Waiting for Death: The Poetic Transformation of Grief

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Volume 1
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This thesis is entirely my own work.

This thesis contains no material previously published or written by myself or another person, except where reference is made in the thesis itself. This thesis has not been previously submitted towards a degree or diploma in any university or other higher education institution.

Susan La Ganza
12 June 2012
Abstract

This project begins when I find myself writing a poem to express a sudden flow of painful feelings. My lover has cancer. He will die within two years. He asks that we do not talk about it. I see that in this first poem the dominant text is from earlier times. The cancer is subtext. His shocking news with its silencing injunction has fired dark images in my imagination. As I write more poems an autoethnography evolves where I observe and reflect on the conscious and unconscious unfolding of a grieving process. The poems comprise Volume 2 of the thesis.

To carry out this study a framework is set up to use poetry in the form of autoethnography as a qualitative research method. As this thesis is based on creative practice, a poet, Geoff Page is added to my supervisory panel. The poems themselves are part of the framework, as are the synergistic works and the theoretical ideas from poetry, philosophy, anthropology and psychoanalysis. I dream, remember and discover, and write a series of relatively autonomous poems over four years. The chair of my panel responds to my ideas by proposing cross-cultural ethnographies and poems of loss to enrich my inquiry. In particular I focus on research that has been undertaken into Yolngu mortuary rituals. This dialogic process fires my creative work.

I analyse the poems using psychoanalytic ideas, and anthropological writings. Building on the insights of the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, I look at what lies behind the veils of the metaphysical core of my poetry.* At the same time I discover a resonance with Yolngu philosophy, and the capacity of Yolngu rituals to transform death into life.

This study generates knowledge of my unconscious grieving process. The poems show how my mind deals with the loss, and how I use my mind to free my spirit from the pull of death. I find much in common with grieving in other cultures. The poems show a way through the grieving process. They transform raw grief into unconscious elements of experience, which are linked and contained in metaphor and expressed like daytime dreams. In this way, as in the poetry of Yolngu crying ceremonies, sung by the woman who is the primary mourner, the unbearable becomes not only bearable but also expressible and inclusive. I discover that as I live and observe my own process I experience a surprising transformation. I go to the origins of shared cultural experience. Like the Yolngu, I am no longer waiting for death but anticipating birth.

Acknowledgments

I thank Professor Howard Morphy, chair of my panel, for bringing his imaginative thinking and keen sensibility to this study. He encouraged my autonomy and was fearless at critical moments. His knowledge and connection to the Yolngu and the transformative power of Yolngu mortuary rituals opened my eyes, not only to a world I had not seen, but also to a wider avenue of expression, like the poetry and songlines of mourning. I experienced the transformation of raw elements of grief into poetry and music.

I thank the poet on my panel, Geoff Page, for his steadfast loyalty to the poetic process, and for his generosity in both time and thoughtfulness.

Dr. Debjani Ganguly, the third member of my panel listened to the early unformed poems without flinching. I thank her for this, and also for being there for the thesis.

Professor Paul Pickering nurtured and inspired the poems and chapters through the thesis writing seminars. I am deeply grateful that he has a sixth sense about being there when he is absolutely needed.

I thank my generous friends and colleagues from the Research School of Humanities and the Arts.

My thanks to Carlo who entered the poetic work at just the right time.

I thank the Yolngu people, my welcoming hosts at Garma, who showed me how to transform unbearable grief into joy, through being immersed in a crying ceremony.

I thank my family and friends who lived through the process of this thesis with me.

Thank you, Tom.
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My lover has cancer. He will die within two years. He tells me the diagnosis, and adds: ‘I am going to beat it’. I know he cannot beat it—the cancer will win, but I remain silent.

Later, in shock, I go home and begin to write a poem:

Mount Nebo is big and dark
I am four and afraid.

It is August 2004. Tom’s statement has thrown me into a place that surprises me. I find myself writing a poem to manage a bewildering flood of painful feelings and images, but as I begin to examine this poem in some detail I notice that the dominant text is from earlier times. The cancer appears as subtext. I see, also, that his shocking news with its silencing injunction has fired dark images in my imagination, and revived fearful memories from my childhood. I am again a small child in the Queensland rainforest:

Mount Nebo is full of mist and rainforest and damp and leaches
It is rounded and solid and mysterious
It has dingos and snakes
A carpet snake came down from the mountain and took my kitten
from the foot of the bed.

As it unfolds, this poem continues to surprise me, in that it connects the approaching death to what the cancer means to me in terms of the fears of my childhood. The carpet snake that terrified me as a child has returned in a different guise—and I see that in my imagination it is the cancer.

Over the next few weeks I find that I am thinking and dreaming further images, which connect the cancer and its attack on Tom’s life to the images and experiences of early memory. The vivid memory of my fear of meeting a carpet snake, or having one drop on me from a tree, seems blood-curdlingly real—like a body memory—a
visceral reality rather than a visual memory. I am moved to write more poems to express these memories as the past uncoils into the present.

Connecting these ideas makes me more and more curious as to where my thoughts are taking me. As I step aside from *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark*, and realise that it is the voice of the frightened four-year-old who speaks, I begin to believe that a grieving process is unfolding that I may be able to express in poems. I also begin to see that I am engaged in a process that has a complexity far beyond what is ‘said’ in the words of the poems. I have a sense that this complexity has to do with thinking and dreaming. I wonder if there is someone who will be interested in thinking about and observing the nature and trajectory of this process with me, and who will also nourish the work, and help me expand it beyond my own imagination. Tom suggests I approach someone from the Australian National University.

While I am considering this, in December 2004 I write another poem: *Tom is Home*. I now see more clearly, that in my dream world, as well as in my daytime thoughts, there is a struggle to process what the illness and the eventual death mean:

I dream I am climbing a mountain—
struggling up a steep cement path,
so steep I almost fall back with each step.
The path is hard and grey like the cancer
which comes nearer and nearer,
as it steadily approaches.

On 20 January 2005 I make email contact with Iain McCalman of the Humanities Research Centre at ANU. I tell him about the context of writing *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark*, and mention how I discover that my creative imagination, under the extreme stress of an approaching death, has linked present and past in the images of some poems I have begun to write. Because of my background as a psychoanalyst I have some ideas about what is happening, but I would like to understand this process in greater depth, and to observe it as it unfolds.

Professor McCalman is generous and encouraging—but we never meet. He is in California.

In June 2005 Professor Howard Morphy from the Centre for Cross-cultural Research meets with me. He asks to hear some poetry. I read *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark*.

I am very surprised with how readily he relates to my poetic work, and to my idea of observing a mourning process expressed through a series of spontaneously written poems. The poems would be relatively autonomous, that is they would, as far as possible, have a creative life of their own—observation would come later. He
is interested, cross-culturally, in death and mourning. He is also interested in my ideas, and opens them up and responds with other ideas. I feel deeply met, and find this interaction exciting.

We think about a cross-cultural study around death being a possible project. He suggests that I read Metcalf and Huntington’s *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Rituals.* We have some discussion about apparent universals in mortuary celebrations, such as the symbolism of life, birth and regeneration occurring side by side, and also notions of the care of the spirit and body of the dead person. A significant part of this care is in helping the spirit return to a place of rest. There is a question as to how the rituals described in the ethnographies may resonate with the rituals described in the poems. At this stage I do not know that I will later discover how profoundly my implicit theory resonates with Yolngu notions of the spiritual dimensions of existence.

We discuss the idea of poems as ethnography in some detail. Discernible patterns may emerge which, while reflecting the intensely personal, may also reflect the human and social response, in a broader sense, to a significant death. We think of the role of the group of principal mourners in Yolngu society, and the lone primary mourner in European Australia.

As well as the ethnographies, Howard Morphy mentions Stanner’s Monograph, *On Aboriginal Religion.* He also suggests that I write a preliminary proposal for a research project.

At a later meeting he mentions the notion of ‘the vulnerable observer’ and Ruth Behar’s ethnography: *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart,* which I later realise is autoethnography.


My research proposal is accepted and I enrol in January 2006. Later, in January 2006 my panel is chosen with Professor Howard Morphy as Chair, Doctor Debjani Ganguly, and a poet, to be chosen later.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The series of poems, *Waiting for Death*, began in response to a shock: the news of the approaching death of my lover. The poetic response evolved as a discontinuous expression of my mourning process over four years—just over one year’s anticipatory grief, and three years’ moving through the mourning process after Tom’s death.

At first the ethnography develops side by side with the poems—as reflexive ethnography, with me, as writer situated ‘outside’, observing myself ‘in’ the process. The process begins with the poems. It is here that I express my flow of thoughts and feelings. I then observe what I have expressed. As I observe, I begin to think about and analyse, in my mind, my own poetic process, in much the same way as Freud begins to analyse his own dream process.

Freud’s biographer, Ernest Jones, describes *The Interpretation of Dreams* as Freud’s major work:

> Above all it affords not only a secure basis for the theory of the unconscious in man, but provides one of the best modes of approach to this dark region.¹

In 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in German in Leipzig.² It was first translated into English by A. A. Brill in 1913. In Chapter 1 of the third English edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1931, Freud introduces the idea of dream interpretation:

> In the following pages I shall demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. Further, I shall endeavour to elucidate the processes which underlie the strangeness and obscurity of dreams, and to deduce from these processes the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or co-operation is responsible for our dreams.³

Moreover, Freud links poetry and dreams. In an introductory note to the third (German) edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he predicts the direction of further editions:

> Dream-interpretation must seek a closer union with the rich material of poetry, myth and popular idiom... ⁴

For Bion, dreaming occurs both in sleep and in waking life. In *Cogitations*, he quotes Freud:

> Freud says Aristotle states that a dream is the way that the mind works in sleep.⁵

He then builds, with difference, on Freud’s ideas:

> I say it is the way it works when awake.⁶

For Bion, dream-thought is an unconscious way of thinking generated in response to lived emotional experience, and constitutes the impetus for the work of dreaming. For example, the impetus for the writing of my poems comes from the unconscious thought derived from my grief response to Tom’s death. Therefore, Bion’s thinking complements Freud’s. In Freud’s ‘dream work’, unconscious thoughts are made available to consciousness. By contrast, Bion’s concept is that conscious life experience is altered by the mind in such a way that it becomes available for the unconscious mind for the psychological work of dreaming.

This distinction is important to the present study, because I show through my poems that, as if I were dreaming, I am doing primary unconscious psychological work with my lived experience. In this sense, my poems are daytime dreams. They are the containers of my dream thoughts. They hold my grief. More than this, they express my grief.

I also need another dimension, beyond Freud and Bion, which illuminates the ‘unbearable’ quality sometimes present in the expression of my grief. This ‘unbearable’ quality is made bearable by Yolngu women in the music of the songlines of crying ceremonies. This quality of free expression is necessary to my poems if my dream-thoughts are to be an avenue of expression of my mourning.

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4. ibid., p. 10.
process. Fiona Magowan shows how the expression of emotions can transcend cultural difference in her ethnography of music and emotion: *Melodies of Mourning*.7

In 2005, Ogden presented a number of thoughts that he describes as essential to his conception of psychoanalysis. He begins with some thoughts about dreaming:

Dreaming is an ongoing process occurring both in sleep and in unconscious waking life.
The dreaming process is the transforming of raw sense impressions into unconscious elements of experience that can be linked.
These linked elements generate dream-thoughts in sleep and in waking life.8

As I have said, in a sense, the dream-thoughts are my poems—the relatively autonomous part. The foundations of how I think about my poems are in part from Freud, and psychoanalytic writers after Freud such as Bion, Bollas and Ogden—and also, in part from the Yolngu women who taught me about the ritual expression of pain, and about how crying can bring alive that which was not alive.

Another source of my poems is from my earliest childhood experience with my father. In some of my earliest memories my father sings to me, and plays imaginary games where we make up little poems and rhymes. He has a deep love of nature and we look at birds and beetles, and pick up pebbles in the shallow pools of Dawson Creek together. As I write I try to discover what shape and form fits best the expression of grief.

As well as a method of dream interpretation, many of the other concepts of how I think about my poems have evolved from Freud. An example is the method of self-reflection in which I create a space in my mind to allow the poems of the ethnography to emerge. By combining ethnography and psychoanalysis, I combine poetry and scientific investigation. I am often surprised to learn what I have not consciously known about my own thoughts, and how it happens that new thoughts and images appear in dreams or are expressed through poems.

As I focus more and more on my unconscious process, over time a transformation occurs. I am no longer ‘outside’ the work, looking in.

A different structure, and a change of genre evolve, as I move more and more ‘within’ the work—coming ‘out’ to observe. I live ‘in’ the writing, while opening myself up to encounters from without as well as from within. The poems arise outside of rational control, from a stream of consciousness that is at first porous to

consciousness, but then released from it. Narrative clarity is not aimed for, as the unconscious mind is seen to follow its own direction. The synergistic work is taken into my poetic imagination, and after a time, when the acute mourning passes, sparks the poems.

I imagine a creative work in which as writer I both live ‘in the writing’ and also observe the poetic process from ‘outside’. As the synergistic process initiates ideas for poems, I am aware of how a flow of previously unconscious ideas and relationships breaks through into my consciousness. I experience a resonance between ideas from outside and inside.

Later, in the same year that I enrol, a poetry advisor enters the realm of the ethnography. The impact of Geoff Page, an established poet, of how he attempts to direct the poetic process, and how he introduces the poems of the (English) Canon, is a recomposition, not only of the poetic work, but also of the whole ethnography. There is also an attempt at cultural repositioning: with him, I study seven centuries of English poetry. I also read and listen to the work of many different Australian poets.

I struggle to define myself and my own direction. I seek synergies in human experience, taking in the ideas and sounds of tens of thousands of years of poetic and singing traditions among the Yolngu.

It is only much later, in August 2010, when I read Carl Leggo’s recently published essay, *The Mentoring Relationship: A Poetic Perspective*, that I begin to fully appreciate the extent to which the poetic work is grounded and fed by the vast underground stream of the shared mentoring process between my supervisor and myself.9 Our mentoring process and the input of synergistic work is firmly established before the introduction of the established poet. I first imagine the shared time and space, and the feeding in of the ethnographies, as ‘the backbone’ of the work. The metaphor changes over time. I imagine that the energy created by the resonance of Yolngu ritual as it meets my own poetic ritual, powers the work. It gives spiritual authority. New ideas are full and flowing. They are held at the source of the unconscious work which goes on quietly processing itself and then emerges in the poems: cautiously at first, but freely flowing in *Part 4: Waiting for Death*.

By October 2005, an autoethnography that experiments with a fluid and inclusive approach, and which embraces the writing of the poems and the ‘bringing in’ of the synergistic ‘outside’ ethnographies, has begun.
Debjani introduces Geoff Page, and by May 2006 the inclusion of a selection of poems of the (English) Canon is set in motion. I am challenged to ‘get off death’ in my own poems. I struggle to protect my autonomy. I must consciously hold to my experimental position, while at the same time maintaining a state of mind of overall floating awareness and the relinquishing of rational control. In December 2006, with the detour into *Black Swan*, the experience of the past is vividly lived anew, but differently.

From the outset, this research focuses on a discontinuous, connected and interactive series of poems, which are the expression of a mourning process. At the same time as expressing, they also help to contain the grief process. At this early stage, I am able to discern that the research has two parts. The first part is the creation and analysis of each poem of the collection. The collection is now called *Waiting for Death*. The second part is the provision of sustenance: first to sustain and develop my mind, and secondly to inspire and maintain the spirit of experimentation and intensity with which the flow of poems has begun. This sustenance comes partly from a bringing in of inspirational synergistic work, which includes poems of loss that have a resonance with my own poems and with my own ideas and experience, and Yolngu and other cross-cultural rituals that create a synergy. A coming together of two disparate elements creates a vibration and connection, which blurs the boundaries and creates a third—a new poem or a different train of thought. As I follow my curiosity I re-discover poets such as Rilke and Yeats, whose work informs mine.10,11

The provision of sustenance includes my ‘apprenticeship’. I engage in Geoff’s readings of the poems of the (English) Canon, which catch my imagination and impact on the poetic work. These two elements—the synergistic work and the poems introduced by Geoff—overlap. I struggle to find a way through to define myself. I need space to think and also to allow my dream-thoughts to emerge. I also feel sustained by my own reflection on the poetic journey, and what is discovered on the way as I express my grief. For example, I am surprised by how moved I am by the Sabarl woman who waits with her dead husband, but also further surprised that I hold this memory until it is ready to emerge as the poem, 75. *Death*.12,13 The integration of what is discovered, thought about and remembered becomes the autoethnography. There is also a transformative synergy of the past expressed in the present going on at an unconscious level throughout the journey. Evidence of this emerges in other poems that arise later in the sequence.

1.2 **AIMS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The present inquiry aims at an in-depth understanding of how the many connections of my grieving process are revealed through the series of poems, and of any outcomes of this process.

The introduction of the ethnographies in the context of shared mentoring is seen to nourish and transform this process, and provide a framework for my grieving—similar to the way that rituals provide a framework for the Yolngu to grieve, and to care for and transform the dead person’s spirit.

This research also aims to generate knowledge of the use of autoethnography in the form of research poetry as a qualitative research method. The general questions guiding the inquiry are as follows:

1. How might the poems, as autoethnography, first reflect the evolution of a poetic work, and secondly provide a framework for a grieving process?

2. As I have said earlier, I see the poems as arising like daytime dreams. In the dreaming process, the raw grief is transformed into unconscious elements of experience that can be linked and contained in metaphor and images, and expressed. Will this ongoing expressive process bring about the resolution of a mourning process?

3. How might the boundaries of autoethnographic research poems reveal the unconscious dimension of my personal process, including a synergistic poetic expression beyond the realm of words that is from ‘beneath the veils of the metaphysical core’?[^14]

4. Why do I choose poetry to express my grief? Is it successful in making the experience bearable and understandable? How does my use of poetry explore and reveal glimpses of my unconscious dimension, and how is my imagination used as an avenue through which to express my grief?

5. What is particular about the poetic process of the woman who is the primary mourner, especially taking into account cross-cultural comparisons with the poetry of Yolngu mourning rituals, particularly crying ceremonies?

1.3 **Preliminary Thoughts on a Research Method**

Almost from the beginning it seems apparent that the research method will be ethnography—perhaps reflexive ethnography. I understand that the notion of reflexive ethnography arises out of a movement in anthropology to include a reflexive element in the practice of ethnographic recording and writing so that the writer is acknowledged to be part of the process, and to influence the process. The ethnography will include a series of poems following the trajectory of a mourning process with many—yet to be discovered—interwoven strands, and a thesis containing an analysis of the poems, with an observation of the trajectories of the strands. It takes some time to come to grips with the nature of an ethnography of my own experience and for me to realise that not only the poems, but also the interactions of all the events in the creation of the work will be of interest. I begin to wonder if the term *reflexive* ethnography accurately covers what I am doing.

After our first meeting in June 2005, I continue to do preliminary work with Howard Morphy. He later becomes my supervisor, but from the beginning feeds in ideas, inspirational poems and cross-cultural ethnographies, which resonate with what I bring him. He is sensitive to the grieving process I am going through. He lets me take my time, and provides space for the poems to flow in an uninterrupted stream. We meet again in October 2005, and he gives me Debbora Battaglia’s (1990) *On The Bones of the Serpent*. This ethnography has a profound impact, which is surprising, given the urgent nature of my ongoing grief process. Strong images from this work are caught in my imagination and later emerge in the poems.

In November 2005, I begin to read *The Body Silent*, an ethnography written by Robert Murphy. Howard emails that Murphy ‘writes an ethnography of his own disablement... it is a book that crosses the boundaries between anthropology and psychology’ (email, 18 November 2005). Robert Murphy is an anthropologist who stands back from the experience of his long illness with a disease of the spinal cord, and writes about his journey towards death as if it is ‘a kind of anthropological field trip’. Murphy describes the initial challenge of being both subject and object—both ethnographer and informant.

After a time as I reflect on my poems, I notice how the expression of grief broadens. I see that it embraces the synergistic works. I have a glimpse of how these early meetings lay the foundations for an ethnography to be written that is experienced from an inner perspective. The new ideas enliven and inform the creative process.

17. Email to Susan La Ganza from Howard Morphy, 18 November 2005.
18. Murphy, R. F., op. cit., p. xii.
They stimulate thoughts, which join with the flow of grief to allow new poems to emerge and new ideas to be taken in.

More than taking in happens. The ethnographies and poems of grief and loss open up new worlds. They throw light on Yolngu, and other cross-cultural expressions of death and mourning. I begin to question the European Australian society in which I live, and its attitudes towards open expressions of grief in death and mourning. My eyes are beginning to be opened to a wider view of an Australian tradition of poetry and poetic expression that is not caught within English or even Western traditions.

Later in 2006, I read Pat Jalland’s recently published Changing Ways of Death in Twentieth-century Australia, which focuses on the attitudes that shape the memories and experiences, which emerge in this study. Jalland describes how, towards the close of the twentieth century, the earlier ‘suppression of sorrow’, which is illustrated in this study by being told: ‘you have to get off death’ is replaced by ‘the revival of expressive grief’.

The group experience is central to the evolution of the creative process at the Research School of Humanities. I find that it acts as a catalyst for my own development. Paul Pickering nurtures and inspires the postgraduate group. He provides ideas for references and knows all the theses and protects students’ autonomy when necessary. It is he who draws attention to Pat Jalland’s study, and also a study by Joy Damousi, The Labour of Loss. Although Damousi focuses on ‘the common bonds that war so effectively severs’, she has as a starting point: ‘to examine the process of mourning and the expression of grief’.

In January 2006 I begin to engage with the first of three poets who express the loss of a loved one in a focused way. Donald Hall writes The Painted Bed—powerful, passionate poems on the death of his wife. Later, I read Daniel Hall’s anthology Under Sleep. He writes dense, poignant poems on his lover’s death. Later still, I engage with Christopher Reid who, in 2010, wrote poems before and after his wife’s final illness. The volume A Scattering is a tribute, which tells of their joint struggle with her ‘skulking sarcoma’. Although each of these three tributes is individual in its approach, there is a common experience described by Reid: ‘the poet / as he mazes the pages / of his notebook, in pursuit / of some safe way out.’ As with

23. ibid., p. 1.
27. ibid., p. 12.
my ethnography, each of the collections of these three writers’ works crystallises around the death, and equally lingers with the final precious moments ‘beyond translation / beyond words. / Exultantly peculiar. / A charmed moment’. 28

Over time, my research method is refined. I am aware of something structural happening within the ethnography. Out of the meeting of the mourning process and the synergistic works there develops a sense of inner cohesion of the newly created work as a whole. The personal and often unconscious nature of this poetic structure means that over the years of writing, traumatic events that intrude into my day-to-day life will inevitably impinge on the work. The structure explodes into chaos at various times such as at the time of Tom’s death, the anniversaries, the emergence of the Epilogue or when the autonomy of the work is threatened. During 2006, while the grief is still acute and the poems of mourning are flowing freely, I take in the synergistic works, but the time is not right to fully respond to them in the poems. This response emerges later. For now, I begin to be aware of the formation of a skeletal accretion of knowledge that forms the necessary backbone to hold the work on course. Soon after this, I notice that as I let go of Tom and our familiar life, the reflexive ethnography comes alive and the poems take on autonomous shapes and connections of their own.

1.4 Perspectives on the analysis of meaning in the text: modes of understanding

What do the poems mean? During March and April 2006, I begin to reflect on how best to express what I am coming to know about my poems. I think about different perspectives from which to analyse meaning in the texts of the poems. I am already engaging with ideas from anthropology and philosophy, including psychoanalysis.

My background and training are in psychoanalysis. As I think of how to interpret the meaning of my poems, my mind turns to Sigmund Freud’s dream-theory, which opens the way for the analysis and interpretation of his own dreams. I have already mentioned A. A. Brill’s translation of The Interpretation of Dreams, in which Freud shows how his technique of dream interpretation reveals their meaning. 29 Laplanche and Pontalis describe how ‘once decoded, the dream no longer appears as a narrative in images but rather as an organization of thoughts, or a discourse, expressing one or more wishes’. 30 My early poems were written unselfconsciously, and I have from the beginning thought about their unconscious meaning.

28. ibid., p. 13.
I have mentioned earlier that, in 1994, Bion expressed a view that the mind subjects conscious thoughts to unconscious dream-work while we are awake. This view confirms my intuitive notion that my poems are daytime dreams.\textsuperscript{31}

I struggle to understand my experience in relation to Tom’s dying, and to be clear as to how I express its intensity in my poems. I think of how Freud also struggles with concepts of life and death forces as he engages in psychological and biological speculation. Eventually he develops his dualistic theory. In the seventh section of \textit{Analysis Terminable and Interminable}, he puts forward the notion of:

‘our two primal instincts, Eros and destructiveness, the first of which endeavours to combine what exists into ever greater unities, while the second endeavours to dissolve those combinations and to destroy the structures to which they have given rise’.\textsuperscript{32}

Freud never wrote about the ‘death instinct’ as Thanatos, but it came into usage as part of what Laplanche and Pontalis refer to as ‘the final Freudian theory, where Thanatos is used by analogy with Eros to designate [what came to be called] the death instinct’.\textsuperscript{33}

Jon Mills interprets Freud as emphasising ‘the dialectical nature of the drives, where life and death, being and nothingness, are mutually implicative dialectical relations that constitute the opposing forces that fuel and sustain psychic organization’.\textsuperscript{34} These ideas become relevant later as I experience the opposing forces within myself when I struggle to maintain a sense of my own life force—to stay alive while Tom is dying.

Freud, in \textit{Mourning and Melancholia}, said: ‘Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage, between the critical activity of the ego, and the ego as altered by identification with the abandoned object’.\textsuperscript{35} For Freud, the loss of the one who dies becomes a problem to be struggled with, internally, over time, by the one who does not die. In the poems of this ethnography, the shadow cast by the loss of the one who dies unfolds in the wordless elements between the form of the lines, and the flow of the words. Geoff

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bion, W., op. cit.
\item Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J-B., op. cit., p. 447.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Page has a strong response to the unwritten subtext, which permeates my written words: ‘No one could stand this, Sue’.

Christopher Bollas further extends Freud’s idea of ‘the shadow of the object’.36 He describes the character of ‘that part of the psyche that lives in a wordless world... the human subject’s recording of his (or her) early experiences of the object. This is the shadow of the object as it falls on the ego, leaving some traces of its existence in the adult.’ For Bollas, the emergence into thought of early memories of being and relating is critical for the capacity to form adult relationships and the development of the capacity to mourn. He uses the term unthought known, for that which is ‘known, but not yet thought’.

The poems that form the basis of the present study are conceived partly in the moment, but also partly in the virtual, or unthought-about, past. Many of my poetic images emerge as ‘unthought known’. An example is the malevolent image of the carpet snake, which unfolds in the present and demands to be thought about. This image is highly emotionally charged and causes a proliferation of connected, but previously ‘unthought thoughts’ and sinister images about death. These images are relatively autonomous of me or my conscious mind. The notion of the ‘unthought known’ becomes central to a way of understanding and analysing what is revealed in my poems.

I bring my ‘unthought thoughts’ into consciousness through my dreams and via my poems. My dream life is also revealed in the poems. The cross-cultural works are gradually seen to emerge into consciousness or to come to life in my dreams. There is the sense of a conversation beginning. Thomas Ogden refers to the ‘wordless conversations between poets and the poems they make’, and the imaginary conversations such as dreaming and reverie, which he says are ‘often the most real’.38 He goes on to say that ‘the internal conversation known as dreaming is no more an event limited to the hours of sleep than the existence of stars is limited to the hours of darkness... the conversation with ourselves that in sleep we experience as dreaming continues unabated and undiluted in our waking life’.39 He mentions the notion of a ‘reverie experience, a waking dream-life’ that involves ‘a withdrawal from the logic, demands and distractions of external reality that is analogous to the darkness of sleep’.40 The present study draws on the notion of a continuity of dream-life and reverie as it follows the trajectory not only of a mourning process, but also of the autoethnography itself. There is a resonance of cross-cultural works relating to

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37. ibid., p. 5.
39. ibid., p. 5.
40. ibid.
mortuary rituals and processes, including the expression of grief, which impact on me, as mourner and writer, and on my expressive journey.

Ogden, writing about dreams and reverie, says that ‘to my surprise, I have found that a set of metaphors introduced by Freud more than a century ago provides a fresh language and imagery with which to think and speak about the [dream and] reverie experience...’ 41 He is referring to Freud’s so-called ‘topographic model’, which was introduced in 1896 and fully developed by 1915. 42 In Freud’s topographic model, he conceived of the mind as being in three parts: the conscious, preconscious and unconscious minds. Freud thought of the preconscious as being ‘... below the level of immediate conscious awareness from which memories and emotions can be recalled’. 43

Ogden is interested in what he terms the ‘perceptual surface’ between the preconscious and unconscious minds. He argues that this frontier is ‘the place where dreaming and reverie experience occur; where playing and creativity of every sort are born; where wit and charm germinate before they find their way into a conversation, a poem, a gesture...’ 44 ‘... the frontier of dreaming is crackling with the impulse toward symbolic expression ...’. Ogden quotes Grotstein: ‘At the frontier of dreaming, the dreamer who dreams the dream is in conversation with the dreamer who understands the dream’. 45

Ogden puts forward a notion that ‘living (being alive) at the frontier of dreaming is not only an art but the lifeblood of art itself’. 46 In February 2007, I begin to focus on the analysis of the poems that are the data of this study. I am able to sense that the emergence, not only of the poems, but also of the autoethnography itself, takes place in this ‘frontier’ between my preconscious mind and the unconscious.

It is at this point that there is a crossing of the boundaries between psychology and anthropology: the expressive content not only conveys the sense of the writer’s experience, but creates a new experience. This new experience, which is beyond conscious understanding, has connections with what Stanner terms the ‘metaphysical core’. 47

41. Ogden, T., op. cit., p. 6.
43. ibid., pp. 180–185.
44. Ogden, T., op. cit., p. 7.
47. Stanner, W. E. H. op. cit., p. 75.
Stanner’s monograph, *On Aboriginal Religion*, is referred to by Howard Morphy as ‘a work of intuitive genius’.\(^4^8\) He goes on to say that, for Stanner, there is almost a disjunction between ‘the complexity of social life and the simplicity of the metaphysical core that lies at the heart of it’: that the complex reality of life creates a series of masks that obscure the central concerns. Morphy quotes Stanner who says that ‘Myth, song, dance, mime, social organization and institutional practice all lie like so many veils between the observer and that mystery which is phrased analogically’,\(^4^9\) and argues that the complexity lies in both the metaphysics themselves and in everyday life, ‘for when we break down the metaphysic by analysing how it is worked out in action we find that reality is complex, multi-layered and multi-determined’.\(^5^0\) As Morphy then states: ‘this is why the metaphysical core is never merely said. It cannot be condensed in a single sentence; rather it is performed, painted and danced, for if one tries to reduce it, it becomes oversimplified and loses its connections’.\(^5^1\)

In order to think further about the question of the veiled connections between the conscious person and their metaphysical core, as described by Stanner, I imagine the ‘metaphysical core’ as a dynamic unconscious process. When an event such as death or birth occurs, a disturbance arises, which requires an immediate response in the present moment. This immediate response is followed by more complex expressions, as the experience of the past and the past of previous generations gradually unfolds. If, as Morphy says, ‘the metaphysical core is deeply connected with ... individuals' pasts and presents...and actors can respond in quite different ways according to context', I would argue that expressions may be ‘said’ in poetic form (just as they may be danced or painted) if a method ‘of saying’, or expressing, can be found that allows connections to be made behind what Stanner refers to as the veils of the metaphysical core.

Using Stanner’s concepts, the poems of this ethnography may, because of their (unconscious) meaning ‘beyond words’, retain their connection to the process going on beneath the veils. In this way, they will illuminate something of the previously ‘unthought’ nature of the process of the metaphysical core itself. I imagine that the poems can be thought of as the veils on which images may be projected, or through which the symbolic meanings and processes, which lie behind, may thereby be glimpsed, or in part revealed.


\(^{50}\) ibid.

\(^{51}\) ibid.
Stanner (1965) takes Freud to task for insufficiently acknowledging the function of society in the psychic development of the individual.\(^52\) Freud obviously does not have Stanner’s sophisticated knowledge of the Australian Aborigines.\(^53\) However, Stanner, in 1965, did not draw attention to this gap in Freud’s knowledge, but took issue with Freud in an area where Freud is on firmer ground. He focused on Freud’s theory of psychic development and on his metaphorical use of the Oedipus myth in his theoretical formulation of the Oedipal Complex, which is central to Freud’s theory of personality. Stanner’s comment that ‘Oedipus did not have an Oedipus complex!’\(^54\) could be understood in that we do not see Oedipus as a child.

Freud uses the myth of Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, as a metaphor. He creates an analogy with the young child, who wants to get rid of the father in order to have the mother to himself or herself. It may also apply to a young woman or man in the context of wanting to get rid of the father to claim his inheritance. The child or young person also loves the father—hence the conflict in the situation. In working through the conflict, the young person becomes able to fend for her or himself. She or he finds a partner in life and contributes to society by engaging in satisfying productive work.

Stanner argues first: ‘that Freud had no sufficient theory of society’, and secondly, his idea of man is fundamentally contra-social.\(^55\) Stanner reads Freud as saying ‘We are born to suffer, to be victims and all we can do is to outwit society’. He then disagrees with the notions expressed in this reading of Freud’s formulation of unconscious life, and asserts a view that ‘men can be both social selves and at the same time free, self-responsible and rational’.\(^56\)

Surprisingly, even though Freud and Stanner come from different viewpoints—that is, Freud emphasises the individual, and Stanner emphasises society—I would argue that they come to similar conclusions. Stanner’s notion of men (or women) as ‘free, self responsible and rational’ is quite similar to Freud’s notion of the individual’s ‘making the unconscious conscious’ so as to be in control of one’s destiny as far as possible, and to be fully engaged in ‘love’ and ‘work’—that is engaged in the sense of cooperation, not in the sense of ‘outwitting society’.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud focuses on the prohibition of incest and connects it to his work on the Oedipal situation, in the context of Darwin’s references to ‘the primal horde’.\(^57\) Freud says ‘They hated their father who presented such a formidable


\(^{54}\) Stanner, W. E. H., op. cit., p. 2.


\(^{56}\) ibid.

\(^{57}\) Freud, S., op. cit., p. 141.
obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too’.  

Stanner disagrees with Freud’s use of the myth, saying it is ‘woefully distorted’ as Freud uses it. He seems annoyed that Freud took liberties by using the metaphor and not sufficiently acknowledging the myth itself.

It may be that Stanner’s appreciation and knowledge of social functioning across cultures makes him impatient with Freud’s emphasis on the individual. Stanner is more interested in the communal tribal society he is studying than he is in Freud’s more individualistic European society: but in fact, Stanner and Freud are not so much at odds as Stanner believes. I notice that he omits to acknowledge how his theory of the veils is validated by Freud’s theory of the unconscious.

Freud’s notion of the layers of ‘the mystic writing pad’ is quite similar to Stanner’s notion of ‘the veils’. Henry Schwartz (2009) cites Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) that ‘Freud never developed a theory of time, focusing instead on the problem of memory which he reworked across his life and was never fully expounded’.  

Freud’s essay A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad describes a model for memory where he compares the psyche to a pad comprised of a wax tablet covered by two layers of celluloid. After writing on the upper layer of the pad the writing can be seen inscribed on the middle layer, but after lifting both upper layers only traces of what was written remain in view. However, all that was written is permanently retained at the deepest layer.

Freud used the metaphor of the ‘mystical writing pad’ to represent the layers of the psyche. The wax tablet, like the unconscious, retains all experience. As the present study shows, in the unconscious, a distant memory from past childhood is as powerful as a memory of today. Freud regards the upper layers of the mind, the pre-conscious and the conscious, to have a protective function against stimuli, and also to be the place where experience from the outside world is mediated. These structures protect the mind from being overwhelmed by potential emotionally traumatic experiences, such as seeing or suffering an abusive attack.

In this study, I show how the upper layers of my mind worked to protect me from being overwhelmed by witnessing my kitten being taken by the carpet snake.

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58. ibid., p. 143
The trauma was severe—but hidden. It became an ‘unthought known’ in my unconscious mind. Years later when my lover discovers he has cancer, I discover that I have a hidden traumatic memory, which resonates with his attacking disease. This unthought known becomes known when I express it in a poem.

As I have said earlier, I argue that Freud’s metaphorical notion of the layered transparent celluloid coverings of the unconscious mind has a similarity to Stanner’s notion of the veils, which cover the metaphysical core. Each notion validates the other.

In the process of making the unconscious conscious, the symbolic meanings are revealed. Examples of how symbolic meanings can be shared across cultures, and across the rituals and ceremonies around death and sexuality, are brought forward by Howard Morphy in his Re-reading Ronald Berndt: Exploring the Depths of his Yolngu Ethnography. What emerges is that for the Yolngu, fertility, birth and sexuality are symbolically restored, not only after the ritual of burial has been carried out, but also that these elements are part of the ceremony of the burial. A striking example is the yingapungapu sand sculpture used in mortuary rituals. It can be used in the purification rituals that follow burial, or it can be the main sculpture used in the burial ceremony itself.

In September 2010, I experienced the power of a mortuary ritual, which includes the performance of the creation of a yingapungapu sand sculpture. I recognise and engage with the release of the maggot dance. I watch and see from beneath the veils and with my newly opened eyes, a performance of the Yolngu tragedy Ngurru-Milmarramirriw (Wrong Skin) danced by the Yolngu Chooky Dancers. I see in the dance how there are many strands of mourning interwoven with restorative strands, which celebrate life, love and sexuality. I am inspired and moved by the inevitability of the tragic ending. I think of Stanner and wonder if he would prefer this tale of forbidden love between two young people and the tragic consequence of their ‘wrong skin’ coupling, to the Oedipus myth as a way of thinking about the dilemmas and dangers of incestuous wishes.

In the final poem of this ethnography, Epilogue, I express a strong fusion of images of death, birth and sexuality. The rhythmic movement of the ‘rhythm of the waves / and the sound of the sea’ suggests the rhythms of intercourse and procreation, as well as those of birth and death.

Throughout the evolution of this study, I am a practising psychoanalyst, professionally engaged in introspective conversations with others every day. Part of this work is to turn my gaze inward. The poems reflect this. They may have the quality that I am either free-associating, or conversing with myself. In a sense, the research poems of this study are like a qualitative research interview, which goes beyond language—I interrogate my own process.

1.5 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research as:

A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.67

1.5.1 THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Steinar Kvale, in 1996, wrote extensively about the qualitative research interview:

The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an inter view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.68

Kvale is interested in the psychoanalytic interview as qualitative research. He refers to psychoanalytical knowledge production as ‘an innovative form which has largely remained outside the discussions of scientific method.’69 He regards the psychoanalytic interview ‘where knowledge production is not the primary purpose’, as being ‘the psychological method for providing significant new knowledge about humankind’. He quotes Freud who regarded the therapeutic interview as a research method: ‘It is indeed one of the distinctions of psychoanalysis that research and treatment proceed hand in hand’.70

69. ibid., p. 74
70. Freud, S. (1963) Therapy and Technique, New York, Collier, p. 120.
1.5.2 RESEARCH POETRY

The idea of poetry as a form of qualitative research has been of growing interest during the past two decades. In this section I cite several of these researchers. For example, Faulkner explores the connection between social science research and poetry, arguing against perceptions ‘that poetry is too difficult to use as research, that only poets should be concerned with poetic craft, and that the creation and evaluation of poetry is too mysterious’. Arguing strongly for researchers using poetry in their qualitative research projects she asks the question that is asked of the present study ‘Why use poetry?’. She answers it by referring to Hirschfield’s belief that ‘poetry has an ability to clarify and magnify our human existence’, and cites this author as claiming that,

each time we enter its word woven and musical invocation, we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry’s knowing, and to the increase of existence it brings, unlike any other.

She also quotes Longenbach, who observes that:

A poem’s power inheres less in its conclusions than in its propensity to resist them, demonstrating their inadequacy while moving inevitably toward them... Rather than asking to be justified, poems ask us to exist’. Poetry can be a means to enlarge understanding, resist clear undemanding interpretations, and move closer to what it means to be human.

Richardson considers poetry to be useful ‘when we experience epiphanies in field-work...and we wish to relive the instant, to show a moment of truth’. Similarly, Gonzalez writes poetic ethnography as a way ‘to avoid distorting the nature of what others have shared with me, or the relationships I have developed... traditional academic writing could distort real experience of the dialectic tensions of positive and negative, strong and weak, admirable and shameful’. The notion of direct expression, which reveals without distortion, is important for the present study.

72. ibid., p. 8.
73. ibid., p. 16.
77. Gonzalez, M. C. (2002) Painting the white face red: Intercultural contact through poetic ethnography, Boston, Massachusetts, McGraw-Hill, p. 17
Faulkner\textsuperscript{78} shows how Neilsen furthers this argument: ‘A reader comes away with the resonance of another’s world’. ‘Why do we, as researchers... remain wedded to telling rather than showing or imagining?’\textsuperscript{79}

The present study resonates with the notion of Furman et al.,\textsuperscript{80} also put forward by Faulkner, that ‘Research poetry is a way to tap into universality; the poet uses personal experience to create something which is universally generalisable because the readers see the work as if it were their own.’\textsuperscript{81} This study explores the possible human universal of the response to a significant death by its resonance with the poetry of Yolngu mortuary rituals as well as other poems concerned with death.

My poems are interpreted as personal data: I first immerse myself in the expressive work, and then step aside and observe what I have expressed. At the time of writing, I am in good health and rationally assume that my death will be some time away, so I understand that my set of observations is very different from that of Robert Murphy, who monitors his own slow progression towards death.

Paradoxically, I also know that in my inner world I am not so sure. Sometimes my life seems threatened by Tom’s cancer. Sometimes I want to die with him, so as not to be left behind. While for Tom ‘the cancer gets nearer and nearer’, the carpet snake waits for me ‘with his coils and springs’.

I interpret the meaning of the poems, firstly, by using an analytical reading, based on my training in child, adolescent and adult psychoanalysis, and on my personal experience of psychoanalytic method. I show how this unfolds in practice in \textit{Chapter 5: Exegesis}. Secondly, I take into account that the poems reflect my Australian–European socio-cultural embeddedness; and thirdly, I use a reading in which the data interacts cross-culturally, and brings to the fore apparently universal meanings.

As writer, I view the poems as spontaneous in their expression. I also acknowledge the expression of mourning beyond words. As analyst of the poetic work, I seek to grasp the interweaving of the many voices, the multiple connections, and the different movements and potentials expressed in the poems. I try to tune in to the voices of the many ages of my many selves. I locate myself among the possible understandings of past and present, and bring to the fore what feels most alive and most heartfelt. Underlying processes, for example the trajectories and intense expressions of the underlying mourning process, are important. I have an

\textsuperscript{78.} Faulkner, S. J., op. cit., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{81.} ibid., p. 17.
expectation that there will be, over time, an integration of the primary mourning with the synergistic works. I wait for surprises and the unexpected to turn up.

My understanding has been considerably enlarged by reading and exploring cross-cultural mortuary and mourning rituals, and also by the synergistic works—the ethnographies and poems, which have enabled me to discover a world of meaning, expression and ideas for poems far beyond my expectations.

1.6 **THE CANON OF POETRY IN ENGLISH**

On 11 May 2006, as I am turning over in my mind the challenges of writing about individual mourning in a society that is not quite comfortable about death, I receive an email to let me know that Geoff Page has been invited on to my panel as an external advisor. I am uneasy about this decision. We have not yet met, or discussed this arrangement with each other.

I meet Geoff Page on 15 June 2006. He has already read some of my poems from *Part 1. When Will We Die?* He prefers to discuss the poems individually, and not as part of a connected series. He does not want any background about my research. He is clear that he is ‘for the poems and not for the thesis’. We agree to meet regularly to discuss what I am writing, and to read from the canon of poetry in English.

At our next meeting two weeks later, we begin to read from Geoff’s selection: *80 Great Poems from Chaucer to Now.* We begin with ‘The Oxford Clerk’ from *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. He reads aloud in Middle English in a way which delights me, and makes the Oxford scholar come to life:

> Sonninge in moral vertu was his speche,  
> And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

We engage easily and there is a sense of optimism as we decide on the readings for the next several meetings.

As time goes on I begin to realise that many poets believe that there is no actual direct teaching or learning of poetry: the most important factor is the development of oneself and the freeing of the imagination. The maturation of the writing of poetry happens in part by simply writing poetry—a process of opening up the flow of uncensored feelings, rhythms and images: being surprised, making links to the unthought but unconsciously known.

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Seamus Heaney uses Yeats’ words on the development of poetry:

True poetry, Yeats would declare, had to be the speech of the whole man. It was not sufficient that it be the artful expression of daylight opinion and conviction; it had to emerge from a more profound consciousness and be, in the words of his friend Arthur Symons, the voice of ‘the mystery which lies about us, out of which we have come and into which we shall return’.83

In the spirit of ‘the whole man’, Yeats writes A Bronze Head.84 This poem was written towards the end of his life: Yeats stands in the Dublin Municipal Library in front of Lawrence Campbell’s bronze painted plaster bust of his unrequited yet beloved Maud Gonne, who both inspired and tormented his work.

This poem can be thought of as a conversation Yeats has with himself about Maud Gonne in her imagined presence. The first two stanzas are tributes to her power and presence, even though he and she are ageing. A third stanza begins with an image of beginnings. When he first loved her, he was a starting poet ‘at the starting post, all sleek and new’. What unfolds is his fear of his own wildness, which he sees reflected in her. In his mind’s eye he sees how her wildness and what she must live through to express it has ‘shattered her soul’. He must live through the terrors of expressing his own uncensored wildness, as he becomes the ‘whole man’ through his writing. Through the creation of this poem and via his imagination, he reveals glimpses of his wild but terrified young self:

But even at the starting-post, all sleek and new.
I saw the wildness in her and I thought
A vision of terror that it must live through
Had shattered her soul. Propinquity had brought
Imagination to that pitch where it casts out
All that is not itself: I had grown wild
And wandered murmuring everywhere, ‘My child, my child’.85

This poem casts light on a struggle Geoff Page and I have in our ongoing conversation about my work. When he is faced with seeing me ‘at the starting post’ and is confronted with the wildness and terror of grief unfolding in my poems, like Yeats he is faced with ‘a vision of terror’—with ‘what no one can stand’.

85. ibid.
Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated in 2011 by Mark Harman, also quotes W. B. Yeats:

> we make of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. — Rilke

Harman comments that Rilke’s letters, ‘in which he discloses his unorthodox and often paradoxical ideas about creativity, art, sex, solitude and God, merge rhetoric and poetry’. — Harman

Rilke comments further on the maturation of poets and poems:

> Let your judgments [of your own poems] follow their quiet undisturbed evolution, which like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be pressured or hurried in any way. It’s all about carrying to term and giving birth. To let every impression and every seed of a feeling realise itself on its own, in the dark, in the un conveyable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of your understanding, and to await with deep humility and patience the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is to live artistically, in understanding as in creation.

