

A Gathering.
by
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At the beginning, between Covid—19 lockdowns, on the day of the January 6 insurrection, my husband, our two children, and I move four hours away from the regional city we moved to when the children came along, to a small town in the Victorian High Country. We have moved here for the autism school that our son will attend, and for the software development job my husband has been offered at the school.

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Soon after we move in, contractors colonise our lovely one hundred-year-old wisteria-covered rental house. Due to complications, the re-stumping work that should have taken two weeks instead takes six weeks. At the commencement of my PhD in February, my days are soundtracked by jackhammers, by overheard conversations that take place beneath the floorboards¹, and by the young apprentice's death metal music blasting from beneath my feet. Who can deny him whatever accompaniment he chooses, in that dark, hot, confined space? The town's little library only opens for limited parts of the day, and they close for two hours at lunch time. There is nowhere else to go².

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I have no idea what I am doing, anyway.

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During one of the many online inductions I take part in while trying to fashion a shape for my research, when asked how many hours per week we should spend on our research one of the heads of HDR arts and education at my university says 50 hours. I think of the six hours of

¹ *Fuck there are a lot of spiders down here!*

² In mid 2022, to improve regional retention rates, the Federal government funds a fully equipped study space for university students, situated within the adult education centre. I use it a lot when I am writing my exegesis.

the day that my children are at school, and of the four lots of holiday's book-ending school terms that stretch impossible distances between those daily blocks of time. I contemplate sick days, and possible lockdowns and the odds of any of us or all of us catching Covid. I think of how exhausted I am in the evenings. I think, I am almost 50 years old.

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I have no idea how to write a lyric essay.

With Anne Carson's *Nox* as inspiration, I take out a long flat archive box of old photographs and documents and I begin laying objects out on white paper on my dining table, scanning them and putting them together into a document.

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I put headphones on.³ I spread *Nox* out, unfold its accordion length. Thus unfurled, it doesn't fit across the length of my extended kitchen table. I think of Carson's permissions to throw it down a staircase (though it is also itself a staircase in which a dead brother remains mute) but I can never bring myself to treat *Nox* as anything other than a precious artefact. It is the only one of the texts I write a chapter on that I never mark with a pencil or ink. I try to replicate it in a Moleskine notebook, so that I can mark that, but, although *Nox* is itself a replica (of Carson's original scrapbook), there is no sense in trying to replicate it yourself, no matter how amateurish the attempt in the first place.

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I begin to attach my own fragmented stories to the scanned archival traces.

A story to a page.

I weave stories between objects, and

All that white space.

You can fit every wound, every shining thing
into the margins, the spaces-between-words.

³ I know the music that came later, all those tracks without words, or recognisable words: Sigur Ros, The Dirty Three, Angel Olsen, Nick Cave and Warren Ellis film soundtracks, but back then I don't know what the music would have been. Something loud to compete with the re-stumper's efforts. Maybe PJ Harvey.

I read about archives.

I read about lyric essays.

I read lyric essays.

How do you write a lyric essay?

How do you *read* a text as a lyric essay?⁴

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I write 5000 words in the first month. I call this document ‘Pale blue archive’. I weave these broken stories, grandmother stories, the limbs and branches of mother-trees. All that trauma, those ribbons of generational troubles that are part of the fabric of me. Even the parts I don’t know and will never know. Those parts that sit in the white spaces. Though I don’t write, then, about my own trauma and loss.

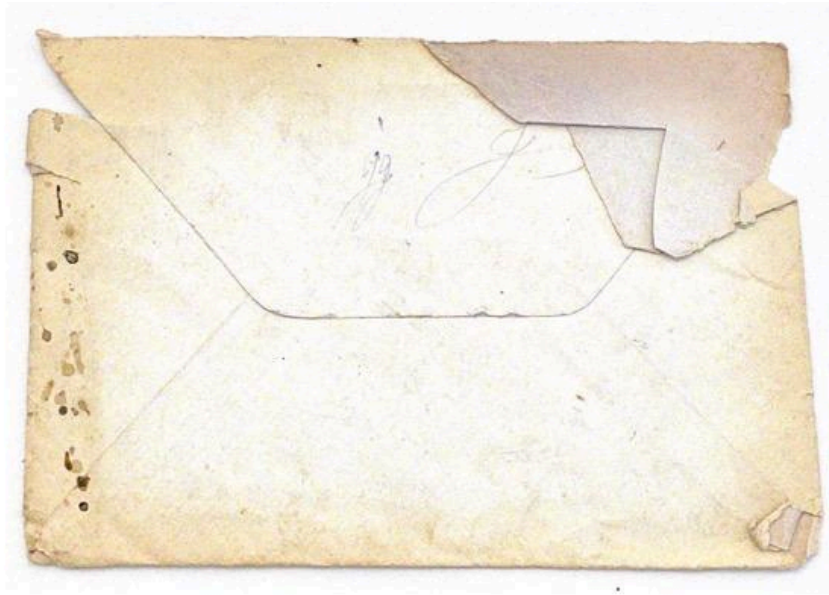
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My supervisor asks what I think ties all the fragments together. I take this feedback as her saying that they seem too disconnected. If I had known more then about the organic way that a lyric essay moves, and accretes depth and meaning, if I had known about not giving in to the impulse to fill in the white spaces for my reader, but to let it sit in blankness and be joined via the work of association, trusting my reader in that way, I would have acted differently, but I don’t. I put the pale blue archive, the mother-trees aside and turn instead to a story I know, the story of my witnessing the drowning deaths of my father and brother.

