story in each, perhaps not the complete structure of a story, but a suggestion of one, that allows various interpretations. There is little “about” about these poems, but hopefully they do undermine the boundaries and balance between the creative and the object.

The illusion that they are autobiographical may not be an illusion, at least not completely, but characters are secondary to the text. If I were not a mother, it would not have occurred to me to delve into this theme. What do I think a mother thinks about, as mother? How does she say what she thinks?

Years ago I realized that my poems had strong psychological leanings when a female painter emailed me saying that she really liked my poetry. As soon as I could I left my office to visit a gallery on “gallery row” in Los Angeles to see her paintings. One of her paintings was of a body bag (with a body in it) lying in the bottom of a clothing closet. Her work was a visual representation of my kind of text work.

The opening piece, “Theory,” speaks about a grown son, a mother and the son’s friends, one in particular. Her noticing certain attractive physical things about one of the friends and therefore about herself, is the “about” of this poem. The third piece is not a direct revelation of poet’s psychology, but more a persona poem and an investigation into the dramatic physical connection of a mother with a baby: “She is pretty much bursting out of that red dress for him.” The fourth piece places the male child at the center and questions the clichéd position of women in
the domestic setting. In the final piece I again used a “baby-talk” ending with the “choo-choo” train buildings around the bookstore courtyard. In “Crossing” I used the word “boing” to describe the reflex action of a baby’s legs.

The difficult part is keeping a balance between the story and the consciousness of the text. I do this after the poems have been around in rough form for a while. It is usually a cutting away, adding a slight connection here or taking one word away there, being cleaner grammatically, deciding how much ambiguity and irresolution to allow, including some mistakes.

Barbara Maloutas on the Web

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Oliver Rice


Oliver Rice on the Web

www.creekwalker.com/oliver-rice-poet.html
Jeff Schiff

In addition to That hum to go by (Mammoth books, 2012), Jeff Schiff is the author of Mixed Diction, Burro Heart, The Rats of Patzcuaro, The Homily of Infinitude, Anywhere in this Country, and Resources for Writing About Literature. His work has appeared internationally in more than eighty periodicals, including The Alembic, Grand Street, The Ohio Review, Poet & Critic, The Louisville Review, Tendril, Pembroke Magazine, Carolina Review, Chicago Review, Hawaii Review, Southern Humanities Review, River City, Indiana Review, Willow Springs, and The Southwest Review. He has been a member of the English faculty at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

About the Work

Although they are all informed by the same tensioned combination of showing + telling that has animated my poetry for the past four decades, the three poems in this issue of Segue were born in very different places and occasioned by very different confluences.

I wrote “Withdrawal” in El Paso, Texas, when I was house-sitting for a friend. His lawn was small, and precious in the high desert. Today you’d say that it was a politically incorrect garden, sucking water as it did. But it havened birds and insects and flowers and called to me, particularly at softening dusk. Like so many of my poems, it considers—but does not, I hope, manhandle—binaries. Here those binaries form an ego continuum—positioning speaker-as-self-charged-judge on one side (“expertly adjudicating between x and y”) and speaker-as-enlightened-newly-mute-observer on the other (“I have learned to nod/ and in such/ am done…”)

I wrote “Revival” years later about my Rogers Park neighborhood in Chicago. While it may not have been prudent, I often walked those streets and alleys at night. Again, the poem is full of binaries and near collisions, about a flipped world—where flora and fauna still keep the urban grit at bay. It’s also very much an optimistic song, a narrow breath strung from the beginning “And” to the double entendre “stalked.” I hope I captured that in my audio recording.

Finally, I wrote “Dear Wife” in Valparaiso, Chile, days before one of the worst recorded earthquakes in history. I had not been communicating with my then wife (for personal, not seismic reasons). No phone calls. No emails. I was keeping my head down, ducked out of sight. Looking back on it now, I see the poem was a guilt offering. It could have been addressed to anyone, though. Small as that sounds, I did try to consider the world broadly within its delicate frame. The fraught occasion aside, I must admit I’m pleased to have written those lines about tea seeping on the table “under a sun/ which matters in a way/ art can// to even those/ who fortify against it.” That’ll ring true to me, I think, for a long while yet to come.

Jeff Schiff on the Web

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Changming Yuan

Changming Yuan, seven-time Pushcart nominee and author of Chansons of a Chinaman (2009) and Landscaping (2013), grew up in rural China but currently tutors in Vancouver, where he co-publishes Poetry Pacific with Allen Qing Yuan and operates PP Press. With a Ph.D. in English, Yuan has recently been interviewed by [PANK], and had poetry appearing in Asia Literary Review, Best Canadian Poetry, BestNewPoemsOnline, Istanbul Review, London Magazine, Paris/Atlantic, Poetry Kanto, Poetry Salzburg, SAND, Threepenny Review, Two Thirds North and 779 other literary journals/anthologies across 28 countries.

Changming Yuan on the Web

poetrypacific.blogspot.ca

poetrypacificpress.blogspot.ca/

www.facebook.com/poetry.pacific