> Time is no measure there, a year is worthless, and ten years are nothing. To be an artist means not to calculate and not to count; to mature like a tree that does not pressure its sap and stands amid the spring storms with assurance and without the slightest fear that summer might not come. It does come. But it comes only for the patient ones, who stand about as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly still and vast. I learn this every day, learn it amidst considerable pain, for which I am grateful. *Patience* is everything. — Rilke

When I read Rilke’s words, I feel he speaks for me in a way that I cannot speak for myself.

Poetry is also partly ‘learned’ by engaging with the work of poets, such as those whom Geoff Page calls ‘the Great Poets’. I often feel a sense of resonance, such as with William Carlos Williams, and Sylvia Plath. The shaping of a poem can be learned and practiced. We discuss the form, the lines, the rhythms, the metres and the nature of poetry. Awareness of form and meaning in the writing of poetry seems to evolve by practice and experimentation. The forms of my poems change with this awareness. I join the Canberra poets, and attend poetry readings.

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87. ibid., p. 1.
88. ibid., p.41.
Many of the poems Geoff Page chooses are deeply engaging. He is also clearly inspired by what he reads. Occasionally a strong sense of irony emerges, such as when we read:

Weston wynde, when wyll thou blow
The small rayne down can rayne.
Cryst if my love were in my armys,
And I yn my bed agayne.\(^{89}\)

The irony reflects the absence of connection in our conversation between the expression of the poet’s longing, and what I am studying and expressing in my own poems. Not unexpectedly, in this poem about a lost love, I make a powerful internal link and go off to write 39. \textit{Return}:

I hear in my mind’s ear
the carpet snake, coiling
and uncoiling in his forked
bed...

Geoff Page is sometimes responsive to my wish to engage with death. He suggests \textit{Aubade}, a poem by Philip Larkin in which the poet talks about his fear of dying.\(^{90}\) He follows this by Larkin’s \textit{Explosion}, also about death and loss following an explosion in a mine.\(^{91}\)

A kind of ‘apprenticeship’ to Geoff Page begins. I do not know certain things at the start, which I gradually learn in a series of revelations. This ‘apprenticeship’ reminds me that, like Proust,\(^ {92}\) my poetic imagination is not only or not mainly oriented to the past and the discoveries of memory, stimulated by the intensity of feelings around the grieving process, but to the future and the progress of an ‘apprenticeship’. Also like Proust (as described by Deleuze) the poetic work is:

given a rhythm, not simply by the contributions or sediments of memory, but by a series of discontinuous disappointments and also by the means employed to overcome them within each series.\(^ {93}\)


Disappointment is there from the start. Geoff’s position is that he is ‘for the poems and not for the thesis’. He is quite focused on my development as a poet. He believes that if I am to develop as a poet I must write about a range of topics. I ‘must get off death’. I understand his point, and respect his position. I attempt to write about something else, but know it is too soon after Tom’s death. I must express my grief. I experience his advice as a repeated silencing injunction, which sets up a situation of mutual disappointment. I cannot get off death and he finds it hard to tolerate my repeated poems around the same topic. We both search for a way out. The dilemma precipitates a crisis in my poetic work around the time of the first anniversary of Tom’s death. During this period, my disappointment becomes such that my poetry dries up. For a time, I stop writing altogether. I try desperately to remain in control of my poetic process. To safeguard this process, I need to retain the sense of authorship of my work. I try to keep in my mind that Geoff Page is on my panel as a source, and not in any way intended as a determining influence over my work. I struggle to ensure that I maintain the integrity of my own direction, and do not become overly influenced.

My expression—now that the poems have dried up—struggles to find a way out. I begin a collage. I talk to my colleague Moira who makes a very valuable comment that I go away and think about. She says:

Your work makes me cry.

I know immediately that within this comment is the clue to why Geoff Page is backing off from my work. It has embedded within it what the Yolngu traditionally describe as Nathī—‘womens’ business’: the aspect of the work in which the emotion is embodied.

My background in psychoanalysis helps me reflect. I need to continue writing. I turn further to philosophy to help me think a way out of my dilemma. Howard suggests Deleuze. In time, I have an idea for a way out—I will attempt to change the subject, but to a related subject which will allow the mourning to continue.

In order to change the subject without cutting too deeply across the mourning process, I need to discover concepts for how expression occurs, and also concepts to help me think about time, and how the past returns: for example, how is it that for me the carpet snake returns when the cancer is announced? Can I still mourn if I change the subject? What of my primary images? Will the carpet snake still return if I change the subject?

94. See Appendix 1: *The Snake*, p. 204.
I turn to Deleuze to discover what he says about the possibilities of expressing the past in the present in different ways. Todd May, in 2005, offered an account of how Deleuze, in 1983, brought together ideas from Spinoza, Bergson and Nietzsche, to show how in the process of becoming, expressive substance returns from the past, and folds, unfolds and refolds, as it is actualised in the present. He describes this process as much like Japanese origami:

there is a folding and unfolding in time, in which that which folds, unfolds, and refolds is a past that is never gone.

The dilemma now becomes how to find another ‘fold’ to help me to resume my expressive flow. My writing has still ceased. To help me restore the flow, I continue to work on the collage of how I experience the situation: a baby swan swallowed by a carpet snake (Appendix 1). As the collage develops, the lower part of the snake fragments into a cloud of cut-up pieces of blue silk. It is as if it explodes into pieces, which I believe are the unwritten poems. I feel somewhat released by this. There must be a way out. I reflect on the images in the collage: the baby swan (the poetic work) has been crushed and devoured by the carpet snake (the dilemma caused by the silencing prohibition ‘you must get off death’). The snake (the dilemma) is exploded (solved) by the solution—try another fold.

In early December 2006, I come across the concept of ‘line of flight’. I read in Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus, the notions of:

- shaking up the verb ‘to be’ and replacing it with the conjunction and... and...
- and, and then—lines of flight... experimentation... and having a small plot of new land at all times.

Todd May clarifies:

a line of flight is not a flight from reality, but a flight within it. It does not create from nothing, but rather experiments with difference.

I decide to take a line of flight—and imagine a series, Black Swan, about the old man who lives around the lake.

In late December 2006, I begin to write Part 2, Black Swan. After these poems are written, I need to reorient myself and step aside to see where I am. I find myself entering a liminal place. The poems of transition are grouped in Part 3: Change of Season. In these poems, I find my way back to the grieving process.

In August 2007, at the second anniversary of Tom’s death, I write an anniversary poem: 72. *Waiting for Death*. Not long after this comes the First Year Conference where I deliver a paper outlining my research. In it, I show how my poems reflect a discontinuous trajectory of a mourning process, and how this fits with the notion of reflexive ethnography. Geoff Page hears my paper, and for the first time hears me read my own poetic work aloud. He hears two poems about death—in context. They are poems in which I am raw, vulnerable. Paul Pickering is at the helm. He quietly but strongly holds the process and is the first to speak. He validates the work.

Geoff Page does not challenge me. This occasion has freed us. He is now ‘for the thesis as well as for the poems’. We begin to work more easily together. The ‘apprenticeship’ is maturing. Within a few days we work on 71. *Namadji*. By the end of 2007 I have completed *Part 4. Waiting for Death*.

By December 2008, Geoff Page has for some time suggested that my work has a resonance with William Carlos Williams and e e cummings. We discuss these poets, along with Ezra Pound, in relation to the line—or the broken line—as a unit of thought. Geoff Page summarises:

> Pound regards the line as a unit of thought, while WCW was clearly interested in the disjunctive effects one can get by seeming to lineate ...arbitrarily. cummings’ free verse is interesting to look at in this context.

He gives me a copy of his verse novel *The Scarring* (1999). I spend a whole day reading it and feel that we understand each other better.

I begin to write *Part 5. Scrub Turkey* in July 2008. I have now regained autonomy over my work. The ‘apprenticeship’ has transformed into a more facilitative relationship. Geoff Page is more of a mentor. He says: ‘Sue, you are becoming more iambic’.

I have a sense that what he means is that my recent poems have a more recognisable form and an iambic metre. My grief is passing and so my poems are not so raw. I agree with his view that readers will find them easier to bear than the earlier poems of heartbreak and carpet snakes.

In the same month, I hear that I am accepted as a member of the Australian Anthropological Society.

I write *Epilogue*. By December 2008, my poetic work is completed.

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CHAPTER 2

The Search for a Genre
2.1 Overview of the Thesis Structure

The structure of my thesis is, by intent, not organised to show the clear, logical, linear and systematic development of a mourning process. This is partly because of the discontinuous nature of my mourning, but also because of the evolving choice of a genre to accommodate the ebb and flow of an unconscious dimension.

The poetic work of my ethnography begins in 2005 as one series: *When Will We Die?* By mid-2007, my poems fall into two series. The first directly facilitates the expression, and traces the trajectory, of an experience of grief and mourning. The second series is written in response to a selection of cross-cultural synergistic works, such as the poetry of mortuary rituals, which evoke symbols and images around death.

By the end of 2008, my poetic work forms a single, connected but intermittent flow of poems, which falls into five parts: *When Will We Die? Black Swan, Change of Season, Waiting for Death,* and *Scrub Turkey*—plus an *Epilogue.*

There are many interwoven strands—for example, the discourse of what is *not* to be talked about. I am not to express my fear of being crushed or attacked by a predator, or my fear of death. These fears are so deeply silenced that they become pushed out of sight and stored in my unconscious mind as ‘unthought known’. The poems about the carpet snake are a way of giving voice to what was previously forbidden and not to be said aloud.

I think of the ‘completed’ life and the ‘interrupted’ life. Although in one sense Tom’s death came too soon, in another, there is a sense of completion because of how he died, with so much thought and preparation, and because he fought a valiant fight.

The ethnography is both an avenue of expression, and an exploration of newly integrated concepts and images from the synergistic work. It includes assimilation of past images, which repeat in the present and have multiple meanings, such as the images from the rainforest. These meanings are not constant, and come in and out of consciousness. The methodology that evolves provides structure and ‘backbone’ for the work.

My original intention to use the poems simply as an avenue of expression, as in *When Will We Die?* gives way in the later poems to the conscious wish to reveal unconscious meaning, not only to myself, but equally, to communicate something heartfelt to the heart and mind of the reader as, for example, in *Waiting for Death.*
2.2 **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, ETHNOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH POETRY: THE SEARCH FOR A GENRE**

The poems are clearly connected to me at many levels of my consciousness. They have their source in my unconscious process. I am inside the poetic work when I am writing. The impact of the synergy of the poems with the cross-cultural ethnographies is internal—it happens in the mind and the imagination. I write from inside and venture outside to observe. Herein lies the reflexive element: the awareness of the fact that the researcher influences the research, which in turn influences the creative process.

By March 2009, it becomes clear that although there is a reflexive element, this study is more internally focused and centred than reflexive ethnography. As with the work of Daniel Hall and Donald Hall, Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Hewett, Christopher Reid, Robert Murphy, and Ruth Behar this study is concerned with the transformation and expression of the thoughts and feelings of unconscious processes. The expressions of these unconscious thoughts and feelings are the 'data' of the ethnography. The internal world through which the social environment is seen and reacted to is the 'field'. To the extent that the work of these writers and also my study are ethnographies, with aspects of the self as the central characters or subjects, they are autoethnographies.

In my autoethnography the research poems, which reflect inner experience, are the data of the research. Ellis and Bochner, in 2000, described autoethnography as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’.¹ Because this study is a recording of inner experience, the reflexivity involves me, as writer getting outside myself so that I can see my poetry and myself more objectively. This is a reversal of the usual definition of the process of reflexive ethnography, in which the anthropologist/writer places herself inside the picture in order to reveal her own bias or her own position.

This study challenges the notion of a simple ‘layering of consciousness’ in its exploration of the functioning of unconscious processes. It sets out to explore the unconscious dimension of my personal process, which is not adequately covered in any of the above definitions of autoethnography. This exploration of the unconscious also includes concepts of thinking and dreaming, and how dream-thoughts can be used to contain and process experience. I look to the Yolngu crying ceremonies for inspiration about the expression of the painful intensity of grief. Prendergast,² used the words of Clough who imagines the working of the unconscious and its

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connection to poetry. As in the present study, there is a notion of surprise, or of something not previously thought about being revealed:

The unconscious is a turning—not so much the subject’s turning in, looking at herself but a turning around of vision so to see the other side of the scene—the other side of seeing...

Flores was an early researcher using poetry in qualitative research in anthropology. She says of her use of ‘field poetry’:

I did not do the same things... I had to attend to the relation between selves ... and to the concerns of our common humanity. Finally, I created for myself new and deeper understandings of my own being...

Poetry used in qualitative research has been given a variety of names. Poetry in anthropology has been referred to as ethnographic or anthropological poetics.

Prendergast, in 2009, compiled an extensive annotated bibliography of the use of poetry in qualitative research and found forty different labels that researchers used to describe their work. She adopts ‘poetic inquiry’ as an umbrella term to encapsulate the diversity of poetic forms and labels. She speaks of worlds to be discovered through poetry.

Poetry is used as a tool and method for presentation of research data, as a source of data, and as a source for data analysis. Prendergast argues that the majority of the work uses researcher-voiced poems, which emphasise the experience of the poet-researcher using field notes, journals and reflective writing as data for the poems.

Faulkner, also in 2009, reviewed a sample of poet-researcher’s work, their goals for using poetry, and the process they follow when constructing poetry. She discovered that ‘many poet-researchers consider poetry as an excellent means to present data

9. ibid., p. 541.
about the human experience and consider poetry an ideal way to capture and present this experience in a more easily "consumable," powerful, emotionally poignant, and accurate form than prose research reports.10

Saldana argues for the use of drama and poetry in the qualitative research method.11 He acknowledges Wolcott, who also reflects on the parallels between art and ethnography.12 Saldana expresses a notion that in order for ‘the drama of everyday life to be faithfully reproduced’ it is necessary to find ‘the poetry in everyday language so that it may inspire the evocative monologue and dialogue’.13

Behar, writing in 2008, uses anthropological poetry to allow for the experience of ‘the emotionally wrenching ways in which we attain knowledge of others and ourselves... the most charged intellectual insights occur precisely when one’s ethnographic work and one’s life crash into each other in a head-on collision’.14 The present study takes Behar’s notion one step further and searches for the unthought known in the emotional wrenching pain.

Brady uses the term ‘ethnopoetics’ to describe his style of writing ethnographic poetry.15 He deals with understanding using rational thought, as does Leggo who puts forward a notion:

That everything is constructed in language: our experiences are all epistemologically and ontologically composed and understood in words, our words and other’s words.16

Faulkner shows that Leggo’s question—‘How do I know what I know?’—frames his use of poetry in educational research.17 She says that ‘he uses autobiographic poetry to be open to process, to mystery, to fragmentation and understanding because there is much we don’t know and can’t possibly know and control’.18

This question often hovers over the present study. However, there is a difference. This study does not assume that meaning is only constructed verbally. It is informed by inner resources beyond, and developmentally earlier than, words. The ‘language’

17. ibid., p. 166.
of my poems is often communicated in feelings or images—not words. I transform the raw grief into unconscious elements of experience that can be linked to generate dream-thoughts. The dream-thought is the meaning. The poems are linked dream-thoughts. The present study reveals a non-verbal epistemology.

The unthought known is first discovered and then verbally expressed. There is also a broader view of ‘words’ implicit in a statement by Leggo, put forward by Faulkner,\(^{19}\) there is no separating the personal from the professional.\(^{20}\) The present study supports this notion.

Over time, ethnographic research poems are spoken about as a genre. Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor propose that ethnographic poetry—’one of many vibrant new styles of anthropological scholarship’ is already a genre that is established and growing.\(^{21}\) I am not yet satisfied that this genre covers what I need for my study. The present study needs a more elastic genre.

Denzin in 1997, describes ethnopoetics and narratives of the self as ‘messy texts’ because they are multi-voiced and no one interpretation is privileged. ‘The poetic self is simply willing to put itself on the line and take risks... Messy texts make the writer part of the writing project’.\(^{22}\)

Pelias, in 2005, also, referred to the poetic self ‘putting itself on the line’ and, further, making the writer part of the writing project as ‘performance writing’.\(^{23}\) In an earlier publication, Pelias (2004) stated that ‘my search for form is an autobiographical quest that uses the data of everyday life, real and imagined to articulate self, to find a self’s centre’.\(^{24}\) This use of ‘the data of everyday life’, be it real or imagined, resonates closely with the present study.

Many of the studies to which Faulkner and others refer point to a way forward that I have already taken up in my study. My study looks ‘beneath the veils’, as suggested by Stanner in 1966, to discover the unconscious connections.\(^{25}\) As mentioned earlier, Ruth Behar focuses on the collision of conscious and unconscious connections, when she states her belief that ‘the most charged intellectual (my italics) insights

\(^{19}\) ibid.
\(^{20}\) Leggo, C., op. cit., p. 91.
\(^{24}\) Pelias, R. J. (2004) A methodology of the heart: Evoking academic and daily life, Walnut Creek, California, Altamira, p. 71.
occur precisely when one’s ethnographic work and one’s life crash into each other...”.26

In Behar’s terms, my study begins after the crash. Mount Nebo is Big and Dark tells me that a crash has happened. I am surprised that it tells me that it happened the first time when the snake took my kitten, and it is now about to happen again. The cancer is almost upon us. My unconscious mind responds to the sudden pain and violent shock of the anticipated loss. As I write the poems, which press upon my conscious mind with great urgency, I learn more about what I already know but have not been able to think about. I now see that I am writing poetry as an autoethnography of my world of unconscious meaning—the world of my dream-thoughts.

2.3 AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND DUALITY: THE IMAGE OF THE SNAKE—MENACE AND POWER

‘Look at how beautiful he is. Look at the sun on his scales’.

My father tries to coax his small daughter closer. He hopes to quieten my terror of the ‘harmless’ carpet snake. He later tells me playfully that I was born in the Chinese year of the Dragon, and that I may well be a distant relative of the snake.

This is my first memory of my father’s huge carpet snake-companion with the generic name: Joe Blake. He is a diamond python, housed in the farm shed where my father is working on the genetics of producing the perfect tomato. He is sheltered in the shed in return for hunting mice and bush rats. As I mentioned earlier, I am always fearful of carpet snakes, believing that they lie coiled in trees waiting for small animals like rats or possums or little girls to walk underneath.

The images and sensations of the vivid carpet snake memories form a kind of ongoing experience, which moves in and out of my imagination, and so in and out of the ethnography. This harbinger of death seems to have been present in my awareness from a very young age. It may leave my awareness for extended periods, but as this ethnography shows, it reappears, in a different guise, in times of stress or crisis.

There is a strange paradox running through the imagery of the carpet snake—it is seen at different times as either attacker or protector. It is quite striking how my perception of the carpet snake changes as I struggle in my ‘apprenticeship’ to maintain my autonomy. Around this time, I make a collage, which both invokes the

protective power of the carpet snake and also expresses my vulnerability to its attack (Appendix 1). Most significant of all, as the collage shows—it frees me!

By the end of April 2009, I have begun to determine the genre I am using. It is at this time I come across Zygmund Bauman’s Afterthought, in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edition). Bauman quotes Milan Kundera, writing in 1986:

> To write means for the poet to crush the wall behind which something ‘that was always there’ hides.\(^{27}\)

I feel that Kundera’s words eloquently allude to my poems and my collage. At this moment, his words illuminate my dilemma. The collage and the subtext of my poems reveal something unbearable. Something not able to be simply ‘said’ in words. I have freed myself with an image of violent action. I have symbolically blown the carpet snake apart!

Have I found my genre? To create a genre that allows for the crushing of walls in the interest of discovering what is inside could seem like collapsing a wall to expand the genre of autoethnography and ethnographic poetry so as to include a psychology of the unconscious. Is this the new unknown territory to be explored? Perhaps. But what about the violence in the image—is this the method of the carpet snake? The method of my collage? I remember the yingapungapu and the joyous maggots, and say to myself that this is the method of the imagination: to free the spirit and let it fly to where it is going.

### 2.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: META-AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By May 2009, I have read Carolyn Ellis’ newly published *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*, and discover her notion of meta-autoethnography, ‘a model to reflectively make sense of experience’.\(^{28}\) Carolyn Ellis and I share the aim of making sense of experience using self-reflection but we are in different domains. She is reflecting from within the domain of consciousness. My contribution is to push beyond consciousness to reveal not only the ‘perceptual surface’ between the preconscious and the unconscious,\(^ {29}\) but also to reveal the unconscious dream-thoughts,\(^ {30}\) and unthought known.\(^ {31}\)


By May 2009, I have many new questions about presenting my work. I have found a genre that encompasses the immediacy of writing ethnographic research poems, but I think about a second immediacy: the need to write an autoetnography in which I bring the poems into the present, and at the same time integrate and analyse them. It is now three and a half years since Tom’s death. In a sense I am partially rewriting the mourning process. As I struggle with this, I see that a similar struggle is described in Revision, where Carolyn Ellis reflects on meta-autoethnography:

To connect the past to my life now, I add current reflections, narrative vignettes, and analyses, which I call meta-ethnographies, that fast forward these stories to the present. My meta-authoethnographic treatments provide opportunities to alter the frame in which I wrote the original story, ask questions I didn’t ask then, consider other’s responses to the original story, include vignettes … that have happened since I wrote the story … that affect the way I look back ….

Here, Ellis clarifies some of the possibilities of meta-autoethnography:

My goal is to turn the narrative snapshots I have written in the past into a form more akin to a video—a text in motion—one in which I drag and drop in new experiences as well as revised interpretations of old storylines, then reorder and thus restory them… to model a way to reflectively make sense of experience—using hindsight to follow the thread back into the labyrinth.

Ellis does not elaborate on the image of the labyrinth, but leaves it to tease the reader’s imagination. I wonder if my study is an exploration of following threads back to ‘the labyrinth’—defined in the New Oxford Dictionary as ‘a complicated irregular network of passages or paths in which it is difficult to find one’s way’. I think this idea is expressed in 40. Afternoon Stillness:

The childhood memories
are in the granite boulders,
the hoop pine planted
when I was born,
and the strangler figs
that are the same figs.
I sit on the front steps

33. ibid., p. 13.
As I revise and reconstruct the poems, and write the analysis of the poems, I am aware that what I am constructing is from my current experience, and that it is, as Ellis describes, ‘always partial, incomplete, and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose to a particular audience ... changing yet continuous and coherent’.\(^{35}\)

### 2.5 Poems as a Mode of Action

From the beginning, it is clear that my poems have relative autonomy. They arise spontaneously, and have a life of their own. They sustain an expressive feeling flow which, most of the time, connects one to the other, and to my grieving process. The words give the poems shape, but often emerge after the expression of powerful feelings and images. The words can run out, as they did before the carpet snake collage released them. The poems are concerned with action: they have work to do—grief work. They find a way into and through, and finally a way out of, my mourning process. Sometimes they seem connected and flowing, while sometimes they seem to spring up like new blades of wallaby grass after a bush fire—growing spontaneously side by side out of the black stubble and ashes mingled with the fertile Mount Nebo soil from the place of my childhood. At other times, the stanzas seem to cluster like pebbles on a shallow part of the creek bed, each pebble having a tinge of colour reflected from all the other pebbles—all the colours of grief.

Christopher Reid (2009) (whose work is mentioned earlier) is described by Ben Hoyle as writing ‘...a quietly devastating volume of poetry written as a tribute to the poet’s dead wife’ and ‘mined from the deepest of personal sorrows’.\(^{36}\) He quotes Reid as saying: ‘I think she knew I was bound to turn to the only thing I could do to make sense of it’.\(^{37}\) Reid’s poems, although apparently contained, are concerned with action. They have work to do in the sense of containing and steadying the expressive path of grief. Adam Newey says:

> These are calm, careful, coolly self-contained poems, but they invite the reader in without reserve. If there’s a sense of something being worked out here, Reid’s engagement with the process of bereavement, as both husband and

\(^{35}\) Ellis, C., op. cit., p. 13.


poet, only helps to prove the aptness of Donne’s dictum, that “Grief brought to
numbers cannot be so fierce, / For he tames it that fetters it in verse”.

Newby also says: ‘Reid’s poetry has always delighted in confounding expectations’.
I argue that this poetry exposes a grief that is rarely tame. A poignant example is:
‘I listened to her undress, / then slide along the far side / of our bed and lift the
covers. / Of course, I’d forgotten she’d died’. Surely, this poetry, at its core, sobs
heartbreak. I would argue that at a superficial level, the dominant text of this poetry
may appear ‘cool’, but at a deeper level, beneath the veils, the sobs are easily heard.
As reader, I am shaken by the subtext. In my view herein lies the hot thrust of the
expressive work of the poem.

In March 2009, Howard Morphy introduces me to a dialogue around Alfred Gell’s
book Art and Agency. He draws my attention to the debate about agency. While
there is agreement about the position of an action-oriented perspective on art, it
can be said that Gell’s argument ‘deflects attention away from human agency by
attributing agency to the ceremonial or installation objects themselves. It is [further]
argued [by Morphy], ‘that ...aesthetics and semantics—are integral to understanding
art as a way of acting in the world...’

The present study shows intention and agency in how I use my poems. I write
poems to create a framework to express grief and loss, and equally, to try to
understand, contain and regulate the flow of emotion. Poems as aesthetic creative
works, because they carry meaning, can be used as a mode of action—a way of
intervening in the unconscious world to facilitate transformation in an individual
mourning process. There is no evidence to suggest that the poems themselves have
agency. They have relative autonomy and evocative power, but not agency.

There is a striking synergy between my poetic process as the primary mourner,
and the ceremonial mortuary rituals of a group of primary mourners, as in the
Yolngu. The singing, the dance and body painting are known by Yolngu to affect
the journey of the soul of the dead person. In both cases ‘meaning—in the sense of
“unthought thought”—pre-exists action and indeed is one of the things that makes
action possible’.

As I think more about Yolngu society ‘with art at its centre’, and become more
familiar with Yolngu mortuary rituals, I recognise the extent to which I am moved
by the power of Yolngu poetic expressions: not only in mortuary rituals, but also
in the poetry of the songlines that express the deep attachment to country and
landscape. The poetry of love of country, which is structured into Yolngu society

and ritual, is synergistic to my own deep attachment to Mount Nebo and my life in the Queensland rainforest where I was born. I am often surprised at how strongly I carry the landscape of that life and the place of my birth with me into any new experience.

As I immerse myself in this study, I discover the striking synchronicity between my past experience at Mount Nebo as it echoes back and forth, and the present, as it presents itself through what I am feeling, reading and imagining. *Part 5. Scrub Turkey, 97.* Friday plays with images of past and present, and how I imagine my life emerges out of death:

> In the beginning is death
> and then fear: a lily born
> from a place of parting
> into a rich tropical loneliness.

It also reveals my delight in seeing in action a nurturing parent like the scrub turkey:

> In the morning is mist
> and then a rustle
> and a grunt—

> the scrub turkey
> works on his mound
> talks to himself
> checks the warmth, careful of new life.

The poems of *Scrub Turkey* emphasise my connection to Mount Nebo, with its old forest trees shading the inhabitants of the dark mulchy earth. As I read about the ‘spiritual presence of ancestral forces in the land’, I recognise difference, but I also recognise a common belief in the connection of country and birthplace as a belief, which crosses cultural boundaries.  

41 I will later show how connections to country and landscape intertwine in Yolngu mortuary rituals in a way that resonates with my own implicit belief system and my use of poetry as ritual.

41. *ibid.*, p. 3.
2.6 THE UNCONSCIOUS DIMENSION AND THE DYNAMIC FIELD

As I move through the process of this thesis, I absorb new ideas and think more about relationship to country in an indigenous sense. I am moved by The Pilot’s Funeral, which shows the traditional Yolngu burial of Adrian Wagg, a helicopter pilot who had worked with the Yolngu, in a very significant way, by establishing homeland settlements. He was adopted into the Mangalili clan, and his country is the saltwater country. He has a yingapungapu ceremony and a crying ceremony, followed by a burial in a Larrakitj coffin painted with stories of the currents, the waves and the tides of his country. As I watch and take in the power of this and other ceremonies—such as Howard Morphy’s Yilpara Funeral and Curtis Levy’s documentary of a Tiwi funeral, Mourning for Mangatopi—I have a sense of synergy of ceremony and music and dance, which I take into my poems.

By the end of May 2009, it has crystallised that the original contribution of this study arises from its exploration, through the use of ethnographic poems, to glimpse beneath Stanner’s ‘so many veils’, and Ogden’s ‘frontier’ to reveal Bollas’s ‘unthought known’, and to process the unconscious daytime dream-thoughts—Bion—while expressing Magowan’s Melodies of Mourning. The focus of this study is the dynamic field of the unconscious dimension of a mourning process.

As I think more deeply about the nature of my ‘field’, I read how Susan Bennett, in her 2009 online handout for Susan Bennett’s Autoethnography Workshop, quotes Wittgenstein:

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity (Wittgenstein).

Bennett’s definition of autoethnography is: ‘the study of the awareness of self within a culture’. If I put her definition together with Wittgenstein’s words, I arrive at a notion of the duality of what can be consciously known, and what is hidden from consciousness and is only unconsciously known.

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44. ibid. p. 17.
45. Morphy, H. & Deveson, P. (2009) Yilpara Funeral: A Film in Four Parts, Canberra, Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Australian National University.
47. Magowan, F. (2007) Melodies of Mourning: Music and Emotion in Northern Australia, Crawley, Western Australia, University of Western Australia Press.
It is not unusual for writers to comment on being surprised when they become aware of what spontaneously emerges from the ‘frontier’ of their preconscious and unconscious minds. Patrick White, in his memoir *Flaws in the Glass*, writes:

> I sometimes wonder how much of my life has been mistaken...I never re-read my books once I have corrected the proof, but if for some specific reason I have to open one and glance at a paragraph or two, I am struck by an element which must have got into them while I was under hypnosis. On one level certainly, there is a recognizable collage of personal experience, on another little of the self I know. This unknown is the man the interviewers, the visiting professors, the thesis writers expect to find, and because I am unable to produce him I have given up receiving them. I don't want to pretend to be me... the characters of whom I am composed cannot include those not yet revealed to me.⁴⁹

Taking these ideas one step further, I realise that a sense of the ‘self I do not know’ can be discovered within the poems I am creating. Within the duality of Bennett’s notion, I have my ‘field’. As I experience being ‘in’ this field, I become aware of the powerful dynamics experienced in moving between that which can be consciously known, and that which is hidden from consciousness. I am aware of the impact of the synergistic process colouring all my experiences. I am aware, not only of Chaucer and the canon of English poetry, but other poems inside and outside the Western tradition, particularly other experimental poetry, and also the power and music of Yolngu and other cross-cultural work and ideas. I am changed by the experience. I am freed and expanded. My poetic work has expanded. I feel more open to myself, and more appreciative of difference and a bigger world. As I relinquish overt control of the inner life of the poems, and allow the expressive process to take over, I am able to step aside and observe, in Stanner’s terms, the nature of what is revealed by glimpsing beneath the veils, which lie ‘between the observer and that mystery which is phrased analogically’.⁵⁰ This ‘unveiling’ is played out in the *Epilogue* as the connections of birth, pulsing aliveness and death.

This glimpsing beneath the veils, in Stanner’s terms, allows the emergence of what Christopher Bollas referred to in 1987 as the ‘unthought known, as I have already discussed.⁵¹,⁵² Through the text of the poems, some of the previously unthought thoughts are discovered and understood. However, in later poems, these thoughts emerge touched by the metamorphosis I have undergone in the synergistic process in which I have immersed myself. I have been liberated by the freeing of structures and rhythms in cross-cultural ceremonies, including crying ceremonies, and

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⁵¹. ibid.
in the poems of raw grief, such as those created by Donald Hall.\textsuperscript{53} Through live performances and documentaries, I have moved to the beat and the music of the indigenous rituals.

I acknowledge the tradition of Yolngu poets and songwriters. I am struck by the meticulous ceremonial care taken with the body of the dead person, and the concern for the journey of the soul carrying the spirit to its destination, such as that described in Howard Morphy and Pip Deveson’s \textit{Yilpara Funeral}.\textsuperscript{54} Each clan group has its own dance as the mourners approach the body in the shade. I am struck by how sympathetic the Yolngu ceremony is to my ideal ceremony for Tom, and how close their philosophical position is to my own implicit position. In retrospect, I long for Tom to have had a more energetic funeral that cared for the journey of his soul and spirit, and which was more inclusive of the whole social group. For myself, I would have liked a crying ceremony to gather me up with all the sadness of the world embracing my grief and sharing my tears.

I see the intensity of the mourner’s grief in Curtis Levy’s film of a Tiwi mortuary ritual.\textsuperscript{55} In the Yolngu and Tiwi ceremonies, I see how the rhythms of the songlines seem to pulse through the bodies of the mourners. The Yolngu and Tiwi mourners have their bodies painted. I recognise the cross-hatching on the Yolngu. I see how movement and spirit and emotion lead art and poetic expression. I also see that sometimes at the close of ceremonies, veils are replaced with protective intent. Now that my acute grief is passing I find myself, at times, wanting the freedom to forget.

Experimentation is important to me. I build up a sense of what may be possible for my poetic development. I know that through writing the poems and this thesis, I have connected creatively with many cross-cultural traditions, and dreamed or written poems expressing this connection. I have embraced the energy of thousands of years of Yolngu, and other indigenous Australians’ poetic and singing traditions. The Yolngu tradition is alive and continuing. I remind myself that I am not caught within an English tradition or even a Western tradition. I can experiment. I am free to get on with ‘writing the poems I want to write’.\textsuperscript{56}

In putting together Bennett’s definition of autoethnography with Wittgenstein’s thoughts about what is hidden, I can expand the notion of ‘partly hidden self within a culture’, to be ‘self, partly hidden, within many cultures’. I have learned about the power of ritual, and of poems as poetic ritual in a mourning process. I can experiment with difference, and embrace a full expressive process of grieving through my poems.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Morphy, H. & Deveson, P. (2009), op. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Levy, C., op. cit.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER 3

An ‘Apprentice’ Poet
When Will We Die?

Reflections on the Birth of a Book of Poems

The loss of the beloved is the true subject of poetry—

FAIZ AHMED FAIZ

Meeting Geoff Page

11 May 2006

An email arrives from Debjani saying she has spoken with Geoff Page about being my external advisor:

While he’s agreeable in principle, he wants to see samples of your poetry before he gives his formal assent. Can you send him some of your work at the email below?
geoff page@ozemail.com.au

I think definitely not and email offering to come to meet with him and to bring some work.

He says NO SEND THE WORK

I think NO this is impossible
And then remember that
I must not be
Faint-hearted.
You come from a family of footballers
DO NOT BE FAINT HEARTED
I AM STERN WITH MY SELF
Speaking in my engine driver’s voice.

So by now I am
Shitting myself
One could say
How can I
Send naked glimpses of myself
To a man I have
Never met.

I send the work
Feeling foolish
My work is so young
Mount Nebo is Big and Dark
He’ll think it’s childish.
I send the work
He’s busy
Being a big shot
At the writers’ festival

I send the work
and get no reply

for days
and a week

Two weeks

Sunday, 21 May 2006    An email at last.

I have looked through your poems
and scribbled a little on them
I could send them to your street address
He says
Or would you like to MEET me

Of course
I’d like to meet you I reply
Could it be on a Thursday?
After my seminar
Say 11.30 or 12... .

11 he says
messing up my seminar,
on the 15 June
after the writer’s festival.
At The Gods.

I do not know what THE GOD’S are
I feel that I should know
It must be where the POETS hang out.
At first I think to myself
I could ask Debjani
Or Moira. They’ll know.

Again, to myself, sternly: Ask him!
I email:
Where are the Gods? I ask

In the University Quadrangle
At ANU
OK.

Another email
Would I like the scribbled on poems
Before I meet him.

NO!! I scream to myself.
Not before I meet him.
And email back:
Yes, thank you.
But resolve not to read his scribbles.

The scribbled on poems come
the night before I am to meet him
I read them
And discover he is quite tender with my poems.
Calm down. It’s all right.

7 am, Thursday 15 June 2006

The airport;
A sweat of anxiety.
11AM is four hours away
I feel sick.
I haven’t eaten.

There is fog
All the planes are cancelled till midday.
I find his number
Phone him
He is not too put out
Doesn’t blame me
This afternoon at 2.15.
At the Gods

But, what do you look like?
He says.
I have no idea what I look like.
I look down to check.
I am wearing my nice Arche boots
Can’t mention them—

I have a plum coloured
scarf, I say to him.

I am big with a lot of white hair
He says
And a blue shirt.

He’s a poet
he knows
What he looks like.

I arrive
Early
At the Gods
He is not there
I buy coffee and wait
I watch the door
He enters from the balcony
Immediately recognisable
I stand up
Hold out my hand
And almost drop my coffee
at his feet,
Splash his partner
Alison, who smiles kindly
And briefly stays to meet me
Then leaves.
You’re not a competent poet you know
Says Geoff
I know, I say
Quite excited to be described
As a poet
Even an incompetent one.

It takes a while, you know
Says Geoff,
How long do we have?
I say I am part time
And I wait for him to say it takes a lifetime
And I have left my run
too late.

He goes on
to what is troubling him:
Where do the poems fit?
An appendix, a footnote?

THEY ARE THE HEART
OF THE THESIS, I say.

All right, he says:
If we work at it
You could be competent in three years.
Looks at me
I can only offer you two hours a week
He says
Surely my eager ears are
deceiving my heart.

Two hours a week!!!
We’ll start with Chaucer
And then do a depressed woman:
Sylvia Plath.
My heart begins to sing.
He sets up a time to meet me.
You can come with me
to the Dead Poets’ Dinner
he says.

I am so unsure
So happy and so confused.
He is very sure of himself as a poet.
He is also quite aggressive with me.
He may be contemptuous about
psychoanalysis. I won’t mention it.
But so far he is respectful with the work.
Will this hold?
Will he be too brutal with the Tom poems.
What if I can’t stand
how he is with my work?

I am struggling. I try to take control of the situation.

Would you be on my panel I say
And if something terrible happens
Like we don’t like each other,
Or we can’t work together
You can go off my panel.
Yes, he says, that will be
How we’ll do it.

Send me some more poems.

On the way back to Sydney, later that day, I write Not a Poet.

22 June 2006

Geoff and I do not meet. I am wondering which poems I dare send. It is
like entrusting one’s child to the first day of Pre-School. I choose One
Legged Bird, Don’t Look and Canberra is Grey.
I do not send:

**Not a Poet**

You are not
A competent poet
Says Geoff.

My heart sings.

To be described
As a poet at all
Even an incompetent one
Throws me
Into an exciting
    Unthought about
Place,
Where I do
Not yet
Belong.

**29 June 2006  Second meeting with Geoff**

My anxiety is extreme. I am going through an ‘all at sea’ time with my research project, so thankfully I see Howard first. Howard has that gift of putting the world back in order. He has from the first seemed to be able to hold a vision of the fragments of my research project as some kind of connected entity, when I can only see fragments. I therefore know what I am doing again before I meet with Geoff.

I arrive at The Gods first and wait for Geoff at the table he chose last time. Geoff asks me what coffee I like. He buys the coffees. My turn next time. We look at *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark* and I can sense that Geoff is not very impressed. I feel very exposed when he does not seem interested in engaging in my idea of the voice of the child dialoguing with the voice of the adult. Bad luck. This is my best idea. I do not mention layers of meaning, my second best idea. I do go tentatively with the idea of the connection each poem has with each other poem, and a body of connected work. He says yes, but each poem must carry enough
information to tell a story by itself. There cannot be any dialogue about this. It is too early. So far nothing I have shown Geoff makes the grade.

His view is so different from mine. Too different? Do not worry about this I say to myself. Have the experience. Something exciting and unforseen will surely come out of the experience.

Is his idea of a collection quite different from what I think of as a body of connected work? I do not call it Reflexive Ethnography. That would put him off, but this is what I want to write, and it is something very different from poetry in the Tradition. He means Seven Centuries of Poetry in English. That tradition.

I hear the idea of the right way to do things. I remember that T.S. Eliot was very badly reviewed in the beginning. The critics of the day said his work was not real poetry. So each poem in Geoff’s tradition has to have enough information to stand alone. More like autonomous than relatively autonomous. I understand his suggestions, but do not like it that he wants to polish Mount Nebo is Big and Dark.

**Mount Nebo is Big and Dark**

Mount Nebo is big and dark
I am four and afraid
Mount Nebo is full of mist and rainforest and damp and leeches
It is rounded and solid and mysterious
It has dingoes and snakes
A carpet snake came down from the mountain and took my kitten
From the foot of the bed
I had to run and get my father from my Uncle George’s place
Where they were drinking claret
And singing Deutschland Uber Alles
My father makes frightening dingo noises when he is asleep
Then he gets up and does a comforting noisy pee on the lawn
It is a tropical Queensland evening
My father listens to the War on the wireless
I sit on the front steps with my mother
We talk and look down to the dairy and pineapple farms of Highvale
There is sadness in the mist rolling in from Morton Bay

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And beginning to cover Mavis McCulloch’s house with the red roof
When will we die? I ask
Not for a long time says my mother
The sadness in the mist deepens
When is a long time?

The prisoners of war are coming home
It says on the wireless
There is a sense of death in the mist
When we wake up in the morning it will have crept over the paddocks
And up into the garden

I have recently felt the mist again
It is around Tom’s voice
He makes an effort to use his big voice
But the mist is rolling in on him quietly and surely

Tom has Staph Pneumonia
He sometimes feels like my baby son
When he was four months old
Soft and vulnerable
Thin and pinched and pale
And in hospital with Staph Pneumonia.
The nurses washed his hair and brushed it up
It was fragrant and delicious on the side of my nose.

The nurses got Tom ready before I arrived
He was very young and freshly washed
With his newly grown soft baby hair
Brushing the side of my nose
I took him in the wheel chair
Under the white Canberra gum trees
Remembering pushing my baby out to get some fresh air

How can I say, don’t touch this one it’s special. It is my seminal work. It is the one that alerted me to my idea of layering of consciousness in poems. It is the one I read to Howard on that first day. This poem is how I am here. How can you have a seminal work when you aren’t a poet?
So did you? says Howard. Did you say don’t touch this one it’s special? No, I say, I could not find the right words.

I am not a poet. I have a desire to say to Geoff that I know I am not a poet of any kind, even an incompetent one, and does this really matter? Mercifully, I don’t say this. Get a grip. Why is it such a big deal if he doesn’t like your poems? It is like having someone say they don’t like your children. It runs deeper than creativity. I gave birth to them.

Howard says: That is right—your uncertainty it is in part a consequence of the professionalisation of art practice and the creation of fine art, which has distanced the every day sense of art or poetry from being an artist and a poet.

Geoff has a very keen eye for what he calls ‘the best word’. I am confused with how sensitive he can sometimes be to my work, but also how dismissive of me. Not really dismissive. I think my grief for Tom confuses him. I look OK but I am so raw around my loss, and my child poems. I realise I am far too defensive about my work and struggle to drop this. But he shocks me. He wants to scrap *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark*. Maybe forget it and write a new one. Combine it with the ideas of *Tom Is Home*.

**Tom is Home**

Tom is home after ten weeks in hospital
I’ll be on a plane at Christmas, he says
I can’t believe him.
I try to believe him
Fearing that if I disbelieve it will weaken him
I am still weak, he says

I dream that I am climbing a mountain
Struggling up a very steep cement path

So steep I almost fall back with each step
The path is hard and dark grey like the cancer
Which comes nearer and nearer
As it steadily approaches
I tread carefully as I climb
Knowing I could fall and die
I now have to clamber up
On to a ledge which is too high
I strain to get a grip for my foot
And to get my fingers around
What I discover to be a granite stepping-stone
Solid like Tom
Thick and sure and rounded

As I move my weight on to the stone it begins to fall away
I now remember that I had known
That the stone would fall
I remember that to save myself
I must grasp the metal ring
To the left side of the stone
The ring is securely fastened
Into the granite bedrock.

As I grasp the ring with all my might
And take the weight off my foot
The stone slips away
Falling into the valley below

I am now left
Grasping the ring
With both hands
And beneath my right foot
Is the deep moist black mulchy earth
Of the rainforest

Somewhere inside me I know that it is possible that this makes intellectual sense for him, but for me it feels like emotional violence. I know I will not mess around with these two poems. They are in my heart. They are part of Tom and me. They are my thesis. I am still not sure that we can work together. This might kill me.

He asks me again about why the thesis. Why are you doing a PhD? He is asking genuinely, I know, and I think it is a legitimate question. He sees his brief as transforming me into a poet (three years' project), so why would
I want to cloud my mind with a thesis. He does not say this directly, but implies it. I understand. It reminds me of having to be thoroughly engaged in my own analysis (two to three years) before beginning or even applying for Psychoanalytic Training.

Geoff is a very impressive person. A poet. I feel overawed with the immensity of his published work. Narrative Poems. Verse Novels. A different world. Mars and Venus. I sense that he is not sure if I know what a beginner I am. I tell him. I am an absolute beginner. This is not true. What about all those undergraduate years. A year of Tragedy: Oedipus. Hamlet. A semester of poetry with Thea Astley. Also, in the moment it IS quite true. He mentions again that it will be some time before I am competent. I know this and tell him. Then I get a surge of something like indignation which I hope I conceal. I also know that he will not break my spirit. I am beginning to have an idea of what I want to do myself. It is not like his tradition. I have Chaucer as part of my life, but I am Australian. I ALSO want my Australian heritage. AND other things too. Other ideas. Other cultures...the Barawan. I am feeling the power of the synergistic work as I get to know it—as it breaks through into my consciousness. It frees me.

11 July 2006  DEAD POETS’ DINNER.

This is a magnificent event at The Gods. Geoff is King. I see Howard at lunchtime, which integrates me around my research and settles my terror at going somewhere I know no one. I choose to read two tiny jewels of William Carlos Williams', Red Wheelbarrow and Poem.3 4 I long to grow up to be like WCW.

I sit at a table of immensely friendly people who seem to be mainly musicians and I don’t have to say what I do for a job. No poets. Everyone seems pleased that I am not a poet. I am a PhD student with the CCR. Everyone likes ANU and the CCR and so I bask in the joy of coming from a good family and being well connected. (When I began at The Australian National University, the Centre of Cross-cultural Research had not yet become The Research School for Humanities and the Arts.)

Janice on my left walks with two sticks and offers to drive me home. I accept and help her negotiate the buffet. Tony, on my right is a songwriter. He has written a song called *Women who Dare* about a Russian woman astronaut, with six long Russian names. This woman’s names are the only words of the song. He sings it for me over the salad. Later he reads a piece of T.S.Eliot in a way that brings tears.

13 July 2006

We arrive together and Geoff buys the coffee. We agree that next time it’s my turn.

I have been to Mount Nebo, and again feel quite raw about the work the visit has inspired. I would like to be further along with my grieving. More robust.

We work on *Two Trees*, and speak about getting rid of the adverbs. I agree, wincing inside, but knowing he is right... We get rid of ‘gently’ twice. I agonise about this and I put one ‘gently’ back later.

*Two Trees*

Two tall white
flooded gums
side by side

swaying
(gently)
together

looking as if they had wandered out of the rainforest
to be alone with each other.
A sappy section of each
touching
and growing
towards the other

swollen, as if
with desire

gently
kissing

taken by the rhythm of the wind.