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I begin with the backs of envelopes from World War I. Those emptied vessels that once contained letters sent to my grandmother from the trenches of France and Belgium. The fronts of the envelopes show the postal address of the ancestor land we left from on the afternoon my father and brother died.

⁴ This is not a question I know enough to ask, then.



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I write in fragments, and weave them slowly into a larger fabric of other deaths, of bodies, of bodies of text, of the ways we live beyond and within grief. I turn to the National Library's *Trove* website and build snippets, clippings, texts of historical drownings into my narrative.

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Seven months into my candidacy—two and a half months before my confirmation, I wake up to horror—news that will change my family forever. It is no death, but an unspeakable crime that my twin brother has committed. I tell my mother in disbelief: *He has set a blowtorch to his life—*

But I don't know then that he has set one to all our lives.

Everything collapses.

The moon hangs low
a bottom-heavy boat
gravid with ballast

slipping snail trails, lighting

the way
for more night,
this cycle of terrible sorrows

an accumulation
of griefs, imagine
a susurrations, dead leaves
gathered, faded

like the left scales
of butterflies
at the ends of their lives,
almost colourless,

and the mild-faced moon
will not care, will never dim
the silver shine of the spill –
those bodies, drifting, their eyes

wide, mouths like funnels, and
no matter how you call
and call, they will not hear,
cannot look your way.⁵

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For three weeks I am immobile, frozen with fear and worry and shame, and completely unable to attend to my research. I tell my supervisor that there has been deeply troubling family news, but I am unable to elucidate. What has happened is not the kind of thing you want to confide, as if you carry the whiff of it in your clothes, on your skin.

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⁵ A version of this poem, titled 'Siren fires for August' was originally published in *Blue Bottle Journal*, 2021

How quickly we take on the shame of others.

*

(White space)

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At the beginning of my PhD, my mother-in-law already has stage four lung cancer. H— lives in Kiama, about eight hours drive from us, across a state border, in a year when state borders come to be more than a name on a sign. We come to know the trauma of borders, like the transgressed borders in Simon Tedeschi's *Fugitive*, another of the texts I write a chapter on in my exegesis. My husband and daughter get to see my mother-in-law one last time while I stay behind with my son, but near the end, we plan to surprise her in hospital. To just turn up there. We arrange to put our disabled son into respite care for four days—Oncology wards are not his domain, even if his grandmother would love to see him, knowing that her time is rapidly drawing to its close. In the days before we are due to depart, New South Wales records a rapid rise in Covid-19 cases. We wait nervously, watching numbers swell. The night before we are to leave, we realise we can't risk being shut out at the border on our return, with our son on the other side.

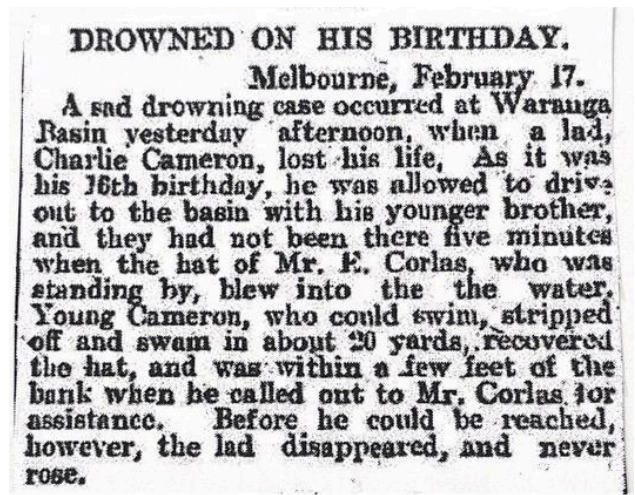
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We never see H— again. When she dies on the last day of winter, two weeks after my brother's crime, there is no funeral—her four children live across three states. On the morning H— is cremated, my daughter and I sit on our front verandah, looking at the far horizon, the shape of a distant mountain.

