

# **Writing Life: Reflections on parenting, poetry and practice-based research**

**by**

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## **Ancaster**

*after Barbara Hepworth's 'Mother and Child' (1934), pink ancaster stone*

The coarse stone from which cathedrals, manors, stations  
emerged, honeyed and blue-streaked, is the stone of the body:

bioclastic, containing the remains of molluscs, coral, algae.

A living stone, pink as a muscle. Mother and child have lived

here for millennia, speaking softly to each other in shallow water,  
learning the taste of shell and creek bed. The bond they share

is the bind of endless nights: the child sleeping or not, the mother  
sleeping or not, waking in fits and starts to the same smooth face.

Take a hammer to mother or child and it will make no difference:  
each lives in the other, enduring until cathedrals, manors, stations,

continental shelves crumble, the time spent together collecting  
and re-collecting like sweet atoms between them.

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I place my son in front of his temporary babysitter — *Bluey* — with a bowl of sliced banana. A few minutes later, my colleagues' faces appear on my laptop screen, positioned in the adjacent room. They smile, blink and nod as I begin my presentation.

Half-way through, I notice my son has begun climbing the dining room table where I am sitting. I try to repel him with a look. *Do not do this*. I raise my eyebrows. Please *do not do this*. He presses on until he is hovering behind my screen. I switch tack: I ignore him. I plough on. The sales team are watching me expectantly. My manager is watching me expectantly. Then my son throws a yellow sun hat in my face.

The hat, which belongs to my daughter who is currently at school, hits me squarely between the eyes before dropping into my lap. I emit a sound halfway between a gasp and a laugh. Then I blink, surprised to notice tears pricking my eyes. I feel humiliated, although I know I shouldn't: my son is sick from childcare, I am working from home, everyone knows toddlers are unpredictable and attention-craving.

I clear my throat and continue speaking as if nothing has happened. The faces on the screen continue watching me as if nothing has happened. My son, realising my resolve is — for once — stronger than his own, shimmies down the table leg and returns to the television. I speak for ten more minutes, take questions, and then set myself to mute.

I quit my job. Not because of the hat incident, although it still smarts. I quit because I cannot manage the division of work-work and home-work and care-work any more. It does not help that illness has troubled my family for most of the year, or that my husband's workplace is unsympathetic to the realities of parenting young children. Balancing competing demands that do not 'speak' to each other becomes exhausting: another form of work. A feeling of fractiousness and an inability to get ahead stifles the creativity required for the role. When I try to muster enthusiasm for paid labour, I am left with nothing but exhaled air.

During this time, I put together an application for a PhD in Creative Writing at Monash University. I write my proposal quickly, on my phone. For two days it is all I can think about. This burst of activity feels like a sign: this is a good idea.

I am accepted and begin my PhD a few months later. Returning to university, I feel simultaneously committed and anxious about my capacity to commit. My daughter is in her first year of school and my son has just turned three. I am embarking on full-time study at the same time that we have reduced my son's days of childcare (rising costs mean that two days is the most we can afford).

Taking into account school hours, I have six uninterrupted hours two days per week to research and write. I use these twelve hours mostly for the 'research' component of my doctorate: reading, taking notes, maintaining a research diary. For the creative component — writing ekphrastic poems in response to digitised images and born-digital art — I write whenever I can: evenings, the spare minutes in which my children are otherwise occupied, weekends when my husband takes them out of the house.

The most productive time, however, is the very early morning. After having two sleep allergic babies, I am now hard-wired to wake between 4 and 5am (sometimes as early as 3:30am). In the darkness, I open a Google doc on my phone and begin re-reading, editing, writing. Because my youngest still ends up in bed with me during the night, he is usually sleeping beside me. A quiet, roving companion: he rouses, moves his limbs so that they take up maximum mattress space, presses his hands to my back to make sure I am still there, falls back to sleep.

When I try to tally the hours all this in-between writing adds up to, the minutes scatter, dissolve like birds amongst foliage. What is left are impressions: a child breathing, the blue of morning light, the blue light of the phone screen.

Finding 'time to write' often feels complicated and conditional — dependent on the whereabouts of children and the state of the house. However, because it is creative work, it is also pleasurable work. Sometimes it resembles leisure. Perhaps it *is* leisure. Contained within the formal lines of a PhD, I could simply call my work (my writing) research. But it is more

than that. Akin to speaking or walking, writing has become so closely entwined with my day-to-day that it begins to reflect living. A kind of life-work.