We work on Afternoon Stillness. Geoff says ‘say what you mean’. I think he is sick of grief, and my skinny minimal expression. He helps me find ‘is held’, and he’s good he doesn’t tell me the word, he just says make this clearer. I think we like each other.

Afternoon Stillness

The forest is silent.

Only the bellbirds
resist the afternoon quiet.
Where is the flow of my grief

the sadness is there
and the longing
a wispy mist

but the big grief
the howl of it
is held

in the flooded gums
the Bangalow palms
the trickle of the creek

and the moist fallen leaves silencing my footfall.
We do not discuss *No Dreams*.

**No Dreams**

I long for a dream  
Why can I not dream?

Am I empty  
Did all that crying  
and vivid childhood dreaming  
empty me out.

Take too much  
from the source.

We speak about the carpet snake coiling and uncoiling. He says ‘didn’t your parents tell you that carpet snakes are not dangerous?’ I react too quickly, and with an edge I would have preferred to conceal. ‘My carpet snakes are dangerous. You are like my brother’. We laugh, but the damage is done. I plan a hate poem.

We change the subject. Discuss the other work I have sent him. I tell Geoff about Mount Nebo and the memories. He says perhaps I could try something not so subjective. I say I will try. I can’t imagine this at the moment. When I am by myself I will try to get off death and loss and childhood. Why?

We discuss *Remembrance*. Geoff says ‘change childhood’, and he helps me with the form. We work well together. I want to please him. I wish he liked my work. I want to do long lines.

**Remembrance**

I return to Mount Nebo

The childhood  
Memories  
Are in the granite  
Boulders  
The hoop pine
Planted when I was born
And the strangler figs that are the same figs.

I change the second and third lines in my mind:

Memories
Of the child

and I am pleased with it. I like this poem.

Remembrance

I return to Mount Nebo

Memories
Of the child
Are in the granite
Boulders
The hoop pine
Planted when I was born
and the strangler figs that are the same figs.

I sit
On the front steps
Receiving
As a child
all the noises from the rainforest.

The bellbirds
The frogs
The whipbird’s crack—
the mate’s reply.

I am with Tom
My parents.

I hear in my mind’s ear
The carpet snake
Coiling and uncoiling
In his forked bed:
raising his head, and waiting for the next meal.

Geoff thinks I need to try to work in a way which is not so minimal for a change. I say I will, but I dearly love the minimal. My poems seem to go in that shape.

He tells me to write about something else. This is impossible. Maybe it sounds a bit weak but Tom has not yet been dead for a year. I haven’t really told him. I wish Howard had told him. I should tell him. It’s not fair not to tell him. He wants me to focus on writing poems. Not death. What is there except death? I am reading The Painted Bed and think of Donald Hall quoting Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

The true subject of poetry
Is the death of the beloved.⁵

I am not handling this well. I go away and write I Hate Boys.

I Hate Boys

I blow out eight candles
I hate boys

They are not afraid
Of anything

Even carpet snakes

Their bite is not dangerous
says my brother

I wish for a
Carpet snake
To drop on him
Squeeze out
His life

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Sink in the juice
Of my hate
With his fangs.

27 July 2006

I am early and buy the coffee. I have forgotten Tony’s name and have to ask him. He reminds me and asks my name again. He says one flat white and one for Geoff Page.

We work on I Hate Boys, and Geoff is still incredulous that I didn’t know about carpet snakes. ‘I don’t think they have fangs’ he says. ‘They do for me’, I say.

Howard says that in a way they do for Yolngu too, or at least they are extremely dangerous and fangs are a symbol of danger.

Geoff quite likes the poem. He has a sense of humour. On the surface it is about my brother. I am unsure if Geoff knows it is really about him and me. He gives no indication if he does. He questions the last lines. He reminds me to say what I mean. He wants to take the ambiguity out. He wants to change my last lines, which are full of venom:

I wish for a
Carpet snake
to drop on him
Squeeze out
His life

Sink in the juice
Of my hate
With his fangs.

He says with an absolutely straight face that it is not clear whose fangs are referred to. Then he says again they don’t actually have fangs. They do. I know and I tell him but I don’t tell him whose fangs, because in the moment I am the carpet snake and we are the poem.
It is not until after I leave him that my outrage hits. I hate him challenging the core of my work. No. I hate him. I hate his authority. His arrogance. No, maybe he is not arrogant. He is a poet. The know it all. I cannot bear this. I cannot bear that I can’t tell him that I am saying what I mean. I should be straightforward with him that I am in full grief. And that I mean the ambiguity. I do not know whose fangs they are. I want to leave it unclear. Inexplicable. Why can’t I simply say that when I am with him? Why am I silenced? Why all the rage? Why am I so silenced? Why don’t I tell him in an ordinary way that Tom has just died?

Calm down. This is not only between him and me. And it is not just grief. This is my own stuff. My powerlessness when challenged by the voice of my elder brother, Tony. My own rage at my powerlessness. My ‘youngest child in the family’s’ feeling of insignificance.

As I rage I struggle to know whether or not this is about Geoff. But maybe it is about Geoff. Is it internal to me and I am playing it out in my imagination with Geoff? This experience with Geoff can be very good for me, if I can bear it. It is helping me to define myself. In a way I want to put the grief aside and get on with things with Geoff. Get over it!

While he is sometimes dismissive of me he is mostly . . . sometimes . . . quite gentle and respectful of the work. Very respectful of the work in fact. I wonder if he thinks I get in the way of my own work. Is he trying to help me get myself out of the way to give the workspace a chance to develop? Is it about negative capability? Uncontaminated space? He is deeply and relentlessly challenging. He is dedicated to the work. This is a fight to the death, but I like the challenge. There is only one possible outcome for me. I have to define myself and be myself as separate from the work and separate from him.

This helps because I am familiar with this struggle. The struggle to be oneself. True self . . . All the bits. The child and adult as self. My adult self gets lost. Wanders off into the bush? I despair that when I am deeply challenged I have to fight for my identity in this way. My integrity. I would like to be cool: one part being self and one part other? A secure but permeable identity. You wish. I wish.

Why am I so threatened? It is not about becoming a poet. I am actually grieving. Perhaps it is about becoming an integrated self and being able
to say No! I am grieving! What is becoming a poet, anyway? Perhaps I will want to become a poet. Perhaps I will become a poet without wanting to. Like Hopkins. He wouldn’t have thought he was a poet. Perhaps it would be good to become a poet if it happens before my research project is finished. But a poet as part of me—an integrated self.

Howard says poetry is an ordinary way of acting in the world for some people, a capacity which can be developed, like painting or gardening. Knowledge about poetry is like knowledge about the Australian bush—knowledge is knowledge.

I feel quite a resistance in me to having my identity meddled with. He is sure of his rightness—like the analysts. I still bear initiation wounds from the journey of becoming a psychoanalyst.

Nothing worries Howard. He is an anthropologist. He is used to sorcery and crocodiles. If I tell him that Geoff puts me in the fire until I am red-hot and glowing, and then uses an iron bar to shape me, and then takes me out and hoses me down, sputtering and sizzling he will say: this is a very strong position, Sue. You must write about it.

I will have a huge sense of failure if I cannot work with Geoff. I need to speak with Howard about what we do if I cannot continue to work with him. I will try not to think of that yet.

Meetings with Howard and Debjani

From the beginning Howard is very acknowledging of space for the creative process. He is very encouraging of my poetic process but absolutely unintrusive about the poems. He knows about room to write my poems. He discusses with me some exciting synergistic work. I am beginning to write my essay on Behar (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer* and Hall (2002) *The Painted Bed*.6,7

I have a very helpful meeting with Debjani.

I am surprised at how much anxiety I express to her about working with Geoff. I wish I was not so sensitive to how dismissive he can be. I wonder

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about this. I sense that it is not so much dismissive about me, it is some quality in my work he cannot bear. Is it the intensity of my grief? She says there are other poets if it doesn’t work with Geoff.

She lets me read some of my own poems. I am grateful for this. I don’t know why it matters so much to read them. It does. It completes them in some way.

Debjani helps me focus my thoughts. At the end of May she had gathered all the threads together to help me focus my thinking and then suggested that my Research Project at the moment sounds like:

A Reflexive Ethnography on death with alternate focus on representations in multiple genres of the experience of death.

At a later meeting we speak about philosophy. Debjani suggests I ask Howard about philosophy and that I get on with my first essay.

I ask Howard about philosophy and he suggests I have a look at Deleuze.

I am excited as I begin to read Deleuze. I understand what I am reading when I am reading it and find the ideas like ‘multiplicity’ fit with my own creative process. I am also lightened and liberated by what I am reading:

The essential thing from the point of view of empiricism is the noun multiplicity, which designates a set of lines or dimensions, which are irreducible to one another. Every ‘thing’ is made up in this way... In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms or the elements but what there is ‘between’ the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like the blade of grass or the rhizome... To extract the concepts which correspond to a multiplicity, is to trace the lines of which it is made up; to determine the nature of these lines, to see how they become entangled, connect, avoid or fail to avoid the foci. These lines are true becomings. Multiplicities are made up of becomings without history...

‘Between the between’. That’s where I want to be. Is this where I am? Is this where the creative process happens? The liminality inside the liminality. Is this where the poems are? Is this where the multiplicity of the root metaphors reside?

The multiplicity of expression. Different ways of expressing. Ways without words? I think I am on to something.

Weekend 22–23 July 2006


I have repeated intrusive thoughts of Geoff’s challenging me too much. I feel that this whole thing of Why a thesis is getting to me. I have never asked Geoff if anyone told him how the poems fit with my research project. I really would like him to know that I am grieving. It will make my poems make sense. I email Geoff telling him. I wonder if I am writing too aggressively. Somehow I have to assert myself, or I cannot go on with Geoff. I long to engage him in my research project, and particularly my interest in where do the poems come from?

He replies very soon. I don’t engage him and I hurt his feelings. He emails do I want to continue with him? Do I want someone more psychological? I am shocked that I have hurt him. I email straight back that I am very clear now that I want him for the poems and we will work it out.

In one way my effort failed miserably. In another way it succeeded in helping to create a clear space for the work to go on. I have to be careful not to let my feelings spill over into being disrespectful to Geoff. I don’t want him to give up on me. I find his knowledge exciting. I love how he reads Chaucer.

I go on to write *Murmuring Trees* and *Moment of Conception.*

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Weekend 29–30 July 2006

I go to a conference in Brisbane and have conversations with young poets and established poets who are writing theses around poetic work. People think I am very fortunate to have Geoff Page. They think his care of me is exceptional. How he has time for me and how he reads my work within the week. Some of them have to wait for a month. That would kill me. One of them asks ‘do you understand him?’ ‘I think so’, I say. Then he asks ‘does he understand you?’ ‘Not really’, I say. ‘He gets a bit sick of death being the source of my inspiration. He can’t stand my grief.’

The reply comes: ‘It doesn’t matter if he understands you or not. Forget it. Don’t worry if he doesn’t get you. He will make you grow as a poet’. I take this conversation as a gift.

3 August 2006

I am early and buy the coffee. Tony now recognises me and that I am Geoff’s student. He knows Geoff is my mentor. He knows how Geoff has his coffee, but has to ask me how I like mine.

It is my first meeting with Geoff since we had almost drawn swords by email over the question of ‘Why a thesis, why a PhD?’ I know he doesn’t like the idea of the poems being a means to an end. I really like this about him. He is very pure about the poems. I admire this. We speak about the poems being separate even though they are an integral part of my Research Project. (I think of what Howard says about relative autonomy but wouldn’t dare go there. Not now.) I say I want to see something through with him. I think that something has been cleared up between us.

Before we say goodbye I apologise if I came across as aggressive. He says ‘it’s all right. You have some talent. Enough talent to be a poet’. Then he adds, ‘you don’t really need a lot of talent to be quite a successful poet’. I am not hurt this time. I like him.
9 August 2006

First Anniversary of Tom’s death.
Full Moon.

10 August 2006  We do not meet.

Two days previously I had accidentally sent Geoff half an email which I had decided not to send telling him I am feeling terrible and asking not to meet. I am shocked when I find out I had sent it and email again immediately explaining my mistake. I am mortified that I have sent it. I imagine an aggressive response, but am met with gentleness: ‘That’s Cool, Sue’.

Sometimes he can be just right.

I am relieved not to be meeting on the day after the first anniversary of Tom’s death. I am quite raw and meet with Helen Ennis from Art to talk about death and photos. I want to show her the last photographs of Tom. Eventually I would like to show them to Geoff, because I would like to write something about them. Even as I think this I dismiss the idea. I decide it is far too soon to mention them. Maybe next year. Will there be a next year for Geoff and me?

I spend a week struggling with a new poem as he has suggested. As he so delicately suggests ‘jig the two of them together’. I absolutely reject this in my mind. Has he no sensitivity? I write something. It comes together and I email Moment of Death to Geoff. I do not expect a response until I see him. I now know that he reads and digests and writes scribbles on the work before he discusses it with me, and always speaks about the poems to me in person.

I have sent the genuine minimal Moment of Death to Howard and Debjani. I later feel very glad that I have done this. They both respond quickly and are affirming for which I am full of gratitude.
17 August 2006

I am early and buy the coffee. I now know Tony, and he recognises me but forgets that I like flat white. He always remembers that Geoff likes latte with chocolate on top. I ask for a flat white and a Geoff Page. I play with wondering if he thinks I am a poet. I myself wonder if I am an ‘apprentice’ poet.

We begin reading Chaucer.11 Geoff reads Middle English beautifully. I remember a time when I was first at university dreaming of an academic career as a Chaucer Scholar. We also read Westron Wynde12 I feel excited about what we are doing. Today I know why Debjani chose Geoff. I feel a burst of gratitude.

We look at Moment of Death. Geoff thinks it is too lean, skeletal, something like that. No. These are my words.

He simply says too minimal, and I know maybe he’s right, but it is too raw for me to discuss properly. Leave it alone! I scream to myself. I want his opinion but I wish I could be less invested in the work, less vulnerable about it. Well, it’s hard not to be vulnerable about this one. Impossible, in fact.

**Moment of Death**

I wait with the setting sun
Expecting
The full moon rise and
The remembered moment:
A quarter past seven.

The sun sets.

Behind a shroud
Of dark clouds
The moon rises
Unseen

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Beyond
the Commonwealth Bridge.

Night passes

In the morning
I see the moon
Pale and tentative
In the dawn light
Slowly fade
As it sinks
Behind the dark gums
Of Black Mountain.

As it fades into itself
I think of Tom
A year ago
Fading into himself
As he swallowed.

I tell Geoff there is another poem about the moment of death, not so lean, from last year.

12 August 2005

Tom has died.
Beautifully
With me
as I wished.

At a quarter past seven
He looked over to me
With his direct piercing gaze
Looking right into
My hollow eyes
Exhausted with vigilance
In my hollow face
Exhausted with waiting.
His loud laboured breathing
Now noticeably quiet
He composes his face
And, quite elegantly
Swallows, once,
And then again
Once more
And settles back
Having done
What was to be done.

I sit with him
Happy
that he has found
the way out of life.
That he has done it.

You did it, I say
Speaking to his hovering soul.

I am filled with elation
As happens
after birth
or death.

I remember
a month earlier,
As he collapses
On the floor
Using me as a cushion,
Pleading
Die now while we are alone and together.

We look at 12 August 2005, the poem describing the actual moment
of Tom’s death. Geoff suggests I use ideas from both poems and write
something combining the two. ‘Maybe something not quite so personal’.
I can hardly bear the pain. I so clearly know what he’s saying. He has a
point. But I also know I am struggling to take it in. Not today. I am still
too close to this work. I struggle to listen. He says try something else.
Something that isn’t death. Something that catches your imagination
on TV. I do not say that death is all there is right now for me. I am full of death. It is just one year. How can I not be full of death?

I go away and cry. I am full of hurt rage. The pain is intense. I go for a long walk and meet Pam another first year PhD student who is just right. She is hurting too for a different reason. She cannot speak to the Ngaanyatjarra People she needs to speak to for her thesis. We sympathise with each other. I hear myself saying how hurt I am but that I still think this poet is good for me. Just right I say. He’s good. He is really good. I must be mad.

It will take time to get into perspective what I experience as the violence of throwing Tom’s death poem and his anniversary poem together. And losing both? I need to hide. Just to cry. Where is Howard? In Darwin.

I go to the 20/20 Seminar in Old Canberra House. New ideas. Just what I need to get my misery into perspective. Something healing. Something riveting. People I know. Maria-Suzette speaking about unspeakable violence and detention in Morocco transports me to somewhere in the external world. I remember the terror for artists when I was travelling with an artist in Morocco. I remember my own terror even as a tourist. My current wounded state seems ridiculous.

Later, I think more about combining the two poems one year apart about the moment of death. I know that I will not do this. I will look for another solution. As I recover I see that a new poem may be emerging combining the ideas of both. A new poem, leaving the others intact. I begin to feel quite excited.

I write another *Moment of Death*, this time in the third person. I make a big effort to write differently. Longer lines. Not so lean. This time I am trying to write a poem. It is a different experience from using the medium of poetry to express something pressing to be expressed. Perhaps I am beginning to understand what Geoff means.

Later in the week I again make a huge internal shift away from death, and write *Sensual Memories*. Geoff later asks: Don’t you mean Sensuous? ... and of course I do, or do I?

I am forever thinking: ‘He has no idea what he is asking me to do’.
24 August 2006

Geoff buys the coffee. He no longer asks me what I like. He returns with two Geoff Page lattés with chocolate on top. Chocolate on top of a latte!

Geoff and I work well together. He is softer; not quite so challenging. Perhaps he is beginning to trust that I really am listening. We really play with ideas of changing the images and metaphors. I am enjoying myself. We have a laugh about Sensual Memories. Maybe I will change it to Sensuous. We work well on the poems together and I return to University House and complete them and email them to Geoff.

I have a worry, which doesn’t seem to matter when I am with him, but gets bigger when I am on my own writing. He is increasingly sick of my writing about death. Try something else, he says. My anxiety goes up. The source of my inspiration is death. I am full of death. It is only one year. I will be full of death for as long as it takes. I need to express it. How will I manage this and continue to work with Geoff? Calm down. Let yourself write about death or whatever comes. Let something else come. See if there is something else. Remember negative capability. Clear a space. Try.

27 August 2006

I am at ANU for ten days. The first Year Conference is at the CCR next Monday. Not my conference. My full time colleagues are presenting. I present my research project next year. Apart from that I am meeting with Geoff twice and getting my poems in order. I plan to begin a second essay. This time on Debbora Battaglia (1990) The Bones of the Serpent, and Robert Murphy (1990) The Body Silent.¹³

I am now beginning to see how I can play with writing poems. I feel more free. I think there will be two sorts of poems for me. The pressing serious ones, and the playful ones.

I have two pressing poems to write, two marvellous dreams: one about Root Metaphors, and one about a woman who is murdering someone, or being murdered.

I am playing with ideas of why I am allowing Geoff to be so powerful. I think he has to be if I am going to let him see my work in an undefended way. He is so big when I am, in comparison, as small as I need to be to do this transformative work. Who is Geoff? Who does he represent to me? Is he my brother? Is he God? Is he the carpet snake? Is he my analyst? Is he my Mother? Or worse, much worse, are we playing at being Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle? I remember that he has mentioned thoughts of transformation for me. Does he think he is going to give birth to me as a poet? In his image? Do I think this?

I understand why Debjani chose him. He is an established poet. She would have seen his skill. His feel for the ‘right’ word. His passion for The Tradition. His tradition. I see this too. He has a good appreciation of the poems he likes. They excite him. He reads them beautifully. He is both passionate and cool. His own work is competent. His work comes from a much more rational place than mine. This is both good and bad. It is good because it works for him. He says what he wants to say. It is easy for him to be objective. It is bad for me because he doesn’t want to help me discover my own direction. He doesn’t read my poems aloud. I do not read them aloud either. I have no voice. He is already impatient with me that I cannot get off death.

Monday 28 August 2006

First Year Conference. I really enjoy myself. The full time people present. I will not present my research project until next year. I learn a great deal about PowerPoint, and the projects being presented and group solidarity. I go for a drink with my group afterwards and feel that this is what University is really about.

Tuesday 29 August 2006

I am a bit late for Geoff, which surprises me. I have brought him a sprig of wattle from the beautiful avenue of trees in full bloom from my walk across from University House. My analyst would say that such a gesture is a bad sign. Geoff buys the coffee and this time I ask for a flat white.

I am still full of my recurring crushed turquoise dream from the previous night. I think it is about my grandmother who was strong and protective—and a poet. I have been unable to write a poem about it. Perhaps I won’t.
Maybe I just needed her protection. I will just let it settle for a while and see what happens. I will not speak about it. I don’t seem to be able to fire Geoff’s imagination in the way I would like. Does this matter? I ask. The truth is I cannot tell.

Geoff reads Philip Larkin’s *Aubade* and then we discuss it.15 It is about the poet’s fear of dying and of death. Geoff says that although it is personal he is still able to be objective. I get the point. He reads *Explosion*, beautifully and we discuss it.16 He is really engaged and we both enjoy ourselves. He continues on about getting away from the subjective. No death. No subjective—what else is left for me? He reads again and then I read for the first time. Philip Larkin’s work, not my work. I long to read my own work but I no longer feel safe enough to read. This thought surprises and shocks me.

I think about writing about Martin Bryant. The traumatised child. The damaged child. The murderous damaged child.

Geoff says that we will now get on to my work. ‘We should have done yours first’, he says. Says something about the let down but doesn’t have to say it. He is acting it. He radiates let down. He points it at me like a laser beam. Again I cannot tell if this is a joke. Is it a joke ... even a bad joke? I search for his joy in my work. What joy? I have this feeling of swimming against the tide. We have a laugh over Not a Poet. No, I say this is just playing. Nothing is just playing. He comments on the cliché of my heart sings. He thinks I could do better. I say if I do better I may lose my status as incompetent. He reminds me that there are levels of competency and that competence is the bottom rung.

I hold this image and resolve to write about it later.

He says that:

Throw me into an exciting
Unthought about
Place

is too vague. ‘Can’t you get closer to what is in your mind’, he says. I do not tell him that THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT WAS IN MY MIND AT THE TIME. I say I will give the matter some thought. You bet I will! I am now beginning to be really irritated. Come on. Where is my sense of humour? I rally. I begin to plan The Land Of the Incompetent Poets, and am in a good mood again.

We discuss Primal Murmurings:

Geoff says ‘interrupt’ is the wrong word, and I am convinced he is right. The wrong words leap out for him.

In an outcrop
Of granite boulders
Is interrupted
by the murmurings

Later at a performance of Bell Shakespeare The Tempest, with my fellow student Ann I think of the word I need. I change ‘interrupted’. Later I change it back.

Primal Murmurings

My mother
Is in the kitchen.
I am playing
In my cubby.

The imagined
Happy home
Created by
the five year old
In an outcrop
Of granite boulders
Is interrupted by
a ruffle of leaves
Then penetrated
by the murmurings
Of two trees
In the forest.
I run inside
Afraid

It is the two trees
That rub against each other?
Says my mother
Trying to reassure,
They are kissing.

This is not
Reassuring.

The murmuring
Is reminding me
of the kinds of sounds
my mother makes
When she and
My father
Are together
At night

And I am alone
Listening.

Geoff says he can’t see why I have to use this minimalist form. Why do you still have to use these short lines? He says. I would like to be able speak with Geoff about the interest I have in the inexplicable. Later, we look again at Sensual Memories, a poem I have written with long lines as an exercise in trying to be more cheerful. I remember I have not changed it to Sensuous.

Sensual Memories

A dazzle of brightness is what I remember
As a rainbow lorikeet dives through
An upward splash of water
Into a pot of golden seeds.

Heat haze and the call to prayer are what I remember
About three Moroccan girls in an orange tree
Throwing down heaps of cream and orange fragrance
To be caught in a sheet on the warm white stones...

A moment of reckless unbelief is what I remember
Approaching Paris from under a Thai Airways blanket
Thrown by a thoughtful attendant over me and
my newly met companion

Thinking we were a couple.

Geoff doesn't like the title—or the form. 'Is this all you remember?' he says. He again suggests a longer poem with more memories. I agree with him. I shall try.

I plan a longer poem, and begin to re-write as:

Sensuous Memories

I remember:
a nectar seeking
Rainbow Lorikeet diving through
an upward splash of water, into
the curls of a golden grevillea.

I remember:
heat haze and a call to prayer,
three Moroccan girls in an orange tree,
throwing down heaps of cream and orange fragrance,
to be caught in a sheet on the warm white stones.

I remember Tom,
full of health leaning into me,
my hand in his black hair
a forefinger tracing a tear,
as I give him six yellow roses for our first Valentine's Day.

This won't do ... death again ... and Tom. It doesn't matter because the conversation takes a very interesting turn. We look at the Dark Rising of the Moon. This poem, which is a reworking of my memories for the first anniversary of Tom's death, is surely doomed. It is an exercise in long lines
using the more removed third person to avoid too much intimacy. I don’t like it much, but even though I hate it I am trying to work on it as an exercise.

The line I really hate is ‘Just one whole year ago’. This is alien, not like me. This whole poem is alien. This poem is not mine. It does not express what I want to express. I will get rid of it.

The Dark Rising of the Moon

She waits alone on the bridge,  
where they had stood waiting together,  
for the full moon, beyond the darkening mountains.

The moon rises secretly and unseen behind the clouds,  
marking the time of death one year ago.  
Night falls uneasily, and in the morning she watches  
the full moon waning and slowly sliding behind Black Mountain  
as he himself had slid into the vessel of his waiting soul.

Geoff questions ‘uneasily’.

Then he asks about the stand alone line, and my unusual theology. A waiting soul? I say I am writing about what I experienced. As I say this I fear we are venturing into the realm of the inexplicable, the unfaceable, the unbearable. We don’t usually do too well here. This time it is too late. Let’s go on.

I say to Geoff that what I experienced was Tom coming into clear consciousness, his loud laboured breathing ceasing, holding my gaze with his strong passionate blue eyes, gripping my left hand in his right hand, rising in the bed where he had lain flat for a week, pausing and still holding me in a long moment then gently lying back, swallowing, swallowing again, going deeply within himself, and then having done what needed to be done he rested back after his labour. He rested. I was left alone: left being, and so naturally spoke to his hovering soul, saying ‘you did it’.
I imagine his soul case waiting like a boat for him or his spirit to slide into and to be transported. I do not know where, but I know that after a time of waiting and when the raw grief passes he will come into the mooring, which my beautiful sensitive son Matthew has made in my garden. I have only to wait and to watch.

There is another part to tell which, if I were in another state of mind I would keep to myself. I tell Geoff I have another thought about death. About the swallowing and the carpet snake. The carpet snake can swallow something bigger than itself. Is death like this? Like swallowing oneself? The opposite of birth?

Geoff is with me now. ‘You need to change this he says to say what you mean’.

I have a moment of realization. I am fighting here for something Fundamental to my work.

Geoff does not easily warm to my style or my method, or my content for that matter. These are connected. If he would let me read my work perhaps he would HEAR what I am trying to do. Perhaps not. I want him to FEEL what I am expressing. I am not sure that he thinks what I want to do in being in the experience and then stepping aside is legitimate.

He doesn't
Like
my short lines.
He also
 Doesn’t like
Death
Unless it’s funny.

And he won't
let me read

my work
aloud.
I rewrite *The Dark Rising of the Moon*.

**The Dark Rising of the Moon**

She wonders if she can bear
to wait on the lonely bridge
where they watched uneasily
together for the rising moon.
She yearns beyond the darkening
mountains but the night is silent
and unconsoling. The morning
sees the full moon waning and slowly
sliding behind Black Mountain.

She remembers how a year ago
he raised his eyes, gripped her hand,
swallowed twice, and fading into himself,
slid into the bright vessel of his waiting soul.

I am beginning to wonder about the realm of ‘what no one can stand’. I have talked it over with Moira. I think it is the tears embedded in my poems.

**Thursday 31 August 2006**

This is our tenth meeting. Ten to go. We are working more easily.

Geoff and I meet for the last time until October. There is a different feeling. I have been reading Deleuze: thinking about multiplicity and the rhizome, and the poems as little new shoots from the rhizome, thinking about unlocking all my little internal locked doors. I am freer. There seems to be some room for discussion and even difference of opinion. I have passed the test with the *Dark Rising of the Moon* (he says it’s good now). I don’t like it much and will probably get rid of it. It’s OK, but I hate messing with my work. I prefer the first one.
We have a laugh over 23 August 2005, and Geoff says he doesn’t cook with fish sauce either. I really warm to him and feel grateful for the good work we are doing and the moments of fun. Then—he wants to cut the first three lines ... No way!

23 August 2005

Two weeks ago
Today
Tom died.

Tom
The self-described
Plain blunt man
The depression boy
Who prides himself
On not needing anything
Who makes a study
Of not getting it
Emotionally
Of gleefully enjoying
His bad timing. His
I don’t give a rat’s arse
When you’re aching
For tenderness.
The man who says he hates
Smokers, wankers, silvertails,
Private school boys, French champagne
First class travel, French films, films with subtitles
French anything, olives, oil and vinegar dressing, garlic, fish sauce,
Parsley, herbal tea, flowers, gardening, ironing, resort holidays, slinky silk
Underwear,
And too much fun of any kind.
Just as well it works if you surprise him.
Saturday 2 September 2006

I make an effort to play with my ‘skeletal’ form. I also make an effort to be more light hearted. I write *Bones*, and *Encounter*.

**Bones**

Do they have to be
So minimal
So skeletal
So spare
So sparse
So uncovered
So bare
These poems?
These bare poems
That do not seem to give
Much information
But that give
So much away.

These bare bones
Have a story
Of starvation
Of greed
Of loss
Of excess
Of what is left
After the Carpet Snake’s
Dinner,
Or after
The Carpet Snake.

Like in the Louisiades
Creating Sabarl: The Bones of the Serpent.
Encounter

My unsteady bike
wobbles by the lake
in the last sun of early Canberra Spring,

too late to avoid a sideways shove from a rough
running rhino-Labrador, who comes to lick my wounds
as I lie in a daze of wet grass and spokes and spun-out wheels.

The view from the grass
is of two rosellas shaking down
a silent splash of white petals into the darkening lake.

I yearn at the sight
of this pair as I get up alone,
leaving my bones on the grass to be
swallowed by a carpet snake looking for a backbone.

Saturday 9 September, 2006

I awake from a dream where I am the hero-woman in a James Bond situation. I am to spend an evening with a Russian Spy. The spy is gorgeous, around thirty, and very sexy and communicative. He speaks no English. The meeting itself involves lots of playful gesturing and joking around but no actual sex. Sex is not allowed. It will interfere with my mission. The dream seems to go on for quite a while. I awake thinking about my poems and how for me the issue is not words but what the poems communicate, and how well they communicate feelings. I also know there is a warning in the dream.

I think the dream is a sign that I have to be careful not to get into bed with Geoff. I think this means that I have to be careful not to let him influence me too much, or take over my mind. I already feel in danger of losing respect for my own work. I feel in a true dilemma. I do not want to FAIL with Geoff. I also want to enjoy the experience with him. I want to work with Geoff, but I am grieving and I must write this grief process out of me. I have no choice.
I do not want to lose myself and my own direction.

I am profoundly challenged by what I am reading. I have found Rilke again. I am feeling the chemistry of the synergistic work, and feel the beginnings of new poems. I am now taking seriously that I must guard my autonomy. I resolve to be in harmony with myself. I did not come here to be cautious and fearful. I came here to expand my mind. Writing poems is an opportunity for me to take risks, to experiment, to be open to my vulnerable self: to see where the poems take me.

My only option, now, is to break free: to celebrate my difference. I will use the creative collaboration of the synergistic work to inspire my thoughts, and also to protect the free flow of ideas nurturing my poetic process. I will change the subject.

I do not know where to go. How to break free. I will find a different way to express what I need to express. I must work out a way to write freely or I cannot write. I will make a collage.

**Wednesday 14 September, 2006**

I have completed a collage where there is a snake and an explosion of new poems—full of as yet unthought thoughts. I am free but full of loss.

**Friday 16 September, 2006**

I awake early with thoughts of loss, having dreamed about the loss of a ring, perhaps a child’s ring, in the sand at Mount Nebo, at a place where I played and made little gardens when I was a young child. The dream reminds me that on one occasion there was a storm after I had finished playing, and the flowers and leaves I had planted took root. I was aged about five, but I still remember my amazement and my burst of delight when I discover that the twigs and flowers in my garden have taken root. I take this dream as a powerful communication of hope to myself. A dream where the ring may mean the possibility of finding union and surprising new growth. I have much to gain if I am strong and clear and weather the storms. I will stay with Geoff—and experiment. I will make the most of the experience. I will let in the joy. I need to chill out. I will use

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18. Appendix 1: The Snake, p. 204.
Rilke to protect my creative process. I am always touched when Geoff introduces me and says he is my mentor. I wish we were more often on the same wavelength.

Soon I will stop grieving. I will find my own tradition, not only in the experience of Chaucer and Yolngu, but also in the discovery of which forms and rhythms delight me, and which images and songs touch my ear and my heart.
CHAPTER 4

Ethnographies and Poems
I look back to June 2005. Tom is dying. It is immensely relieving to have some challenging reading and thinking on which to focus. I am beginning to read for my preliminary proposal and to think about my poems as revealing the trajectory of a mourning process. In one part of my mind, I am grieving and writing poems: in another, I am reflecting and reading and thinking. In my imagination I see the image of the coiling and uncoiling of the carpet snake, and have Rilke’s words in my mind:

Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being
Something helpless that wants help from us.¹

What is the carpet snake? What is it in my deepest being that wants help? As I reflect on what I am expressing, and how I am expressing it, I reach for dynamic concepts to make sense of what I am doing.

I am writing from a raw place. I know that my experience of losing Tom links with earlier fears. I wonder about an avenue of expression for these fears. Bion puts forward a concept of dream-thought as an unconscious way of thinking generated in response to lived emotional experience: this way of thinking constitutes the impetus for the work of dreaming.² The concept that the energy for the writing of my poems comes from emerging unconscious dream-thought gives me a way of thinking about how it is that my poems often contain surprising or terrifying images (the carpet snake) but still help me process my grief. I can think of my poems as daytime dreams.

If the image of the carpet snake is part of a daytime dream, I understand that in my deepest being, my unconscious mind, I need help because I am both the little kitten—the prey of the carpet snake—and the carpet snake itself. Neither is free. In the course of this powerful process of the mind and the imagination, just begun, both will be set free. The flow of grief will bring forward both the carpet snake and the kitten. I recognise them as the terrible but helpless creatures of my unconscious mind that need help. I now see how it is that the image of the carpet snake appears when Tom’s cancer is diagnosed.

In August 2004, I write the first poem using thoughts and images derived from the lived emotional experience of being part of Tom’s fight to the death with cancer. As I continue this process, I can see that these thoughts are predominantly unconscious. Bion’s concept of ‘container-contained’ is of use here. This concept is concerned with

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the processing (dreaming) of thoughts derived from emotional experience. The idea of the ‘container-contained’ addresses the dynamic interaction of predominantly unconscious thoughts (the contained), and the capacity for dreaming and thinking those thoughts (the container).³

The poems are avenues of expression for the intensity of my grief. The dimension of expression is of the utmost importance in my letting go of the weight of the grief I carry.

The first cross-cultural work to impact on my mind, and eventually to transform into images for poems, is Metcalf and Huntington’s *Celebrations of Death.*⁴ The initial impact of this study of rituals surrounding death is that it ‘hits the right spot’: it resonates with what I am writing. I begin to believe, and to experience, that poems, like mortuary rituals, can provide an expressive way through mourning. As I read further, the study points me in the direction of liminality, and the liminal state, as described by Hertz⁵ and van Gennep.⁶

These authors, together with Turner⁷ and Douglas, develop ideas of waiting and the liminal state, which resonate with the idea of mourning as a way through.⁸ I know that as I wait with Tom in this ‘in between’ place, I am in a liminal state.

Van Gennep, in 1960, argued that a universal pattern can be discerned in the ritual movement from one status to another, such as from child to adult, unmarried to married, or from life to death. This movement is not abrupt, but occurs over time. He argues that, for example in mortuary rituals, a mediating period with a beginning, middle and an end occurs. This period of transition between states of being he terms ‘liminality’. Metcalf and Huntington mention Victor Turner’s elaboration of this concept with his emphasis on the autonomy of the liminal.⁹ They show how Turner develops a view of ‘state of transition’ which builds on van Gennep’s notion that, while in funeral ceremonies ‘one expects rites of separation to be their most prominent component... a study of the data reveals that the rites of separation are few in number and very simple, while the transition rites have a duration and complexity sometimes so great that they must be granted a sort of autonomy’.¹⁰

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10. ibid., p. 146.
Mary Douglas brings forward a notion of liminal periods as ways out, or times of movement through periods of emotional or social change. They are set aside to resolve situations of social ambiguity, and to create or restore order. Douglas puts forward a notion of ‘purity’ not only in the sense of cleanliness, but also of ‘creating a semblance of order’ ... the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death’.11

On the ninth of August 2005 Tom dies. I grieve and write poems. For a few weeks I am unable to think of anything else: or write anything else. By September I am thinking again, but I cannot write a poem of the funeral—so I leave it. I realise that I am still in a liminal state. I ponder the notions of the liminal state together with Stanner’s concept of ‘the veils’, and find myself imagining my poems arising from behind the veils of an internal interleaved liminal state of mind. I then find myself wondering further about the unconscious nature of the images that arise.

Ogden describes how he turns to poetry:

> to glean for myself and the reader a sense ... of important human experiences.

Prose states: poetry merely suggests. Poetry suggests because what it suggests cannot be stated... The sense that we glean from a poem is not already there waiting to be illuminated; it is newly created each time.12

I begin to know how it is that each new poem builds on the poems that come before. As I write each poem I am different—I evolve as the poems evolve. Later, when I am emotionally ready, the powerful images from the cross-cultural rituals enter my imagination and emerge into the poems. For the present moment, Tom’s death is the impetus for my poems. In time, dream-thoughts that link to images from the remote past, like the ‘one-legged-man’, or ‘the doorway with no door’, take shape and come into the present.

I have mentioned earlier that Metcalf and Huntington review the ethnographic case material that led Hertz and van Gennep to think of death as ‘a gradual process’. They argue that ‘if death is to be seen as a transition from one state of being to another, then it must be placed in the context of the period that follows, and the period that precedes it’.13 Here, there is a notion of the preparation of a way through death for both the one who is dying, as well as for the survivor: a shared liminal space in which an anticipatory mourning process, as well as a shared mourning, takes place.

By October 2005 I am reading again—and taking in the synergistic work. I engage with Debbora Battaglia’s study of the Sabarl people of the Louisiades, *On the Bones of the Serpent*.14 This ethnography is a very significant source of inspiration for the poems of the present study. Battaglia brings in, from the first, the idea of remembrance. In her introduction ‘Approaching Remembrance’, she invites the reader into the Sabarl imagination:

Sabarl tell a story from the ‘beginning of time’ (sauga tawa lelei) about a great sea eagle who challenges a giant serpent to a mortal test of strength. The sea eagle tricks the serpent into leaving its hole at the edge of the sea, then snatches it up in its beak and circles the sky until the serpent dies and decomposes. The rotting flesh falls into the water and forms a ring of islands. Then, when only the skeleton remains, the eagle tosses it away. Creating Sabarl: the ‘bones of the serpent’.15

Battaglia describes Sabarl as shaped like a writhing snake, some four miles long by half a mile wide, with two small island ‘eyes’ floating off one end. It is part of the Calvados Chain, which forms the southerly section of the ring of islands created by the eagle and the serpent. This ring is part of the Louisiades, an archipelago off the southern tip of New Guinea and ‘marking out the reefy seas of one of the world’s largest lagoons’.16

Battaglia argues that cultural process is defined by:

> a single problematic reality, that reality itself is culturally organised and disorganised, not discovered, that the meanings we give to our perceptions and experiences are constructed rather than passively observed and that these meanings are alternatively deconstructed as we recognise new differences and ascribe them significance.17

Many of Battaglia’s comments about Sabarl notions of remembrance and forgetting, have relevance for the present study. She describes Sabarl people as having no conscious concept of memory as a faculty, so any opportunity to review present knowledge is welcomed. Battaglia describes what Sabarl call the ‘holes in the net’. These are spaces left where markings in public places, such as cliff faces, were once present. The acts of marking and erasure have to do directly with the central place of remembrance and forgetting in ideation and cultural practice. She says her account

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16. *ibid*.
17. *ibid.*, p. 3.
of Sabarl cultural experience, in the sense of the movement of human life on the physical environment, ‘might be called ethnography of separation and absence’. 18

As I write, I recognise the struggle to find a way a way to remember, and to negotiate and renegotiate memories. The connected poems of the five parts of *Waiting for Death* move through death and memory, adding and taking away familiar elements and revealing new elements on their journey. As they move, they create a connected body of work around an imagined central self, which is in the process of being rediscovered. I am thinking about the images of bones and death and the serpent, which are synergistic with my poems, and particularly at this moment, some ideas crystallise and become 74. *Poems and Bones*.

The broad theme of the series of *Segaiya* feasts is what Battaglia terms ‘projective remembrance’. 19 When a male elder dies, the widowed spouse shares with the ritual father a relationship to the deceased that is constructed through feeding, across differences in blood. She would always have been in service to her husband’s senior clanspeople, but now must display self-effacement and shame as primary mourner.

Her duties as primary mourner begin before her husband dies. As he approaches death she is the one who leads the weeping and keening. As I think about how this work inspires the poems 73. *Beginning of Time*, 75. *Death* and 76. *Dream*, I feel quite deeply identified with the woman who blackens her skin with itchy charcoal, and who clings weeping to her dead husband in the period between his death and burial. As I write, I think about the emotional experience and social demands connected with being the primary mourner.

### 4.2 FIRST ANNIVERSARY


Battaglia describes in vivid detail how the mortuary festivals emphasise the significant relationships with others, not only the past and the dead, but also the present living relationships.

She also emphasises how for Sabarl, spoken words are not as important as performance for the reproduction of ancestral stories. It is understandings gained from participation in public performances that carry memories of current concern to people.

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Battaglia tells of the casual but poignant evidence of a deceased person’s handprint, and gives further examples of a gash on a tree ‘where your young wife sharpened her bush knife, her footprint on the path to the garden, a shell that she attached to a shingle just for style’. She comments that ‘observances like these keep fresh the sense of emptiness as an inner reality’.20

Battaglia conveys very vividly how the feasts of Segaiya are occasions for the experience of absence. Death brings people home from wherever they are to ‘the bones of the serpent’. She says, in conclusion, that ‘a young man explained to me once that Segaiya was like a bright spot left on the floorboards after a mark is scrubbed away’.21

The image of the sea eagle tossing away the serpent’s bones, immediately catches my imagination. I imagine the bones of the carpet snake, articulated but separate. This is the image I have for my autoethnography. A group of poems articulated but separate. The carpet snake and the cancer are part of this. They are waiting in the background. 48. Bones was written during my second reading of Battaglia’s ethnography. I explain its origins to Geoff Page (my newly met poetry advisor), who finds the skeletal forms of my poems with their imagery around death puzzling.

In November 2005, I read The Body Silent which (as I have mentioned earlier) is an autoethnography written by Robert Murphy, an anthropologist who stands back from the experience of his long illness with a disease of the spinal cord, and writes about his journey as if it is ‘a kind of extended anthropological field trip’. He says that he uses his ‘own odyssey in inner space to explore the structure of selfhood and sentiment’.22 This study brings forward my first thoughts about genre, and the concept of reflexive ethnography—which leads, by 2009, to (meta)-autoethnography.

Murphy describes the initial challenge of being both subject and object, both ethnographer and informant. He recreates in his mind the early days of his recovery from spinal cord surgery. He describes lying in his hospital bed and thinking of ‘my new and permanently altered feelings of who and what I was’. He describes how he began to feel shocked and dissociated. ‘I began to think of myself as if a part of me were perched over the headboard, watching the rest; it was as if it were happening to someone else’. He describes being challenged by questions of life and Death. ‘Would one really be better off dead?’.23

In a moment of strange coincidence, Murphy discovers that the maximum growth of the tumour is at the top section of his thoracic spine, more or less between the

20. ibid., p. 198.
21. ibid., p. 199.
23. ibid., pp. 5–6.
shoulder blades. He is amazed at this discovery, and in a rare moment of poignant self-revelation exclaims:

    Remarkable! That’s exactly where the Mundurucu believe the soul is located!  

Murphy describes the Mundurucu as an Indian tribe in the Amazon region of Brazil where he and his wife Yolanda had studied for a year. In the Mundurucu view of things, loss of soul was a major source of illness.

As he thinks of death, Murphy describes a deep human loneliness: ‘Nothing is quite so isolating as the knowledge that when one hurts, nobody else feels the pain... and that when one dies, the world continues with barely a ripple’.  

At this point of intense aloneness he seems to lose awareness of what he remembers at other times: that Yolanda is there suffering with him.

In a chapter titled *The Damaged Self*, Murphy quotes from Kafka:

    As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his back, as if it were armour plated, and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments...what has happened to me? he thought.
    It was no dream.

Murphy describes that he is experiencing such a metamorphosis. As reader, I experience moment by moment the parallel of Murphy’s plight and the anguish of Kafka’s character. Murphy insists that he lacks expressiveness. It is as if he does not realise how powerfully, if unknowingly, he shares the terror and inevitability of the experience of his progressive illness. It concerns him that he does not cry. He reports a conversation with a woman who says she cries a lot. He replies:

    I can’t cry at all, and that’s worse.

Murphy feels that he lives between life and death, and describes himself, and those like him, as ‘liminal people’. He quotes Victor Turner as having said, in 1967, that ‘liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness...’.

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24. ibid., p. 29.
25. ibid., p. 63.
As Murphy describes his progressive loss of function, he quotes Samuel Beckett’s character, Murphy:

Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped... Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free.\textsuperscript{29}

As reader, I prepare myself for Murphy’s slow and painful movement towards death. My own grief breaks through as I read. In the last section of the book, Murphy puts his house in order. As he does this he, like Beckett’s character Murphy, shares with the reader the poignancy of the experience.

He looks back over the memories of his life searching for meaning. It is as if the significance of the simple experiences eludes him. He searches his mind for clues in the books he has read. He looks for theories. He finds no clear answer to his question. It is the reader who sees the profound sharing of the experience that is going on with Murphy and Yolanda, and wonders, why is this not sufficient? Perhaps in his statement: ‘Life is less a state than a process’, he comes closer to realising which process matters in the end.

I become riveted as I discern many parallels with my own story in this last Section, \textit{On Living}. The final chapters, \textit{The Deepening Silence}, \textit{Love and Dependency}, and \textit{There’s No Cure for Life} resonate with the poems leading up to Tom’s death, in Part 1. \textit{When Will We Die}?

Murphy begins to forget that Yolanda is separate from him. I remember this happening to Tom and me. I become aware of our lack of separation. For example, I fear that I could be carried away by Tom’s cancer, which often seems like our cancer.\textsuperscript{78} \textit{The Cancer is Here} was written four months before his death: ‘The cancer is here, a trampling / nightmare of wild wheeling horses.’