A memorial service is held months later, in the week before Christmas but even then, it is the beginning of another major wave of Covid—19 and two of her children contract the illness the day before and cannot attend the service.

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I know I hold space for H— in between words of my creative artefact, which is an elegy to begin with, for so many people, so many losses.



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In my lyric essay, the body count grows, via a literary, cultural and historical bricolage. In those early days, I write my fragments on separate pages. When I print them out and try to identify the themes of this writing by making piles of pages, I discover that it is bodies I am writing most about. Dead bodies, beginning with the unresolved grief derived from seeing my father and then my brother disappear beneath the surface of the water in which they drowned, then never seeing their bodies—

The oft-reported refrain—

Best to remember them as they were

Before,

(the funeral director tells us).

*

⁶ This newspaper clipping records the death of my great grandmother's first cousin in 1908.

Through all this, I think I will never get my confirmation document done. I am terrified by the idea of this milestone. Though I keep putting it together, draft after draft. On the morning of my colloquium (on zoom, as they all still are, then), I do a little dance in my dining room beforehand to loosen my muscles. I am [a terribly nervous public speaker] frozen with fear.

I pass the confirmation with nothing but positive feedback from my panel.

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In the new year, my supervisor gives me the news that she is leaving my university, and my associative supervisor will become my main supervisor. My associate supervisor, a poet and essayist helped me come up with the premise for my proposal, so I know it will be a smooth transition.

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We will lose the ancestor land that's been in the family 170 years because of my brother. Aspects of elegy for this place, already featured in the creative artefact become inherent. Threaded, woven through. Surely though, we are not the first to have this land taken in such bitter circumstances, and

what is 170 years?

*

Every day I await my mother's breathless calls. More dramas. My brother regularly sends me text messages in the night saying goodbye. I learn to put away all communication devices at night. I read. I draw the comfort I have always derived from reading books. I breathe in that salve and apply it to my dreams. I wake in the nights in stark terror, my heart beating hard. To soothe myself, I imagine I am one of the peregrine falcon chicks I have been watching on YouTube, growing on a ledge high above the city in downtown Melbourne. I repeat to myself over and over in the night—

You are warm.

You are dry.

You are safe.

*

I tuck the trauma quietly into the white spaces of my work.

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In this year, there are six Covid—19 lockdowns of varying lengths and conditions. In my journal, I record the daily numbers of cases in Victoria.

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Each morning, I begin writing and piecing fragments together again.

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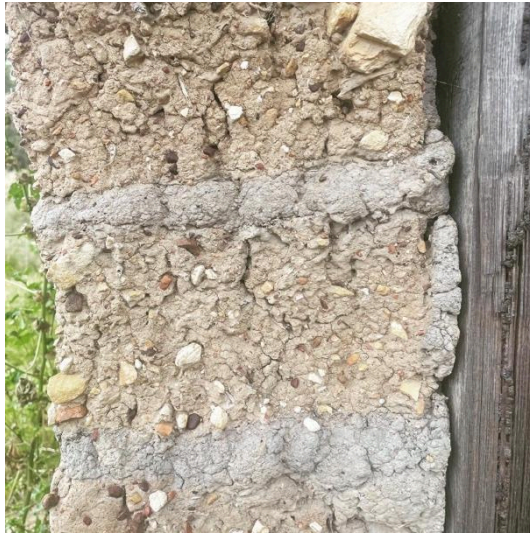
For all of 2022, I sail along. My new supervisor, D— is wonderful, and he loves my creative work. I finish the first draft. My abstract for the AAWP conference for that year is accepted, and I spend weeks writing the paper⁷.

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I am at the Sunshine Coast for a week for the AAWP conference in the days that the beloved ancestor land is relinquished. Before I leave for the conference, I lay my hands on the mud bricks my father built by hand on the outhouse he constructed on that land the year before he died, then I get into our car and weep all the way into town, to the new house we have bought for my mother to live in.

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⁷ 'Lyric essay: Writing to the Boundaries of elegy'.



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I finetune the creative artefact. In the New year, D— asks me to put together a chapter outline and timeline for my exegesis. I am immobilised by cluelessness, but I cobble the document together⁸. I don't realise that the knowledge I have already garnered will accrete meaning and connection through writing, that I already know much more than what I think I do, and that I will still come across so much more material that grows my knowledge as I write the chapters of the exegesis.