Because living is interlaced with my creative practice, I allow life into my PhD by drawing on practice-based research methods, autoethnography, reflective practice; and writing on topics close to my heart (motherhood, caregiving, creativity, the body). If I had tried to keep life out, I am certain that it would have found a way in regardless. Sustaining three years of research while simultaneously caring for young children requires me to acknowledge my role as a parent and to hold space for their needs, wishes, notions, pastimes.

It should be noted that there are benefits to writing while caring for young children. Their presence hones my ability to focus, turns my concentration razor sharp. Take this paragraph, for example. I am writing it just after 6am while my children play in the bed next to me. They kick their legs, speak loudly, place a pillow over my head. A part of my mind detaches from my body, propels itself forward like torch light.

Parenting, like writing poetry, is closely connected to the act of paying close attention. A poem values the living that happens between writing; small moments of noticing. The colour of the sky when I drop my daughter off at school. The way the flower-laden branches of a neighbour's grevillea droop when a honeyeater alights. Then, like a signal, the red flash of its throat. In the same way I can intuit a change in my daughter's mood or the first sign of illness in my son, writing in the in-between sharpens my observations, my ear for poetry's rhythm and music, my eye for a surprising or affecting image.

When I step away from my computer to slice an apple, or bead a necklace, or break up a sibling fight, I exist in the present tense. In doing tasks like these, I am reminded I have a body. I move around and movement helps when the words become stuck. And in the times when there is simply too much noise and activity to write a single line, I reread my works-in-progress. The process of editing becomes both regular and happenstance. In the constant and often spontaneous return to my work, I become a better editor. A better writer, too.

I spend the year 2020 on maternity leave and under lockdown. Despite the challenges, caring for my newborn son and two-year-old daughter in the early days of a global pandemic has an unanticipated effect on my creative life. My dreams become infected with startling images, tremors of deep feelings. I find myself writing like I used to write when I was an unencumbered undergraduate (which is to simply say, a lot). I feel compelled to record what was happening around me. I write on my phone while I feed my son in semi-darkness, devise lines of poetry in my head while showering, lavish what precious free time I have drafting and redrafting poems.

Linda Gregg, reflecting on her experience as a young poet in the 1960s, notes of that period, “time was more important than money. / Life was more important than poetry. / Poetry helped you experience your life”<sup>1</sup>. I think about this a lot. My creative practice and everyday life are twinned like stars: each orbits, informs, sheds light on the other. During that first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I wrote odes to our white noise machine and poems about crying babies and breastfeeding and pain, I understood my life better. It also became more bearable: the chronic sleep deprivation a source of creativity; ferrying a baby down our suburban street a cure for writer’s block.

Similarly, research and creative practice illuminate and influence each other. My creative practice informs my research, and my research provides new directions and avenues of inquiry for my creative practice. One-third of the way through my PhD, I am pleased to realise that this work is both sustainable and sustaining, and that the fact of children has not been a set-back to my work but a boon. While my arrangement is perhaps not ideal — the scrounging for time, the very early mornings — it has not stopped me from writing. In fact, the opposite is true: I have never written so much in my life.

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## Sampling the Future

*after a virtual tour of the 'Samping the Future' exhibition, National Gallery of Victoria,  
November 2021-February 2022*

My fingers do the walking. They step, white circle to white circle,  
    like trained horses—*woah girl*—until I nearly fall through a wall.  
My heart beats faster. This confusion, a kind of quickening:  
    what here is liquid, is solid there. I enter an arch.  
Glass walls glide like slim fish. For a split-second, I see my reflection  
    swimming in a window. I think: who else would exhibit in a tank  
if not a shark? Artwork shimmers, newly haptic. The elided names  
    of artists collide. I walk into sculpted coral, sea urchins shaped  
from wood or plastic or ceramic. Light refracts. I mistake  
    the hand sanitiser dispenser for an object of significance.  
It does not matter: no one can see me. My fingers are shameless.  
    They never tire. They are like the regenerating arms of a starfish.  
O to be a fossil in the age of the Internet! I zoom. I backtrack.  
    I arrive at a sign for Baby Change: the entrance to my left. A room  
I cannot enter: my children have grown as tall as my hip.  
    Now there are no more white circles on which to stand.

<sup>1</sup>L Gregg, 'Time Over Money', in *Poets & Writers*. July-August 2010, viewed on 27 January 2023,  
[https://www.pw.org/content/from\\_poets\\_amp\\_writers\\_inc\\_0](https://www.pw.org/content/from_poets_amp_writers_inc_0)