As mourner and writer, I recognise that Tom, like Murphy, has no idea of the weight carried by his partner. Tom has no idea that I share his dying. He has only rare glimpses of the profound level on which we share his death. He thinks it is touching, but a bit odd, that I dream his dreams, and cry his tears.

Ogden describes how he reads a poem of grieving:

\begin{quote}
I attempt to enter deeply into the poem and allow it to enter deeply into me—which is to enter into a variety of coexisting forms of love that shape an experience of grief.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{30.} Ogden, T., op. cit., p. 178.
\end{flushright}
Taking this notion a step further, it occurs to me that as I write, I am entering deeply into my own work. I am also moved by the process of a shared dying, and equally by my poems as I write them. By allowing myself to enter deeply into the process, I build on my experience. This shapes what may be revealed by the poems.

The oncologist often reminds us of how much longer Tom has to live. I find this annoying. Tom is amused, and thinks it is a challenge. I cope by writing 79. *Time Running Out*.

A recurring resonant theme is that, near the end, the woman is left alone to have knowledge of, and so to grieve, the loss of the couple. The couple dies first, unnoticed. The man fails bravely, nobly, dry-eyed. The woman weeps. ‘Death is everywhere’, is another recurring theme. I write 74. *Poems and Bones*.

Murphy’s imprisonment within his body preoccupies my thoughts, and evokes images from my childhood. I think of Mount Nebo and of my father constructing a wire cage with a single spiral entrance, to catch mice, alive. I found the distress of the imprisoned mice unbearable. The plight of the mouse in the cage caused me so much suffering that I often let the mice out. I was terrified of being found out and having to suffer my father’s anger. I write 77. *Cage*.

The poem begins:

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The mouse is a poem
in a cage waiting to escape
one way in, no way out.

As I watch the mouse
with my four year old eyes
I am in the cage with no way out.
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The carpet snake and the cancer are still not far away. In this poem I find a way out. I write 80. *Waiting in Silence*, 81. *Through a Doorway* and 82. *Dancing With No Legs*. The cancer will pass. What will return over and over are the images of the cage, the carpet snake and the bones.

Ruth Behar’s study *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* is an autoethnography written as a series of essays. 31 Behar very openly shows how she struggles with carrying into lived experience the concept of being the vulnerable observer of herself. She makes several attempts, through the essays, to observe, and at the same time, respond to her vulnerable self. It is 1996. She does

not have the advantage of a developed, thought-through and named genre of (meta-)
autoethnography. She sets out to create a genre. Behar begins her first essay, *The
Vulnerable Observer*, with a quotation from George Deveraux:

> It is customary to call books about human beings either tough minded or
tender minded. My own is neither and both, in that it strives for objectivity
about the tender mindedness without which no realistic behavioural science
is possible.\(^{32}\)

She then goes on to describe an avalanche in 1985 in Colombia, which buried an
entire village in mud. The reader realises that the dimension tough minded/tender
minded is central to Behar’s story. She quotes Allende who, in 1995, writes about
a girl of thirteen who is trapped in the mud and becomes the focus of what she
describes as obsessive media attention. A photographer, Rolfe Carle, unable to watch
silently from behind the camera, crouches down in the mud, throws the camera
aside and ‘flings his arms around (the girl) as her heart and lungs collapse’.\(^{33}\)

Behar describes Carle as, in her view, ‘the vulnerable observer par excellence’.
She says he observes, and yet at that moment is able to emotionally identify with the
object of his observation. She asserts that ‘anthropology has always been vexed about
the question of vulnerability’, and goes on to further quote Deveraux, who said very
clearly that ‘what happens within the observer must be made known, if the nature of
what is being observed is to be understood’.\(^{34}\)

Behar describes a debate going on for many years in anthropology about the place
of introspection. This debate is obviously relevant to the present autoethnography.
She quotes Geertz, in 1989, insisting that it ‘is inappropriate to interiorise too
much, what is in fact an intensely public activity’. She challenges this view, and
emphasises the impact on the anthropologist of what is observed. This problem is
acknowledged by Geertz, whom she quotes as saying that ‘we lack the language to
articulate what takes place when we are, in fact, at work. He says: ‘There seems to be
a genre missing’.

Behar boldly takes up the challenge: ‘Consider this book a quest for that genre’.\(^{35}\)
Meanwhile, I know that my study has found ‘that genre’.

Behar goes on to describe her own struggles and fears about being vulnerable, and
how she would like to support others to be vulnerable. She describes choosing the
essay as a genre through which to attempt the dialectic between connection and

\(^{33}\) Behar, R., op. cit., p. 1.
\(^{34}\) ibid., pp. 1, 5, 84.
\(^{35}\) ibid., p. 9.
otherness: ‘the essay is at once the inscription of a self and description of an object’.36 She describes how she began to use the essay, and some performance pieces, as being a step in the direction of the really creative writing she longed to do. This creative expression calls for an intellectual and emotional engagement from the listener. However, I have a sense that Behar is not entirely happy with her solution. It is not easy for her to be deeply moved by her own process, or to convey this to her readers.

The poems of the present study call for an emotional engagement at many levels. At times, the adult voice is the dominant voice, but at other times the adult remains silent while the child speaks. I have a sense that the child’s voice often cries for a way out. Sometimes the cries are silent or silenced. It is these silenced cries that emerge in the subtext of poems, such as 20. Normal Life—Warmth, where a shiver of loss and deep abandonment emerges in the subtext, or 77. Cage, where the sense of a stifled cry of fear is lightly held in the subtext.

As I read Behar’s essay, I begin to experience a resonance with the author in her dilemma to connect with the people she is observing, and at the same time to connect with herself. I also begin to realise that Behar’s study is a reflexive ethnography within a reflexive ethnography, with the reader invited to be the vulnerable observer. However, the more I engage with her work, the more I realise that, at times, she struggles to find a way into her grief. As vulnerable observer, I feel concern as I begin to see how this keeps her on the periphery of her life. She describes in these essays that she does not join in the rituals that are central to other members of her family.

I identify a similar struggle emerging in her second essay, Death and Memory: From Santa Maria del Monte to Miami Beach. In this essay, she describes a situation of travelling to Santa Maria del Monte, a rural farming community in a northern Spanish village, with her husband and baby son. She brings the book she had written in English, following her fieldwork some years earlier. While she is engaged in this reunion, her grandfather lies dying in Miami Beach. She partly (and again, only partly) understands at an intellectual level what is happening, but becomes uncertain, and displaces the responsibility for her choice on to her commitment to her role as an anthropologist:

I couldn’t forget that my grandfather was dying; that everything I was living an ocean away in the space of a village in Spain was being lived in the time frame of his dying.37

36. ibid., p. 20.
37. ibid., p. 43.
A few pages later, she fleetingly reflects on her inability to connect to what is happening to her in her own life. She has a moment of clarity:

\[\text{my grandfather is dying and I realise I am not there with him. I have chosen to be at an enormous distance, to hear how others die because I have not resolved how to be there with him. (Or is this what I think now, two years later?)}^{38}\]

I argue that her struggle, and my struggle, reflected in the poems of the five parts of *Waiting for Death*, are to find the strength to stay connected at many levels, and ages, of the self: to protect the feeling flow while bearing the anguish of waiting. It often feels impossible to observe, while equally to be present in the moment.

It is not until the fourth essay that I can make sense of what is happening to prevent Behar from going to be with her grandfather. She tells how she sees that she cannot connect to her own emotional need to be with her grandfather, and then act on this need. It is as if she cannot easily let herself grieve. She has to ‘be brave’.

She is really much more easily connected to the emotional needs of the people she is observing. She cannot easily withdraw her investment in their needs so as to be able to attend to herself. She shows that she cannot readily do both—be the vulnerable observer of her own needs, and then respond to these needs.

Repeatedly, Behar unwittingly displaces her empathy away from herself on to those she is interviewing. She readily feels her way into their sense of being; but as she does so, she at times hardens her heart to herself. It could be said that the crux of this essay is about Behar’s struggle (similar to the struggle expressed in my study) to find a way to be present with herself while waiting for the death of another—or her inability to allow into consciousness that the waiting experience has an importance of its own to her.

As the vulnerable observer of what is being reported in her essay, I wait, and observe my own discomfort in waiting for Behar to be moved by her own story. I want her to stop ‘being brave’. For a moment, she seems to be softening when she says:

\[\text{my effort has been to mark the fact of loss, and to show that there is an emotional force to this fact that we ought not to hide ourselves from.}^{39}\]

She knows in one part of herself that we all need to be ‘in’ our loss as well as observing it, but she does not quite suggest this: ‘I want to suggest that anthropologists and other vulnerable observers should write about loss’.\(^{40}\)

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38. ibid., p. 48.
39. ibid., p. 83.
40. ibid., p. 81.
In a moment of unintended irony, she then eventually declares: ‘Above all I think we need to be absolutely pitiless with ourselves’.\(^{41}\) In what way pitiless? It is at this point that I begin to recognise that Behar and I share the same ‘blind spot’. We tend to be ‘strict’ with ourselves. As I read her next essay, I begin to understand why.

Behar tells of a car accident she survives as a child in which she suffers physical and emotional trauma, and is encased in a whole-body cast. As she tells this part of her story, I observe that Behar is readily empathic to her own struggle. She begins to read about children who have suffered abandonment or other traumatic experiences. She reads about the treatment that she might have had then, and expresses a poignant sense of regret for what could have been a very different life for her, had her emotional trauma been attended to at that time. In one sense it is not too late now: but for her it is too late. She comments that: ‘No one thought to call in a psychoanalyst to figure out why I was afraid to walk’. She knows that she has carried her trauma into the present. She states clearly that: ‘The girl in the cast grows up to be a woman in a cast’. She is aware that part of her still remains the same powerless child, not only in a cast, but lacking language to express her plight. As I wait (in my mind’s eye) for the carpet snake to drop, I resonate with her plight.\(^{42}\)

Being ‘absolutely pitiless’ with her wounded self becomes a habitual way of dealing with her vulnerability. My impression is that it is only when her anxiety breaks through, for example when she is afraid of not finding a way to go home, that Behar realises the extent of this separation from herself. At these times, she is also able to acknowledge that: ‘the girl in the cast lives within the woman who won’t move, can’t move; the woman who has been stopped in her tracks’.\(^{43}\)

There are several resonances of Behar’s work with my autoethnography. In her terms, I am ‘the vulnerable observer’ of my own poems. The poem 1. *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark* recreates a remembered home in the forest held in the imagination. The four-year-old self describes an imaginary world of childhood, with its fears and dangers. This poem shows many connections and disconnections, and is an avenue of expression for many voices. It is unselfconscious and playful, rather than a crafted piece of work. It has an important place in the present study, because the first part of this poem is written in the voice of the child, and from the child’s point of view. Later, like Behar, I express from the shared view of the child and the adult. The observer is invited to enter into the experience of the child threatened by an external attack.

\(^{41}\) ibid., p. 81.
\(^{42}\) ibid., pp. 127–30.
\(^{43}\) ibid., pp. 81, 135.
Behar’s final essay, *Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, begins with an unguarded, heartfelt assertion: ‘here I am imagining that I ought to be somewhere else instead’.\(^{44}\) The essay contains an irony within an irony. In the space between the two, it creates powerful moments of synergy with the present study. As observer, I wait for her final words. I wait for her to acknowledge that the past she brings, raw and unintegrated, into the present, must be attended to. In my final moments as observer, I wait for a sign that she will now acknowledge her own waiting child. She *does* acknowledge. Her child is not present but she does not deny the heartbreak in this, and her final words are: ‘Can’t be here’.

The poignancy of her waiting, and how she expresses her obvious struggle to bring the past into the present in an integrated way, makes me experience Behar’s work as being richly synergistic with my own. She invigorates me with her courage. I believe that I am the vulnerable observer of Behar’s work, but I am not sure that she is truly compassionate with herself. In my view, she does not show how deeply moved she is by her own story: I am moved by her story. Here I begin to understand Behar’s story *from the inside*. It is this quality of ‘being brave’ that I deeply recognise in myself. It shows in my own work. Behar is ‘the girl in the cast’. I am the child who moves through her life knowing that every tree has a carpet snake waiting to drop on her. No wonder we both have to be brave to go on. I believe that, paradoxically, she does not find a way in to her own vulnerability, so she cannot yet help herself find a way out of the cast. She remains an ‘observer’ of, rather than a participant in, her lived experience. My study is also about finding a way out—a way through grief, but also a way out of being afraid of the carpet snake—a way out of carrying the carpet snake within me.

At the time of first reading these ethnographies, my grief was fresh, and so they were important in providing a backbone for my emerging study. I had a sense of ‘storing away’ images and resonant descriptions until my mind had ‘more room’ to consider them and take them in to my creative imagination.

The impact of Donald Hall’s *The Painted Bed* on the present study is quite different from the impact of *The Vulnerable Observer*.\(^{45}\) Hall does not seem, consciously, to reflect on the use of poems as a way to express grief. In a way similar to the present study, he seems compelled to use poems to manage his pain, and as a natural way through grief.

I find the first section of *The Painted Bed* confronting. The poems begin with *Kill the Day*, which is about Jane’s death. Hall writes this first poem in the third person as if he were watching himself in his frenzy of grief. There is no sense of waiting, only

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\(^{44}\) ibid., p. 161.

the immediacy of dying, which floods the second section of poems with fragments of fresh memory. *Afterlife* is the poem of preparations for the funeral and the funeral itself. After the funeral:

he turned
his children out of the house
with difficulty, and was
alone again with her absence.\(^{46}\)

Later, in *Deathwork*, he moves into first person revelation. For Donald Hall, death has wiped out all consciousness of waiting. He rampages headlong through his own turbulent mourning taking the reader with him. Whereas I was the vulnerable observer of Behar’s work, I find myself being swept away in the torrent of Hall’s grief. He spells out what the poems of *Part 1: When Will We Die?* only hint at. He not only speaks the unspeakable: he screams it. He fills in all the gaps, but only gives the briefest acknowledgement of a gap existing.

Following on from where he so poignantly says: ‘Her absence could no longer be written to’, he shows how he indiscriminately fills her absence with activity,

He emptied her shelves, dressers, and closets,
Stacking rings and bracelets, pendants and necklaces.
He bundled sweaters and jeans, brassieres and blouses,
scarves and nightgowns and suits and summer dresses
and mailed them to Rosie’s Place for indigent women.\(^{47}\)

Hall’s work has some similarities with, but also stark differences from, the present study. His handling of the death of his partner has several differences from the poems of *Waiting for Death*. I had wondered if some of these differences may be gender based, but I now think, that cross-culturally, as I have previously mentioned, with the Yolngu, the Foi, or the Sabarhl the men and women often work together to provide opportunities for the whole group to grieve. Hall places no emphasis on waiting. The poems of this study, as the title suggests, emphasise waiting, both before and after Tom’s death. Time is taken to anticipate death, and later to give time to allow a gradual taking in of what has happened. Hall has time to prepare for Jane’s death, but is unable to prepare himself. The reader is left in no doubt that no amount of time would have been enough time.

\(^{46}\) ibid., p. 15.
\(^{47}\) ibid., p. 4.
He struggles to find a way to remember Jane in a way that feels she is with him. The memories do not seem to comfort him, they emphasise her absence. In the painful poem, *The Wish*, he expresses: ‘I feel her weary ghost inside me’. He seems to have no way to think about holding on to her alive presence. His solution to her ‘white withdrawal’ is to let her go. He does not imagine a way of coming out of grief ‘alive’ as the Yolngu do, or as I do, because of a transformation of the grief process. Part of Hall has died, and he anticipates that it can never be brought back to life.

Hall and Behar and the present study have in common the attempt to face the unfaceable: the moment of death. For Hall, it is immediate and without delay. When she dies, he dies:

When she died it was if his car accelerated  
...over the death water...  
...where his corpse  
lay twisted in a honeycomb of steel, still dreaming  
awake, as dead as she was but conscious still.

The poem of the moment of Tom’s death has a very different pace from Hall’s *Kill the Day*. It also has a different emphasis. 29. 9 August is halting, deliberate in its disbelief—of what has just happened. As it unfolds, it emphasises the shock—the incomprehensible nature of the moment.

Tom returns to me before he dies as if to let me know he is leaving and to hold me for the last time. I watch him die: I hold him, knowing it is the last time, but hardly knowing why, or what is happening:

At a quarter past seven  
he looked over to me  
with his direct piercing gaze,  
looking right into  
my hollow eyes,  
exhausted with vigilance  
in my hollow face,  
exhausted with waiting.

A few moments later I address him directly:

You did it, I say,  
Speaking to his hovering soul.
As I look back I see that this is a crucial psychological moment. I have repositioned Tom as an ‘alive soul’ after death, which allows our conversation to continue. It is the beginning of an ongoing conversation that I can imagine having with Tom forever. I imagine him as transformed, but of course the transformation is within me. My emotions fluctuate:

I sit with him
happy
that he has found
a way out of life—

I am filled with elation:
As happens
After birth
Or death.

In the third section of *The Painted Bed, Daylilies on the Hill*, Hall looks back to his childhood. This section divides the past, Jane’s death, from the future, where Hall describes bringing himself back to life with a great deal of sexual activity. It is at times often difficult to distinguish whether these are poems of remembrance or of new life: whether the women are really there, or whether they are Jane in his memory or his imagination. I think both.

He cannot bear his own deadness. He has unwittingly consciously killed Jane when she died, but unconsciously—through the fantasy of new life that underpins sexual activity, he seeks to transform her into an ‘alive soul’ that he can mourn. His work of undirected mourning continues, but he does not have ritual or personal help to manage the pain or process the loss. He cannot alone bring about an inner ‘alive soul’ transformation to help manage the pain. In *Out of Bed*, Hall has a heartbreaking moment of self-reflection:

Returned
from the sexual sea I achieve degradation:
the overturned boat, blue hands clutching,
an angry tongue that specifies the drowned’. 50

He seems to be saying that he longs for closeness and sensual experience to get away from the loss, but then he devalues the experience, because he really wants Jane.

50. ibid., p. 86.
He mourns inconsolably. He is still part of Jane and hardly believes she has died. He is in two minds about whether he is ready to come alive, and he cannot think of a new relationship. He is not ready for a new relationship. As I said before, he does not imagine a transformative grief process. He is lonely—heartbroken—and he wants to be held. Part of him struggles to allow himself to express an awakening of desire and sexuality as a kind of pain relief, while another part, still grieving Jane, holds him back.

Hall seems so overwhelmed with loss that he cannot imagine feeling whole when he is alone. He is broken—shattered. He seems unable to have a time of waiting and being with himself. Even in his final poem, *Affirmation*, his thoughts are of replacing Jane. He sees having a partner as being carried (emotionally) by the woman:

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If a new love carries us
past middle age, our wife will die
at her strongest and most beautiful.
New women come and go. All go.51
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The poems of *Part 1: When Will We Die?* describe my struggle with the problems of not having cancer when Tom has cancer, of being left behind and not dying when he dies, of being alone and only after time passes being whole again: different, but whole. There is endless waiting: waiting for the process to move in its own time. Hall cannot bear to wait and the expression of his loss is eloquent and passionate. He cannot, and does not, want to think that with the passing of time he could carry an alive presence of his lost Jane within.

*The Painted Bed* has an outraged energy that has a synergistic power for the subtext of the present study. The poems of *Kill the Day* and *Afterlife* have a wild freedom of expression that is liberating for the silenced voices of my more restrained work. Hall’s handling of loss is also strikingly different from Behar’s in *The Vulnerable Observer*. Behar has a delayed reaction to her grandfather’s death. She is on a field trip when she hears the news of his death. Her parents telephone and she reports speaking very briefly to each of them. Her first comment is about her mother. ‘My poor mother. She herself had not arrived in time’. Ruth Behar has a baby son less than a year old and finds it confusing to breastfeed and grieve. The two experiences become merged: ‘I felt that he was sucking tears, not milk’.52

51. ibid., p. 87.
52. Behar, R., op. cit., p. 68.
I attempt to stand aside and observe how the three vulnerable authors of the three autoethnographies handle the moment of death of a loved one. What may be partly a gender difference is striking. Hall’s grief is immediate and passionate. He has lost his mate. The one who should be caring for him in his old age. He writes that he expected to die first. Behar is restrained at first, and finds it ‘difficult to mourn alone’. She has delayed returning home until it is too late to be present at her grandfather’s funeral as well as his death. She arrives in time to be part of the ritual family grieving, but it takes time for her to begin to realise the significance of such a deep loss. I am moved by Hall’s poems and I dream in response about my own grief and my struggle to let go. *Dream Within a Dream* expresses this struggle.

The passion expressed in Hall’s early poems and the openness of Behar’s often desolate struggle heighten my awareness of unexpressed parts of my own story. Their straightforward expression helps to bring to my mind the previously unwritten poems.

These ethnographies—both in prose and in poems—hold me by the power of their expressiveness, and in the flow of their words, throughout the first year after Tom’s death. They allow me to focus my thinking and feeling in a way, which frees my mind to write poems as I need to write them, before I turn to the ethnographies in their own right. As well as reading the ethnographies, I have an ongoing conversation with Howard about how human societies such as the Barawan and Yolngu construct rituals to deal with the journey of an imagined ‘alive’ soul, and the continuity of the spirit after death. I show how these conversations lead to later poems.

### 4.3 SECOND ANNIVERSARY

The second anniversary of Tom’s death on the 9 August shakes me as I prepare for my presentation at the First Year Conference on the 27 August 2007. At this conference, I will read my own poems aloud. I review the ethnographies I have read and wonder when I will begin to integrate them into my poems. I do not at this stage realise that this integration is an unconscious process, which has already begun. I notice that as I begin to emerge from the grieving process, the ethnographies are working powerfully to free my poetic imagination.

I ‘change the subject’ and write *Black Swan* from December 2006 to February 2007. I spend the rest of the year regaining my continuity and my autonomous self. I write freely. The synergistic work emerges into the poems. The poems are completed on 26 October 2008.

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53. ibid., p. 69.
4.4 THIRD ANNIVERSARY: CONTINUITY AND BONES

It is Friday 19 June 2009. As I awaken, I remember that I have some yellow rose petals to scatter on ‘Tom’s garden’—a protected place where a bird’s-nest fern and purple sarsaparilla vines grow over the mulch and dark soil mixed with Tom’s surprisingly heavy bones and ashes. As I scatter the rose petals, I think to myself: bones are continuity. This leads me to think back to the importance of bones in the mortuary rituals of the peoples described in the ethnographies I have been reading—and the importance of the ethnographies themselves as mortuary texts.

As I have said, Tom expressed to me his desire for continuity through his wish to have his ashes and bones scattered in my garden: ‘so as to be near you’, he said. In turn, I express my desire to preserve the continuity of our relationship by writing an autoethnography.

For the Berawan of Borneo, the bones assure continuity of the spirit after death, by their role in accompanying the spirit to the land of the dead. Metcalf and Huntington cite Peter Metcalf’s study of the Berawan whose treatment of the body after death separates the bones from the flesh. After the separation is complete, the final rituals can take place. The climax of the death ritual is the singing of a song, which instructs the spirit, and prepares it for its journey accompanied by the bones, to a final resting place in the monument prepared to receive them.

In Yolngu thought, the treatment of the bones is important in the journey of the soul. The treatment and cleaning of the bones is part of a process in which the soul of the dead is transformed back into ancestral substance. Flesh is associated with the ‘corrupt and profane’ human aspects of the person.

Morphy describes how ‘the bones (ngaraka) are the sacred core of the body, and are associated with the wangarr’. The term ‘wangarr’ refers to ‘the ancestors, the world-creating force, or the time of world creation’. He describes how in earlier times after the bones have been cleaned of all flesh, they are collected and placed within a bark coffin, a larrakitj, which is painted with ancestral designs. The bones are kept in their container for many years and carried around from camp to camp. Finally, they are broken up and placed within a hollow log coffin, in a final memorial ceremony for the deceased. As Morphy points out, ‘the set of mortuary rituals thus involves a series of transformations... (finally) the bones have ceased to be the bones

56. ibid., p. 311.
of the person and have, to use a Yolngu metaphor, become the bones (ngaraka) of the clan’.

For the Barawan, the rituals around the bones, and the bones themselves, carry the spirit to its resting place. For the Yolngu, the bones are returned to the spiritual domain of the clan through the transformative power of rituals and paintings. Both of these cultural expressions resonate with my own experience. For me, Tom’s bones are the vehicles by which his soul symbolically transports his spirit. They lie in my garden under a birds-nest fern trailed with a bush vine—a Queensland purple sarsaparilla. My poems, like Yolngu paintings, have transformative power. I imagine that they rest his spirit within me. It is only later, when I can bear to be separate from him, I see that they have freed my spirit.

4.5 WHERE ARE THE STRONG WOMEN?

It is August 2009. I am looking back. By mid-year 2006, Geoff Page my poetry advisor and I establish a rhythm of meeting every few weeks. I send some poems, which he reads, and when we meet we discuss them. He reads me two or three poems, usually from his collection of renowned poets. We call this collection The Eighty Greats.

In early August 2006, he reads Judith Beveridge’s poem Bahadur. I am struck with the power of the subtext of this poem about a boy with his kite ‘working/its way into the wobbly winter sky’. This Nepalese boy has been sold into child labour. Beveridge imagines how:

he is following

the kite through pastures of snow where
his father calls into the mountains for him,
where his mother weeps his farewell into

the carriages of a five day train.

At the time, as he read, I was struck with the irony of my own situation: trying to fly my kite—write my poems, be true to myself—in a strange land. The poem stays in my mind. I re-read it in March and April 2007.

57. ibid., p. 110.
59. ibid., p. 323.
By August 2007 I feel the strength of the ethnographies as backbone and inspiration for new thoughts and poems. I realise forcefully what it means that this study has partly emerged from anthropology. Part of what it means to me is that I must look around me, keep things steady but maintain a strong feeling flow and connection to myself to power the poems. Again, I am reminded of Ruth Behar’s dilemma as I face my own. I know that I must own my study and find my ‘field’. It is not until much later that I can articulate what the ‘field’ is. Each time I read Bahadur, I play with the image of standing aside from myself, flying my kite, while being the child in exile; but this is not enough. What about the woman? Where are the strong women?

I turn to Dorothy Hewett, Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop who in different ways use poetry to free themselves. As in the present autoethnography, an important part of their struggle for freedom leads them on a search for a way through, or a way out of grief—or life.

Dorothy Hewett is an Australian poet whose work strikingly reflects her use of poetry as a way out, and a way through loss. Her writing brings to the fore that even as she struggles to find a way through her losses, she further entangles herself in her own intensely felt personal experiences. In her collection of poems Rapunzel in Suburbia, she expresses images of the tower, of an unattainable love, and impulses of murder and death.60

The use of the Rapunzel fairytale as metaphor creates a vivid sense of how the poet is imprisoned in the world of her imagination. Although she seldom uses dream images, she lives in an intense inner world, like a dream world, so that dream-like images are readily available to her to be used in her poetic work. Paradoxically, there is a sense that she does not use these images in her poems to express her hate and thereby let it go—she holds on and remains imprisoned within it.

In an interview with Nicole Moore, Dorothy Hewett speaks of her passionate connection with her poetic work: ‘I’d rather write poetry than anything else. When it turns out well, there is nothing like that feeling of triumph, until the next time. That wonderful feeling—for a moment that everything came together. I think it’s the economy of it I love to be able to say so much in such a contained form and with such intensity. It suits me, you know. It suits me’.61

Dorothy Hewett struggled from an early age to use poems as a way out. She was becoming established as a poet in her early twenties, but attempted suicide at twenty-two after devastating disappointments in love. Later, unhappily married to

a lawyer, Lloyd Davis, she manages disappointment differently: she pours her rage into her poems giving her a way out in the sense of an avenue of expression, but not a way through in the sense of some attainment of resolution. She leaves Davis and their child for a fellow communist, boilermaker Les Flood, but carries her huge rage with her.

Davis later sues her over a poem, which he assumes is about his second wife, and has the book *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, in which it appears, banned in Western Australia. An edition of the book was pulped, but not before Hewett has expressed what she needed to express. In a poem titled ‘Uninvited Guest’, she imagines she enters the house of her ex-husband and his new wife. She vents her rage first and murderously, to his wife:

> With her bare fat suffering feet,
> With her head stuffed full of tranquillisers and her ovaries removed,
> My ex-husband’s wife stands under the green potato plant
> In her subterranean kitchen and hates me.

> The potato plant grows and covers the walls and ceiling,
> A climbing monstrous ganglia, green nerves, groping arms.
> One day it will lovingly circle her throat and stop her yammering heart.

Seven lines later she turns on Davis, and addresses him directly:

> Where are you while your wife sits strangling in a great green vine in the kitchen...62

There is a sense that in finding her murderous jealous rage and outrage, she has found a way to break out of a humiliating loss. In a later poem, titled ‘This Time’, she begins to move through:

> I’ve made it once again, gone past the pitch of grief...

> It’s over now, the waking up to pain...

> Now that the pain is gone I’m lost without it...

I trace your beardless face,
younger...more vulnerable...
The engaged signal beeps mournfully through the house.

This poem seems to take the poet a step further in her outraged grief. There is a sense that in the writing of the poem, the poet struggles to go beyond rage, and beyond ‘the pitch of grief’ into a softer, more vulnerable place of mourning:

The engaged signal beeps mournfully.

As with the present study, there is also a sense that for Dorothy Hewett, the writing of poems has a function. It not only helps to contain the grief, but also focuses her energy, which drives the creative process. The immediacy of a strong potent expression of hate and outrage are important to her in eventually expressing sorrow and in processing the experience of loss.

In August 2009, as I re-read Dorothy Hewett’s work with my autoethnography beside me and engage with the immediacy of her raw expressiveness, I reflect on how different my poems are. I think of her potent outrage, and my much quieter longing and waiting in Waiting for Death.

Some losses are never completely mourned. Dorothy Hewett’s final poem ‘Grave Fairytale’ further explores her bloody struggle to free herself from her bitter hate. She never freed herself from the dream she had woven around Davis. Although she left him, she believed he would be there if she returned. It is as if all her close, passionate relationships become part of the struggle to break this spell. In this poem, self and other are fused and confused as she traces the connections of the many parts and many ages of her self. She continues to explore the avenues of expression of her murderous feelings around lost love, and lost lovers, as time passes. There are, again, frequent nightmare-like references to a part of her that is impenetrable, her tower: The tower is a dominant theme of the Rapunzel story in Grimm’s Fairytales, where a child is surrendered after birth and is shut away in a tower by an enchantress. She, like Dorothy Hewett, waits to be rescued by a handsome prince.

My poems attempt to express my grief—and to let it go, while at the same time, holding on to myself and to Tom. Dorothy Hewett never expresses her grief in a way that allows her to let it go, partly because she holds on to her hate. Perhaps it is a valuable and vital part of her poetic energy.

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Containment and movement of the grieving process does not happen for Sylvia Plath. For her, poetry is not a way out. The only way out is death. Her poem ‘Kindness’, heavy with irony, from the volume of poems *Ariel*, published in 1965, two years after her death, begins with the lines: ‘Kindness glides about my house. / Dame Kindness she is so nice!’ It contains many images of desperation: ‘...desperate butterflies, / may be pinned any minute, anaesthetised’. The poem ends with the lines:

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.
You hand me two children, two roses."^{64}

It is as if she haemorrhages from the poem. It is deeply expressive, but it is as if she cannot find the words to stop the bleeding: the wounds are too deep. At this time, her death is very close. ‘Kindness’ hands her the gift of these two children, but the gift does not stop the bleeding: the children are lost in the haemorrhage of the poetry. They are connected to her by her blood. They are ‘given’, not born from her flesh. There is no heart connection. Neither they, nor the poems, can hold her steady, or help her to find her way out of grief.

Why can she not use her poems to find a way out? Lynda Bundtzen, referring to Plath’s poem ‘Daddy,’ tells how Sylvia Plath used psychoanalysis for intellectual self-interpretation, and perhaps used her poems in much the same way—to explain herself rather than to express herself."^{65} In ‘Daddy’ (which Plath acknowledges as a poem of self-reflection), she rages against her father. Although she insists: ‘Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through’, she is clearly far from ‘through’, and as Bundtzen points out ‘she cannot, but obviously must, give up the lost loved one’."^{66} Even if, at this point, she cannot grieve, not only for her father, but also for both parents who abandoned her, and for Hughes, from whom she had separated only a few months earlier. It does not necessarily have to be the end. She has a burst of creativity near the end, but again explains herself, rather than using her poems to struggle with herself. She cannot grieve; she cannot find a way to ‘be through’.

Jillian Becker, in *Giving Up. The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*, writes her memories of the last few days of Sylvia Plath’s life."^{67} She tells how Sylvia Plath and her two young children had sought refuge with her and her husband Gerry in their home, until just before she returned with the children to her apartment and committed suicide. Jillian Becker mentions a conversation with Ted Hughes, in which he refers to a
previous suicide attempt, and comments: ‘It was in her, you see, but I told her that if she wrote about it profoundly enough, she would conquer it.’ Jillian Becker then asks him: ‘And you don’t think she wrote about it profoundly enough?’ He answers: ‘No’, and she further comments: ‘His no was a sort of verbal shrug, implying: obviously not—doesn’t this funeral prove it’. He didn’t care to know what I might think of it, but in fact I agree with him’. 68

Jillian Becker gives a view that even Sylvia Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar*, which is ‘about an attempted suicide, comes nowhere near to explaining it’. 69 From this reported conversation, and the comments that follow, it is clear that both are in agreement that poetry could have been a ‘way out’ if Sylvia Plath had used it that way: if she had the capacity to engage with it to help her grieve. There is a sense that she was too fragile, and too lacking in inner strength, to give up the relationships, which entangled her, so as to grieve.

The poems ‘Kindness’ and ‘Edge’, both published in *Ariel*, were written in the days leading up to her death in 1963. 70 ‘Edge’ is the poem that is thought to be the last before her suicide: This poem shows how it is that the poet does not find a way out. There is no alternative to suicide. She connects with her murderous alienated self, but not the desperately unhappy vulnerable self, who needs ‘kindness’. She finds no resource of nurturing within. The image of the moon ‘staring from her hood of bone’ suggests an alienation from her self, specifically her own internalised mother and also her own mothering capacity. This includes a capacity to mother herself. There is a recurrence in ‘Edge’ of the image of the rose that earlier appears in ‘Kindness’. This time, the use of the image suggests that she may be considering killing the children:

*She has folded*  
Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden  

*Stiffens and odours bleed...*  

It could be suggested that writing the image of:  

*Each dead child coiled, a white serpent*  
One at each little  

*Pitcher of milk, now empty...*  

68. ibid., p. 48.  
70. Plath, S. (1965), op. cit.
was in fact a limited use of poetry as a way out: she took her own life but did not kill the children. She left them a ‘pitcher of milk’ and spared their lives.

The works of Sylvia Plath and Dorothy Hewett shake up and energise the poems of this study. Sylvia Plath’s life and work were cut short. She could not find a way to express her grief and continue to live on. She saw death as the only way out. Dorothy Hewett’s work continues to explore ways of expressing deep feelings around loss. She engages with her poems so as to free herself to live.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) is an American poet and writer. She was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1949 to 1950. Her father died when she was eight months old, and her mother then broke down. When she was five, she was taken away from her mother who had been committed to a Sanatorium in Nova Scotia. They were never reunited. Bishop wrote poems from an early age which contain many references to loss, such as those from ‘The Waterfall’: ‘A muffled cry of loss / in cold mist’.71 Later in the same year, 1940, she expresses the longing for union, and the relief of clearing the air of unshed tears. As reader, I am reminded of the poet’s lost parents, and the imagined tears and kisses of reunion, when she writes:

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It is marvellous to wake up together,  
At the same minute; marvellous to hear  
The rain begin suddenly all over the roof  
To feel the air suddenly clear...
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All over the roof the rain hisses,  
And below the light falling of kisses.

The reference to unshed tears recurs in ‘The Reprimand’, where she plays with the idea of a dialogue with her tongue:

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If you taste tears too often, inquisitive tongue,  
You’ll find they’re something you’d not reckoned on...
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The last lines play with an idea of silencing the expression of grief—bypassing the tongue, so that sighing is used rather than crying, which leads to tasting further tears. Although it is playful, this poem has an oppressive feel. The dialogue brings to mind a child separated from her parents, trying not to cry.

The image of a child, not only trying not to cry, but also trying not to remember, is evoked powerfully by ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’. This poem contains the memory of the death of a young child—her cousin Arthur, and a memory of her mother:

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'Come said my mother.  
Come and say good-bye  
to your cousin Arthur.'  
I was lifted up and given  
one lily of the valley  
to put in Arthur's hand.

A moment of irony occurs when the reader realises that at the time of this memory, Elizabeth Bishop was the child about to lose her mother. In fact, this may be the last, or only, memory of being with her mother.

She was never allowed to visit her mother, but writes ‘The Weed’, a strong rhythmic poem about her visits to ‘the tragic man’, ‘the cruel man’, ‘the tedious man’, ‘the wretched man’, the poet Ezra Pound who had been admitted to St. Elizabeth's Psychiatric Hospital in Washington D.C.

‘The Weed’, from Visits to St. Elizabeth’s, which begins with an image her own death and heartbreak, later has an image of healing and a sign of new growth. However, disappointment returns when the young plant turns out to be a weed:

‘I grow’, it said  
‘but to divide your heart again.’

Elizabeth Bishop’s published work shows her devotion to poetry, but gives little indication that writing poems was an avenue for the direct expression of grief about her many losses. For her, poetry was not a way through, but perhaps indirectly, it was a way out of grief.

Dorothy Hewett attempts suicide: Sylvia Plath kills herself. Elizabeth Bishop’s lesbian partner of fifteen years suicides after Bishop leaves her for another woman. Bishop has bouts of depression and alcoholism. It seems different for one of the men—Donald Hall thinks of finding another woman, someone to replace his lost love, but Daniel Hall can wait. He longs for a new love, but knows he is not ready: ‘Not so fast / I pleaded.’

These thoughts lead me to reflect further on my question: What is particular about the woman who is the primary mourner? It is only much later, when I visit the Yolngu that I explore this question more thoroughly.

As I think about differences between the men and women I have cited in this study, I see individual differences, but cannot confidently see a gender difference in the

72. ibid.
expressive response to loss. I see cultural difference as being powerful, particularly, for example in the Yolngu, where both genders participate in facilitating the expression of grief for the group. I turn to *The Empty Place*, a cross-cultural study of the Foi,\(^73\) (a New Guinean cultural group) which not only has gender difference as a focus, but also tells of the use and power of dreams.

James Weiner introduces his study of the Foi by telling a story of the old man, Dabura Guni, of the Hegeso village, who had learned spells that he believed kept his village safe while it was being constructed. He also received from a ghost in a dream the name of his yet unconceived daughter.

For the Foi, dreams are considered ‘a talent, or an art’. A man or a woman may understand that a dream is significant, but it will usually be a man who is able to understand the metaphor of the dream, the messages sent by ghosts, who are ‘the disembodied souls of the departed’.\(^74\) Dreams are the only way that the dead can communicate with the living. Men who go to places known as the spots that attract ghosts carry out the seeking of dreams. These spots are associated with stillness, or halting of flow, as in the whirlpool that stops the flow of water.

At this point in his story of the Foi, Weiner digresses. He does what he later shows that the Foi do: he takes time to prepare the reader emotionally for what is to follow, by creating an atmosphere of stillness, and a mood of melancholy. He introduces the paradox of the Foi funerary songs, which are performed by men, and composed by women.

He then digresses, and says that Feld observes how the Kaluli people of New Guinea draw a distinction between ‘two kinds of structural sound forms, weeping and song… separate but complementary structurings of sound for social evocation’.\(^75\)

Weiner shows how Feld summarises the distinction between weeping and song: ‘Women’s funerary weeping, which turns into wept song… expresses immediate sorrows over loss and abandonment. Men’s ceremonial *gisalo* song ultimately moves listeners to weeping… Women are highly valued and evaluated as funerary weepers, and men are highly valued for composing and performing persuasive *gisalo* songs.\(^76\) Feld concludes: ‘For men, the composition and performance of ceremonial songs creates a grand social focus around them and their powers of evocation… What weeping achieves for women is far less sweeping. No persuasive social ends and no


\(^{74}\) ibid., p. 2.


\(^{76}\) ibid.
long-term changes in social life are affected by weeping; largely, it is it is an intensely aesthetic display of personal grief.'77

The immediacy of this display of personal grief, and what women’s expressiveness achieves, is not taken further by Weiner, but is of interest to me in the poems of this study. I think of this in relation to the Yolngu crying ceremonies, where the potency of the songlines, which are women’s songs, and the women’s contribution to the emotional life of the whole group, is freely acknowledged.

Having set the scene emotionally, Weiner now turns to the Foi. He begins to distinguish the women’s expressive response to loss, from the men’s response, ‘by making a distinction between image and metaphor.’ He says: ‘to put it simply, Foi men manipulate metaphor in its conventional and semantic capacities... Foi men objectify the definitional aspect of Foi words. Women, by contrast, are the image-makers in Foi society... Men make magic, the most crudely instrumental use to which metaphor can be put; women make poetry...”78

He digresses again, making an analogy, which further prepares the reader for what is to come. Weiner likens the emphasis on the image in Foi poetry to Haiku poetry and the ‘imagist poetry’ of Ezra Pound. He gives an example of the use of the image from a Dobuan (another New Guinean cultural group) poet, recorded by Reo Fortune:

A canoe at midnight
the widow Leionai
mourns softly at midnight
a canoe at midnight

He is singing inland
from the straits of Natuwa
black satin bird singing inland.79

Having sufficiently prepared the reader, he now gives a Foi memorial poem and song, written by the poet Kunuhuaka, from the story of a lost child, told to her by her mother. The images of the birds and the silence, and the lost child, who is called but does not answer, are introduced with a gradual build-up of emotional intensity. The subject is addressed directly; ‘But you do not call out’,80 but is named only at the end of the poem. The reader is left lingering, at the end, with the image of the lost child, Ta’anobo, who is at last named, and the cry of the bird, his namesake, the only sound in the stillness:

77. ibid., p. 399.
78. ibid., p. 11.
Ta’anobo is calling out
He keeps calling out
Tanobo’s namesake, the bird
He keeps calling out.\textsuperscript{81}

This poem inspires 92. An Empty Space, which is like a wept song: I call out in longing for my lost love, but express confusion as to whom I am calling. There is a resonance here with Yolngu crying ceremonies that cry for all loss, and not just for the most recent loss,

Where are you now Tom? I am no longer sure, as I cry out, that I cry out to you.

Weiner emphasises the social function of Foi women’s poetry and weeping, and shows how poems composed by women are used by men in their funerary songs and performances. These rituals facilitate the expression of personal grief as well as a group mourning process.

4.6 **FOURTH ANNIVERSARY**

It is 9 August 2009. Four years have gone by. The full moon was two days ago. I think of myself late in the evening two years ago, writing:

72. *Waiting For Death*
The body of the recently dead
and the body of the recently bereaved
are good company
in fact how can you tell
who is who as I lie beside Tom with the right side
of his warm hairless head
against my cheek and notice
the heave of my chest
breathes for him now
that he is not breathing
and the left side of his warm hairless head
cupped in my right hand
holding quite firmly
not ready to let go
as if I am helping him in
or out of where he is going.

\textsuperscript{81} Weiner, J. F., op. cit.
Continuity is restored. My thoughts are flowing again. I am through the liminal state. I ride my bike around the lake. Lost in thought, I reflect on the poems of *Waiting for Death* and listen to the chimes of the carillon:

seven strikes
that set my wheels free, to dance
from patch to patch of early sun.

I miss a cyclist who is riding towards me. He swerves and hits a duck. Feathers go up:

I see the blow, and wheels
over feathers
as the shock hits and the music darkens.

I am disproportionately upset about this. I remember that it is the anniversary of Tom’s death. I also think of my distress, described in 9. *Death Hovers*, when my father killed the ‘old mother duck’ for the table. I think of Stanner\(^82\) as I inadvertently lift a veil to reveal myself, and my current state of mind with its pockets of unexpressed grief. I am still vulnerable on this day four years later to old, as well as to recent losses.

### 4.7 IN MEMORIAM

Helen Thomas writes *As It Was*, the first book of *Under Storm’s Wing*, shortly after the death of her husband, Edward Thomas, the writer and poet.\(^83\) Her daughter describes this autoethnography being written: ‘to try to rouse Helen from the terrible lethargy and desolation which followed Edward’s death in 1917’.\(^84\)

I read Helen Thomas’ autoethnography and recognise that she writes an unselfconscious story of love and loss. She describes how the words for her love letters ‘poured out of my brimming consciousness’, in much the same way that I experience my thoughts flowing freely from my unconscious mind into my poems. I think we are describing a similar process but using different terms.

Helen Thomas describes how, in the last stages of her pregnancy, and under pressure from her husband Edward, she moves in with his family and experiences a loss of freedom: ‘whereas before I had been content in my solitude, now my spirit...

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84. ibid., p. 14.
paced backwards and forwards, impatiently resentful of this loneliness which shut it in like a cage.\textsuperscript{85}

Her grief on the death of her husband Edward can be seen in her words at their final separation as he leaves for his death at the Battle of Arras in 1917:

Panic seized me, and I ran through the mist and the snow to the top of the hill, and stood there a moment dumbly, with straining eyes and ears. There was nothing but the mist and the snow and the silence of death.\textsuperscript{86}

Meanwhile, Edward Thomas has written \textit{In Memoriam}:

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood  
This Eastertide call into mind the men  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should  
Have gathered them and will do never again.\textsuperscript{87}

\section*{4.8 LIFE AND LIMINALITY}

As I look back over this period of four years, I see I have moved through a liminal state of mind. I have stumbled and lost my way. I have changed the subject. My work has been shattered: I have picked up the pieces. I return to Ogden’s notion that poetry can be both surprising and disturbing.\textsuperscript{88} I now know more of myself than before. I know my vulnerability and my strength to meet challenge in the experience of the poems. I also now see the richness of the experience with my poetry mentor, Geoff Page. I know myself more because of this intense time in a liminal state; I am now more fully myself. I feel more free and free flowing. My poems are relatively uncensored. I am aware of how the interplay of conscious and unconscious feelings gives shape to my poems, and how the language of my poems gives shape to what I feel.

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{footnotesize}  
\textsuperscript{85} ibid., p. 68.  
\textsuperscript{86} ibid., p. 173.  
\textsuperscript{88} Ogden, T., op. cit.
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CHAPTER 5

Exegesis

ANALYSIS OF THE POEMS

What else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become.

DAVID MALOUF

In this chapter, I analyse the poems as creative works conceived in my unconscious mind, and shaped by my imagination. I tease out the unconscious meanings embedded in the metaphors and images of the poems, and put this new understanding together with what I already consciously know.

As I have said earlier the poems come to mind in response to internal and external stimuli. Tom’s death and the anniversaries of his death demand immediate direct expression. The themes of birth and death come together in the Epilogue, which presents itself when the group of poems comes to a natural conclusion.

The poems are divided into five parts, and an Epilogue. Each part reflects an expression of the interaction of known and experienced day-to-day happenings with unconscious and ‘unthought known’.²

Each individual poem is like a daytime dream.³ The tears shed in the writing or reading of the poems are part of the work. This expression is termed by Magowan: the Melodies of Mourning.⁴ As a collection, the poems reflect my struggle to remain free to get on with ‘writing what I want to write’.⁵

**Part 1.** *When Will We Die?* shows how the death of my lover revives, with the same urgency, the question I asked as a young child. It refers to the fear that my mother will die, and then I will die too.