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In March 2023, D— takes three months long service leave. Neither of us is worried about this interval, although it marks the beginning of the different sphere of research involving scholarly writing.

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I pitch my creative artefact to the publisher I would most like to represent my work.

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⁸ I have never looked at this document again, except to attach it in an email to my associate supervisor.

I contract Covid the week that I have agreed to start teaching a first-year writing unit online, as well as deliver a first draft of my first exegetical chapter to my supervisor before he goes on leave. My husband and our son also have Covid. For three nights I stay up until the early hours of the morning, writing, though I never stay up this late usually. When I tell D about the late-night writing, he tells me to be mindful of the possibility of Long Covid, and to take care.

*

The draft of my first chapter, on *Nox*, is dreadful⁹.

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I discover over the following 13 weeks that I am incapable of juggling a PhD, my marriage, my primary-school-aged children, and teaching and marking an online class. The PhD is the only thing that allows give, and I put it aside, confident I still have plenty of time to write and submit as planned in 2024.

*

I sign a publishing contract for my creative artefact. It will be published late in 2024.

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While D— is on long service leave, I send an email to my associate supervisor, who I've never met or had any contact with, and ask to meet, as I would like her feedback on my work. She gets back to me, and we arrange to meet on Zoom in a month. I send her my creative artefact/manuscript and my chapter outlines, and happily await her feedback.

When we meet, my associate supervisor is completely lovely and personable. I am in awe of her writing and her accomplishments. She speaks quickly and says so much. I scrawl pages of notes. She asks what my research question is, and I am for some reason discombobulated and

⁹ Though D is, as ever, as kind and constructive as possible.

inarticulate. I mumble the answer, that it is about lyric essay and elegy, but she tells me there is no such thing as a lyric essay, that it is all creative nonfiction. She says she sees my work as being all about trauma and testimony¹⁰ and sharing testimony many years after the fact. She says my manuscript doesn't seem very elegiac, and that the analogous texts I have chosen to write on don't appear to have anything in common with my work; she says that she's sorry if people have told me that these texts are lyric essays, because they are all creative nonfiction. She says she sees my work as creative nonfiction that is further refined to memoir. I nod and take more notes. I smile and thank her. She is very kind. She says my supervisor has been unwell during his long service leave, and she may be supervising my PhD for some time.¹¹

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Immediately after the Zoom, I begin to have serious doubts about my ability as a writer and researcher, and by this, I mean, not just my thesis writing but my belief in myself as a writer generally. I feel seen in the worst way, the way your imposter syndrome always makes you believe you're a fraud, but as though I have actually been called out on my status as fraud in this sphere¹². I spend another three weeks¹³ floundering and questioning my talent, or lack thereof. The logical part of my brain knows I am a reasonably accomplished writer, with a fair number of publications in literary journals to back me up, not to mention a publishing contract for the work in question. And yet. The only thing to do in the end is to sit down and write a proper account of what my thesis is about and to interrogate why it is not a memoir but is the elegiac lyric essay I set out to compose. I lay out the ways in which my work relates to the other texts I have chosen to write about, and the connections are immediately clear and compelling on the page. Eventually, this document, which sets me back on track, forms the blueprint for the introduction to my thesis.

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¹⁰ It certainly does contain a lot of trauma and testimony.

¹¹ Two people I know regretfully walked away from their PhDs due to changes in supervisors, where the supervisors' ideas for the project diverged from the candidates' vision.

¹² Note, I was not called out in this way at all.

¹³ What is it about trauma and the period of three weeks, anyway?

My supervisor returns from his long service leave as planned.

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I never look back.

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I write the chapters for my exegesis and discover that I love this style of scholarly writing as much as I loved writing the practice-led research of the creative artefact.

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Ways that Carson, Tedeschi and Manguso respectively write about trauma and elegy¹⁴

Translation

Borders

Lost time

+

(all three texts)

White space/motif/association/poetic language.

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As Eula Biss has stated, regarding genre terminology, and also in its broader sense—

*It is what it is*¹⁵.

¹⁴ The texts that I have written chapters on in my exegesis, discussing reading them as long form elegiac lyric essays as reading strategies, are Anne Carson's *Nox*, Simon Tedeschi's *Fugitive*, and Sarah Manguso's *The Guardians*.

¹⁵ 'It is what it is', 2013, in M Singer and N Walker *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, Bloomsbury, New York.

* And a creative arts PhD is a beautiful thing, one of the best things I have ever undertaken.