**Part 2.** *Black Swan* is a detour, which experiments with ‘getting off death’. The synergistic work is hidden or disguised: it is used as backbone. Any themes of death are dealt with indirectly or in a disguised form.

**Part 3.** *Change of Season* finds a way back to dealing directly with death. The synergistic work is there but is not directly expressed.

**Part 4.** *Waiting for Death* has a title clearly signalling a return to themes of death. These poems are free and unafraid. The impact of the synergistic work breaks through, and the new poems that relate to it flow freely.

**Part 5.** *Scrub Turkey* returns me to my beginnings. I go to Mount Nebo and re-discover themes that link birth and death. I re-find the carpet snake but also find new life as I watch a male scrub turkey build his mound.

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The Epilogue celebrates the link of birth and death. Tom is dead. The grieving brings me back to life. I give birth to the baby—the poetic work. I live on.

PART 1

When Will We Die?
(AUGUST 2004—SEPTEMBER 2006)

INTRODUCTION

As previously discussed, this first group of poems initially focuses on my struggle to find a way to comprehend that Tom, my lover, is dying of cancer, and also to find a way to let him die while I continue to live.

The poems show how he and I construct rituals in our shared life to continue to live as we face his death. I am vulnerable. My child self is very close to the surface. The question, ‘when will we die?’ was first asked, many years earlier, when I was a four-year-old growing up on a farm in the Australian bush.

As I move through the process of this thesis, I absorb new ideas and think more about relationship to country in an indigenous sense. As I mention in Chapter 2, I am moved by the power of The Pilot’s Funeral, which shows a traditional ten-day Yolngu Larrakitj burial ceremony of the bones of a helicopter pilot who had been adopted into the Mangalili Clan. I also take in the power and music of ceremonies such as Howard Morphy’s Yilpara Funeral and Curtis Levy’s documentary of a Tiwi funeral, Mourning for Mangatopi. I also have a sense of synergy moving within me from the ceremony and music and dance from my time of being with the Yolngu. I struggle to maintain freedom of thought and expression, and realise how essential they are in the writing of poetry.

1. MOUNT NEBO IS BIG AND DARK

It is August 2004. The first poem: Mount Nebo is Big and Dark, begins with the lines ‘Mount Nebo is big and dark / I am four and afraid’. I relive my fear of being alone and overwhelmed: everyone in the world could die. The images of danger dominate.

I relive being the small child who is very alone in the shadow of a mountainous rainforest full of ‘mist and damp ... and leeches’. The presence of the carpet snake gives expression to something unknown and menacing, which hovers over the child and the poem. In later poems, the carpet snake is the cancer.

This poem introduces the idea of the power of the tropical, rugged landscape, and the intimacy of the organic connections to my place in it. I experience Mount Nebo as ‘rounded and solid’ but also ‘mysterious’. The rainforest seen through my childish eyes is also dangerous. If carpet snakes could eat kittens they could eat small children. There are dingos. These images of mystery and danger while death is hovering remain as an entire symbolic subtext, often breaking through to become the dominant text. At first, the poem does not explain why ... ‘There is sadness in the mist rolling in from Moreton Bay’. Memories unfold which link the rolling in of the mist with death and dying and prisoners of war. For my adult self it also heralds Tom’s death.

The poem ends with the image of my sick child and Tom linked. I can bear the memory of ‘pushing my baby out to get some fresh air’. The child recovered. He lives. Tom is dying. I cannot face the fact of the cancer.

The form and spacing of the lines convey the veil-like mist rolling in, and the snake-like movement of the mist. This is one of many places where the carpet snake and the cancer become one: between the lines but also where form and content meet.

2. **Tom is Home**

The first few lines of *Tom is Home* reveal that Tom and I live in different cities. Tom is based in Canberra—I in Sydney. We are both affected by the cancer, which hovers over our relationship as a continuous malevolent presence. I do not yet express my own weakness directly. I also struggle to believe that his regained strength is genuine.

‘I dream that I am climbing a mountain— / struggling up a very steep cement path, / so steep I almost fall back with each step’. I have a realisation that the hard, dark grey path is ‘like the cancer / which comes nearer and nearer / as it steadily approaches’. I have now named the previously unnameable, and as more details of the dream unfold, I stand aside from myself and know what the cancer means, and what terrors I have to face.

The process of my internal struggle to stay alive and not to withdraw, but to stay closely connected to him as he dies, begins to unfold. At first the task seems impossible. I am young, helpless.
I face the approaching danger: ‘I could fall and die’. An image forms in which I am very small, and ‘I now have to clamber up / on to a ledge which is too high’. I do not have the strength or the capacity for such a task. I strain to get a foothold, and then strain further to find something to hold on to. In the dream, as I search for inner strength, I discover something solid. I grasp a stepping-stone of the pink granite from Mount Nebo—a powerful protective image from the place where I was born. I then link the images: ‘solid like Tom / thick and sure and rounded’. In my dream, I am beginning to find a solution to my day-to-day dilemma of how to stay connected until the end. I must find a way to grasp, and hold firm to my inner strength; then I can let him go, while I stay behind.

In my struggle to resolve my dilemma, I create, in my dream, an image of Tom and the strength of our relationship fused with a sense of my own strength. I also draw on my imagination. I search in my memory, and draw on the strength of what I remember from the people who came before, and from the richness of the history of the place of my childhood: my internal ‘granite bedrock’.

An image from my imagination presents itself—a metal ring. I can stay safe and watch from a distance as the granite boulder ‘like Tom’ falls into the valley. There is a dawning awareness that I knew all along that I would have to let him go, and rely on my own resources. As the boulder (Tom) begins to fall, I remember that there is a way I can save myself. In order to save myself I must first let him go, and then look to what other support there is. To the left of the boulder that fell is a ring, the link with the bedrock, the foundations of my secure sense of self. The ring is securely fastened and can take my weight.

Beneath everything is the fertile rainforest: the rainforest with its ‘deep, moist, black, / mulchy earth’. There is fertile soil here for the seeds of the experience to fall into.

The poem ends with a strong sense that I have found my own bedrock: reconnected to my own solid foundation. I will not be overthrown and fall into the valley of my own grief when he falls. I will stay internally connected to the rich organic experience I have taken in. This connectedness will enable me to grieve, and also to live. The meaning comes to me with an immediacy that surprises me. My strength is affirmed even though I know, also, that the wishful element in the dream is prominent. I would like to be as strong as I need to be.

The analysis of this dream relies on using the dream as metaphor and connecting to the unconscious ‘unthought known’.⁹

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⁹. Bollas, op. cit.


3. ORDINARY LIFE

It is January 2005. This poem begins to explore some of the questions that arise out of the shock of the diagnosis. The cancer has been named. I ask: what was life like ‘before’? What was ordinary life? How can I believe this? How can I comprehend? How can I let it sink in?

In this poem, I remember life before the intrusion of the cancer. It is ironic to remember that even before the cancer I am afraid of losing Tom, so I tug at his heart by asking: “What if I get breast cancer / and leave you?” Each is afraid of losing the other.

4. NORMAL LIFE—THE STORM

I am a frightened child in this poem. I remember as a seven-year old the terror of taking a risk: of bravely asking God to send rain to break the drought. An angry god who sends a terrifying hailstorm grants the wish—with a vengeance.

I risk again by jumping into ‘what appears to be ... soft warm white ash’, and am burnt by ‘landing in the ambush of the red-hot coals’.

I am ambushed yet again by the searing news of cancer. This poem tells of shock rather than comprehension.

5. SAFETY

As a child, I burrow in ‘under a chaff bag’. In this poem at another, younger, level I try to hide from the cancer, which is also hiding—hiding in Tom. In this descent into memory, I make an attempt to escape from the cancer: to return to a time when there are places that are quite safe from external danger, even though the internal fears are still there.

6. TOM SHEDS A TEAR

This poem tells of a poignant moment in the relationship, and in what has to be faced. Tom has not only left his work place, but also work that he loves. He has received many cards and emails and expressions of appreciation. Always stoic, Tom rarely cries. He sheds a tear as he tells about writing ‘to thank / them for their generosity’.

This poem echoes with a later poem, Sensuous Memories, which tells of a tear shed early in the relationship when, in an unguarded moment, Tom responds with deep emotion to my gift of ‘six yellow roses on our first Valentine’s Day’.
7. **Canberra Is Grey**

It is raining. This poem conveys the sense of a world in mourning. Tom and I are like two eight-year-olds, as he remembers, with tenderness: ‘The old nuns / at the Kempsey convent / used to complain / when it was wet’.

8. **In Every Moment**

This poem is situated between *Canberra is Grey* and *Death Hovers*. In the previous poem, I describe watching Tom descend into a childhood memory.

In this poem I reflect as an adult, and begin a process continued in the next poem, *Death Hovers*, where I push the images to the limit of endurance. I descend into a memory of ‘ready to break at any moment / like my mother broke / when they separated’.

9. **Death Hovers**

I again descend into memory and seem to push the images of death almost beyond endurance; ‘I put my / fingers in / my ears / so as not to hear / the chop...’

In this poem I am vulnerable. I express with the immediacy of the voice of my young frightened self who, in the moment, experiences the world as a place of killing and death. This young self seems to be shouting with her fingers in her ears, while my adult self struggles to comprehend, and cannot speak. The gut reaction to this paradox is carried in the tension of the text.

10. **Pale**

This poem conveys a sense of approaching death, but also a sense of strong support from a friend who smiles with me in my desperate attempt at lightening the situation: ‘three out of ten / yesterday he was / only a half out of / ten’.

11. **Dying Well**

This poem seems to be a companion poem to the next poem *First Flowering*, where I find it hard to respond to Tom’s newly found expressions of tenderness. In the same vein, ‘he is tender, / and sweet, / and quite oddly romantic. /... as if he’s meeting / all my longings / in the fleeting / moment / before he goes’.
12. FIRST FLOWERING

It is May 2005. The title of this poem suggests a blossoming of the relationship, which happened before the cancer. The poem begins tenderly: ‘the white cyclamen / that Tom gave me / two years ago... is flowering’.

I offer this to Tom as a gift. He misunderstands. Disastrously: ‘It came good at last’. And I, in turn, misunderstand him. Did he not experience a first flowering? Did I only imagine what passed between us? It is as if I am so wounded at every level of myself, by losing him that I cannot speak aloud. I am silenced by what I know. I am silenced by my awareness of the presence of his illness. I am caught in a double irony. I know I am misunderstanding him: of course there was a shared first flowering ‘eight and a half years ago’. But what about two years on, when he may not be there?

As I step aside from myself, I see that there is, in the present, a special blossoming in the sharing of his death, but it is also clear that I now comprehend that death is with us—not in the future, but now, in the present, in the realisation.

[Later, Howard discusses with me that this is an important theme, what cannot be shared, because it is impossible to see who is the subject and who is the object—yet in a sense by dissolving the distinction between subject and object, it is shared already.]

13. MY BIRTHDAY

29 May 2005. The heartbreak is held in the text. Tom will die soon. He has some energy in the morning. The rest of the day appears to be a haze. He eats little. The birthday celebrations take these factors into account.

His body is not mentioned, almost as if it is not there, but: ‘There is so much life in those blue eyes’.

14. TAKEN HOSTAGE

This poem expresses that in my grief stricken state, I am frustrated with Tom: ‘trying to pull my life in / as his life is pulled in’. I am fighting desperately for my life. Tom cannot bear the poignancy of yellow roses, the flowers I sometimes give him on anniversaries: but now I need yellow roses for myself. To affirm that I am alive. The subject–object confusion dominates as we fight for survival.
I have a dream: ‘I am taken hostage. / my captor seems like a young boy’. It is obvious that we are both hostages. We are caught in an imprisoned state where we cannot be together but cannot separate. There is a sense that the final separation is close now. We have heard it: ‘someone shot’—and in that action, we two become one.

15. HATE

In this poem, which begins with hate: ‘the cancer / is winning’, I attempt to revive myself by dealing playfully with the impossibility of the ‘dark and overheated’ situation. I imagine that I, together with the cancer, will suffocate but Tom will recover.

The poem is skeletal in form, with the straight margin like a backbone supporting the lines of a single stanza.

16. THE SPACE BETWEEN

This poem conveys a sense of contained fear. I am expressing an awareness that we are both in this space ‘between / life, and going over into death’.

17. REALLY DYING

This poem continues to develop the idea of a place being reached where death is close but where there is still time for me to gather my thoughts about what is happening to Tom and me: ‘I feel some urgency / that he will die / when I am with him’.

18. STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

This poem is part of a sequence of poems where in my daytime dream-thoughts I am watching, waiting and containing unbearable anxiety. It shows my search for images to help me imagine his death. Here I link to the sound of Verdi’s music and the image of the Egyptian Slaves waiting, like Tom, for freedom: ‘Uplifted, I wonder / how and when, will he free himself?’

I also want freedom. It is apparent to me that since my birthday in May 2005, I have become more and more focused on Tom’s approaching death, and the implications of this for my life. I feel the tug to go with him, but also the danger of being crushed by the cancer. I struggle to preserve my own desire to live. Subject and object are one.
19. SUNRISE

It is June 2005. I am working on my Preliminary Proposal: reclaiming my own life. I imagine how ‘Tom will do it’, while I remain at a short distance—letting him go.

This poem searches for ideas and images to make sense of what is happening, and to struggle to find an image around the death itself: ‘Is this how Tom will do it.../ go gently/ upwards, / like a balloon,...’

20. NORMAL LIFE—WARMTH

In this poem, there is a sense of how confronting normal conversations about ‘next winter’ are, when we both know—but Tom seems momentarily unaware—that there will be no ‘next winter’.

Death is here. It is ‘the fourth week of/the last month’. I shiver on the page as I say ‘I feel the chill of his absence’. I struggle to comprehend that the end is near.

21. DEATH OR BIRTH

I try to come to grips with the power of what is happening. I see that ‘the light is such/that the sun’s rays/seem to touch him’. My thoughts go to the explanation from my childhood: ‘God/is reaching out/trying to help’. At this point, when this ‘birth-death’ is so close, it is unbearable to face the void alone. My sceptical adult belief is not sufficient reassurance.

In the last lines, I find a place in my mind where I can link up with the strength of the relationship and acknowledge that ‘between us there is hovering/a powerful force of spirit/stronger than the cancer,/trying to help free us’.

Howard and I later discuss that it is the human condition that childhood always stays with us, we are always waiting to grow up, and yet growing up is death.

22. LOVE AND MASCULINITY

It is June 2005. ‘With a month to go’ Tom has a burst of erotic energy: He does not take the Viagra that may help prolong this precious moment. It is as if he is afraid that if he takes the last one, he will seal his fate.
23. FIGHT

This poem continues to develop the idea of the power of our connection in the fight for a little more time to live: ‘the fight in you, I say…/ Yes, he says, and the fight in you’.

24. ONLY SPIRIT

More time has passed. Tom’s body is smaller: ‘shrinking / out of sight’, emphasising the strength of his spirit. The morphine is increased. It ‘confuses / what is left of his world’.

This poem conveys the irony of his hallucination: ‘someone is asking / if we’d like to go to Ballarat’. I ask if I am invited to go. He replies, ‘I’m not sure’.

25. SILENCE

This poem conveys a sense of powerful conflicting inner forces. I am fighting to free myself. I am reading Metcalf and Huntington (1991), Celebrations of Death. I have a copy of Stanner (1966), On Aboriginal Religion, on my bedside table, and I begin to engage strongly with Ruth Behar’s autoethnography: The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart.

In my dream-thoughts, the voice of the synergistic work enters the poems: not yet as identifiable text, but as the energy of life—as relief against the silencing forces of death. It is as if my father has come to protect me.

I cry out in the silence. My mother’s voice is only partly reassuring. The child doubts the presence of a comprehending adult. Where is the protective father? The adults seem silent and silencing on the subject of carpet snakes. The cancer and the carpet snake are now one: ‘with their coils / and springs’.

26. THE LAST MONTH

It is July 2005. My Preliminary Proposal is submitted.

This poem expresses the knife-edge of ‘the sixth week of the last month’. In one sense, time and pain go on and on, while in another, death could come at any moment.


In a moment of borrowed time, when the pain is at bay, we hold each other with great tenderness, perhaps for the last time. Again, I express a wish, always not too far below the surface, ‘to go out together into eternity’.

27. READY

It is August 2005.

I listen in to a conversation: a misunderstanding between Tom and his oncologist. The oncologist comes in to check his patient. He wants to make him comfortable, and does not take in that Tom is saying that he is ready to die. He wants to die now: ‘I’m ready to go’. He wants help. Medical help. Morphine.

The oncologist seems helpless, lost for words. He cannot allow himself to think about what is being asked of him. He looks to me for permission: ‘He is in too much pain, I say. / Give him the morphine, / as much as he needs’. The unspeakable has been spoken: permission given for what cannot be permitted.

The atmosphere in the room, reflected in the poem, is acute, unbearable. The intense pain is held, and measured out carefully in the lines of the text, just as the morphine is held and measured. The groups of three lines, with one standing alone, echo the arrangement of the people in the room. Three around the bed, and one alone. The one who is ready to go.

He cannot die while I am beside him. He is exhausted. His fragile energy is spent. He has said his goodbyes. He wants me to leave so that he can die. Alone.

28. DISAPPOINTMENT

It is 6 August 2005.

This brief fragment of a poem tells that Tom did not die as he wished. The text conveys our shared helplessness. There is a sense that death chooses its own time. The virtual moment, is waiting, but ‘not yet come’.

29. 9 AUGUST

Tom has died. I express on the one hand, a simple straightforward understanding of what has happened, but at the same time, my utter bewilderment. I am quite clear that: ‘At a quarter past seven’ he did ‘what was to be done, ‘but also I really have no clear idea of what has happened. Is it death or birth? It must be death: ‘he has found / a way out of life’, but also the elation of birth: ‘You did it I say / speaking to his hovering soul.’
A month earlier, I was aware of what was happening. I knew he was dying when I pleaded: ‘die now, while we are alone and together’. Now I do not know. The numb confusion of the moment of death is conveyed in the text. There are no tears. I am alone with him. Savouring our last moments together.

The text creates a sense of held-back grief with its thin spare form: its brevity, its short irregular lines and irregular grouping of lines. Clumps of lines lurch together to hold the heartbreak.

30. WRITTEN ON AN ENVELOPE

This poem, scribbled on an envelope shortly after Tom’s death, conveys shock and disbelief, as I struggle to take in what has happened. My immediate response of joy to the birth-death has taken me by surprise. I was not anticipating joy. Not elation. As I struggle to know what has really happened, I have a moment of realisation which grounds me: ‘I have a pain / under my elation’. I attempt to grasp the ‘something’ that has happened, as a photographer would grasp the complexity of the moment in an image.

31. LAST CONVERSATION

This poem further conveys the shock and confusion of the moment. The battle is over. Tom is dead. I hold him in the moment while he is still warm, and still with me. There is a sharp awareness that ‘this is our last conversation’. I revert to earlier times, earlier beliefs—a further journey, an afterlife. I speak to his spirit: ‘I hope you will like where you are going’.

32. TOM HAS DIED

This poem is ‘full of memories of the past week’. In particular, I hold the moment of ‘him saying goodbye / and kissing me / with very young, very pouty / eager kisses’.

33. 16 AUGUST 7.15 PM

This poem is from a moment exactly one week after the death, and the day after the funeral. A tiny fragile fragment of a poem, still holding the sweetness of: ‘He did it with me there’.

34. WHY A FUNERAL?

I attempt a funeral poem, but realise it is too soon. I am still unable to get my mind around the reality of Tom’s death: ‘I still need to be near you’.
35. AN OLD CUSTOMER

The first line makes clear that I know that I leave Tom waiting in the car. His ashes are him. I am on a visit to the cemetery to choose ‘a small stone / for his name, and the date’.

Kevin welcomes me, who remembers me from before; when I chose a small stone for each of my parents. ‘You’re an old customer, / Says Kevin…’

I juxtapose: ‘Margaret…(who) took a tumble /… my Mother’s passing / (and) Tom (who) waits / reduced to ashes / in a small box / in the boot of my car’.

Clearly, my mother has passed, while Tom has not ‘passed’. ‘He waits’. And he is intact. Not injured, like Margaret.

As the poem progresses, Tom’s presence, never really a subtext bursts through. His voice becomes the dominant voice. I am at first amused at his imagined presence. My mind also has other thoughts… I think of my father, and the link between Tom and my father ‘…also Tom / …and / one of Tom’s / boyhood heroes’. I have a moment of amused self-reflection, and imagine Tom: ‘thundering from the boot: / hurry up and get on with it!’

Kevin then jolts me back to reality. As we close the transaction, I am confronted with the enormity of the task. I cannot believe what has happened. Tom is dead: ‘The birth date familiar, / the death date incomprehensible’.

The poem is strikingly different in form from previous work. It is very solid, with substantial groupings of lines forming connected stanzas. The capitals at the beginning of each stanza and regular lines aligned to the left give a firm edge, but also emphasise the necessity to provide strong structural support for the vulnerable turn in the narrative, as I visit the cemetery.

The four single lines stand out. The first line of the poem expresses the presence of Tom’s ashes. The second single line expresses a clearly imagined image of Tom, apart, waiting restlessly alone in the car: ‘He waits’. The other two single lines, at the end of the poem, express in stark contrast, firstly an image of birth, and secondly an image of death. One is ‘familiar’, the other ‘incomprehensible’. These two lines at the end of the poem are of irregular length, and give emphasis where my grief breaks through as the experience at the cemetery closes; ‘I feel the tears coming’.
36. WHY A FUNERAL... NOW?

I am still not ready to write about the funeral: ‘Later would be better / when I have time / to prepare’. I cannot get my mind around such an event: ‘We talked about / a funeral... / as if it would never happen’.

It is not relevant that Tom’s funeral is over and I have just picked up his ashes.

37. 23 AUGUST

I try, unsuccessfully, to write about the funeral.

I am too full of images of Tom—the alive Tom, to write about the funeral. This poem plays with images of the many parts of his present, alive personality. I am not yet realising what has happened. In the first moment of the poem, it is announced that Tom has died, but in the expression of the poem he is as alive as he was in life.

The first lines: ‘Two weeks ago, / Today, / Tom died.’ indicate only a glimmer of realisation. The loss is vast, but the event, the death, is carried in the subtext and only tentatively comes through in the dominant text. I then shift from this almost-realisation to a place in my mind to where he is alive. I am experimenting with an irregular sweeping form, and with internal half rhyme. I am in a strange place within myself: going over the memories, as I wait to scatter the ashes. I think of his vibrant energy. I fondly remember how funny and irritating he was / still is.

This poem is a portrait of Tom. I speak of his strength, his values, his stoicism and his capacity to be himself. I see him to be clear about what is important and what is unimportant. This enables him to be strong and clear about relating to me and to himself as his death approaches. He is able to bear losing his hair and his physical bulk and muscle strength if I am with him. Later, at the moment of death, he acknowledges me, and holds my gaze for a few moments before he goes.

Howard says: ‘You convey a wonderful portrait of him—I wonder how that is built in to the overall argument?’ I ponder this question and bring to the front of my mind the strands of the ‘overall argument’. My first thought in response to this question is that that I look doubly beneath the veils¹³ to see a picture of Tom, reflected in me, which surprises me in its clarity. My second thought is that it may reveal something about me as being the woman who is the primary mourner—that I carry such a clear picture of a very-alive Tom. My third response is that a quality I dearly admire in Tom is his capacity to be himself. I want this for myself too. I always want to see all the possibilities. All this self-doubt and wanting to understand slows me down.

My struggle to be myself, and to define myself, becomes central later, when I find myself in conflict as I begin to work with Geoff Page.

38. ONE LEGGED BIRD

As I wait to hear if my Preliminary Proposal has been accepted, I play around with writing a poem that is now called ‘Funeral’. I realise I cannot yet go to this raw place, so I continue to mull over the ethnographies and autoethnographies.

By the end of 2005, my research proposal is accepted. Enrolment is carried out in January 2006.

In the early months of 2006, I immerse myself in the ethnographies, and fill notebooks with ideas for poems.

I need a poet for my research panel. A poet is approached without my knowledge. My mind floods with anxiety when Geoff Page, an eminent poet I have never met, asks to see my poetic work—without meeting me or hearing about the context of my work. He is then invited on to my panel without my consent. I write my worried anticipation into a poem about a one-legged soldier I saw as a child. This memory is revived by seeing a one-legged seagull, and by my sense of being ‘cut down to size’ by how my poetic work may be seen: ‘Today, I see a one-legged seagull / at Manly and the music comes back’. I know that in my grief I am vulnerable. I am the one-legged bird.

39. REMEMBRANCE

I begin to work with Geoff Page. We engage with the canon of poetry in English. This is the delightful part of our work together. There is also a difficulty. Geoff’s position is that he is ‘for the poetry but not the thesis’. He challenges my autonomy. He wants me to ‘get off death’. This not only threatens my independent thought and the flow of my grief, but it also threatens my thesis. It throws me into a panic and ‘gets into’ my poetic work. It interrupts the flow of my daytime dream-thoughts. It inhibits my free use of the synergistic work. Soon I become self-conscious about writing poems about Tom’s death.

As Remembrance begins, I descend into memory. I return to the place of my birth: ‘The hoop pine / Planted when I was born’. There is an echo back to an earlier poem where as a child I sat on the front steps, and asked: ‘when will we die?’

My daytime dream-thoughts hover between my adult and child selves. I find my parents in the rainforest, and then unite them to Tom, as if to anchor his memory with them.
As I become more internally focused, ‘I hear in my mind’s ear / The carpet snake / Coiling and uncoiling / in his forked bed.’ I am now reliving the childhood fear of being the carpet snake’s ‘next meal’, as Tom is the ‘next meal’ of the devouring cancer. Similarly, the pressure to ‘get off death’ threatens to crush my poetic imagination.

When I stand aside from this, I am amazed that I am engaged at all in a debate about whether I can or should write about what I want to write about. I do not have to do what Geoff Page wants. I can tell him this. However, I am on the horns of a dilemma: I also like a challenge. I want to experiment. I want to explore whether the actual topic matters as much as I have thought. I wonder if I can change the topic and still write what I want to write, or rather express what I want to express. I believe I can. I turn to philosophy.

40. AFTERNOON STILLNESS

I struggle to write about the funeral—again. I cannot. I am too full of grief around the image of Tom ‘boxed in’. There is no possibility of thought. The words in my mind: ‘No. Not a coffin’, stall and go no further.

Howard comments:

Yet immediately on death you could write a poem? What is the difference? What does this say about poetry as a way of acting? Who is the audience? See Forward Ben Hoyle in The Times—what does poetry do?14

It is true that at the time of Tom’s death I could write a poem. I wonder about the difference. At that time, I was mainly conversing directly with his spirit, or his ‘hovering soul’. Ben Hoyle, Arts correspondent for the TimesOnline, tackles the question of the function of poetry. He quotes Wendy Cope the poet, who was ‘one of the front-runners to replace Andrew Motion as Poet Laureate as saying: ‘I believe the best way for a poet to serve the art is to remain free to get on with writing the poems that he or she wants to write’ (30 January 2009). I read the implications of this reply as being that this way of writing, of expressing what one wants to express, allows poetry to do best what it does—to be an avenue of free expression for the poet.

I must be free in order to write. At this point, I am still ‘at one’ with Tom, and so if he is ‘boxed up’ so am I. Our spirits are not free. At this point, I know that I do not want to write about the coffin. I hate Tom being in a coffin. I would have managed a Yolngu burial much better. I like the idea of a shade. I could write about Tom’s spirit waiting with his body in the shade to be set free.

I return to the home of my childhood. This poem conveys a lull in the grief. I have come home. The flow of my grief is quietened, or held, by the mother-mountain, Mount Nebo, and the generative father, planting native trees, talking to the scrub turkeys and working the farm. There is a strong sense of the comforting strength of place. The recurring image of the healing mulch, ‘the moist fallen leaves softening my footfall’. There is an echo back to the image of Tom’s death, and his fall where he ‘uses me as a cushion’. I am now cushioned in my grief as I cushioned him in his death.

41. I HATE BOYS

I continue to work with Geoff Page who wants me to ‘get off death’. I wonder why I have no way of telling him that if I am not free I cannot write. We have a conversation about our origins—his in the upper Clarence, mine in Mount Nebo. He is the eldest in his family and carries the mantle of authority easily—I am the youngest of a family of boys—the only girl. I struggle with my self-doubt and my grief. We go almost immediately to a place where he is ‘the authority’ and I am ‘the learner’, the young one. He says he may be able to make me into a poet in three years. The struggle has already begun. How will we ever reach a place of mutuality where we can talk about my ideas or my thesis?

In this poem, I am excited about the possibility of reviving the rages and indignations against my brothers as a space for learning, or in the hope of another chance of growing up.

This poem is inspired by Geoff Page’s comment: ‘didn’t anyone ever tell you that carpet snakes aren’t dangerous?’

The text speaks very directly in the voice of the indignant eight-year-old. The child shouts out in hate and rage against her helplessness in an unfair world: first brothers, then the cancer, the fact of Tom’s death, and also the viciousness of the cancer, which attacked her as well as him—and now this attack on what I know about the lethal bite, and the crushing power, of the carpet snake.

Using my eight-year-old voice, I can be straightforward with the expression of my murderous rage, towards all who cannot see the danger—cannot see how wounded I am, and towards the cancer/carpet snake that is beyond attack.

42. TWO TREES

This poem begins with the image of a couple in harmony: ‘Two tall white / flooded gums /... swaying / together’. It expresses a sense of timeless time in a world with no cancer: a time of losing oneself in the other. I convey a deep longing for
unity—for two as one: ‘side by side’. There is a sense that I am creating, in the poem, a time before death. The poem creates an intimate image: ‘A sappy section of each / touching / and growing / towards the other’. But if the other is not there, the ‘sappy’ section of the one is left exposed. I am reaching out into the vastness of the rainforest to find healing and unity, as the two trees have a unity in their connection: ‘taken by the rhythm of the wind’. Geoff Page and I have some moments of harmony.

43. NO DREAMS

I feel empty. I am in a liminal space in which I face the void left by Tom’s death. I long for the relief of a dream to fill the void.

The dream does not come. I ask why: ‘Did all that crying / and vivid childhood remembering / empty me out, / or take too much from the source?’

44. FEAR REMEMBERED

I am again in a liminal space, but the mood has changed. There is still no dream, but the dreamy thoughts of the dangers of the bush lead me to an idea of gratitude towards Tom for how he died.

I am still shaking internally at some of the terrifying childhood memories, like ‘…a carpet snake rattling the saucepans’, but these are now balanced with a strong inner experience of ‘Tom being there, staying till the end’.

45. MOMENT OF DEATH

I return to Canberra for the anniversary of Tom’s death. A full moon is expected to rise very close in time to the moment of death: ‘A quarter past seven’.

There is no moonrise, but in fact, it seems fitting that ‘Behind a shroud / Of dark clouds / The moon rises / Unseen / Beyond / the Commonwealth Bridge’.

I hold the tension of the moment through the text and in the form of the poem. The lines are short and straight, with a capital at the beginning of each line, as if extra backbone is needed.

The moment of death passes, and in the morning, the moon appears: ‘Pale and tentative / In the dawn light...’ There is a sense of a benign presence. Although Tom has died: ‘Fading into himself / As he swallowed’, he has not disappeared. I struggle to make sense of the event of a year ago. I am still uncertain as to where and how to place him.
This poem is both with and against my ‘apprenticeship’. My awareness of the form of my poem is part of my increased awareness of ‘crafting’ a poem. The poem’s two single lines: ‘The sun sets’ and ‘Night passes’ are criticised by Geoff Page who says they could be read as clichés. I agree that they could—but I do not think they are in this context. I decide to let them stand.

46. PRIMAL MURMURINGS

I speak with the voice of my five-year-old who plays happily while I know my mother is in the kitchen nearby. A breeze causing ‘a ruffle of leaves’ brings the sound of two trees rubbing against each other. The murmuring reminds me of being alone, listening to ‘the kinds of sounds / my mother makes’ while my parents share an intimate moment.

The fear reminds me of the cancer. It also connects me to my desire for intimacy, the expression of which diminishes as the illness progresses. I am again the one who is ‘alone / listening’.

The form of this poem is long and slender like the pair of tall flooded gums, which kiss. It is also segmented and connected like the bones of the carpet snake—the sinister presence, which hovers over me. I notice in my appreciation of form the impact of my ‘apprenticeship’ seeps through.

As I write this poem, I find myself thinking about what the carpet snake represents. The image of the carpet snake concealed within the rounded image of Mount Nebo can be imagined as the ambiguity, for me, of my parents’ relationship. I can feel either included and excluded, or neglected and protected at different times.

My parents’ protection is expressed in the image of my father’s ‘comforting noisy pee on the lawn’ from the earlier poem Mount Nebo is Big and Dark. It is also expressed in the present poem in the immediate availability of my mother, even though she is ‘not reassuring’. The sinister presence in the dominant text is ever-present, as is the wistful sense of loss in the subtext.

47. SENSUAL MEMORIES

I make an effort to put death aside. I enjoy myself as I write from a different place. It is like a rest. I like these memories. They are full of fun and colour.

This poem is written in three stanzas using longer lines. It is nostalgic and relatively light-hearted. Geoff Page likes this poem but questions the title. He thinks Sensuous describes better what I mean. He wants to change the beginning of each stanza to ‘I remember—’ so there is an echo. I do not entirely agree, but decide to leave
this poem intact and write another poem in the way he suggests. Geoff Page also
suggests I should write a longer poem. We are on the same wavelength. I say
I will try.

48. BONES

This poem begins with a stanza, which continues one of the conversations of
my ‘apprenticeship’ about my unexplained joy in using what Geoff Page calls
‘a skeletal form’.

I write Bones at the time of my first reading of On the Bones of the Serpent. The image
of the sea eagle tossing away the serpent’s bones has caught my imagination, and
resonated with my image of the carpet snake that ‘came down from the mountain’
in Mount Nebo is Big and Dark. The form of the poem is structured like a backbone.
The lines are like the vertebrae: articulated, but separate. This is also an image
of the form that the autoethnography itself takes: a group of poems articulated,
but separate.

I am touched by Battaglia’s expression of ‘heart piercing’ memories. She tells of the
casual but poignant evidence of a person’s hand on the world, and gives examples
of ‘a gash on a tree where your young wife sharpened her bush knife, her footprint
on the path to the garden, a shell that she attached to a shingle ‘just for style’.
She comments that observances like these ‘keep fresh the sense of emptiness as an
inner reality’.

In the background of this, and many subsequent poems, is the impact on me of how
vividly Battaglia conveys that the feasts of Segaiya are occasions for the experience
of absence. ‘Death brings people home from wherever they are to the bones of the
serpent’. She says, in conclusion, that ‘a young man explained to me once that
Segaiya was like a bright spot left on the floorboards after a mark is scrubbed away.
Such images are the heart and mind of the matter. And of course they say more
about memory than any story of Sabarl I might be able to tell’.

49. ENCOUNTER

The deceptively playful text of this poem, which describes my late afternoon bike
ride, leading to a collision with ‘…a rough / running rhino-Labrador’, belies its
intensely grief-stricken subtext, which becomes the dominant text, expressed in the
sequence: ‘the view from the grass / is of two rosellas…’ and ‘I yearn at the sight /of
this pair as I get up alone / leaving my bones on the grass’.

16. ibid.
17. ibid., p. 199.
I use linked images of ‘bones on the grass’ and a ‘carpet snake looking for a backbone’. These connected images bring to the fore the sense of my internal dislocation, which is part of mourning, and keeps in awareness that the sinister presence of the cancer is not far away. There is an echo in this poem of the earlier poem, 34. An Old Customer, where my sense of the ridiculous prevails over a chaotic and desperate situation.

50. IRIS

This poem develops the idea of a life cycle where death is followed by mulching and new growth, and where it may take years for the completion of the cycle. ‘—one of Tom’s / untended plants that never flowered’ has a new shoot. Later in the poem it is: ‘Flowering / the blue-violet of those still alive eyes’. The poem expresses an idea of Tom leaving something in the world, beyond himself, which will grow, out of the mulch of his life and our relationship, and blossom. The sense of stability conveyed by the images of the ‘granite bedrock’ and the ‘mulchy earth of the rainforest’ first appears in 2. Tom is Home, but echoes back and forth through the creation of later poems.

51. MOVING ON

I have a dilemma. On the one hand I am afraid that if I continue to work with Geoff Page my direct expression will be intruded upon: I will no longer express my grief directly through my poems, but equally, if I discontinue with him I will lose the source of creative energy powered by my ‘apprenticeship’. Our disagreements help me to define myself. He opens a world of poetic thought that I am taking in. And there is something else: I am fascinated with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980)\(^{18}\) concept to which I referred earlier, of experimenting with difference. I believe that herein lies my way out. I believe I can find a different way to express what I need to express.

This poem begins by expressing an impasse: ‘You must get off death’, and ‘I cannot get off death’.

It also expresses my anguish. The metaphor is exile. Perhaps it is not metaphor. Perhaps it is exile. Homelessness. But then I begin to find a solution; ‘the old man who sleeps / near the lake’... ‘He is homeless too’. I have been thinking not only about difference, but of Deleuze’s concept of the fold, which (as I also mentioned earlier) is clarified by Todd May (2005)\(^{19}\) as being like Japanese origami: ‘there is a


folding and unfolding in time in that which folds, unfolds and refolds is a past that is never gone’.\textsuperscript{20}

Now I can think of a way to go on: ‘I will write about him /and loss, and loss, and loss’.

52. WHERE IS MY WORK?

I am again in a liminal space. I have made a decision to move, but am not ready to move. My work has dried up. I cannot write. There is no subtext. There are two parallel texts: one weeping for the dropped grief, the other holding steady to the lost mourning.

PART 2

Black Swan

\textit{(October 2006–February 2007)}

INTRODUCTION

As I move into \textit{Black Swan}, I create long lines and regular three-lined stanzas.

The first poem has the form of a heavy blanket—one to wrap my bruised self in while I get on with thinking about my ethnography. What I do not see until much later is how my vulnerability around my loss clashes with Geoff Page’s vulnerability around death. Paradoxically, in my imagination I construct a view of Geoff Page as at once the carpet snake invading my space and the kitten, terrified of death. Therefore my perception of Geoff Page embodies the themes of my seminal poem: 1. \textit{Mount Nebo is Big and Dark}—hence his perceived power for me. If I had not been so bruised myself, I think in retrospect, I would have been more alert to our two very different positions.

The poems of Part 2. \textit{Black Swan} are different from Part 1. \textit{When Will We Die?} As a result of my ‘apprenticeship’, I am more conscious of the process of writing poetry. I notice how form is created. I am also more conscious of the presence of a reader.

\textsuperscript{20. ibid., p. 61.}
I transform and displace the loss of my grieving in this imaginary work. The grief is interrupted, but it soon becomes apparent that the interaction between the two people: the old man who lives by the lake, and the woman he names ‘Black Swan’, has a direct continuity with my unconscious dream-thoughts, but also an indirect continuity with my work with Geoff Page.

53.
BLACK SWAN—I

It is as if I am waking from a dream. The first lines: ‘It is morning again after so many years of night / The event, the dark death, now recedes into another change...’ suggests a different realm. A curtain is drawn, or lifted. What has changed? It is soon clear that a great deal has changed. The mood of grief and loss is still in the air, but the free-flowing character has gone. The stanzas are heavy with words, weighed down with the task they struggle with.

The first poem introduces an old man who seems to be waking from a long sleep; how long is not clear. He may have slept through the weeks of early spring; sheltered by the opening blossoms of the wisteria while the event ‘the dark death’ cast a shadow over the world.

The spirit of the lost work may be the woman who walks by. I reflect on her life and the life of the man ‘on the perimeter’. She too is on the edge, and afraid of falling into silence: ‘Silence is another kind of death’.

The ghosts of the lost grief—or the presence of potential new life—are suggested in the last line: ‘Two black swans glide by’.

BLACK SWAN—II

The poems go ‘into the unknown’ as I imagine the man who ‘... changes his life. / goes into the unknown.’. He begins to allow another into his life: ‘He calls her Black Swan’. There is an expression of tension between a sense that he is free, but also protected by the ‘curve in the bank’. There is a sense of his unspoken desire for connection as: ‘A woman walks by’.

BLACK SWAN—III

The woman perceives the man’s vulnerability. She is reluctant to ‘break his solitude’. There is something in the gesture of how he ‘touches his cheek and turns away’ that strangely moves her. I notice that I am impatient about Geoff’s vulnerability around death, whereas my character is sensitive and compassionate about the man’s vulnerability.
BLACK SWAN—IV

Like the old man, I struggle with how ‘The new day pierces...memory—’. Despite having changed the subject, I return to thoughts of ‘the one who left’.

I imagine the man ‘roll up his bed’, come to life, think of the woman and how he might ‘tease her a bit’. He then becomes fearful of a new connection. Is he really ‘too tired’, or too hurt by the women who have left? Again I echo his resignation: ‘forget it’.

BLACK SWAN—V

With this poem, I begin to pick up the threads of my grief. The mist veils a drama being played out between a mother and child. It echoes how I have attempted to silence my grief: my ‘own lost little one’.

I fear that my recent loss of Tom, expressed as ‘the dark death’, has recreated another lost child, the lost poems. A grief from the distant past is gathered into the expression of mourning of the recent losses. The losses then become the same loss: and the grief an intense, undifferentiated grief. It is unclear who the ‘lost little one, the child who only spoke one word’ represents.

In the subtext, I am now able to show more clearly my struggle to maintain the continuity and integrity of my mourning process.

BLACK SWAN—VI

This poem at first holds the connection to the mood of the previous poem. The losses are still merged: ‘There was a future. / Not now’. I am caught like the man in a long, timeless moment of no past and no future.

The image of Black Swan is suddenly there. Her entry breaks the silence, and the timelessness of the moment. In the juxtaposition of ‘Her scent’, with ‘His endurance’, a dilemma is revealed. He is drawn to the scent of the woman and all that this represents in terms of the longing for intimacy and connection. At the same time, he remembers how he has had to endure the demands of a relationship. Who is ‘the other woman’? Why does he harden his heart? The last line reminds me of what I have done. I have divided myself in order to harden my heart to my grief.
The form of this poem comes out of my ‘apprenticeship’. The dream-thoughts bring two sets of juxtaposed images. The poem, in the brevity of its two verses, and sparse three-lined form, at first conveys a sense of the lightness of this man’s ‘pared-down’ life. There is time to look at nature, at a bee going about his daily work. Then the recent loss of Tom changes what I imagine and I see a dual image: I imagine that his sparse ‘pared-down’ life is enriched as he watches the bee, but also that he is confronted by his loneliness as he watches the bee fertilising and feeding in the blossom.

The poignant echoing sound of ‘pair’ and its many meanings takes me into an observing space where I project my loneliness.

The irony of my ‘wandered off aloneness’ now hits me. Have the poems ‘wandered off’ or have I?

Perhaps my thinly veiled grief returns in ‘the heaviness of his hunger’ as he conjures up in his imagination, and sees, out of reach: ‘Black Swan smiling from her eyes’.

The poem echoes my dilemma. Is it possible to walk away from a painful situation and leave the feelings of loss behind? Does this move create a state of freedom? Or does it create a greater loss? How can he be ‘free of what he carries’?

I observe how my story returns with a difference. I have found a detour in which to situate my story, but have I lost my focus? Have I moved too far, and lost the flow of my grief?

The image is of a distant memory of mine—a two-year-old, whose mother leaves suddenly, leaving him before he develops a visual memory. She leaves only an olfactory memory of ‘the scent of her skin’, which is powerfully connected to a sense of loss. He clings to the two-year-old’s memory, but at the same time is under its thrall. He is not free to make another relationship—just as I am not free. Neither of us has grieved sufficiently to let go of the grief.

The form of the poem is quite tight, and wrapped, and seems to echo the abandonment that has left him unprotected with only ‘the scent of her skin / ...wrapped / around his nakedness’. The last stanza strains to ‘break the spell’.
BLACK SWAN—IX

The image of ‘mist on the lake’ echoes Stanner’s image of the ‘veils of the metaphysical core’.\textsuperscript{21} To glimpse behind the veils, I listen to the ‘phussh’ of the swans as they fly in: ‘Entering the silence / embracing the silence’. There is a sense of the richness of this world, but at the same time its nakedness: ‘his wounded life, and his reduced world’. I am uneasy about the damage I may be doing to my ‘reduced’ grief work.

BLACK SWAN—X

I have a sense of undisguised grief. No veils here. There are no sobs, no floods of tears, only a drizzle of grief that can go on and on through a lifetime. The dilemma: the longing for connection; but ‘how to respond / when she is so far away, / and he in a distant place’. I too am afraid I have I sent my flow of grief so far away that I will never find how to connect with it again.

BLACK SWAN—XI

This poem brings together the woman, the lost child from my distant memory and the man who may be free ‘choosing this life’, or who may be cast out. She breaks the silence, speaks out awkwardly, too loudly. Something shifts. There is now a context for conversation. There is life, music, and a renewal of connections ‘arising from a spring lost in another life’. The form has changed. The poem ends with two lines, a runaway pair, which have escaped from the regular three-lined form. I feel that I am gathering strength to return to my autonomous work.

BLACK SWAN—XII

I want to be free. I wonder if my experiment in difference is working. I wonder if I too am ‘Caught / between past and present’.

I attempt a magical solution whereby the man attempts to returns to life. He is filled with love and desire. He pursues the woman. Through him, I face my own reality. She leaves him, as the mother of the two-year-old left ‘leaving a trace of scent’. The one free line, at the end of the poem, tells not of freedom and reunion, but reconfirms the experience of utter aloneness of the one who is left.

As I reflect further I notice that the woman ‘does not take the turn, but lifts her wings,’ and flies free. I know that my rage against Geoff Page has been more than rage against the constraints on my work. My freedom has been restricted. I realise

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[21]{Stanner, W. E. H., op. cit., p. 75.}
\end{footnotes}
that I struggle not to identify with the one who is left and has no choice. I must allow myself to re-establish my freedom.

**BLACK SWAN—XIII**

The form of this poem is more loosely structured than the previous poems. The divided line ‘He has walked out and beyond the edge / and kept going’, is freestanding, as if it the line itself may have kept going—and as Tom kept going. The last two lines return me to my mourning process: ‘this man is beyond the reach of her longings / when there could be more, always more’.

There is a sense my experiment in difference—the attempt to ‘get off death’— has somehow come to a natural conclusion.

Like the woman, I have left a difficult situation. She leaves because, although she can see there is more, she realises it is beyond her reach. I have compromised my grief and my poetry. I need now to return to unselfconscious grief work.

While I have struggled with the *Black Swan* poems, my engagement with the ethnographies has continued to inspire and steady me, as has the study of ‘the great poets’ of the (English) canon—and Rilke.22

PART 3

Change of Season
(MARCH–JULY 2007)

INTRODUCTION

As I move beyond my uneasy experimental detour into Black Swan, I find myself thinking about Rilke’s image of the panther, who ‘feels as though a thousand bars existed’.23

I begin to read Helen Thomas’ autoethnography, Under Storm’s Wing.24 As I engage with the first part, As It Was, I recognise that she writes an unselfconscious story of love and loss. She describes how the words for her love letters ‘poured out of my brimming consciousnesses’. The present study began, similarly, in an unselfconscious way. Both auto-ethnographies began in freedom, written for expression—not for an audience—but like Rilke’s panther, both become constrained and self-conscious, and struggle with loss of freedom of the imagination.

Helen Thomas describes how, in the last stages of her pregnancy, and under pressure from her husband Edward, she moves in with his family, and experiences that she loses her freedom: ‘whereas before I had been content in my solitude, now my spirit … paced backwards and forwards, impatiently resentful of this loneliness which shut it in like a cage’.25

I think of my dilemma—of my wish for my ‘apprenticeship’ to evolve. I am struggling in one part of my mind to free my imagination to get back to writing my grief, yet in another part of my mind I am working with my poetry advisor to discuss and refine the poems of Black Swan.

I speak to Howard. Should I do something? As I have said earlier, Howard conveys to me that it is much stronger and more interesting to free myself by writing about my dilemma. I struggle like the panther: ‘turning there / in tiniest of circles... /...round a centre where / some mighty will stands paralytically’.

23. ibid., p. 33.
25. ibid., p. 68.
The *Black Swan* poems are completed. Part 3. *Change of Season* begins to emerge. I see myself, not only lost in a liminal space between past and present, but equally like Rilke’s panther, held in the grip of an external ‘mighty will’.

Helen Thomas writes *As It Was*, shortly after the death of her husband, Edward Thomas, the writer and poet. Her daughter describes this autoethnography being written: ‘to try to rouse Helen from the terrible lethargy and desolation which followed Edward’s death in 1917’.

54. TWO YEARS ON: CHANGE OF SEASON

I say ‘good morning’ to the man who lives beside the lake, and remember that I have used him in my mind: ‘playing with his hurt, in my / make-believe world’.

The stanzas are three-lined. They give away little until the last two stanzas, where I have a moment of shame, and a realisation that ‘the missing / piece, invisible but imagined, / is mine to long for’. By the end of the poem, I am ready to grasp and hold on to my autonomy: ‘this space: / where to find it, and how to hold it’.

Before the experiment of *Black Swan*, the poems arise, first from a feeling, usually grief, outside of thought, but then stimulate thought. In order to ‘change the subject’ and write *Black Swan*, I cut across my flow of feelings. I break the feeling-thinking link between my unconscious mind and my conscious creative process. The previously ‘unthought thoughts’ (Bollas) that flow naturally are not available to me. I am afraid of what I have done in cutting across my flow of feeling. When I read about how Helen Thomas risks disapproval by being true to herself, and in the straightforward expression of her story, I wonder if I have sold out on myself. It is as if my poems have been killed off too early—as with Tom, an early death robbing me of what might have been. Yet, even as I rage to myself, I know that ‘the apprenticeship’ is changing my poetry. I am ‘more iambic’, more aware of metre and rhythm and form. My poetry is also more self-conscious. More processed. Not so raw.

55. LOOK BEYOND

I struggle to see a way out. I cannot escape the discomfort of the liminal space. It is part of grief. I look beyond the black swans, and what they now represent, to bring the moments of past and present together. I look within and see that I must let go the man who left, but not abandon the struggle to find myself—‘to find the lost child’.

27. Bollas, C., op. cit.
56. SECOND ANNIVERSARY

It is two years since Tom died. I wait for a dream and sense a change, but cannot make sense of the dream image: ‘play-doh at day-break’.

I have a second dream: romantic music with Tom alive again. Part of me wants to resume my mourning, but in another part of my mind I imagine going out ‘somewhere—anywhere / bursting with wild animals— / running, dancing, exploding the cancer / out of me...’.

57. A BOOK MARK

I play with the idea of needing a bookmark ‘to know where I am / up to’. Hope and ‘first memories’ are returning. As I connect past and present, I feel Tom to be ‘strong and alive’— and with me. In turn, I become ‘strong and alive: ‘To be dead was two years earlier, / when there was only cancer, and no hope’.

58. 2AM

The confusion is clearing. I am becoming myself again. I long for the return of my lost lover, and to be myself again in my mind and body. My body is inviting his. As the poem develops, I can be myself again, and in my own body. My indignant: ‘I don’t forgive you’ shows some internal separation of subject and object.

59. WHERE AM I NOW?

I express a sense of loss at not being ‘in’ the mourning process, which for so long defined me. I cannot ‘pick up the threads’ of my grief. I am confused between healing and damage: ‘I am a spider whose web was run into. / I am a silk worm who cannot finish / her task’.

The form of the poem with its split lines underlines my dilemma. I have no choice but to risk a new becoming: to ‘remake myself’ and ‘learn to dance alone’. If I do not struggle, if I do not pick up the dropped threads of my grief and finish mourning, I will remain unravelled.

60. THEN A DREAM

There has been a prolonged dead space—the void left by the completion of the Black Swan poems, and ‘for months no tears’. Then a dream in which I am coming back to life: ‘poppies, bright ideas, / opening red in the summer heat’. At the same time ‘the bright flowers are dead’ beyond reviving. The poem has a central split line, emphasising my split—my dilemma of allowing the grief to die or pass, so as to
embrace life. The contradictory image, ‘dusty dry /like flecks of pollen’, emphasises my confusion around death and new life.

61. I MISS MY GRIEF

That I ‘miss my grief’ is now central. The imagery of this poem is more playful, more light-hearted, than in earlier poems. I remember the ‘ready tears’ of the earlier mourning; its oceans of tears waiting to be stumbled into, and its rhythmic waves of grief. This new state of mind has ‘lost the comfort of the raw edge’. I am coming to life sensually and sexually. The desire for the ‘warm well muscled /body’ reveals that I am beginning to play with the idea of letting go of grief, in order to embrace life.

62. LIFE RETURNING

In this poem, I play with losing and finding. I watch myself in a moment of playful connection and delight: ‘our glances cross in mid-air’. I see two moments, one from the past and one from the present: I lose my place (with Tom) but regain it—the moment of tenderness in the gift of the apple.

We play a shared game. He takes my place in the queue, while I am trying to make good a loss ‘a forgotten single red onion’, but then he offers the apple, ‘the best one, the one with the streaky blush’.

The three split lines in this poem pick up the images of life: ‘a tray of green apples’, ‘our glances cross in mid-air’, and finally, ‘Life is good’.

63. THREE DREAMS—1

The second anniversary of Tom’s death is close. I have ‘three connected dreams: /the first is after the diagnosis /… before we took in, /cancer’.

Tom and I are on the way to the airport. He says: ‘I cannot take you with me’.

This poem tells of my first moment of shocked realisation, as I begin to take in the meaning for me of Tom’s approaching death: ‘Somewhere in my heart, /I know that/he will go, and I will be left behind’. There is also an echo from earlier times—to my parents’ separation—that separated me from my father, when I left and he was left behind.
64. THREE DREAMS—2

This dream takes up my body’s expression of the enormity of the approaching event: ‘Tom’s time is coming / He is thin... I know that I have grown too big and cannot follow him’.

The poem does not have regular symmetrical stanzas. Its lines are of irregular length and broken rhythm. The structure of the poem is open and vulnerable. It reflects my openness, and my vulnerability as I struggle with an incomprehensible reality.

65. THREE DREAMS—3

I dream that ‘I need three thermos flasks, / for my research’. I think about the three sections of my poetic work, and how the middle section, Black Swan is an experiment. Perhaps it is a horticulture experiment. I think of Tom’s iris, which is a rhizome, and therefore a plant that does not conform to an expected pattern of growth. I have Tom’s iris in my garden. It never flowered in Tom’s garden. This is not surprising, because he never watered it. Tom’s iris has flowered for the first time since it has been moved to the mulchy soil mixed with his bones in my garden. My middle son, Matthew (a horticulturalist), found the iris flowering in an unexpected place. I know that if I can live through what turns up for me in the mourning process, I will grow in unexpected ways.

I experience a flash of anger at the loss of ‘the silver container / that keeps the warmth in’. In the multiple meanings of the dream, and the poem about the dream, it seems that the container is Tom’s thoughtful mind and his warmth, which are lost. I now descend into my child’s memories of Mount Nebo. As I look, I see the valuable gifts from my parents. My father, ‘the athlete, / running free and naked’ with his free mind, and his energy for life and growth, his care of the land and for planting seeds in the earth; and my mother, the ‘newly scooped out hollow’, always with a capacity to renew herself, to turn rubbish into compost or mulch. Yet, even having this capacity, she died an early death without having mourned my father and come back into her own life.

I then turn further inward and look at the rubbish I have inherited along with the gifts: the homelessness they left me with from their separation, and later from their death; so that years later, when Tom dies, I go to an emotional place of homelessness that I have experienced before. I remember a child I played with ‘who / cut up a box, and made a homeless home’. And then there is Tom, who left me the rhizome, the life I can have if I find a way to ‘scatter the pieces and mix / in some dead leaves’. I so desire to cut up my grief and make poems of new life out of the pieces of the
'homeless home'. In a sense I am escaping my own death by grieving until I cannot grieve any more.

66. AUTUMN

I experience that ‘My dreams are changing’. I see that the linking of past and present transforms the moment and creates a third experience, which is different. My creative process is restored. My thoughts flow. This frees me and integrates the pain. I am not so raw. In Freud’s terms, ‘the shadow which fell upon my ego’ when Tom died is lightening. My grief is not so dark. I am reminded of my dark grief when I found the images of ‘Mount Nebo is Big and Dark’.

This poem shows how my dream-thoughts link past and present: ‘I have lost Tom again, searching / for him in the time before we met’.

As I reach out into the empty space, for Tom, I play with the memory of another time and another place. There is a sense that there is now room to play with the empty space.

The form of this poem is of three stanzas of three lines, with one final stanza of two lines. In the last lines, there is a sense of an experience being brought in so as to be paired with Tom’s memories.

67. SENSUOUS MEMORIES

This poem is rewritten from 45. Sensual Memories. Each stanza begins with ‘I remember’. I am attempting to write several stanzas, without remembering death. This is impossible. As soon as I allow the poems relative autonomy, they return naturally to the grieving process, and memories of Tom.

In the first two stanzas, I am cautious about expressing too much grief. The memories are clear and distinct, past and present, with a strong wistful subtext. The subtext breaks through in my final memory: ‘Tom, / full of health, leaning into me, / ...a forefinger tracing a tear’ as I give him six yellow roses on our first Valentine’s Day.

The form and content work together to express the sense of a free flow of feeling being restored. The second anniversary is approaching. Grief is breaking through.

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68. **FUNERAL**

The grief breaks through. A poem of the funeral is possible at last. The poem speaks my confusion. I both know, and also do not know, that Tom has died.

I am shocked when I find myself at the funeral—Tom’s funeral, with Tom ‘cramped up in that coffin’.

I am young, vulnerable, ‘I miss my parents. / I hate the coffin.’ The poem conveys the sense of my bewilderment: ‘everyone hugs me. It must be because / I can’t speak’. It also conveys my rage at the constraint of the coffin, which in turn recalls my rage at Geoff Page’s constraint on my poems as they move on to get past death.

I *become* an abandoned child. I become the infant before speech. I allow my children and granddaughter to baby me and care for me. I do not speak for myself. My son, Matthew speaks for me. I have no poem of my own. My eldest son Bill has a poem.

The form of this poem reflects my unintegrated state. The lines are irregular, and broken, as I am broken.

69. **ASHES**

This poem with its regular three-lined stanzas expresses my relief at order returning. I have brought Tom’s ashes home, and am beginning to be able to take in what is happening: ‘you can get your mind around / the ease of ashes and bones’.

The form of the poem is open, the lines are regular, and the control, present in the previous poem, has relaxed. The change in form reflects the change in my state of mind expressed as: ‘Here is Tom / in his changed state /... Something / quietens in me...’ These lines also remind me that the ashes are more than merely ashes. They are Tom’s presence. I experience them not as representation, but as presentation—as Tom himself.

The image of the mulch mingling with Tom’s ashes echoes back to my childhood, and all the rich meanings of the mulchy soil of the rainforest.

70. **THE LIGHTNESS OF BONES**

This poem of unsettled sleep and a remembered dream conveys a sense of deep, moist, organic, almost vegetative grief and ‘misty sadness’, accompanied by thoughts of death. I describe my dream of dying, linking it with thoughts of union with my
mother. I dream of ‘Govett’s Leap,’—where my mother / walked as a child’, and describe dreaming that I drive over the cliff and gently fall into the mist in harmony with the elements: ‘I fold / the rising mist around me.../ a soft way to die’.

I play with images of death and life. There is a sense of Tom set free by the return of his bones. This frees me: ‘I imagine heaviness / falling through the mist...’ and ‘relieved of the weight of myself / I drift...’

71. NAMADGI

Strong images conveying the power of place reveal a sense of the solemnity surrounding the carrying out of the second part of Tom’s wishes, for the placing and scattering of his ashes. He wants his mates, Ed and Ian, to be present. He tells me: ‘First, all in your garden, / and later some of the ashes / and soil, over the Namadgi, / so we are in the Namadgi / together’. I have a sense of the solemnity of the occasion with the repeated: ‘This is not a time to cry’.

I am joined by Tom’s mates, Ed and Ian, on the pre-dawn journey to the Namadgi. We scatter the ashes from a group of boulders ‘over an edge, from above’. Ian, the artist of the group, is disappointed that they are wet and therefore heavy. They will not cloud, which is usually the pleasing way of ashes. They are, as Tom requested, a combination of his ashes and the mulchy earth from my garden. The ‘soil and bones’ are wet with recently fallen rain. Within his request is Tom’s desire for regeneration.

I write the poem in regular five-lined stanzas with a straight left margin, steadying the structure of the poem. The control breaks in the final stanza, when my grief, always the subtext very close to the surface, becomes the dominant text: ‘I do not say I know that the ashes / are wet with the unshed tears’.

29. Govett’s Leap overlooks the Grose Valley and Bridal Veil Falls in a moist and often misty part of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, Australia.
PART 4

Waiting for Death

(AUGUST–DECEMBER 2007)

INTRODUCTION

Many of the poems of this section evolve from making unconscious links to the cross-cultural works and the poems of lost love I am reading. I am also aware of my mixed responses to a new love. Ethnographies read earlier have been ‘digested’ over time and are finding a way into the poems. The cross-cultural and other synergistic works not only enrich the poetic work, but also energise it.

Just as some of the images of earlier poems take me by surprise, the poems of Part 4. have also taken me by surprise as unexpected images or long-forgotten experiences are revealed or recreated.

72. WAITING FOR DEATH

This first poem of Part 4. Waiting for Death is written in the evening on the occasion of the second anniversary of Tom’s death. I have been ‘waiting for a poem’ all day, and as I get into bed I know I have it.

In the few weeks prior to the second anniversary, I have begun to immerse myself in the synergistic work. I am immediately confronted with the question of the care of the body between death and burial. This poem recreates the time of ‘recently dead’ and ‘recently bereaved’, where the two are part of each other. There is no separation of subject and object.

I begin to focus my mind on the clear, detailed intensity of my own memory of the last moments together: after life, but before death. I imagine holding the long moments between life and death with my measured breathing: ‘the heave of my chest / breathes for him now / that he is not breathing’.

Not long before writing 72. Waiting For Death, I re-read Debbora Battaglia’s study On the Bones of the Serpent: Person, Memory, and Mortality in Sabarl Island Society.30 I imagine that I am having a similar experience to a Sabarl woman at the time of the ‘longest sleep’ between death and burial.

This poem is inspired by my delight at a story told by the Sabarl, ‘from the beginning of time’, about ‘a great sea eagle who challenges a giant serpent to a mortal test of strength’. I have described before how ‘the eagle tricks the serpent into leaving its hole at the edge of the sea, then snatches it up in its beak and circles the sky until the serpent dies and decomposes. The rotting flesh falls into the water and forms a ring of islands. Then, when only the skeleton remains, the eagle tosses it away, creating Sabarl: the ‘bones’ of the serpent’.  

As I write this poem, I am circling and circling the sky in my imagination. Battaglia’s ethnography resonates with and opens my grief. It is a peaceful, rhythmic way of grieving. Her description of Segaiya, the term that refers to the mortuary feast series, emphasises the compelling power of death, which ‘brings people home to the bones of the serpent’.  

This poem, like Bones, responds to the first reading of The Bones of the Serpent: ‘Poems and bones are / ends and beginnings’. 

In the search for memories, it is as if there is a picking of the bones, of remembering and forgetting. 

I visit my childhood home and see that ‘a shattered bone lies / on the forest floor’. This poem links to the vulnerability of life in the face of death. The absence of punctuation emphasises this: ‘undraped unwrapped / nakedness / death on show’.  

I am inspired by ‘The Death Scene’ section of Segaiya. In this section, Battaglia describes how, when a male elder is dying, the widowed spouse’s duty as primary mourner begins. When the man is near death, the widow leads the other women in weeping and keening. They all blacken their faces and smear their bodies with itchy charcoal. The women accompany the widow, staying with her, as she lies beside him after the death, and until after the burial. 

This poem echoes my earlier poem, Waiting for Death. It responds to the spirit of ‘she waits, her body with his’. I have a moment of regret at a missed opportunity: ‘did I leave too soon / waiting alone, between death and burial?’
76. DREAM

I re-read Segaiya and become immersed in the images of the woman waiting beside her dead husband. A powerful, unconscious synergy is transformed into a dream.
I understand the images in this dream to represent parts of my own emotional life.

In this dream, I express my dilemma at Tom’s death in a very condensed form: part of me very strongly regrets not staying with my man who died until his burial; and part of me is afraid that if I had stayed until he was cold, I would have died too. The dream takes a surprising turn, in that my wish to reunite the two parts of my inner reality (in the dream the Sabarl woman and myself) is expressed as sensual desire. It is as if a part of me close to death needs a strong, sensual life force to reintegrate me back to life. The expression of erotic sensuality affirms that I have not died, and emphasises that my body is alive, and has survived Tom’s death.

As I am interpreting this dream to myself, I think of Ogden’s notion of the ‘perceptual surface’ between the conscious and unconscious minds being the frontier where dreaming and reverie experience occur. \[33\] I have an awareness of being at this frontier where, as Grotstein describes, I am ‘the dreamer who dreams the dream’ who is in conversation with the ‘dreamer who understands the dream’. \[34\]

77. CAGE

This poem was written in response to my first reading of Robert Murphy’s The Body Silent. \[35\]

I respond to Murphy’s sense of being trapped in his progressive condition of the spinal cord, by reliving a poignant experience of my four-year-old self: ‘I am in a cage with no way out’.

Writing this poem absorbs me for several days. Murphy’s imprisonment within his body preoccupies my thoughts. I think of Mount Nebo and of my father constructing a wire cage with a single spiral entrance, to catch mice, alive. I find the distress of the imprisoned mice unbearable and often let them out. I am terrified of being found out and having to suffer my father’s anger.

I watch in anguish, as I ‘become’ the mouse. Similarly, I am deeply touched as I identify with Murphy’s struggle and his repeated attempts to free himself.

78. THE CANCER IS HERE

This poem was written in an off-guard, but deeply felt, moment while I was reading The Body Silent (1990). It stands out as a daytime dream. There is a powerful linking of ‘the cancer’, of the poem that poignantly expresses both Tom’s cancer and Murphy’s progressive illness: two deadly approaching forces, combined as one force: ‘We have no choice but to ride / with it, as it careers onward / towards eternity’.

79. TIME RUNNING OUT

There is a month to go. I am still reading The Body Silent. The mood of the poem is bleak and confronting, but peaceful. All superficialities have fallen away: ‘His hair deserted’. In this moment of ‘early sun’, the acute hurt has passed: ‘Even the pain seems to have left us’.

Murphy’s plight, so much worse that what we are suffering taps into the magnitude of the loss, and resonates with it. The line ‘leaving him naked’ has connections to the double loss embraced by the image.

80. WAITING IN SILENCE

This poem, also in response to The Body Silent, took me by surprise. It was written a year later than Time Running Out.

Waiting in Silence in more than one way alerted me to an image I had put out of my mind many years earlier. I become flooded by the memory of an event, which happened when I was a twenty-year-old physiotherapist in a Spinal Injuries Unit. I was sensitive to the dynamics of a young man with a severe spinal injury whom I saw falling in love with his physiotherapist. Unwittingly, I took in more of the pain of his situation than I could express at the time.

I am aware that on many levels I experience a profound unconscious resonance with Robert Murphy’s understated expression of his heartbreaking loss. In his muted rage and despair at his deterioration, and without awareness, he gradually separates from his wife. Tom sometimes did this, too. It could well be said of each of the three situations that ‘I saw...his whole / body’s longing in his / eyes, and his fingertips’ as he progressively, and silently, lost his body, his woman, and his life.

In each situation, my response to witnessing the man’s silent expression of loss, drops me into a place of anguish, of which I am at first unaware. The difference, this time, is that there is a resonance between the experiences, which allows the unconscious feelings to break through into awareness, and gives me an opportunity to express the anguish through a poem.
81. THROUGH A DOORWAY

The power of the combined effect of the two experiences mentioned in the previous poem also produces a dream. I dream of ‘a big house/bare and empty’, which I later realise is the gym building where the young men, rarely women, with spinal injuries come for their rehabilitation program.

I dream of a young man ‘tall and warm’. In a dream with no linear time, I am young and we are alone and together; the doorway is ‘out of sight’. Then the shock comes of ‘...a wheelchair/on the floor’.

The ambiguous lines ‘I dream desire/and reach for courage’ suggest that, unlike in the original experience, I am now responding to the feeling of desire.

The repeated ‘doorway with no door’ has multiple connections to all levels of experience. One connection is an echo back to the earlier poem Three Dreams—2, which is from near the moment of Tom’s death: ‘he goes ahead through a narrow doorway./I know that I have grown too big and cannot follow him’.

Another connection is to the anguish experienced in my years of working with young people with spinal injuries that I have repressed—pushed into my unconscious where it is apparently attached to other unconscious pain and stored as ‘unthought known’ (Bollas), but as this dream and the following poem show, can come into consciousness quite easily.

82. DANCING WITH NO LEGS

This poem also resonates with the many understated, but deeply felt, moments in The Body Silent, and evokes another poignant memory from my time at the Spinal Injuries Unit.

Murphy finds it almost impossible to express openly the anguish of his experience of his illness. He often touches on the experience, and then backs off, silencing further expression. An example is where he begins ‘disability, dependence, and unequal reciprocity have eroded my leadership role in the family’, as if he is about to express from his own experience; but goes on to speak of ‘the life of his household’, rather than his own life. He readily admits he finds it hard to express feelings about his illness directly, but often expresses his sadness in terms of Yolanda whom he says ‘at the first news of my diagnosis... went home and cried, something I am incapable of doing’.

37. Murphy, R. F., op. cit.
38. Ibid., p. 217.
This poem expresses my confusion at being ‘in a world / of broken bodies’, where nothing is clear. Where there is no way to tell ‘joy from suffering’, and what sustains vitality is ‘…an energy keeps us going, / keeps the life charge in the air / like specks of dust in sunlight’.

83. NOT A RICE WINE JAR

In this poem, I reflect on how the Barawan of Borneo,39 studied by Peter Metcalf, and described by Metcalf and Huntington (1991), confront one of the dilemmas of death and burial: how to separate the flesh from the bones in order to set the spirit free. The poem expresses my surprising reaction to the notion of ‘…a chosen, a particular, / rice wine jar waiting / comforting / upside down in the kitchen’. I surprise myself in my warm response to the idea of such an intimate plan for the first phase of burial.

84. ANOTHER BEGINNING

I take the metaphor ‘not a rice wine jar’ a step further, and link birth and death. I imagine the baby ‘upside down in the womb’, and also ask the question: ‘At the end of life / can we easily know / where life should go—’ and the answer gives the link: ‘upside down in a jar, waiting / in the womb of the kitchen / sounds a good way to begin’.

85. O BRIGHT RED

I am inspired by the Bara of Madagascar, who are studied by Richard Huntington and described by Metcalf and Huntington (1991).40 The Bara sing the song of childbirth O Bright Red, which is also sung as ‘a funeral song— / a lament’. It is a song of pain, intensely felt, and so expressive of body experience that ‘A wild response / to death is called for / to get the pain out: / to bleed out / the agony’.

86. THE VULNERABLE OBSERVER

I respond with Ruth Behar to the ‘the little girl / the crippled nine year old / whose childhood ended’. I recognise the search. It is also my search. As she searches to rescue the girl in the cast, similarly I search to rescue the little girl in danger from the carpet snake. I search with the author, throughout Ruth Behar’s (1996) ethnography. With Behar, I perceive that ‘…she waits, but does not / know the lost child awaits her’.41

40. ibid.
41. Behar, R., op. cit.
87. DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

Donald Hall (2002) writes as if the death of his wife is his death: that if she has died, he must be dead.42 I resonate with his heartbreak as: ‘Hall screams from the painted bed, /hurls his anguish, shakes the /earth from beneath my dreams...’

The second stanza, quoted from the poem Kill The Day, vividly conveys not only his intense grief, but also his belief that he has in fact died, following her death.

I have a dream in response to this poem. The dream reveals the strength of my reaction to the images, and also to the sense of desperation conveyed by Hall in this poem. I dream ‘...a very distressed /open-faced young woman /who asks me to help her’. This young woman is clearly a young part of myself, the dreamer. I come to my own aid by dreaming, within the dream, ‘...an old lion /bounds across a green /paddock, and then, like /a young colt, canters /off into the dense forest’.

As I awaken, I identify the old lion as Tom, who has now been dead for two years. I am surprised that in the dream I set him free. I see his transformation from an old lion into a ‘young colt, (who) canters /off into the dense forest’, as also freeing me: I recognise the forest as the forest of my young life, and young life growing again within me.

I am still grieving, but not as acutely, so the loss goes its own way most of the time. I identify with Hall, and am moved by his grief as I remember the intensity of my own new grief, which at times is still ‘new’. My dream reflects this inner duality. Part of me is still grieving, but a more settled part of myself is often able to comfort my distress. My grief is not as inconsolable as before. I am now generally more settled, but the mourning process is not yet completed. At anniversaries and some other times when I feel vulnerable, I fall into what I think about as ‘pockets of grief’.

88. WE WON’T CRY ABOUT IT

I am shaken by the intensity of my passion in response the words and images of Under Sleep, Daniel Hall’s (2007) densely interconnected poems in memory of his lover Long Nguyen. I weep on the first page as I read the dedication:

the aftermark
of almost too much love.43

I weep through the collection, which I read in one sitting. I am so moved by this work that I find it hard to use it ‘in resonance’. I find that I take it in but do not transform it—I react. When I write in response, I find my poems to be not always synergistic, but in parallel. The synergy—the chemistry—will develop in time.

We Won’t Cry About It describes moments of heartbreak when I come upon saved text messages, or remember often-used phrases like ‘we won’t cry about it’, but most of all when I think about the shared moment of death. The moments are distilled after encountering Daniel Hall’s expressions of pain, joy and erotic passion in his poems in the aftermath of his lover’s death. This work is often raw and disturbingly close to my own experience.

Hall recreates the moment of death in his poem Then:

You looked up vaguely
or you didn’t—even the memory
is dying. Then your whole body
breathed out, and the argument ended.

‘...I am done crying about it
but I am not done crying’.

Hall’s painful thought ‘even the memory/is dying’ reminds me that both in my work with Geoff Page and in my poems and thesis there are threats to the memory of Tom. With Geoff Page I may be distracted and forget, but equally if I keep working with my grief I may move on and forget. I know that I, too, am not ‘done crying’:

If you want to give me
a ring... give me a ring. It’s very strange
without you...

you would say... we won’t cry about it,
and not wanting to disturb you—my body is silent.

The broken lines used by Hall, and which I use above, emphasise the broken-up experience, and the heart-broken quality conveyed by the poems.
89. **Do I Breathe?**

In the previous poem, I identify closely with Hall’s work. I struggle to transform, rather than simply react to what I take in from Hall’s (2007) collection of poems *Under Sleep*.

*Do I Breathe?* has an easy, if contradictory, resonance with Hall’s *Waking to Another Landscape*, which centres on what he seems to be describing as the disorienting experience of his lover’s death:

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Waking to another landscape
not my own, spinning and sifting
through the first few moments
of bafflement...
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As Hall’s poem develops, the loss and confusion fades, and a series of clear images recreates a remembered moment of erotic encounter:

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we’re heading south, and the thrust’s
as clear and muscular
as the flow of cold water,
over me, through me, bearing me
into another country.
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In *Do I Breathe?* I play with remembering an erotic encounter as I tentatively move into a new relationship:

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We look into the evening
clouds, and while I’m wondering if it’s
wolf or sheep we’re playing with...
It’s wolf, he says, as I
move into the rhythm of his breathing.
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I struggle with my duality. Part of me is ready to explore a new relationship, but part of me is very tentative. I am still grieving, but with much less intensity than before. I use this poem to help me find a way through my uncertainty.
90. YOU ARE ANNOYING

In this poem I also struggle to find a way through grief and a way back to life and love. I struggle to find my voice. I express in terms of what he says:

We must get some new speakers,
He says, so we can hear the music.

I am now reading Dorothy Hewett’s (1975) collection Rapunzel in Suburbia. As I have previously discussed, Hewett’s work strikingly reflects her use of poetry as a way through loss. She battles and struggles to find ways through her losses, but further entangles herself in her own intensely felt rageful indignation at lost love and betrayal. As with my poems, there is a sense that for Dorothy Hewett, the writing of poems has a function as a way out of grief. I see with her work, as with mine, that the poems not only help to contain the grief, but also focus the energy that drives the creative process.

91. WALKING UNDER WATER

This poem recreates a dream I have in response to a few days of reading Sylvia Plath’s work. She begins with Ariel (1965):

While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

These images spark the dream in which I hear my own voice read a poem:

I am walking under water
and I hear a voice I know
cloudy, blending with the wave wash
in the place of sleep and waking.

As I said earlier, unconscious containment and movement beyond the grieving process does not happen for Sylvia Plath. For her, poetry is not a way out. The only way out is death. The stars are fixed. There is no alternative to suicide.

In this dream, it is as if I am attempting to create a way out for Plath and myself. I have discovered a way through to freedom. I am at the bottom of a pool where
the water is flowing freely and I am flowing with it. The stars are not fixed. There are choices:

I am running under water
wild and foamy, unrestrained...

or, in a quieter mood:

I am floating over water
quietly bubbling with the flow
there and not there, touching down
on crunchy sand, in patchy sunlight.

92. AN EMPTY SPACE

This poem is inspired by a Foi song of loss and longing written by the poet Kunuhuaka, as described by Weiner. It is from the story of a lost child. In the poem, the mother calls to the child but the child does not answer. The image of the lost child and the cry of the bird, his namesake, who answers the mother’s call, are woven into a wept song that reminds me of the crying ceremonies of the Yolngu women and their very powerful songlines in which the weeping seems to facilitate, not only the expression of grief for the loss of a loved one, but also a return to joy, the birthing of the new day, the growth of new shoots and any creative process that is in progress.

I weep as I write the images followed by the lines of longing. The longing builds up without using Tom’s name, until the last two lines, where the grief gathers all the losses into itself and asks:

Where are you now Tom?

The grief-stricken reply comes:

I am no longer sure, as I cry out, that I cry out to you.

..............................................

93. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—1

Chocolate Porridge

In this poem, I look at big things from a very young place. My unconscious journey takes the poem from a place of wonder to a place of terror.

Tuning into Yolngu mortuary rituals has linked me back, in memory and imagination, to my childhood, in an unexpected way. Just as in the earlier poems, I was thrown into my anticipatory mourning process in a way that surprised me, so I am emerging from the mourning process in a surprising way. The world of this awakening poem is a world of wonder, but also of too much brightness, too many words. The words have run out. The writer is beyond ‘synergy’ and ‘resonance’. ‘Brilliance’ is needed.

As the poem begins, I am at a source, ‘beside the spring’. It is a dull morning until ‘a narrow stream of light escapes / through an opening in the early / morning clouds.’ I recreate my childhood illusion that my father and I are alone in the world. As a six-year-old, I become the mother. I imagine a leap from dull to brilliant: ‘I will make his breakfast of / chocolate porridge from the dark / soil of the rain forest…(and) streaky bacon from the / trees in full scarlet blossom’.

The world is bright and intoxicatingly sensual: ‘brilliant red and gold / depths’, and then the snake enters with his ‘diamond / sheen’, and his ‘…mesmerizing / shining power’.

When I see the carpet snake, the world of wonder and illusion changes to a dangerous place. It opens up many dark meanings and connections. As in the earlier poems where the sinister presence of the carpet snake heralds the cancer, in this poem its presence ends the game. It shatters my illusion, not only of having an exclusive and protected place in the bush and with my father, but also the illusion of a safe and peaceful world.

It is apparent that this poem, which resonates with Ancestral Connections, has many layers of meaning for me. In Ancestral Connections, the knowledge of the ancestral world is described as being constructed of layers of encoded meaning and levels of symbolic knowledge. In Chocolate Porridge, I know about the layers of deep danger and terror in the bush that my father does not know.

49. ibid.
94. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—2

Granddad

I am unsettled: ‘My dreams are strange / and not remembered’.

My dream-thoughts are emerging uneasily. There are uncomfortable links between my granddad and death.

I remember meeting my maternal grandfather when I was five years old. This poem touches on some memories I have of meeting him and finding him disappointing, ‘for a long time I / liked the imaginary one better’.

My thoughts go to his death, but return to the carpet snake taking the kitten: my first experience of death. I go back to the quietness, which fell on the day of his death. There is a sense that I may still carry something of my mother’s grief-stricken reaction: her ‘whole body sobbed’.

95. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—3

The Cry of the Spirit

In this poem, I play with ideas around spiritual energy—‘the cry of the spirit’—and spiritual power. I almost chant the tensions between brilliance and darkness, outside and inside, death and birth, action and waiting, body and spirit, and also ‘when to wait, and when / to find the way / of new beginnings?’ I attempt to tease out what is universal in the emotional response to death. Through the poem, I show my resonance with the intense feelings released in the rituals evolved by the Yolngu to express the emotions death evokes. Similar emotions are released on the occasions of death or birth. The crying ceremony for birthing has much in common with the crying ceremony for a funeral.

The energy of death and birth build up within me to be released in a dream of birth and death:

   The cry of the spirit
   the body waiting
   when is the right time
   to begin again...?

96. AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

I am deeply affected by aspects of Kratz’s (1994) detailed account of a young women’s initiation ritual, and of her discussion of the power of ritual to produce social transformation.51 Taking the passage of a cohort of ‘girls into womanhood’ as her topic, she ‘explores how Okiek children in Kenya are made into adults through initiation, and the diverse experiences involved in that process’.52 An aspect of the process that resonates with the present study is the confronting of an experience of pain so intense, that the physical and emotional experiences become fused into an experience that is personally, as well as socially, transforming.

This poem evolved out of a speech of encouragement, which is recorded in vivid detail by Kratz, as it was delivered prior to the women’s initiation ceremony. I have chosen a poetic form that joins in with the rhythm of the young women’s preparations. My poem, like the speeches, chants advice about how to survive the full intensity of the experience, and how to bear the pain, for example:

    Stay completely still
    Don’t squirm
    on the way from girl to woman.

A ceremony such as this is very different, culturally, from my own experience. I find engaging with the idea of young women undergoing a painful cutting initiation ritual confronting and painful. I try to engage with the spirit of the ceremony, and in the poem I attempt to join in with giving reassurance to the young women that others have been through the initiation experience and survived.

97. FUNERAL PRAYER

I play with writing a funeral prayer. I use some of the images of God and Man, which resonate with the spirit of Barbara Myerhoff’s study of her Jewish heritage.53 The synergistic process between this work and the present study is summed up in the last three lines of the poem: ‘...teach us to make / space: teach us to number our days / knowing that we have not wisdom’.

The lines ‘teach us to listen / to the whispering voices from behind / the betraying shadows...’ open an avenue of thinking about silence, and what is hidden under, or behind, silence. These ideas, which are a subtext in this poem, are developed further as a dominant text in the next poem.

52. ibid.
98. SILENCE AND ABSENCE

I link my thoughts to ideas about silence. The first seven lines, a quotation from the feminist poet, Adrienne Rich,\(^{54}\) refer to women’s silence as resistance; the second seven lines (in italics) refer to my unconscious link—the silence of a child playing. The first seven lines speak of an adult world where you must have your wits about you; the second seven lines speak of my imaginary world where a child plays, alone and disarmed, in the Australian bush. In each situation, it may be difficult for an observer to know of the inner experience of the other, in the silence.

Visweswaran, in 1994, comments on how women’s silence may be understood, or misunderstood, in fieldwork. She goes on to argue that women may limit what they are willing to discuss with an outsider. She also points to ‘what strictures are placed on women’s speech’, and further mentions that silence, in fieldwork, may be the result of ‘imperfect rapport’.\(^{55}\) She then quotes Adrienne Rich: ‘Silence can be a plan / rigorously executed... It is a presence / it has a history a form/ Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence’, to illustrate her point that, like Rich ‘we might learn how to plot those silences, very possibly strategies of resistance, in the text’.

I play with the notion of expressing silence. For example, ‘Silence can be a game / with an imaginary friend / a way of bringing to life / an adventurous journey’. It may allow the reader space to tune into pre-verbal expression: ‘It can also be an absence / somewhere to keep a / sense of longing out of sight’. I am aware that also, some of the silences in my text may come from ‘imperfect rapport’, even between different parts, particularly different ages, of my self. I have found that I struggle with problems of openness similar to those encountered in fieldwork, as described by Kamala Visweswaran.

99. JOYOUS MAGGOTS

This paper has great significance for my study. It brings to the fore the links between my poems and the ethnographies. The maggots, on the cusp of life and death, are able to transform dead flesh into lively energy, and then again to transform themselves into bush flies, and go off into a new life. The maggot dance shows both the simplicity to which Stanner\(^{56}\) refers, and the complexity that Morphy illuminates.\(^{57}\) The maggots’ process, reflected in the dance, illustrates the process of life into death and death into life.

\(^{56}\) Stanner, W. E. H., op. cit.
I am transported back to my childhood in the bush, where ‘You can see in the bush / how the lively maggots / appear at a death / to clean up the bones’.

The poem also shows that I am at the place in the mourning process where, in resonance with the ritual, I am emerging from death into life: ‘the final dancer / spears the ground in / front of the shade— / opening it: death into life’.

100. The Fame of Gawa

This poem is inspired by the Gawan mortuary exchanges, as described by Munn in 1986. As in my study, themes of remembering and being remembered are important. A significant part of the mortuary ritual is focused around the exchanges of food and of making the occasion memorable. The blackening of those close to the dead person is partly carried out as part of the mortuary ritual itself, and partly to ward off witchcraft.

An irony arises between the expression of danger hovering in the bush where ‘Drumming is / forbidden; / the witches have a drum / dance in the bush’, and an echo back to the earlier poem, Chocolate Porridge, where, in the bush, ‘the carpet snake / ...stretches / ...its dark and dangerous coils’.

My poem comes to an end as the mourning process itself is resolving ‘transformation completed / remembrance / secured with the skirt exchange. / It is now safe to beat the drum’.

INTRODUCTION

I spend a week in Queensland watching a scrub turkey make a mound. As I watch, I remember my fascination with scrub turkeys as a child. I write a short series of poems called *Scrub Turkey*, and discuss them with Geoff Page. I know that these will be the final poems of the autoethnography.

I feel that my work with Geoff Page is freer now that I am not grieving. I have stopped quarrelling with him in my mind. There is some tension, but I am regarding this as normal tension related to the creative process. I move away from this tension as I read J. B. Leishman’s Introduction to Rilke (1964) *Selected Poems*, where he quotes Yeats’ words: ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’.60

I think of the quarrel with my father who often did not take me seriously about the dangers lurking in the forest, and how this quarrel had ‘got inside me’ in terms of feeling unprotected. From a young age, I believed I had to be vigilant about keeping on the lookout for danger.

As I watch the scrub turkeys, I observe that while the dominant male builds the mound, his mate waits close by, getting ready to lay her eggs. Another female from another mating pair, who will also lay her eggs in the mound, may join her. After the eggs are laid, the dominant male, who commands the mound and keeps watch for intruders, tends them.

The poems are a glimpse of my experience in my family of origin, where my mother stayed close by, but my father was in charge—on the perimeter keeping watch over the family.

59. Rilke, R. M., op. cit.
60. ibid., p. 22.
I am born into a world at war. The world is full of ‘death / and then fear’, but closer to home there is the death of animals, and my fear of being crushed to death by a carpet snake. Friday has associations of death and crucifixion. My name, Susan, means ‘lily’ and there are arum lilies in the creek bed where the black snakes are. I dream of carrying these lilies when I get married, but my mother tells me that arum lilies are used for funerals.

‘A place of parting’ refers to my birth, but also to my mother’s loneliness because she is separated from her parents, who live in Sydney.

The image of my siblings being together and then dispersed: ‘one by one / the brothers go to boarding school’, is contrasted with the image of the male scrub turkey who tends the eggs in the mound: ‘checks the warmth, careful of new life.’ At the same time, there is an irony in this image: I know that the scrub turkey abandons his hatched offspring—releasing them into the forest as soon as they can run off.

Life and death are found side by side. The images are of colourful pieces of life flying through the air as the scrub turkey works on his mound. The ‘rustle and whirl of flying leaves, / twisted earthworms, bits of / roots and moss’ are bright in contrast with the ‘dark memories’. The split line emphasises the split between images of light and colour and the ‘dark memories’:

earth thrown
up with torn-off scraps of
orange lichen
pieces of life against dark
memories; the scrub turkey...

I emphasise the diligence of the turkey, which ‘rules lightly’ and is absolutely focused on the task of checking his unhatched brood. He is compared, by implication, with my father, who is far too relaxed about the dangers of the forest.
103. SUNDAY

My poem begins with life: ‘Birdcalls on an early morning walk. My father sings and picks wild raspberries’. I take these bright images from my earliest memories of my father pushing me in the pram through the forest.

The bright images fade as I remember my mother writing letters to her own parents in Sydney: ‘my mother writes of a good life—’. As my mother writes the fiction of ‘the good life’, I draw my fears in black.

As I look through the cracks to see beneath the surface, I use a split line which joins ‘dark’ and ‘fear’ and emphasises my efforts to draw my fears:

with bright pastels or
smudge with charcoal the black unformed creatures of the dark.
I write with fear in strokes and signs the grip of a bad dream, the howl of a dingo...

I remember being a child with my parents. I remember my mother did not want to talk about daytime fears and bad dreams:

You have to get off death, she says.

104. MONDAY

The eyes of the child watch as ‘The mound grows and rounds’. I see the male bird prepare a safe place to hatch the babies. This image of the mound hints at my secret dream of my mother having another baby.

The memory of my mother brushing my hair ‘a/hundred times in the sun’ is relived and linked with a child’s state of mind where there is ‘time/to dream and imagine—’.

Through the poem, I express a sense of my parents’ lack of vigilance in protecting me from the dangers of the forest. I notice the care with which the scrub turkey checks the eggs, and has his claws at the ready for the carpet snake. I notice that he discerns a lesser degree of danger with the goanna, and ‘moves him on’.
105. TUESDAY

Morning mist covers the mound. There is an echo back to an earlier poem, *Mount Nebo is Big and Dark*, where: ‘There is a sense of death in the mist’.

I watch the scrub turkey, and in my mind’s eye see my father ‘bend to / check the seedlings, but notice he is not / on the lookout for.../ the slide and glint of scaly coils’.

106. WEDNESDAY

In this poem, I step aside from my adult world and remember the questions and mysteries I thought about as a child: ‘missing newborn kittens and wandering daytime / moons.’

The mysteries of life, particularly of origins, and how they are veiled: ‘I just see through the mist’, is further reflected in ‘chopped-up / pieces of life and memory.’

The most complex question is at the end, where I wonder:

‘—what comes next, after you get off death?’
**EPILOGUE**

**Birth and Death—**
The Poem Before the Beginning

26 October 2008

*Epilogue* takes me back to my birth and, linking past and present, to the birth of the poems.

This poem has autonomy. It stands as the raw material fell upon the page.

The daytime dream-thoughts are relatively unprocessed and seem quite closely linked to night-time dream thoughts.\(^{61}\) The title of the poem reveals how and where it is situated. It glimpses beneath the veils, and shows the simple yet profound connections of birth and death, which are there before the beginning and throughout life.

The epilogue is, at first sight, unformed prose-poetry. The form of the poem is equally the form of the sea where it meets the shore, with long lines of waves that come in sets, like the waves of the ocean as they ‘come from the deep and reach out to the sand’.

This poem is newborn. It is relatively unprocessed. It links many births. It was written at 2am on the twenty-sixth of October 2008, two days after the anniversary of the day that Tom and I first met. In this sense it is about the birth of our relationship. I present the poem in the form in which it was written—in five parts, like five sets of waves, or five waves in a set. There is an echo of sexual passion or the strong contractions of the last stage of labour, or the huge last breaths of life—Tom’s life. In the sets of lines, which roughly form stanzas, a kind of newborn chaos is revealed, partly unveiling the mystery that, in Stanner’s terms, has lain concealed ‘beneath the veils between observer and that mystery which is phrased analogically’.\(^{62}\)

The poem begins with the writer in a state of mind—and body—as if in labour: the immediacy of middle-of-the-night images of muscular movement and whole-hearted effort going on in a dreamy but energetic trance-like state. There is a sense of the links between the breathless passion of birth, death and sexuality being expressed. There is also a sense that the elements are in sympathy with the intensely focused ‘I’ who is ‘rocked in a dream’, and with the rhythmic movement of the breathing

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61. Bion, W., op. cit.

body and mind in a dream-state where ‘I breathe and heave with / the rhythm of the waves / and the sound of the sea’.

There is a linking of many ideas here. *Epilogue* is not only a place where the primordial dualities of life and death are emphasised: the theoretical ideas mentioned in the introduction to the thesis now have a clear relevance.

This poem shows how there is a meeting of the two primal instincts named by Freud: ‘Eros and destructiveness, and in later Freudian theory, Eros and Thanatos—the life and death instincts.’63 It also shows how ‘the shadow of the object fell upon the ego’;64 For much of *Epilogue*, Tom and I are one. I breathe for him: ‘as I fall into his rhythm and nearly lose / consciousness in the big pauses’.

The notion of ‘unthought known’, as used by Bollas (1987),65 complements Stanner’s notion of ‘something to say’ in the connections between myth and rite. Stanner says:

> Each myth has something to say—something significant said beautifully and tragically—about the first and last formula of things, the ultimate conditions of human beings, the instituted ways in which all things exist, and the continuity between the primal instituting and the experiential here and now.66

Concerning rite, his notion of ‘not the same as before; there has been a change...’ also contains an idea similar to the process of the journey of my poems with their glimpses of discovery of ‘unthought known’:

> Someone is sent or withdraws from a safe habited place to a place of solitude... after a pause there is a return to the first pace. But it is not the same as before; there has been a change; the old is not quite annulled and the new not altogether unfamiliar.67

If it is possible to think, at the same time, of these notions put forward by Stanner and Bollas, it could be said that the journey of my poems has facilitated moments of realisation and understanding of previously veiled or unknown thoughts. The final poem, *Epilogue*, connects these thoughts and brings them into the foreground of consciousness. Bion (1994) throws light on how the veiled or unthought thoughts come into consciousness.68 His concept, which I mention earlier, is that conscious life experience is altered by the mind in such a way that it becomes available to the

64. Freud, S., op. cit.
67. ibid., p. 104.
68. Bion, W., op. cit.
unconscious mind for the psychological work of dreaming. So, according to Bion, the unthought known enters the conscious mind as dream-thought ready to be thought about.

The last two waves [stanzas] go over and beyond the moment of the crescendo of passion:

When the sickle shaped spike of the breath which is a wave reaches the top of the cliff I know Tom is dead and I have given birth to the baby boy and we can all be still.
Conclusion

A writer can only ever write the way he or she wants—write what he or she can.

TRIGORIN¹

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I begin to write poems out of pain. At first, I do not pay attention to what I am writing about, only that I am writing. I write from an interior place. I write the ideas and images that come into my mind and begin to feel some relief from the pain. With the relief, I begin to feel curious about what I am writing.

I see that my early poems are constructed like dreams. This process has two parts. The first is the relatively autonomous construction of the poem, where I am like the unconscious dreamer who dreams the dream. The second is where I intuit or generate meaning in the poem—I am like the unconscious dreamer who, coming into consciousness, understands something of the meanings of the emotional situations being faced in the dream.

The poems reveal images and early memories of my childhood: terrors of the carpet snake who coils itself in trees, or the dingo who howls on Mount Nebo, the big, dark mountain towering over the rainforest where I live as a child. Later, the content of the poems is more obviously connected to my reactions to Tom’s cancer and the trajectory of my mourning process. By calling on the energy of the past, the poetic process brings energy and power from within to the grieving process.

Writing the poems takes on a ritual quality. I write in a notebook each day. The words and images come into my mind with a sense of urgency, which pushes them forward and fills the notebooks.

In the background, as fresh mourning reopens old memories, I vividly remember my ongoing childhood fear that a carpet snake is waiting to drop on me out of a tree. New ideas are sparked by the interaction of this process of remembering with the power of the synergistic work. I begin to read Metcalf and Huntington’s Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual (1991), and feel a profound resonance as I identify with van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage: ‘at each stage an old self perishes ... and a new one is born’.  

I am very taken with the Barawan of Borneo’s distinction between soul and spirit, and with their sensitivity to the time needed for the journey of the soul, and the eventual physical death. The singing of ‘death songs’ prepares the soul for its journey to the final resting place. These songs contain specific instructions for the journey. Following the singing of these songs, the bones (containers of the soul) are taken to their final resting place in the land of the dead. If all goes well, physical death occurs on arrival at the land of the dead. Physical death is usually referred to by the expression ‘to lose breath’. The Barawan acknowledge that the soul needs time

to convert itself into a spirit worthy of the land of the dead, ‘even as the corpse needs
time to become dry bones’.3

Metcalf and Huntington (1991) complete their ethnography with an analysis of
American Deathways. They comment on the existence in the United States of ‘a civil
religion’, which they argue ‘explains the uniformity of American death rites and
enables us to discuss them in general terms’.4 They refer to the paradox that this
civil religion is ‘death-centred’. This is indicated by the ‘sacred quality of funerals’
compared to other rites and ceremonies such as weddings. Marriages are often
carried out in registry offices, but ‘death demands a full religious service’, even
though it is sometimes interdenominational. The wake is extended and important,
and largely social in context:

Its most important icon, the embalmed corpse, presides in impassive
benevolence.

In contrast to other societies I am studying, there is a striking absence of concern for
the journey of the soul, or the freeing of the spirit:

In the funeral parlour, basic values of life are condensed
into the peaceful image of the embalmed body.5

I continue with my own mourning but am powerfully affected by new thoughts and
different experiences. I am excited as I find resonance with my own struggles as I
engage with a broad range of ethnographies and ethnographic poems of love and
loss. I recognise that others go through what I am going through: they feel what I
feel, and struggle to express as I also struggle. For the Yolngu, crying and tears are
embodied within the crying ceremonies and expressed as part of the ritual. This
expression of grief seems to be universal. There is chemistry and release of energy
into ideas for new poems. Further, new creative ideas spark different previously
un-thought-about images, which as the grieving resolves, are then released into my
poetic work.

I feel an immediate affinity with Battaglia’s (1990) myth of Sabarl, told in On
the Bones of the Serpent, which shapes the form and content of my poems with
surprising immediacy.6

3. ibid., p. 90.
4. ibid., p. 213.
5. ibid., p. 214.
When I encounter celebrations of mourning among the Yolngu I am surprised at how often I recognise something of my own in the strong images of the crying ceremonies and dances like the dance of the ‘joyous maggots’. I know the juxtaposition of death and a sense of joy. It is my experience as I sit with Tom who has just stopped breathing: death and joy—at the same time. I know maggots, harvested with a sense of fun by my father as food for the hens who then laid nourishing eggs. I also know them in the bush as the Yolngu celebrate them, as creatures transforming rotten flesh, cleaning it from the bones. The idea of a maggot dance, with its juxtaposition of notions of smelly discomfort and a joyful breaking out into freedom and flying off, allows a transformation within me as observer. The image resonates with the desire for the soul and spirit to be as the maggots are—free at last after their transforming work.


*Nothing takes so long over its journeys as the soul.*

—JEAN COCTEAU

Tom, the Irish lapsed Catholic, says he has no soul: ‘I am a plain man. You get what you see’. Paradoxically, he also talks to me as if he has a soul, in the sense of a spiritual part of himself, as distinct from the physical. He wants his ashes in my garden: ‘I want to be near you’.

In one sense I view myself as agnostic, but when I think about it and when I see how I write about Tom’s approaching death, I discover to my surprise that I have a contradictory view similar to his. I do not anticipate an ‘after-life’, but I believe in a notion of continuity. I have a notion of a spiritual part of both of us. I believe that this spiritual part lives on. I find it easy to accept that Tom will be ‘near me’.

*Waiting for Death* traces the uneasy transformation of our connected souls and the freeing of our individual spirits. My spiritual dimension is defined in my early poems by two landscapes: the outside landscape of Mount Nebo, the place where I was born, and the inside landscape—the landscape of my inner self as shaped by the place of my birth and my early relationships. Mount Nebo is introduced as:

full of mist and rainforest and damp and leaches,

it is rounded and solid and mysterious.

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It is 'big and dark'. By contrast I am small: 'four and afraid', but I am also shaped by Mount Nebo, which stands strong and steady overlooking our place.

Tom is introduced as very young:

   with his newly grown soft baby hair
   brushing the side of my nose.

We wait interminably together for the cancer 'which comes nearer and nearer'. Because of my childhood experiences, which inspired my wonder and awe of nature, I am able to transport myself unconsciously to another place and another time. My memory and my imagination at first bring back painful images of my childhood at Mount Nebo:

   the seven year old jumping, with both feet...
   and landing in the ambush of the red-hot coals.

Tom and I sit together. Waiting. I buy yellow roses to make it more bearable. Tom is impatient:

   I have said there will be no more
   flowers, they’re a waste of money.

The poems, which lead up to Tom’s death, show our vulnerability as we sit together and wait. He is cold. The house is overheated. I daydream and allow a fuzziness of rational thought. I imagine his soul gathering strength to transport his spirit to freedom. As Tom fights the cancer to the end his spirit is strong, but his body is more and more a bony shell:

   he is pale and thin.
   Disappearing.

There is often a very strong desire in me to go with him:

   to hold this last moment,
   to make it go on forever,
   and by an act
   of will, to go out together into eternity.

I am part of Tom’s dying. My poems are part of a shared creative process where living and dying are blurred. Much of the time I look back, or to the side. Tom looks steadily forward. I remind myself that he is dying: I am going to live on. What I read enlivens me and generates fresh thoughts.
I dream and write and reflect on our changing states of consciousness and unconsciousness. Tom and I share half-forgotten memories. Our life of thoughtful decisions and political conversations falls away as we live in a spiritual dimension.

For the Yolngu, the spiritual dimension of existence (wangarr) is central. I feel my own implicit beliefs to be close to many Yolngu beliefs. When I read about the transition to death in Yolngu society, I recognise the richness of the rituals. The notion of ‘singing the songs of the ancestral beings who will guide the person’s spirit home’ resonates with recent memories of singing lullabies to Tom with my friend Suzanne. The singing felt like calling forth parents or grandparents. The spiritual underpinnings of Yolngu society and rituals make it understandable that the Yolngu were able to find a way to relate to Christian beliefs and rituals. I share the Yolngu value of an extended process of mourning. I share the use of art in mourning. My grief flows through my poems. In a similar way, the Yolngu use crying ceremonies—singing, dancing and body painting—to facilitate the flow of expression in mortuary rituals. Art has unconscious as well as conscious connections to the spiritual dimension. The making of art may have a conscious intent but also taps into the unconscious—connecting with dream-thoughts and unthought known. Yolngu art is also a legal document, and has a sacred dimension that I do not share, but when I am pressured not write about death I have a powerful sense of outrage as if something sacred is being attacked.

As I read further and think my own thoughts, I ground myself. I find myself thinking about the soul and the spirit. In Greek philosophy, Socrates was said by Cicero to be ‘the first to call philosophy down from the heavens’. The concepts of soul and spirit are different from each other in Greek philosophy. R. M. Hare, writing in Greek Philosophers, shows how Plato, who expanded and recorded Socrates’ ideas, formed the idea of soul (psyche) or mind being an entity ‘distinct and separable from the body... before our birth it had acquaintance with objects in an eternal realm’. By comparison, the body ‘and its base desires’ was denigrated. In ancient Greece, ‘spirit’, seen as ‘a constituent element of an individual,’ was identified or closely connected with breathing. According to The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy, the words for ‘spirit’ and ‘breath’ are the same (pneuma).

Recent Western definitions of soul include notions of spirit, but not of mind. In the New Oxford Dictionary of English, ‘soul’ is defined as ‘the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal regarded as being immortal’.

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10. ibid., p. 2.
During Tom’s last days, I sense an intense spiritual power between us. Like Plato, I make a distinction in my mind between soul and spirit. I see his soul as the vessel to carry his spirit, which is like breath. Tom is steady, directed. I see his spirit ebb and flow. I watch the fluctuation of his energy and his breathing while he waits. I think of the Yolngu ancestral beings who will guide the person’s spirit home. I imagine an outside force helping Tom’s soul gather strength to carry his spirit to freedom:

between us there is hovering
a powerful force of spirit
stronger than the cancer
trying to help free us.

We are powerfully united in mind and spirit when he announces:

I’m ready.

A few days later, 9 August:

Tom has died,
beautifully:
with me
as I wished.

I feel elated that:

we have won.
We have beaten the cancer.
It can do no more harm.

For months I cannot write about the funeral, which I experience as shocking and intrusive, a terrible cutting across of our journey, a backward step. As in Yolngu society, Tom is involved in his own transition into death. Family gather around him. He thinks about the disposal of his bones. Unlike the Yolngu, he wants his bones and his spirit to be only with me. The Yolngu return to their own place and the lived reality of the wangarr—the spiritual dimension of existence. Tom denies his spiritual dimension yet wants to be ‘near me’ in my garden. We are together in spirit until just before the funeral when he is put in a coffin and separated from me and, subjectively, I lose him for a time. He has chosen, with me, the music and the form of his funeral, but the music is played in the wrong order—and misunderstood.
In retrospect, I long for a Yolngu funeral: something more openly dynamic. I would have loved a more expressive ritual: the comfort of a crying ceremony, the energy of the dances, time to laugh and cry. I would have loved a vibrant occasion where Tom was centre-stage and my grief as primary mourner was not so obvious: where it was more shared with the whole group, and where it went on long enough for me to be physically exhausted and for the joy to return, creating a natural pause, a rest.

I am overjoyed when Tom’s ashes are delivered and I can have him back. We can continue with the journey of soul and spirit. I carry out his wishes for his ashes to be first settled in the soil of my garden, and later a handful scattered in the Namadgi National Park where we often walked.

The extended nature of our spiritual journey goes on for years, as does my grief. It is moved aside, unwittingly, in the first year after Tom’s death, by the entrance of Geoff Page, my poetry advisor. His focus is the poetry, and in the interest of my development as a poet, wants me to ‘get off death’. He also tells me, in a brotherly fashion, that carpet snakes are not dangerous. I have a very strong reaction in *I Hate Boys*:

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I wish
for a Carpet Snake
to drop on him—
squeeze out
his life
sink in the juice
of my hate
with his fangs.
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I return to Mount Nebo and think of Tom. I briefly write poems about Mount Nebo. I return to write the poem of the first anniversary, *Moment of Death*. I hold on desperately to my primary task, which is maintaining the flow of poems engaged in the journey of our souls, and in the freeing of our individual spirits. All this could suddenly stop. I know that I have to face a dilemma:

```
I cannot get off death.
Death is my home,
where I reside.
If I get off death
I am homeless, in exile.
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I struggle to see a way out, to see if I can change the subject, put a dark veil over my work, without dropping my primary task. I think of an imagined piece about the old man who sleeps near the lake:

He is homeless too.

I will write about him and loss, and loss, and loss.

I make a collage.\(^ {15}\) This frees me. In late December 2006 I write *Black Swan*, followed by *Change of Season*. I return strongly to the journey of the soul in *Waiting for Death*, the poem of the second anniversary:

the heave of my chest
breathes for him now
that he is not breathing...

As I explain earlier, Geoff Page and I reach a place of resolution. He sees how the poems and the thesis fit together. In time, when I have some separation from Tom, I see how the poems and the thesis can be separate. The poems sparked by the synergistic work, some of which have been veiled in my notebooks, now emerge in the fourth section, *Waiting for Death*.

I return again to Mount Nebo and look at how I am shaped by the place of my birth, and how this internal landscape and internal map has helped me to stay on my journey with Tom. In October 2008, five years after our journey began, I know that I can write:

**Epilogue: Birth or Death**
**The Poem Before the Beginning**

When the sickle shaped spike of the breath which is a wave reaches the top of the cliff I know Tom is dead and I have given birth to the baby boy, and we can all be still.

I have a strong resonance with the Yolngu view of the extended nature of mortuary rituals reflecting the extended nature of the journey of the soul.\(^ {16}\) My poems reflect how the soul needs time to follow a natural process, not only to rest the soul of the one who has died, but also to heal the spirit of the one who has lived, and to release her. I have lived and observed my poems at the heart of my grieving, in a sense

\(^ {15}\) Appendix 1: *The Snake*, p. 204.

resonant with how art is used at the heart of Yolngu society. Both are the medium of
the spiritual dimension of life, and of relationships with place and with people.

6.2 **THE MEANING OF POEMS AS ETHNOGRAPHY**

My poems powerfully direct my grief. They are a way of harnessing the strength of
the memories of my parents and my place, Mount Nebo. For years, writing poems
is a part of every day, and becomes a part of my life. The poems, now ethnography,
express the shared pain and joy of how Tom and I live the last moments of his life.
At the same time, they recreate details of stories such as my father killing the carpet
snake that had slithered quietly through our open front door on a hot Queensland
evening. The snake took my grey stripey kitten from the foot of my bed and coiled
around it, crushing its growls in preparation for swallowing it.

The creation of rituals centred on family celebrations, with stories told and retold,
resonates with the use of paintings, songs and dances in Yolngu art and ceremony.
These events in turn set off a flow of dream-thoughts and memories and yearnings
to nourish my poetic process.

Paintings are ‘loci of ancestral power’ for the Yolngu. The power is invested in the
design in two ways. ‘In the first sense the ancestral design is believed to be an actual
part or creation of the ancestral being: in the second sense it is a representation, and
an ancestral representation at that, of the events that took place’. Similarly, in one
sense my carpet snake is connected with my father and me in a particular way that
is mythical, not symbolic. My carpet snake has fangs and is poisonous. I believe that
it waits in a tree for food, and may at any moment drop on me. In another sense it is
symbolic. More recently, in my dreams and in my poems it represents the
cancer.

The poems provide a containing framework for the grieving process, but more
than this they have a symbolic power of their own: they are a pathway by which
long-forgotten memories can be rediscovered. They give strength and vitality to the
grieving process. As Howard Morphy, my supervisor, offers pieces of synergistic
work, I see that how I use my poems resonates with how the Yolngu use their
paintings. Paintings have conscious and unconscious meaning for the Yolngu in the
same sense that my poems have conscious and unconscious meaning for me. They
go further than my poems in that they use spiritually powerful ancestral designs,
which are the property of clans and which store information about ancestral events,
but there is a synergy in the process, which helps me to take my work further.

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Press, p. 114.
6.3 **POWER AND FORM**

The form of my early work is irregular, simple, unselfconscious—a vehicle to hold my first words. My free-flowing expression creates work simply formed and emotionally raw. The words are clear and spare, and the poems take on a life of their own. I pay little attention to form.

I have argued that, as with Yolngu rituals and paintings, my poems draw on powerful family myths, dreams and symbols. There is a poignant moment in celebrating a funeral where the ritual moves from deep inner expressions of sadness to rediscover joy. There is a burst of creative energy, which fires the process and gives it life. I begin to see a connection between the power invested in the designs for the Yolngu, and the power invested in the form of my poems. I see possibilities for my work to be stronger if I pay attention to form and content.

Experimentation is important to me. I enjoy experimenting with different forms and allowing the content to shape the form, or the form to shape the content. Sometimes I play with the tension between form and content. As I read the myth of *The Bones of the Serpent*,\(^{18}\) I begin to experiment with skeletal forms, which look like a backbone and which express ‘bare bones’ and ‘close to the bone’.

6.4 **VULNERABILITY**

I sense a creative tension around my work. At times I write because I must write to soak up the grief. I step aside from writing to see that I am engaged in a mainly unconscious creative process. In this process I am strong because I am tapping into the power of the unconscious, but I am also doubly vulnerable. I am vulnerable, first because in my unconscious process the past meets the present: the carpet snake waits in the fork of a tree and I am young and unprotected. In the second place I am vulnerable because I am grieving. Grief is a force. It seeks to express itself. In expressing grief, I am open to the flow of ideas and images from my imagination, and from how my mind plays in the present with past stories and memories.

Tom’s approaching death interweaves with my thinly veiled, youngest child’s self-doubt. Half-forgotten memories of being ‘the smallest person in the world’ come vividly into the present. My dreams and imaginings are now fired by the synergy of what I am reading, and interact powerfully with my unconscious tracking of the cancer. Sitting with Tom allows time to know that I am losing him. It revives my sense of being small, unprotected and alone. My way of dealing with this is to express it. I write to express my partly unconscious fears: my daytime nightmares—

\(^{18}\) Battaglia, D., op. cit.
and to allow the flow of my tears. In the year before Tom’s death I set out to find a mentor who will help me transform and integrate what I am writing so that my unconscious fears can be known and understood and used in a creative way. I find Howard Morphy. As I have already mentioned, I later engage in an ‘apprenticeship’ with an established poet.

Into my world of poisonous carpet snakes, last breaths, death and loneliness comes my poetry advisor, Geoff Page. He expects that we will work with poetic images in the realm of the rational and conscious. He does not know I am grieving. He expects me to write on many topics. Our vulnerabilities clash. In his life and work he does not dwell on death. He believes, in the interest of my development as a poet, I should ‘get off death’. He is also tuning in to an imaginary audience: ‘No one could stand this Sue’. We are thrown into a place of mutual disappointment with each other.

In the beginning, Geoff Page and I struggle to remain optimistic about working together on my poetry. There is a natural progression in the interplay of our ideas. I know that we need time. He is generous with his time and his comments. We both enjoy studying the Great Poets. He reads the poems aloud and I listen. We enjoy each other’s company. I have mentioned earlier that I am enchanted with how he reads Chaucer. I admire his command of Middle English. He reads ‘The Oxford Clerk’ from ‘The General Prologue’ to The Canterbury Tales, and I think momentarily of my father, the Oxford scholar. I let this thought pass and as I relinquish control, the relative autonomy of the work takes over and I tune in to pure expressive form: the music of his reading. I see the poet as he reads.

He reads my work silently to himself and insists that I try another subject. I cannot bear that we disappoint each other. I hope that if I stick with what he is offering me I will grow and develop as a poet. He occasionally reads his own work aloud. He does not want to hear me read my poems aloud. I tell him I write about death in order to face it. He says people in general are not interested in facing death. He wants the poems and the thesis kept separate. I try to understand this. I believe it is possible that he wants to protect my young creative work from academic dissection. What he calls ‘the thesis’ is my mourning process. In the early months, the mourning process and my poems are inseparable. They are part of the same fabric. This creates a crisis, which I have to deal with as both an emotional and a political reality.

My emotional reality is that I cannot get off death. I am grieving. I also cannot yet change the structure of my poems. I find to engage in this argument ridiculous, and yet I am caught in it. My political reality is that I believe I am in danger of being invaded. I begin to lose sleep. I lie awake at night trying to think of a creative solution to my dilemma. Can I change the subject? There is no way out but to experiment. I must also expand my skills as a poet to regain my autonomy.
There is no easy solution. I turn to philosophy in order to build a framework to think about the problem. Deleuze says: ‘Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many... Its multiple expression on the other hand involves Unity’.  

His comment about ‘one’ and ‘many’ throws light on the synergistic process: the collision of two ideas becomes a dynamic collective entity of many ideas as one, and the one then explodes into many more ideas, each with a difference. I begin to express this in a collage, which symbolically explodes my dilemma. It frees me. I have ideas for new poems.

Deleuze’s view of expression as being an act of folding, unfolding, refolding with many options confirms my view that I can draw on my unconscious store of unthought thoughts without changing the expressive content.

I decide to change the subject and trust that I can maintain the relative autonomy of the work: that it will unfold and refold while at the same time staying true to the expressive content. I trust that if I introduce from my imagination new people or new forms of life (animals or birds), which are not part of my everyday experience, they will nevertheless inhere in the fabric of my existence, and create for me what I wish to express. What is there I cannot predict. My dream-thoughts are as yet undreamed. I can think about it—I imagine that I reach forward to it as if anticipating its shape in the dark. I wonder about some poems about the homeless man who lives around the lake. I am unsure. I cannot know, and I must bear this not knowing. I am afraid of damaging my work. What I know is that the poems are alive. They will unfold. I will start with images. I resolve to trust that no matter what I am writing—if I sit with my thoughts long enough and relinquish control over my inner process—the poems will express my grief. Not in the same way as before, but differently. If I am open I may have another understanding of myself. I may open up other ways to flow with my grief or a different way to think of it.

Before I begin to write Black Swan, I struggle with feelings of helplessness. Every so often I step aside and look at the absurd in my situation. I feel foolish. I imagine myself swallowed by the carpet snake. I find myself in a liminal space. I am paralysed with no words. I cannot write but I play with images. I complete the collage in which the carpet snake is exploded and disempowered. This desperate but playful action releases thoughts. It re-establishes my flow of words and I can write again. I am now able to use memory, and play with thoughts and images in my imagination. In three months I complete the poems of Black Swan. Later, I know I will separate the poems from the thesis.

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Ruth Behar says of her autoethnography *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* that it: ‘cuts deep and raw into the gullies of the self’. Behar’s words stay in the back of my mind as I write. I feel a resonance between the ‘girl in the cast’ and my own child-self who walks softly in the world, fearful that a carpet snake will drop from a tree.

6.5 **SEPARATION OF POEMS AND THESIS: PUTTING INTO WORDS ‘WHAT NO ONE CAN STAND’**

A recent translation by Mark Harman of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* tells freshly his strong, calm advice, and reminds me of the struggle I have with myself while writing my poems:

> Think of the world you carry inside you, and find whatever name you like for this kind of thinking: whether it be recollections of your own childhood or a yearning for your own future—pay heed only to what arises within and set it above everything you notice around you.

As I write poems and read the Great Poets, I know I am learning about poetry and growing as a poet myself. I write without concern as to whether readers can stand what I write, but it is always a struggle to take Rilke’s advice to ‘pay heed only to what arises within’. My work flows freely and I see movement in the process as the grief passes. From the beginning, I feel relief at putting the raw anguish of my life into words. I gain validation by the reading of other’s anguish. Reading ethnographies where the authors do not hold back creates a synergy, which opens out my work beyond where I could have taken it alone.

Donald Hall does not hold back, neither does Daniel Hall nor Ruth Behar. Sylvia Plath kills herself but spares her children. She does not find a way to use writing poems to express her grief so as to free her. Ted Hughes, according to Becker, believes that she does not write about her grief profoundly enough. Dorothy Hewett, Elizabeth Bishop and Helen Thomas consciously write openly, and sometimes shockingly, to express their grief. They are then free to return to life.

I desire to write profoundly enough. I find strength in the ethnographies I am reading. As far as I can, I express my feelings and dreams and do not hold back. I know that as I write, my poems change. I sense difference at each stage.

As we begin to work together, Geoff Page wants the poems and the thesis to be separate. The thesis is about death: he wants the poems to express ideas and images of life. At the height of my grief I am not able to separate out the poems, and feel I have no choice about what I am writing. I am full of images of death and loss. I write first, and discover later what each poem is about. The poems of my grieving process are insistent and necessary: they are an avenue of expression for my unshed tears.

Later, as my grief resolves, I am able to open my mind to the synergistic work. At the same time I can now write something different to work on with Geoff Page. This frees him and me, and I am able to enjoy playing with the flow of unformed poems, which are sparked by the cross-cultural images, rhythms and ideas. I discover that I have stored these away while I have been reading the poems and ethnographies. The grief is passing. I can clear my mind and create free space. I feel my work coming alive.

6.6 SYNERGY AND MEMORY

Synergy is about synthesis and the energy released as a result: about ideas colliding and other ideas set free. The synergistic process unlocks memory. It explodes into new thoughts and ideas. It reveals multiple connections I could not have imagined. It brings new poems to the brink of expression. As the turbulence of mourning meets the synergistic work, the full effect of the process comes into play. As my grief recedes, it is available for poems. I have space to think. My imagination is full. I am bursting to get going.

I see that across human societies the themes, which I have structured as central to my poems, are also found to be central. These themes connect cross-culturally, both in celebrations of the value of relationships with people and place, and also a shared sense of loss in celebrating death. There seems to be a universal delight in sharing a return to joy in life. As I take in new ideas, an unspoken dialogue develops between the ideas thrown up by what I am reading and how the thoughts flow as I write. At times, the ideas seem to extend, enhance and energise one another, lifting the veils and dislodging large chunks of memory. An example is when the image of Murphy’s imprisonment within his body has an immediate impact: I see the mouse from my childhood caught in a cage, and remember my childhood panic at its imprisonment. I write a poem, 75. Cage.30

I experience the immediacy of Donald Hall’s poetry as it brings me to tears and keeps my grief flowing.\(^{31}\) I have, like Hall, been writing unselfconsciously and because I must, in order to express my grief at Tom’s loss, but also – differently from Hall –, in that I unexpectedly linger with moments of joy in the presence of death. I intentionally write in a similar way to Donald Hall as I write 87. *Dream Within a Dream* in homage to his poem, *Kill the Day*.

### 6.7 LANDSCAPE AND PLACE

I play alone in the creek. My father works on the farm close by.

I remember this image as I think of the Yolngu, where there is not a separation of the ancestral dimension from the world of lived experience, ‘but folds one into the other’.\(^{32}\) My father’s work folds into my play. He often joins me in imaginative play. I write *Chocolate Porridge* about this experience:

```
We listen to the
noises of the bush waking up, the
first bee comes, and my father says
not to interrupt the bees: they’re

pollinating. When the sun is higher
I will make his breakfast of
chocolate porridge from the dark

soil of the rainforest, lemonade from
the creek, and streaky bacon from the
trees in full scarlet blossom...
```

For the Yolngu there is an alive presence of ancestral forces. I imagine the ancestral spirits roaming over their place like my father did over our place—perhaps still does—noticing changes: seeing new shoots, watching how the whip birds call with huge energy and flourish. They are all part of this loved place, sharing its old spiritual energy. My father tells the history of ‘our place’: the fertile land with its dark soil and the deep gullies made by the flow of the creeks. He also tells of the traditional custodians of the land, whom I later come to know are the Jagera people.


I have argued that, as with Yolngu rituals and paintings, my poems also draw on powerful family myths and dreams. These are often in the form of stories told many times around the meal table. I take in what has become a source of enduring spiritual and emotional energy as I listen to how my parents choose the land for our place, Barn Cedars: a warm clear day, a view out to Moreton Bay, and north to the Glasshouse Mountains. Rich, dark soil. They love what they find. I listen over and over to my father’s dream of growing the perfect tomato. In our own way, we develop strong emotional and almost ritualistic attachment to the land on which we live, which translates into a desire to take care of the land. We cherish it. At night we look at the bright constellations. My father plants by the moon. This is the map and the stuff of my inner landscape.

6.8 **FINDING A FREE PLACE: AUSTRALIAN POETRY**

I discover that I have a storehouse of un-thought-about images from my early life in the Australian bush. These images flow when my imagination is free. I see beyond the coils of the carpet snake. I see the brightness of the stars from our lawn at night and in the early morning: I see a wallaby delicately nibble patches in the dewy grass. I see the full moon fade in first light. Further from home, I run down red sand-hills in the Simpson Desert, and see the late sun on the red sandy soil of Ruby Gorge near Alice Springs. I imagine Jagera children playing in my creek at Mount Nebo. It is also their creek. It was their creek first. Thousands of years before me. When the Bangarra Dance Theatre gives us *Praying Mantis Dreaming, Ochres* and then *Fish*, and later of earth and sky, I have a glimpse of something reached for, something remembered, something in common. When I stay for a few days, centred on a campfire with the Yolngu, I absorb something much more concentrated—I receive the songlines, which carry a birthing cry that now resides in my soul.

I am not satisfied with placing myself in the tradition of poems in English. By the beginning of 2008, I do not yet know where I belong. I keep writing but I know I am held in a liminal space.

Through the ethnographies I am reading, as well as through watching performances by the Chooky Dancers and the Bangarra Dance Theatre and listening to the songlines, I am absorbing some of the indigenous music and art and dance in which I am immersing myself.
6.9 **DREAMING, FORGETTING AND UNTHought KnOwN**

In the writing and the exegesis of the poems, I show my implicit use of psychoanalysis. The theory is always there. It is embedded in my way of thinking and in my way of connecting with my inner process. It informs my dreams and the meaning of my poems. It allows me to forget. It is how I reveal my previously unthought thoughts to myself and make them available to my imagination and to conscious thought.

It is important to note that Bion’s theory of dreaming differs from Freud’s in a particular way, which is relevant to this study. For Freud, dreams serve to disguise unconscious dream thoughts during sleep. For Bion, dream-thoughts are unconscious thoughts generated in response to lived emotional experience and provide the impetus for unconscious psychological work.

This distinction is important for the present study, because I show through my poems that, as if I were dreaming, I am doing primary unconscious psychological work with my lived experience. The poems are, in a sense, daytime dreams.

6.10 **SYNERGY AND NEW LiFE**

The synergies flood in. They enter my dreams. I write about them. I have room to allow new images in, and time to allow a poem to form around them.

73. **Dream**

I dream of a Sabarl woman
waiting with her dead husband
I am afraid that she will die too.

I desire to warm her
to get her away from the cold husband, dead beside her.

The desire to warm her
becomes strong in my body.
I have a sensual urgency

---

to get her away from death
and lie with her myself
to bring her back to life.

I am ready to come back to life. I have looked beneath the veils to see the journey of Tom’s soul and mine, as I accompany him to free our spirits. In a more conscious way I now want to allow the veils to settle. I want to forget: to allow joy and life to return.

I spend a few days at Mount Nebo and watch a male scrub turkey build a mound to protect and keep warm the incubating eggs. I watch with delight as he takes the temperature of the mound with his beak, and stands guard to protect the new life. I return to Sydney to write *Scrub Turkey*. As I write, I am transported to an earlier time:

The child watches,
but keeps a distance. Wispy curls brushed a hundred times in the sun make time
to dream and imagine—
ideas and secrets
shared with the scrub turkey, who listens and grunts
in reply, as he checks the temperature of his mound and watches for the carpet snake or the goanna...

I carry with me the joy in seeing that the scrub turkey is vigilant in protecting new life.

6.11 **POET AND MENTOR**

By the end of 2009, my relationship with Geoff Page is more mutual. I see how raw I was when we began, and how unbearable this was for Geoff. We go to the launch of his *60 Classic Australian Poems*. When he introduces me he says he is my mentor—and he is, in the sense of engaging with my work, and in welcoming me into the group of poets. We work on refining *Scrub Turkey*. We discuss the form and images and half rhymes of my poems. Geoff Page says this work is quite ambitious. We sit in the warm Canberra sun on the balcony of a new *Gods* coffee shop, which is nearer to my room at University House than the old *Gods* where we met for three years.

We are studying images. He reads aloud from Judith Beveridge’s *The Domesticity of Giraffes*. We play with some of her images:

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the moon grows oblong
as a cell ready to divide.\textsuperscript{37}

He also reads ‘The Herons’, a poem from \textit{How to Love Bats} by the same author. He finishes reading the poem and returns to her image of the herons on the river:

\begin{quote}
So we trod quietly back,
left them sitting above the long
brown earthworm of the river.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

He invites me to try something new. This time I have ways to respond. I have learned from Rilke:

\begin{quote}
to let every impression and every seed of a feeling release itself on its own.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

I look again at my collage.\textsuperscript{40} When the poetic process is threatened I go to a different medium to continue the mourning process. In a transformative act I use making a collage to symbolise and examine what I am experiencing. Is it a digestive process? Is it a pregnancy? I see that I imagine a multiple birth of creative ideas. When my ‘apprenticeship’ with Geoff Page represented a fight to the death to retain the autonomy of my work, the collage represented death. This struggle with myself has now passed and with fresh eyes I see the collage as a pregnancy close to term. My image of the work is no longer of the baby swan, crushed and swallowed whole, it is of a healthy baby, head engaged, facing forward, ready to thrust out into the world. Not surprisingly, my thesis is also close to term.

\textbf{6.12 CRYING—FOR COUNTRY, FOR LIFE, AND FOR A FUNERAL}

The ninth of August 2011 is the sixth anniversary of Tom’s death. I am with the Yolngu for the Garma Cultural Festival. We talk a great deal about pain and how crying can bring alive that which was not alive. Over a few days I experience three crying ceremonies. The first, \textit{Crying for Country (Nathi)}, is women’s business. The women gather in darkness well before first light. The stars are still bright. The ceremony is a celebration of Country in the deepest sense. I am swept away as I become part of the spiritual flow of the ceremony. The songlines seem to embrace all the sadness of the world—all the losses. I weep with the women as Lak Lak Marika leads the crying with heartbreaking songlines. The music fills the clearing under the stringybarks, and goes beyond the edge of the escarpment out over the Gulf of


\textsuperscript{39} Rilke, R. M., op. cit.

\textsuperscript{40} Appendix 1: \textit{The Snake}, p. 204.
Carpentaria, carried in the intense darkness before the dawn. At dawn, as the sun rises and the birdsong begins, the sounds of the songlines linger around the camp. A profound peace descends.

Two days later I am present at an art show opening, which takes place in darkness. The songlines of a crying ceremony sung by Gulumbu Yunupingu embody the melodies of death, and having touched the souls of those present, bring the paintings into life, in much the same way as a baby is cried into life. Everyone is present. I cry—readily this time. Some of the men cry. Then the lights go on. It is like a birth. We see that each stringybark carries a picture—an etching or a print. Joy fills the clearing—and beyond.

The third crying ceremony is a funeral ceremony for a young man who died a few weeks earlier. His body is already ceremonially buried. For the previous week the men have been working on preparing and painting his Larrakitj poles—hollow log coffins, which will symbolically hold his spirit for a time. In earlier times they would hold his bones. We are told that his spirit has returned, and now the burial ceremony can be completed. Lak Lak Marika leads the songlines. With her voice and the music of her deep mourning she taps into that place in everyone who has lost a loved one—every mother who has had a child or lost a child. I cry quietly but after a time her sobs become indistinguishable from my own silent sobs. The men cry. She is the primary mourner, but in the moment I, also, become the primary mourner again—with her, and as part of the flow of her grief.

Throughout writing my thesis, I have returned many times to the question of the woman who is the primary mourner. While being with the Yolngu I have thought even more about this question. I find a paradox. While the whole group mourns, it seems to me that only the singer embodies the emotion. She not only carries the knowledge of how to gather up and connect all the grief within herself, but also to express it through the songlines in such a way as to connect the melody to the mourners and bring out their own flow of grief. I wonder if it is how open she is, as primary mourner, and how fluent is the melody of her mourning, that allows others to open their hearts. Magowan points out the social readiness of the Yolngu to grieve and to cry openly. She says:

that managing death and its affects entails the social recognition and acceptance of emotions.41

In my early poems, I write from the inside and consciously bring in the synergistic work. Now, the synergistic work is part of my thought and my rhythm. Throughout this thesis, experimentation has been important to me. *Yilpara Funeral* (2009), and my own recent experience with the Yolngu, show how strong and robust Yolngu tradition is. Built up over thousands of years, it can incorporate aspects of Christian burial without interfering with the integrity of the traditional Larrakitj ritual.42 My poems reflect that although I acknowledge my origins, I am not necessarily caught within an English tradition or even a Western tradition. I am at a beginning again: finding a place to get on with writing, and discovering what I want to write.

A carpet snake came down from the mountain and took my kitten
From the foot of the bed
The Mount Nebo Carpet Snake is an imaginary construction of a little girl growing up in the rainforest in Queensland. I was afraid that if a snake took my kitten it could also take me.

*The Snake* is a collage. It shows the fangs that the deadly Mount Nebo Carpet Snake uses to inject the poison that paralyses its prey. It coils itself in the forks of trees in the sun, and waits in the branches for small animals or little girls to walk underneath. The snake conceals itself, but if an animal or child passes underneath, it drops on its prey and bites it and then crushes it to death by coiling tightly around it. The suffocated animal (or little girl) is then swallowed whole.

*The Snake* is a work on paper (1,225mm long and 585mm wide). It is made out of pieces of cut-out paper and short pieces of blue satin ribbon (lengths of 5 or 7mm). Both the paper and ribbon are cut to size and then glued to the paper. The snake is outlined with black acrylic paint.

It was constructed in September 2006 in an attempt to restore the flow of poems. The poems had ‘dried up’ in response to an injunction from my poetry advisor that I must: ‘get off death’. Constructing the collage restored the flow of feelings and images and I was able to write *Black Swan*.

My poetry advisor Geoff Page is very rational. He does not believe my Carpet Snake is dangerous. He has seen carpet snakes, but only the harmless kind. He cannot imagine a poisonous Carpet Snake.

Howard Morphy says the Yolngu know about poisonous Carpet Snakes. I believe this. I have found that Yolngu art shows rich imagination and poetic sensibility. The Yolngu are very comfortable with metaphor.

The collage ‘changed meaning’ for me over the time of writing the poems. At the same time I also changed from being the powerless little girl swallowed by my poetry advisor, the Carpet Snake, to being the powerful Carpet Snake itself, about to give birth to a collection of poems and a thesis.
References


Pelias, R. J. (2004) *A methodology of the heart: Evoking academic and daily life*, Walnut Creek, California, Altamira.


Waiting for Death: The Poetic Transformation of Grief

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Susan La Ganza

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR
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PART 1

When Will We Die?
1. MOUNT NEBO IS BIG AND DARK

Mount Nebo is big and dark
I am four and afraid
Mount Nebo is full of mist and rainforest and damp and leeches
It is rounded and solid and mysterious
It has dingoes and snakes
A carpet snake came down from the mountain and took my kitten
from the foot of the bed
I had to run and get my father from my Uncle George's place
where they were drinking claret
and singing Deutschland Uber Alles
My father makes frightening dingo noises when he is asleep
then he gets up and does a comforting noisy pee on the lawn

It is a tropical Queensland evening
My father listens to the War on the wireless
I sit on the front steps with my mother
We talk, and look down to the dairy and pineapple farms of Highvale
There is sadness in the mist rolling in from Morton Bay
and beginning to cover Mavis McCulloch's house with the red roof
When will we die? I ask
Not for a long time says my mother
The sadness in the mist deepens
When is a long time?

The prisoners of war are coming home
it says on the wireless
There is a sense of death in the mist
When we wake up in the morning, it will have crept over the paddocks
and up into the garden

I have recently felt the mist again
It is around Tom's voice
He makes an effort to use his big voice
but the mist is rolling in on him quietly and surely

Tom has Staph Pneumonia
He sometimes feels like my baby son
when he was four months old
soft and vulnerable
thin and pinched and pale
and in hospital with Staph Pneumonia
The nurses washed his hair and brushed it up
it was fragrant and delicious on the side of my nose

The nurses got Tom ready before I arrived
He was very young and freshly washed
with his newly grown soft baby hair
brushing the side of my nose
I took him in the wheel chair
under the white Canberra gum trees
remembering pushing my baby out to get some fresh air.
2. **TOMP HOM**

Tom is home after ten weeks in hospital.
I'll be on a plane at Christmas, he says.

I can't believe him.
I try to believe him,
Fearing that if I disbelieve, it will
weaken him. I am still weak, he says.

I dream that I am climbing a mountain—
struggling up a very steep cement path,
so steep I almost fall back with each step.
The path is hard and dark grey, like the cancer,
which comes nearer and nearer,
as it steadily approaches.

I tread carefully as I climb,
knowing I could fall and die.
I now have to clamber up
on to a ledge which is too high.
I strain to get a grip for my foot,
and to get my fingers around
what I discover to be a granite
stepping stone—solid like Tom
thick and sure and rounded.

As I move my weight on to the stone
it begins to fall away. I now
remember that I had known
the stone would fall.
I remember that to save myself
I must grasp the metal ring
To the left side of the stone.
The ring is securely fastened
into the granite bedrock.

As I grasp the ring with all my might,
and take the weight off my foot,
the stone slips away,
falling into the valley below.
I am now left
grasping the ring
with both hands,
and beneath my right foot,
Is the deep, moist, black,
mulchy earth of the rainforest.
3. ORDINARY LIFE

I am afraid of love.

I snuggle up to Tom
doing the crossword.
The cats are stretched

and still. What if he left me now?
What if I get breast cancer
and leave you?
    You won’t, says Tom
I’ll die first.

Don’t be morbid.
4. NORMAL LIFE—THE STORM

What happened
before the storm?
It must have been the five-year-old
praying for rain, to break the drought:
bringing clouds of black and green

and a storm of wind and hail.
Old Bill, the bullocky, my father’s help
on the farm, and my friend, saying in fear:
you want to leave them things alone,
you know nothing about.

Never leaving things alone,
always jumping off,
not seeing danger,

the seven year old jumping, with both feet
from a fallen log
into what appears to be the soft warm white ash
of a smouldering burnt out stump,
and landing in the ambush of the red-hot coals.
5. SAFETY

When I was three
I hid in my father’s
wheelbarrow,
under a chaff bag
to feel safe.

I also hid under my bed
when visitors came.

I even hid from Fred Patterson.
That seems odd,
now that I know that
he was a Communist,
and so always in danger.

Perhaps he was hiding at our place.
6. TOM SHEDS A TEAR

Tom sheds a tear
from his right eye
when he tells me
that he has written
to the A Triple C,
his workplace, to thank
them for their generosity
at his leaving.

Tom has only cried
twice in our whole relationship—
he likes it when I cry,
and he is strong.

I remember, a single tear
shed from that
same right eye
once before: when I surprised him
with six yellow roses on our first Valentine’s Day.
7. CANBERRA IS GREY

Canberra is grey.
I get Tom’s paper in the rain.
I hand it to him.

He feels it,
and as he looks through the raindrops
on the plastic cover,

becomes the eight year old.
The old nuns
at the Kempsey convent

used to complain
when it was wet, he says,
smiling inside.
8. IN EVERY MOMENT

In every moment
there is an echo of
an earlier moment:
a moment already lived,
an experience survived,
endured,
delight ed in.
How shaky,
how precarious,
is our existence,
built on wooden stumps in rainforest loam,
like Barn Cedars
like Mount Nebo
like Queensland:
ready to break at any moment
like my mother broke
when they separated.
9. DEATH HOVERS

When will we die?

Death hovers:
my father
killed a chicken,
drowned the kittens,
cut the head off
the old mother duck.

I put my
fingers in
my ears,
so as not to hear

the chop
of the axe on the block.
10. PALE

I am haunted by how pale Tom is. 
He’s a better colour, today, 
I say to Ed. 
Is he? asks Ed, astonished.

Yes, I say, about three out of ten, 
yesterday he was only a half out of ten. 

In that case, Ed says there’s a significant change.
11. DYING WELL

Tom is dying well.
He is dying better than
I am letting him go.
Now, at the end,
he is tender,
and sweet,
and quite oddly romantic.
it’s as if he’s meeting
all my longings,
In the fleeting
moment
before he goes.
12. FIRST FLOWERING

The white cyclamen
that Tom gave me
two years ago
    for my birthday
Is flowering.

I tell him this.
It came good at last,
he says, as if I were telling him
that it had not flowered before.

Is it like our being together?
Did he miss the first flowering
eight and a half years ago,

but now near the end is seeing it blossom.
13. MY BIRTHDAY

You’re mad, says Tom
as we blow out
my birthday candles.
They are lit in an oval
around a half papaya
with a mound of yoghurt
in the middle:
  my breakfast.
Tom’s energy is up.
It’s early in the day.
He doesn’t eat papaya.
He’s having porridge
Which he
doesn’t really eat
either, these days. I don’t see,
or pretend I don’t see—or both.
He’s in high spirits,
telling psychiatrist jokes
rising to the occasion:
I give him a spoonful of yoghurt—
a piece of my
make-do birthday cake,
And something passes between us.
There is so much life in those blue eyes.
I feel that Tom is trying to pull my life in
as his life is pulled in. Why have you
brought flowers! He booms in his little
voice, reaching for his old authority.
I have said there will be no more
flowers, they’re a waste of money.

I dream that a bank is robbed,
someone shot, and I am taken hostage.
My captor seems like a young boy.

Have you ever had a karate chop? he threatens,
like one of my brothers.
I wake thinking: I am a hostage here—

in this life with Tom. In his reduced state,
forbidding the small pleasure
of yellow roses.
I hate this restricted life.  
Today the cancer is winning.  
That blood transfusion was too much for me, says Tom.  
Well, me too. I think.  
I am imprisoned, impotent, silenced and grounded by the cancer.  
I can’t leave the house which Tom wants dark and overheated.  
Perhaps I will suffocate, and the cancer will suffocate and Tom will recover.
16. THE SPACE BETWEEN

Tom has just collapsed in my arms between the couch and the bed. That was scary, he says,

saying aloud, at last, how frightening this is—in the liminal space between life, and going over into death. As I feel him going, I steady him and let him sink slowly into my lap, on the floor, and wonder to myself: are we there—is this dying?

I think: does he know, or does he wonder too?
17. REALLY DYING

Really dying
Is not the same
as practice dying.
I feel some urgency
that he will die
when I am with him.
He is deathly
today.

Pale.
I don’t seem to be able
to get going again, he says.
He is pale and thin.
Disappearing.
I think I’ll tell Yip
I don’t want
any more chemo,
he says.
18. STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

Tom is smaller and smaller
but not at all diminished.
He seems more
concentrated—
the very essence
of himself.

He has done away
with excess flesh,
and dropped his hair.
My fingernails are dropping off,
he says, when I offer
a manicure.

We listen to classic FM,
Verdi’s *Chorus of the
Egyptian Slaves.*

Uplifted, I wonder
how, and when, will he free himself?
19. SUNRISE

I am going to the Lake
to watch the
sunrise
and see the
balloons go up.

Is this how Tom
will do it...
go gently
upwards,
like a balloon,

leaving the cancer
trapped in his body-shell below.
20. NORMAL LIFE—WARMTH

Tom and I sit
beside the gas fire.
We must get the
heater serviced, he says,
before next winter.

Yes, I say, knowing
that next week
is the fourth week of
the last month, and that
to anticipate next month

is outrageous optimism,
but next year ... next winter ...

I feel the chill of his absence.
21. DEATH OR BIRTH

Tom sits in front of the window.
The light is such that the sun’s rays seem to touch him.

I wonder if God is reaching out trying to help, offering to be the mid-wife to this birth-death that we are waiting for.
Tom has rejected God, and his father. I have no gods, but between us there is hovering a powerful force of spirit stronger than the cancer, trying to help free us.
22. LOVE AND MASCULINITY

With a month to go

Tom has regained
His manhood
It’s the only place I haven’t
lost weight, he says.

He has one
Viagra left
For all
Eternity.

I nearly took it
today, he said,
But I thought
I’d save it.
23. FIGHT

Tom has an appointment
with his oncologist
on the Friday
of the fifth week
of the last month.

He thought I’d be
in hospital by now, says Tom.
He underestimated
the fight in you, I say.

Yes, he says,
and looks at me
as if to say something,
but says nothing.

I wait.
Eventually, I say:
And in me?
Yes, he says, and the fight in you.
24. ONLY SPIRIT

Tom is shrinking out of sight: he is only spirit. The morphine confuses what is left of his world.

Today, out of the blue he said: someone is asking if we’d like to go to Ballarat. It seems a long way. Would you like to come too?

I said I would, but had they invited me, too? I’m not sure, he said.
25. SILENCE

In the rainforest you have to shout to be heard.

You don’t have to shout, says my mother, I am listening.

I know she is listening.

It's the carpet snakes I am shouting at,

with their coils and springs.
26. THE LAST MONTH

It is the sixth week of the last month:
Tom wants me in his bed again.
He’s not so fragile, so tender to touch, except:
     Don’t touch my ribs!
reminds me of all that dark cell division going on in him,
shadowing him and me.

In the early morning we find a way to make love again,
as if nothing else in the world mattered, except to hold this last moment
to make it go on forever, and by an act of will, to go out together into eternity.
27. READY

Hospital.

I’m ready, says Tom, in his little voice, but the oncologist doesn’t take it in. Are you in pain? he replies.

No, I’m ready.

I’m ready to go, says Tom, pleading for help with his last strength. The oncologist begins to hear.

He is shocked, slow.

I’ll give you some continuous morphine, but it will make you drowsy. He is still uncertain. Tom is sure.

I’ve had a good life, he says.

My partner is here: he looks at me. My family: looking at his daughter, Kate. My friends: at our friend, Suzanne.

There is silence.

The oncologist looks at me. He is in too much pain, I say. Give him the morphine, as much as he needs.

I know he will not get as much as he needs, or as much as he wants. He speaks of love to each of us in turn, and lets us speak of his bravery,
his love as a father,  
his friendship.  
We sit with him for a long time.  
Too full to speak, I know I must speak:

he senses this and reaches out  
to grip my hand with a strong grip  
that takes me by surprise—

he draws me to him, and kisses me goodbye.

I want to go to sleep, he says. He means  
the big sleep.  
He needs me to go home, to sleep in our own bed.

Alone.
28. DISAPPOINTMENT

Tom is disappointed.  
He did not die when  
he was ready to die.  
His moment is not yet come.
29. 9 AUGUST

Tom has died
beautifully
with me
as I wished.

At a quarter past seven
he looked over to me
with his direct piercing gaze,
looking right into
my hollow eyes,
exhausted with vigilance
in my hollow face,
exhausted with waiting.

His loud laboured breathing
now noticeably quiet
he composes his face,
and, quite elegantly
swallows, once,
and then again
once more
and settles back
having done
what was to be done.

I sit with him,
happy
that he has found
a way out of life—
that he has done it.

You did it I say
speaking to his hovering soul.

I am filled with elation
as happens
after birth
or death.
I remember
a month earlier
as he collapses
on the floor
using me as a cushion
pleading
die now, while we are alone and together.
30. WRITTEN ON AN ENVELOPE

Sitting by Tom
after he dies
it feels
as if nothing has
happened. But
*something* has happened

I have a pain
under my elation.
31. LAST CONVERSATION

Tom has died
just now.
This is the moment
we secretly longed for.

Tom, this is our last conversation
this is the moment of sharing the loss
while you are still here,
not yet gone.
In this moment we have won.
We have beaten the cancer.
It can do no more harm.

I hold the moment of his warmth
his shape, his hairless head,
the curve of his well known lips.
I hope you will like where you are going.

I hope you are not disappointed.
32. TOM HAS DIED

Tom has died.
I am full of memories of the past week
a week of being with Tom and his dying.
I am still hearing
the silence when he stops breathing.

He loved you, said by his daughter, Jane,
Is the only clear thing I remember
from the funeral.

Before that, asking Suzanne to
cuddle up to me
to hold me back from dying.
She knows exactly how
to hold me back from dying
while I hold Tom
as he comes nearer and nearer to dying.

I think of Tom pleading
with Yip the oncologist,
for enough morphine
to help him die.

I remember him saying goodbye
and kissing me
with very young, very pouty
eager kisses.

I remember Suzanne
rooming in,
being there—
singing Greek lullabies.
The two of us
singing together
The Lord’s My Shepherd
to Tom
who doesn’t believe in the Lord
and who has no anticipation of Heaven.
I remember guiltily buying us a gift of Penfolds 389 to keep us going to help make the whole thing bearable. Then we buy some wonderful Turkish dips and bread. We sit on our beds, and try to eat while Tom struggles with trying to die by an act of will.
33. 16 AUGUST 7.15 PM

One week ago,
today,
Tom died.
He did it with me there.
34. WHY A FUNERAL?

Why a funeral,
a coffin,
now ... so soon?
I still need to be near you.
35. AN OLD CUSTOMER

Tom’s ashes wait.

The cemetery is strangely welcoming.
Tom has asked for his bones
to be in my garden
with a small stone
for his name, and the date.

You’re an old customer,
says Kevin,
as I unpack
my Mother’s stone
from the green shopping bag.
Margaret would have been here, last time,
he says.
She took a tumble, you know,
broke her leg.
I’m sorry, I say
putting the proof of my Mother’s passing
on the desk
while Tom waits
reduced to ashes
in a small box
in the boot of my car.

He waits.

Margaret would have been here,
he says.
Yes, I say,
Margaret met Tom.
This is for Tom.
I’m here to choose a stone,
for Tom.
He died recently,
I add unnecessarily.
Oh, he says, 
and waits: 
sensitive, patient.

I wonder if I will say how much 
Tom liked his work, 
liked the idea of 
a small granite boulder. 
How he 
asked for one the same 
as my father, also Tom, 
the five-eighth and 
one of Tom’s 
boyhood heroes.

I become self-conscious, 
amused at myself. 
This situation seems ridiculous. 
I imagine 
Tom thundering from the boot: 
Hurry up and get on with it!

I’ll do it for the same price 
as before, says Kevin, and 
looking in the computer, asks 
about the stone I have in mind. 
He brings out the green granite 
Forest Green he says. 
I think of the Namadgi. 
I feel the tears coming 
Kevin is used to tears 
this large kind man 
asks for Tom’s name, 
his dates 
double-checks them:

the birth date familiar, 
the death date incomprehensible.
36. WHY A FUNERAL ... NOW?

Why a funeral...
now...?

Later would be better
when I have time
to prepare.

    We talked about
a funeral as if Tom would be there.
We planned the music with glee
and amusement
    as if it would never happen.
Two weeks ago,
Today,
Tom died.

Tom,
The self-described
Plain blunt man;
the depression boy
who prided himself
on not needing anything.
Who made a study
of not getting it,
emotionally,
of gleefully enjoying
his bad timing. His
I don't give a rat's arse
when you're aching
for tenderness.
The man who says he hates:
smokers, wankers, silvertails,
private school boys, French champagne,
first class travel, French films, films with subtitles,
French anything, olives, oil and vinegar dressing, garlic, fish sauce,
parsley, herbal tea, flowers, gardening, ironing, resort holidays, slinky silk underwear
and too much fun of any kind.
Just as well it works if you surprise him.
Fear
Curiosity
Try not to look,
my mother says to
my five-year-old stares
at the one-legged
busker playing his
mouth organ at Circular Quay.

I wait for the ritual—
a pause in the music
then catch his eye
put the coin in his mug—
I wait for his smile,
but watch his stump.

Today, I see a one legged seagull
at Manly and the music comes back
as I feel the raw edge of my mother’s
longings, and the Prisoners of War returning.
39. REMEMBRANCE

I return to Mount Nebo.

Memories
of the child
are in the granite
boulders,
the hoop pine
planted when I was born,
and the strangler figs that are the same figs.

I sit
on the front steps
receiving as a child
all the noises from the rainforest.

The bellbirds
the frogs,
the whipbird’s crack—
the mate’s reply.

I am with Tom,
My parents.

I hear in my mind’s ear
The carpet snake,
Coiling and uncoiling

in his forked bed:
raising his head and waiting for the next meal.
40. AFTERNOON STILLNESS

The forest is silent.  
Only the bellbirds  
resist the afternoon quiet.  
Where is the flow of my grief—

the sadness is there,  
and the longing—  
a wispy mist.

But the big grief:  
the howl of it  
is held  
in the flooded gums,  
the Bangalow palms,  
the trickle of the creek,  

and the moist fallen leaves softening my footfall.
41. I HATE BOYS

I blow out eight candles.

I hate boys.

They are not afraid of anything—
    even Carpet Snakes.

Their bite is not dangerous,
says my brother. I wish

for a Carpet Snake
to drop on him—
squeeze out
his life

sink in the juice
of my hate
with his fangs.
42. TWO TREES

Two tall white
flooded gums
side by side,

swaying
together,

looking as if
they had wandered
out of
the rainforest,

to be alone
with each other.

A sappy section of each
touching
and growing
towards the other

swollen, as if
with desire,

gently
kissing,

taken by the rhythm of the wind.
43. NO DREAMS

I long for a dream.  
Why can I not dream,  
am I empty?

Did all that crying  
and vivid childhood remembering  
empty me out,  
or take too much from the source?
44. FEAR REMEMBERED

For years when I was four or five
my days were uneasy,
and my nights were long.

I lay awake listening to the night noises:
a cricket in the grass
a dingo on the mountain,
a bandicoot digging in the lawn.
On one terrible summer night,
unmistakably, a carpet snake rattling the saucepans.

Three years ago the fear returned
listening to Tom's breathing,
and then at last, not breathing.

I find it very strange
that now after his death,
I am less afraid than I have ever been.

I have survived while he stopped breathing.

I think of the four year old asking: When will we die?
of the fourteen year old coming to Sydney
leaving my Father at Mount Nebo,

and I think of Tom being there, staying till the end.
45. MOMENT OF DEATH

One year on.

I wait with the setting sun
Expecting
The full moon rise and
The remembered moment:
A quarter past seven.

The sun sets.

Behind a shroud
Of dark clouds
The moon rises
Unseen
Beyond
the Commonwealth Bridge.

Night passes.

In the morning
I see the moon
Pale and tentative
In the dawn light,
Slowly fade
As it sinks
Behind the dark gums
Of Black Mountain.

As it fades into itself
I think of Tom,
A year ago,
Fading into himself
As he swallowed.
46. PRIMAL MURMURINGS

My mother
is in the kitchen.
I am playing outside
In my cubby.

The imagined
happy home
created by
the five year old
in an outcrop
of granite boulders

is interrupted by
a ruffle of leaves,
then penetrated
by the murmuring
of two trees
in the forest.

I run inside.
Afraid.

It is the two trees
that rub against each
other, says my mother
trying to reassure
they are kissing.

This is not
reassuring.

The murmuring
is reminding me
of the kinds of sounds

my mother makes
when she and
my father
are together at night

and I am alone
listening.
47. SENSUAL MEMORIES

I remember
a dazzle of brightness
as a rainbow lorikeet dives
through an upward splash of water
into a quivering golden shade.

Heat haze and a call to prayer
three Moroccan girls in an orange tree
dropping heaps of cream and orange fragrance
into a sheet on the warm white stones.

A moment of reckless unbelief
approaching Paris from under a Thai Airways blanket thrown by a thoughtful attendant, over me and my newly met companion,
   thinking we are a couple.
48. BONES

Do they have to be
So minimal
So skeletal
So spare
So sparse
So uncovered
So bare
These poems
These bare poems
That do not give
Much information,
But give so
Much away.

These bare bones
Have a story:
Of greed
Of hunger
Of slithering
Of crushing
Of what is left
After the Carpet Snake’s
Dinner,
Or after the Carpet Snake.

Like in Sabarl:
On the Bones of the Serpent.
49. ENCOUNTER

My unsteady bike
wobbles by the lake
in the last sun of early Canberra Spring,
too late to avoid a sideways shove from a rough
running rhino-Labrador, who comes to lick my wounds
as I lie in a daze of wet grass and pedals and spun-out wheels.

The view from the grass
is of two rosellas shaking down
a silent splash of white petals into the darkening lake.

I yearn at the sight
of this pair as I get up alone
leaving my bones on the grass to be

swallowed by a carpet snake looking for a backbone.
50. IRIS

Tom dies. Everything dies.
It is spring
one year on,
but still dark in the
rainforest, where I am mulching, leaving

nectar for the rainbow lorikeets.
Aching.
I see a new shoot,
bright and pointed
through the lumpy soil—one of Tom’s
untended plants that never flowered.
Tiny-cat dies.
She is in the soil where
the shoot is now an iris. Flowering
the blue violet of those still alive eyes.

How can it be here? I wonder
It’s a rhizome, says Matthew.
51. MOVING ON

You must get off death.

I cannot get off death.
Death is my home,
where I reside.
If I get off death
I am homeless, in exile.

I walk around the lake
see the old man who sleeps
near the lake: see he has
the black swans
for company and conversation.

He is homeless too.

I will write about him
and loss, and loss, and loss.
52. WHERE IS MY WORK?

I awaken alone in the night,
weeping for my lost work
and my lost mourning.

I have dropped the thread
of my grief
lost my place,

I am not finished with
mourning—yet,

not ready to begin a new journey.
PART 2

Black Swan
53. BLACK SWAN

I

It is morning again after so many years of night. The event, the dark death, now recedes into another change of season and flowers. The wisteria which in cold early spring sheltered an old man’s sleep, within a curtain of blue violet now exposes him under a scant fringe of new leaves. In an unwelcome dawn, he makes his shuffle around the perimeter of the lake, and watches from the corner of his eye a young woman with long black-clad legs, moving swiftly, elegantly. She nods as she passes. Half smiles. He is slow to respond. He may not have smiled for a few days. Who sees him? Who smiles? Does anyone speak? Does he speak? How is it for him always on the perimeter? She knows she also is poised on the edge. Are we all, she wonders. Do we all shuffle around the perimeter of our own imaginings waiting to stumble into the darkness? Afraid of another event. To front death or meet silence. She knows death is more bearable than silence. Silence is another kind of death. She pauses, then moves slowly to the grass, and stretches a long shadow towards the centre of the lake.

Two black swans glide by.

II

A man changes his life, goes into the unknown, begins to live by the lake, near a protected curve in the bank, where the swans come and go. A woman walks by: she enters his imagination, and his dreams. He calls her Black Swan.
III

Another bright morning. Too bright, she thinks, as she glimpses an old man hide his bedding from the eyes of early morning walkers, and the curious black swans, waiting for conversation or food. Her energetic pace will soon overtake his shuffle. Will she speak as she passes?

Will she break his solitude? She watches his unprotected back, and how he half-sees, then touches his cheek, and turns away to look out beyond her, and the perimeter. She is oddly hurt and rubs her eye, which gives way how strangely moved she is without understanding why. She does not stretch today, or see a pair of black swans gliding through the rushes.

IV

Unable to prevent the assault of another too perfect morning, inviting cheerful early walkers into his room before he is awake, he struggles to roll up his bed. The light comes quickly: too soon. The new day pierces his memory—forces an image of the one who left, as they have all left him.

Then there is Black Swan, the one who crossed his bow, and almost spoke. She will be here soon. He will tease her a bit. He will almost talk too. Almost talk. Almost smile. Almost touch.

Dangerous game. She likes it. She's getting interested. Good legs. Really good legs. Too tired...

forget it.
She goes out early into the mist, to see
the lake still lit from the Carillon,
and wanders between a straying duckling and

a mother duck, who flies at her to protect the little one.
She cries out at first in fright, and then remembers
her own lost little one, the child who spoke only one word

in their first five years together, and then left suddenly.
What is it about the lake, the ducks, the old man who
does not speak—a sense of something half-forgotten.

The swans are easier, self contained, friendly but discreet.
They glide around her pain and her raw edges. Not so the old man
who almost speaks, almost smiles: too much like the child

who was only ever almost hers. Never connected by flesh and blood,
unless he drew blood. The blood from her heart under his fingernails.
His evil sense of humour. His chuckle. His delight at playing rough.

Old wounds reopen, at the force that draws the duckling to the mother.
VI

There was a future.
Not now.
He has gone beyond the future.
Now there is nature, the sun,
the lake, *Black Swan*.

He muses on how her elegant walk,
her nod, her wisp of a smile
touch the memories of another—
the other woman.
Her scent. His endurance.

Released from the burden of a future
he looks out: sees *Black Swan* on the grass.
Hears her cry out, jump aside,
sees the flapping wings of the duck.
Hardens his heart. What was she thinking?

 Doesn’t she know about getting between a mother and her baby?

VII

He looks out, from inside his proud austerity,
the lightness of his pared-down life,
at a bee in the blossom of a Manchurian Pear.

He looks out, from inside his wandered off
aloneness, the heaviness of his hunger,
at *Black Swan* smiling from her eyes.
VIII

He is free of his life. Now
he dreams in the sun
of being free of what he carries:

like an after-image,
he carries the scent
of baby powder
as if she had just walked by,
or as if she is always just walking by.

He is caught
in the scent and the silence
of a two-year-old’s memory,
snatched as the mother
walked out of his life.

Like a snake,
he wants to shed
the scent of her skin
that has wrapped
around his nakedness.

How can he shed
the skin from the heart
of the child
who clings to the scent
to ward off the loss.

How can he not send away
the woman who risks to stay for love.
How can he hold her so she
does not become the one
who is loved, but leaves too soon?

How can he break the spell:
leave the skin on the grass
sense that he is free—
safe from the thrall
of the mother who left,
but holds him
with the power of her scent?
IX

Mist on the lake.
The *phuss* of the swans
flying in. Entering the silence
embracing the silence,
unlike the entrance of the woman
he has named *Black Swan*,

By naming, he has foolishly let her in
to his wounded life, and his reduced world.
In this bend of the lake he and the black swans

are quiet company. He senses her near,
passing by, no time to respond,
lost in the distance.

X

Drizzle.
Freedom gone.
The wounded world reduced
to a bus stop, between the hard
picnic table, and the bend under
the bridge. He sees *Black Swan*

walking: sees her smile as she
passes by. How to respond
when she is so far away,

and he is in a distant place.
XI

She changes pace. Anniversary.
The child now lost two years.
She will speak to the old man today:

this time give him time to reply. If he will—
If he can. Her child could one day live like this.  
Cast out. Lonely. Or is he free, choosing this life?

She startles as he appears, crossing her path.
She says: Good Morning, too formal, too loud.
His reply is deep and soft—the music catches

her imagination and sets off swirls of colour
arising from a spring lost in another life.

XII

Like a bad joke about what’s new, he lets
New Year pass. Like another season
the world changes around him, while

he does not change. Caught
between past and present, he remembers
he dreams Black Swan passes by:

he follows her rhythm to the place
where the path bends under the bridge:

She does not take the turn, but lifts her wings,
rising over the evening lake, beyond
his reach. A downy feather folds itself

on the breeze, and dissolves, leaving a trace of scent.
XIII

She looks back
at the old man, and thinks
of her child, and his one word: *more.*

She sees how this man lives in a place
beyond her,
and beyond the perimeter.

He has walked out, and beyond the edge,
and kept going
—like the child who lived
in an unreachable place,
one word in a lifetime,

this man is beyond the reach of her longings,
when there could be more, always more.
PART 3

Change of Season
Change of season:
chill in the air—an old man
sits in his sunny spot by the lake.

I walk where she walked, but
reaching the perimeter I hesitate,
a visitor, awkward about crossing

his threshold. I sense we have
been intimate at another time,
shared something in a place

before memory. I say good morning,
and then compelled to say more,
something safe: the fresh morning,

He is patient and interested—
and lonely? I think of Black Swan
and sense that he misses her.

I think of her desire—
of how she took a piece of his heart
and flew with it into the evening sky.

I stop at the shame—
of playing with his hurt in my
make-believe world. The missing

piece, invisible but imagined,
is mine to long for. Can we know
this space: know how to hold it, or where to find it?
55. Look Beyond

Look beyond the black swans:

see a man and a woman—
a man who walked out
and left a lost child.

Look again:
see a man and a woman:
a man who walked out
to find the lost child.
56. SECOND ANNIVERSARY

Nearly two years now: last years’ full moon is past, faded beyond reach. I wait, in the silence of my dreams, for a poem, an image, and sense a change:

I dream of pink shapes like blocks of play-doh at day-break, and yet cannot make anything of them. The next night’s dream is two years earlier. The sounds of a violin and piano playfully inviting each other.

A cool breeze chills:

Tom shivers: he is ill, resting listlessly. I too, am restless.

I imagine going out somewhere—anywhere

bursting with wild animals—running, dancing, exploding the cancer out of me: desperately holding on to life.
57. A BOOK MARK

At the National Library, yesterday, I
looked at the bookmarks. That’s what
I need, I thought, to know where I am
up to. Some days lost,
some days full
of first memories.
I remember, with my forefinger,
rubbing my cucumber moisturiser
into the frown that came, when
your writing was not going so well.
Strange, that in death
you are so strong and alive.
To be dead was two years earlier,
when there was only cancer, and no hope.
2am

Where are you?

I thought I was getting better.  
You’re looking better, people say,  
or, you’re happy again.  
Is this miserable state,  
   happiness?

My body still calling for you, my hand searching  
for that particular hairy part—  
the change of vegetation,  
where your belly meets your chest.

I don’t forgive you for leaving me.
59. WHERE AM I NOW?

I try to pick up the threads of my grief:

I am a spider whose web was run into.
I am a silk worm who cannot finish
her task,
who having dropped her thread
mourns—
for her lost grief and her lost dreams.
I have no substance: I am gossamer
and silk, folding and unfolding
trying to remake myself,
learning to dance alone, in the shifting of light and shadow.
60. THEN A DREAM

For months there are no tears: then a dream comes—a field of poppies, bright ideas, opening red in the summer heat. The same dream, another image: the long stems cut down, the heads arranged in a neat row: the bright flowers are dead, without colour. The limp stems can no longer hold up their heads.

The mood shifts: a wave of loss. I try, with a dry brush, and a block of yellow ochre watercolour, dusty dry like flecks of pollen, to revive them.
61. I MISS MY GRIEF

I miss my grief: the comfort of ready tears. The walk along a cliff hoping to fall: stumble into the ocean. Who can I blame, that I have lost the comfort of the raw edge; let go a precious part of myself. Did it steal away when I was asleep. Consoled. Was I too comfortable, waiting for the rhythm of the waves? Was it too soon washed away with the unshed tears—the unwritten poems?

Was it lost when I was teasing myself with a wish that a friendly stranger, with a warm well muscled body, and a light touch, might slide in beside me?
62. LIFE RETURNING

Saturday growers’ market

chasing a forgotten single red onion
I lose my place in the queue, and irritated,
get behind a man with cases of fruit on wheels.
On the top is
   a tray of green hand picked apples.

Looking more closely, I notice how some are
polished, glistening with their green apple fragrance.
I see three have a blush, one quite early-morning
pink-streaked. One of these is polished.
   We are silent
The ones with a blush are special, he says,
they are often very sweet—
   our glances cross in mid-air
he pays for them, and turns to me, offering an apple,
the best one, the one with the streaky blush.
I take it. He smiles and walks off.
   Life is good.
63. THREE DREAMS—1

I have three connected dreams:

The first is after the diagnosis, 
but before we realised— 
before we took in, 
cancer.

Tom and I are in a taxi 
going to the airport. 
He turns to me, 
lovingly, 
and with great tenderness, 
says: I cannot take you with me.

I do not believe him, 
but somewhere in my heart, 
I know that 
he will go, and I will be left behind.
64. THREE DREAMS—2

Tom’s time is coming.
He is thin.

I am putting on weight.
It worries me.
I still let it happen.

I dream that Tom and I are walking
in the laneways of an old city:
he goes ahead through a narrow doorway.

I know that I have grown too big and cannot follow him.
65. THREE DREAMS—3

I dream
I need three thermos flasks,
for my research.

In my hand I have a black
screw top.
I cannot find the
middle section,
the silver container
that keeps the warmth in.
My middle son, Matthew,
has borrowed this container
for his horticulture project.

I feel anger, and in my anguish
at the loss become the child
at Mount Nebo. I look down into the valley,
and see my father, the athlete,
running free and naked,
around the periphery
of a newly scooped-out hollow,
on the floor of which is a cut up cardboard
box. At first I think it is rubbish; but it could
be mulch, if I scatter the pieces, and mix
in some dead leaves. When I look again,

I remember a homeless child I knew, who
cut up a box, and made a homeless home.
66. AUTUMN

My dreams are changing.  
I have lost Tom again, searching  
for him in the time before we met.

I am on other journeys with other loves:  
I dream of erotic moments with Graham  
on a roof terrace in the Sahara.

In the mornings we are busy,  
he sketches, using dusky pink watercolour  
washes and brown ink. In the afternoons  
our bodies invite each other beneath  
the insistent call to prayer from a distant mosque.
67. SENSUOUS MEMORIES

I remember:
a nectar seeking
Rainbow Lorikeet diving through
an upward splash of water, into
the curls of a golden grevillea.

I remember:
heat haze and a call to prayer,
three Moroccan girls in an orange tree,
throwing down heaps of cream and orange fragrance,
to be caught in a sheet on the warm white stones.

I remember Tom,
full of health, leaning into me,
my hand in his black hair,
a forefinger tracing a tear
as I give him six yellow roses on our first Valentine’s Day.
68. FUNERAL

A coffin.
No, not a coffin,
not for Tom. Death
is one thing, but not a coffin,
and not flowers. He
said no flowers.
Money for Anglicare.
For the children. Tom the lapsed
catholic agnostic
wanting money for Anglicare.
I can’t concentrate. I keep
looking at the coffin.
My children are here

full of care and love
and words. Matthew speaks.
Thoughtful. Fine words.
I am choked. Swollen. Tears.
Tom’s sister speaks.
Generous.

I could die too. Easy.
Just a swallow.
Oh, that coffin.
I am making little breathy
sobs. So many friends, hugs—
Jack from the Canberra Times,
kind, perceptive. Shakes hands, then
hugs. I try to speak.
Everyone hugs me. It must be because
I can’t speak.

Lots of journalists.
Intelligent, political.
Tom is cramped up in that coffin.
My heart breaks. My sons close by.
Paul is here. Matt. Bill has a poem.
Tom’s mates. Ed who made chicken
soup. Ian the artist. My friends.
Suzanne full of love
Rozzie is always there.
I miss my parents.
I hate the coffin.

Dying would be easy. I won’t do it.
Death comes to you.
Friends with their own grief.

    Penny who lost her daughter.
Oh, God. Not a child. That would kill me.
Matt’s daughter, Lili, sits beside me. Holds me. Cries too.
Even sobs a bit. My body is strange.
Weak. Lili makes a speech:
for the grandchildren. Puts Uncle Toby’s Oats
on the coffin, for Tom’s journey.

    What journey?
He isn’t going anywhere. He will be in my garden.
That’s what he wanted.
Scattered at sea? I ask. No, not scattered at sea, he says,
in your garden:

    I want to be near you.
69. **ASHES**

Substantial, heavy,
you can get your mind around
the ease of ashes and bones.

Here is Tom
in his changed state,
his bones ready for the fresh earth.

Something
quietens in me, as I get
my hands in the bones and earth.

I have plenty
of mulch, to mingle
and cover, and settle them down.
70. THE LIGHTNESS OF BONES

Unsettled sleep:
dreams
of dying.

The misty sadness
widens, and seeps out
into the cool space
beside me ...
I remember my dream:

Govett’s Leap, where my mother
walked as a child; I drive beyond
the cliff, and now,
outside the car,
I find myself in a soft cool mist.
I know I am dreaming as I fold
the rising mist around me ...
   a soft way to die.

Half awake, I imagine heaviness
falling through the mist ...
relieved of the weight of myself
I drift with the lightness of bones.
It is spring in the Namadgi.  
At dawn, Tom’s mates  
Ed and Ian  
are with me  
to sign the Visitor’s Book

and bring a handful of  
ashes from the mulchy  
soil of my garden  
to the Namadgi,  
as Tom wished.

I stop the flood  
of memories  
from nine years ago,  
as we sign the book,  
which is now nearly full.

I could look  
at our names  
Tom’s and mine,  
from before, but I don’t.  
This is not a time to cry.

I am not carrying a pack.  
The men are thoughtful,  
Ed carries the water,  
Ian the ashes, in their  
leafy soil, in his pack.

We pause at the sacred  
site: the drawings,  
thousands of years old.  
So much memory.  
Old memory.
I think of the visitor’s book
now nearly full,
and I try not to think
of the ashes.
This is not a time to cry.

First, all in your garden,
and later some of the ashes
and soil over the Namadgi*;
so we are in the Namadgi
together, Tom says, placing us

in his mind. We clamber up
on some boulders, all having
agreed that the ashes
should be scattered
over an edge, from above.

Ed finds a high up
place to begin.
It’s like a garden, I say.
He agrees and waits.
I will scatter first.

Why are they wet? asks Ian,
disappointed, wanting a cloud,
something to draw.
Because they were
mingled together in my garden

soil and bones
I say.
I took a big handful
from the mulchy earth
when it was raining.

I do not say I know that the ashes
are wet with the unshed tears.

* Namadgi National Park forms part of the Country of the Ngunnawal People.
PART 4

Waiting for Death
72. WAITING FOR DEATH

The body of the recently dead
and the body of the recently bereaved
are good company
in fact how can you tell
who is who as I lie beside Tom with the right side
of his warm hairless head
against my cheek and notice
the heave of my chest
breathes for him now
that he is not breathing
and the left side of his warm hairless head
cupped in my right hand
holding quite firmly
not ready to let go
as if I am helping him in
or out of where he is going.
73. BEGINNING OF TIME

The Sabarl know where they began.\(^1\) They carry inside a fight to the death:

- a serpent in the grip of a sea eagle who circles and circles, and circles the sky, until only the bones of the serpent remain. The Sabarl know how to meet death to
- be with death,
- to look after the memory of the dead.

Death circles, and circles and circles the sky and brings people home to the bones of the serpent.

74. POEMS AND BONES

Poems and bones are ends and beginnings.

A shattered bone lies on the forest floor

undraped unwrapped nakedness
death on show.

Shocked at the violence of its journey I see this fragment is all that is left:

end and beginning merge in a dream of being covered in leaves and washed sand

bringing together the missing and the unremembered.
I imagine a Sabarl woman
who weeps
beside her man
who has died
and wonder
is this what women do?
Lie there weeping
until all his warmth
has ebbed away, and she
can no longer breathe for him.

I push my imagination
into the death-time image
of the Sabarl woman,
face charcoal blackened,
lying beside,
in the long sleep
between death and burial.

Vigilant against harm
she clings and weeps
and waits, her body with his:
did I leave too soon
waiting alone, between death and burial?
76. DREAM

I dream of a Sabarl woman
waiting with her dead husband.
I am afraid that she will die too.

I desire to warm her
to get her away from the cold
husband, dead beside her.

The desire to warm her
becomes strong in my body.
I have a sensual urgency

to get her away from death
and lie with her myself
to bring her back to life.
77. CAGE

The mouse is a poem
in a cage waiting to escape
one way in, no way out.

As I watch the mouse
with my four year old eyes
I am in the cage with no way out.

The poem and the mouse
wait in the cage together.
The years remember the fear

and know that my father
caught the mouse to feed
the carpet snake—one way in.

I risk a thunderstorm
and an angry God
by setting the mouse free

to become a poem, and not to be
crushed and swallowed warm,
by the carpet snake—no way out.
The cancer is here, a trampling nightmare of wild wheeling horses.

We have no choice but to ride with it, as it careers onward towards eternity. How will I get off when it is time for Tom to go on, alone?
79. TIME RUNNING OUT

With less than a month to go Tom is failing.
I sit here with him in the early sun—
after porridge.

Even the pain seems to have left us.
His health failed.
His hair deserted.
A fine full head of black hair,
he once described it.

All of us horrified as it fell out.
Everywhere:
all over the pillow
leaving him naked.
80. WAITING IN SILENCE

I read Murphy’s *Body Silent*

and follow him
as he hauls his body
and silences
his longings.²

I remember
watching a
quadriplegic,
eighteen years old
day after day
as he fell in
love with his
twenty-year-old
physio. I saw him
wait for her, his whole
body’s longing in his
eyes, and his fingertips.

One day he noticed
the glint of a ring
pinned to her shirt
and jacknifed out of his chair.

81. THROUGH A DOORWAY

I dream a big house
bare and empty
and a piano
in a room.
through a doorway
with no door.

I dream a young man
tall and warm
with the doorway
out of sight
and a wheel chair
on the floor.

I dream desire
and reach for courage
as the dream fades
out of sight
through the doorway
with no door.
82. Dancing with No Legs

Shall we dance?
he asks grandly
and looks back
over his shoulder
as we sweep
around the room
and he grabs
for his balance.

In a world
of broken bodies
can you tell
joy from suffering?
can you tell
I am held
with his eyes
and his imaginings?

An energy keeps us going
keeps the life charge in the air
like specks of dust in sunlight.
83. NOT A RICE WINE JAR

The Barawan of Borneo have a way of making death familiar, of gently separating flesh from bones, of getting ready to set out into the unknown of death, by anticipating being contained in the known—a chosen, a particular, rice wine jar waiting comfortingly upside down in the kitchen.³

This jar in due course will extract the flesh and deliver the bones.

84. ANOTHER BEGINNING

The unborn baby knows
when life outside
should begin:

when to push off
from upside down
in the womb.

At the end of life
can we easily know
where life should go—

upside down in a jar, waiting
in the womb of the kitchen
sounds a good way to begin.
O bright red

The Bara of Madagascar
sing a song of childbirth
a funeral song—
a lament.

O I am hurting now

I dream of red and white
carnations and a young man
who loved and was loved,
run over by a train—
fresh blood, and then he dies.

O bright red

A wild response
to death is called for
to get the pain out:
to bleed out
the agony.

I am hurting from this birth

Death and birth—so
close—how can you tell
pain from elation, how
can you spark the
vitality. Where is the passion
bigger than death?

O bright red

My breasts have fallen heavily
O I hurt mother
Massage my stomach
Make it easier.\(^4\)

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 124.
How can a tough minded anthropologist be a vulnerable observer.

How can she be tough and also tender—looking out but also inward?

Ruth Behar lives on the horns of the dilemma with no answer. How to find again the little girl the crippled nine year old whose childhood ended.

In her mind but not her heart she knows the girl in a cast, and the woman in the cast are the same. She searches, but cannot recognize the little girl who is trapped: she cannot be the one who responds, who flings out her arms and crouching down in the mud embraces her suffering child. She knows only that she waits, but does not know the lost child awaits her.  

87. DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

Hall screams from the painted bed, 
hurls his anguish, shakes the 
earth from beneath my dreams...

When she died it was as 
if his car accelerated... 
over death water 
...plunged to where 
his corpse lay twisted 
in a honeycomb... still 
dreaming awake 
as dead she was, 
but conscious still. ⁶

I dream a very distressed 
open faced, young woman 
who asks me to help her. 
Within the dream, an old lion 
bounds across a green 
paddock, and then, like 
a young colt, canters 
off into the dense forest.

88. WE WON’T CRY ABOUT IT

the aftermark
of almost too much love.?

Can u fone me?
Can you find me
a lover’s death, or absence.
Now or wen?
The phone calls end:
the texts are silent.

You looked up, searching
for my gaze, and
as the silence held us
you swallowed—twice, then you
breathed out your life, as if you were
giving birth, and then lay back.

If you want to give me
a ring... give me a ring. It's very strange
without you...
you would say... we won’t cry about it,
and not wanting to disturb you—my body is silent.

89. DO I BREATHE?

Do I breathe heavily while
I’m walking? Says Carlo,
Then there’s silence. Is he still
breathing,
   or resting, gathering his power
to move in. We look into the evening
clouds, and while I’m wondering if it’s
wolf or sheep we’re playing with, eyes
closed, set free, the muscular thrust through
me, over me.
   It’s wolf, he says, as I
move in to the rhythm of his breathing,
90. YOU ARE ANNOYING

You are annoying, he says—
you are too, says she. Do you
really mean this, he says.

no, she says,
but what is this ache and throb
that lets her know that she is pregnant
with his fire.

What will we do they say
with this life-force of each playing
out in the other.

We must get some new speakers,
he says, so we can hear the music.
91. WALKING UNDER WATER

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars

Govern a life.

Sylvia Plath 8

I am walking under water
and I hear a voice I know
cloudy, blending with the wave wash
in the place of sleep and waking.

I am running under water
wild and foamy, unrestrained,
in the place of light and dreaming
and the voice I know is mine.

I am floating over water
quietly bubbling with the flow
there and not there, touching down
on crunchy sand, in patchy sunlight.

I am drifting in a cloud of
silvery fish in ribbony seaweed,
sliding under streaming currents
lost in depths of darkest dreaming.

92. AN EMPTY SPACE

At the base of dark Mount Nebo
    I call for you

In the treetops of Mount Glorious
    I search for you

At night I hear the carpet snake in the cupboard
    and call for you

When the carpet snake rattles the saucepans
    I search for you

I hear the echo of my call from the empty space
    and wait for you

I hear the dingo howl in the dusk from Mount Nebo
    and wait for you

The boobook owl with its white spotted back and its large dark eyes,
    calls to you

The night noises of the frogs and the bandicoots
    call out to you

I sense my fear coming as the carpet snake coils and uncoils
    and I cry out for you

Where are you now Tom? I am no longer sure, as I cry out, that
    I cry out to you. 9

93. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—1:

Chocolate Porridge

I chatter to my father beside the spring where the creek begins. As the sun slides out of Moreton Bay

a narrow stream of light escapes through an opening in the early morning clouds. We listen to the

noises of the bush waking up, the first bee comes, and my father says not to interrupt the bees—they’re pollinating. When the sun is higher I will make his breakfast of chocolate porridge from the dark soil of the rain forest, lemonade from the creek, and streaky bacon from the trees in full scarlet blossom, leaning

heavily over the water. Now alone, I watch a callistemon invite a bee into the pollen tipped tufts of its brilliant red and gold depths. All is warm and bright, or so it seems and then I see the carpet snake in the grey fork of a spotted gum, full and alive as it stretches the diamond sheen of its dark and dangerous coils in the sun, and shows off its mesmerizing shining power. With closed eyes it conceals its murder, and shows off its harmlessness.  

94. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—2:

Granddad

My dreams are strange
and not remembered.
I awaken thinking how
the Yolngu use paintings for
transferring the spirit
from the human to
the ancestral plane.\(^\text{11}\)
I think of my Granddad’s death:

I met my Granddad in Sydney
when I was five. Before then he
was imaginary. For a long time I
liked the imaginary one better, the
one who wanted to play the games
I wanted to play. The real one
smoked a pipe in his smoking
room, and taught me little moral
rhymes about tangled webs and
telling the truth. He never came
to visit us in the bush, but he sent
my father a whole round cheddar
cheese. When he died he was the first
death in my life, except for my kitten
who was crushed by the carpet snake.
The house was very quiet that day.
My mother’s whole body sobbed.

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid., p.108.
95. ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS: FAMILY TIES—3:

The Cry of the Spirit

Crosshatching
brilliance
inside space
darkness
the flow
of blood
and power
from inside to outside
always backward
to work forward
all that is new
returns from before.

Connection
shark
saltwater
singing, crying, birth
kinship
clan
when is the end?

The cry of the spirit
the body waiting
when is the right time
to begin again
free, out of life
when to wait, and when
to find the way
of new beginnings?

The cry of the spirit
death and birth
when to push off
elation, dancing, desire
tears, life, grief
crying alive—thousands of years of
songlines, ritual, after this lifetime when is the beginning?12

96. AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

I tell you/
I tell you/
You’re going for initiation
You’re going for tuumto then.¹³

The Okiek believe in
the power of pain.
A girl becomes a woman.
Good pain.
Stay completely still.
Strong pain.
Astonishing pain.
Initiation. Fulfilment.
You don’t know,
We don’t teach you.
Stay completely still.
Don’t squirm
on the way from girl to woman.
Like the women
before, who stayed
still while something
astonishingly painful
was done to them.
There is no other way
for the Okiek.
It hurts to become a
woman, completely,

so stay completely still.

97. FUNERAL PRAYER

So teach us to number our days,
That we may get a heart of wisdom.¹⁴

Lord, who are we, how do you regard us?

Are we like breath, always struggling to find
our true shape in the empty space of our birth?

We do not grow together like the grasses,
enjoying the tall blades flourishing side by side—

we cut the others down before they wither—
we take up all the space. Teach us to listen

to the whispering voices from behind
the betraying shadows. Teach us to

nurture each other: we are linked
by pain and hunger and by our fear

of each other. How can we value each day
and care but not destroy: teach us to make

space: teach us to number our days
knowing that we have not wisdom.

98. SILENCE AND ABSENCE

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
It has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.\(^\text{15}\)

Silence can be a game
with an imaginary friend

a way of bringing to life

an adventurous journey.
It can also be an absence,

somewhere to keep a
sense of longing out of sight.

99. JOYOUS MAGGOTS

[Life is] a joyous thing
with maggots at the centre.
W. E. H. Stanner\textsuperscript{16}

You can see in the bush
how the lively maggots
appear at a death
to clean up the bones.

The bones of the dead
are sacred and safe.
Yolngu dancers follow
the rhythm of the maggots,
and the furrows in the sand
show the movement of
the maggots in the
\textit{yingapungapu}

The yithuwa are
channelling and patterning
lusting and feasting
leaving marks and slashes
in the dashed design.
The final dancer
spears the ground in
front of the shade—
opening it: death into life.

100. THE FAME OF GAWA

The remembering  
begin with  
darkness  
blackening heaviness  
exchange fame  
family and community.

How will the others  
remember the celebration  
the mourning  
the gifts of food  
a young death illness.

Drumming is  
forbidden:  
the witches have a drum  
dance in the bush.

The remembering  
is in the ritual  
the dish exchange  
body care of the mourners  
emergence  
from the darkness  
the ritual washing  
taking them  
down the cliffs to the sea.

Action  
action preparation  
transformation completed  
remembrance  
secured with the skirt exchange.  
It is now safe to beat the drum.17

PART 5

Scrub Turkey
101. FRIDAY

In the beginning is death
and then fear: a lily born
from a place of parting
into a rich tropical loneliness.

In the beginning
we are together
and then loss: one by one
the brothers go to boarding school.

In the morning is mist
and then a rustle
and a grunt—

the scrub turkey
works on his mound
talks to himself
checks the warmth, careful of new life.
102. SATURDAY

Shadow of Mount Nebo,
rustle and whirl of flying leaves,
startled earthworms, bits of
roots and moss, earth thrown
up with torn-off scraps of
orange lichen
    pieces of life against dark
memories: the scrub turkey
with strange certainty recreates
the world where he rules lightly:
wraps his black, red and gold,
then bends his head to check his mound.
103. **SUNDAY**

Birdcalls on an early morning walk. My father sings and picks wild raspberries. My mother writes of a good life—the steamy smell of the forest, the children splash in the shady creek. I sit with her in the hot bronzed shade, and draw with bright pastels or smudge with charcoal the black unformed creatures of the dark.

    I write with fear in strokes and signs the grip of a bad dream, the howl of a dingo on the mountain, the click of a cricket the creep of footsteps on floorboards—
    the grab of panic when a shower of gumnuts scatters from a branch over the tin roof. Tell me what they say, I ask—before she looks, she knows the fear and the bad dreams—you have to get off death, she says.
104. MONDAY

The mound grows and rounds. The child watches but keeps a distance. Wispy curls brushed a hundred times in the sun make time to dream and imagine—ideas and secrets shared with the scrub turkey, who listens and grunts in reply as he checks the temperature of his mound and watches for the carpet snake, or the goanna who comes to break the eggs and eat the babies, before they hatch and run off to take their chance in the undergrowth. The turkey puts out his razor claws ready to shred to strips the scaly diamond skin of the snake—but gentler with the goanna, moves him on.
105. TUESDAY

The mound is lost in early cloud. 
I peer through the silence 
but the mist pushes back. 

I strain to see how 
the bright eye watches, alert 
to the carpet snake. The forest 
drips, a few leaves fly and then 
stillness: the red neck and draped 
yellow wattle bend, the beak adjusts 
the dark wet leaves.

I see my father bend to 
check the seedlings, but notice he is not 
on the lookout for a sudden move in the 
grass—or the slide and glint of scaly coils.
106. WEDNESDAY

Last day. I just see through the mist
the turkey on his mound, the chopped-up
pieces of life and memory scattered around my
feet—missing newborn kittens and wandering daytime
moons: mingled fragments of new life and old loss,
and wonder what comes next, after you get off death?
EPILOGUE: BIRTH OR DEATH—

The Poem Before the Beginning

I am rocked in a dream
where I breathe and heave with
the rhythm of the waves
and the sound of the sea.
My son Matt—or Paul is there
I can’t tell: my child of the sea, who also breathes to
the rhythm of the waves as they come from the deep and reach out to the sand.

The cliffs are high, the waves come
in sets, and they sigh as they reach for the top of the cliff
with a sickle shaped spray coming higher and higher with each set and
moaning a noise louder and louder and higher and higher in a way that I know

from before. As they come on the sand I know the sound—
the breathing is Tom's breathing near the end
and me giving birth is the same breathing
and also my breathing as I fall into his rhythm and nearly lose consciousness in

the big pauses. I know that I knew it from another place and time
and remember this is the breathing at the end of pregnancy
when the waves helping the baby boy caused the huge breaths
as Matt surfed his way into the world being gentle as he came.

When the sickle shaped spike of the
breath which is a wave reaches the top of the cliff I know Tom
is dead and I have given birth to the baby boy and we can all be still.
References


