

Up close from afar

Eugen Bacon

Abstract

I wrote 'Up close from afar' after the death of my sister Flora. The emotion is raw, honest—I connect with it personally. It is partly autobiographical—the story of an African migrant in Australia, a tale of hybridity, being between worlds. It is a writing of the self, and it started with a skeleton: a narrative about grief. The rest was experimental. When first person narrative became too close, research helped remove the story away from me. The writing became generative. The written became visible, more deliberate than speaking. It allowed me room to contemplate. Later, I understood how protagonist Sienna mirrored facets of me. Where at first the writing investigated, sought words to voice the ineffable, gradually it unbundled self-revelations: inward rage—how dare she die? Identity: the self and the unself—who am I? My relationship with Sienna was symbiotic. I needed her as much as she needed me. As I developed her character, transferred to her my direct experiences, she responded. Without answering all my questions, Sienna filtered meaning.

Key words: Autobiography, HIV/AIDS, Grief, Catharsis; Short story

SEGOMOTSI—YOUR NAME means a comfort in Setswana. Few people here know you by that name; they call you Sienna. McBrown, the Aussie you married. Sienna McBrown.

It is years since you travelled home. Botswana will be a stranger, the village of Lejwana even more. But with your parents gone, and without your sister Mokgosi—that means call for help—what is left to call home?

A girl is waiting at the shrink's office. She flicks through pages of a brand new issue of *Women's Weekly*. She is chewing gum. Flick, chew chew.

The receptionist ignores you both. Her face is sharp as a pin, her nose and ponytail equally harsh. Back home, you would chat to strangers like old friends; ask about their cows, their goats, their children. Here, folk don't do that.

The psychiatrist who retrieves you has dimples. His pensive face is complete with lines: forehead lines, crow's feet at the sidelines, Marionette lines run straight upwards from the corners of his mouth. His room is pristine, bland colours disallowed to touch your moods. The leather couch on which he swivels is like the two-dollar massage sofa at the Jam Factory in South Yarra. Your settee smells of leather. Nothing like the dusky cowhide on Uncle Kopano's chairs in Lejwana, unbleached skin and hair that smell of wet mud. This leather is coffee coloured, café latte. You recline, face up to the bland ceiling.

'How are you?' Dr Putnam. His voice is bland. It matches the room.

'Cross,' you say.

'Why cross?'

'Work sucks. Been thinking to leave.'

Silence.

‘Don’t want them to be nice.’

Silence.

‘Employee assistance program, three days bereavement, cards, flowers ...’

‘I’m glad you took EAP—that’s why you are here,’ says Dr Putnam.

‘Didn’t take the three days,’ you say.

‘Why didn’t you take three days bereavement leave?’ says Dr Putnam. Bland bland bland.

‘It’s called compassionate leave,’ you say. ‘Not bereavement leave.’

‘Why didn’t you take compassionate leave?’

‘Took one day, worked the next. They gave me hugs. Checked on my feelings.’

‘Why didn’t you take the remaining two days?’

‘Couldn’t owe them. Didn’t want to.’

‘Do you mean the workplace?’

You nod.

‘Why didn’t you want to owe them?’ says Dr Putnam.

‘Nice is hard,’ you say. ‘I preferred mean from them. I was thinking to leave before...’ you choke.

He hands you a tissue.

*

A week.

‘Surprised?’ Dr Putnam. Sometimes he is like this, prods you with a question. ‘Why so? You say she surprised you?’

‘Mokgosi hurts more than when my mother died.’ A tear brooks its way round your nose to the corner of your lips.

‘How is that a surprise?’

‘We weren’t that close.’

*

A week.

‘Tell me how you feel today.’ Dr Putnam.

‘Far.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Too far to mourn.’

‘Why didn’t you go to Botswana when she was sick?’

‘Work, studies ... stuff.’

‘How are you dealing with being far now?’

‘I sent money. Western Union. To help with the funeral.’

Silence.

‘But they didn’t need it. Took them a week, a whole week for Uncle Kopano to collect it. The chief is a friend of my family. He paid for everything: hospital bill, ivory-finish coffin. They didn’t need my money.’

‘How does that make you feel?’

‘What do you expect?’

Silence.

‘No Tobin Brothers Funeral services in Lejwana, you know. Nobody to wash her. Nobody saying to you: *How would you like to make your coffin look? Or: We'll send out the funeral notice to your friends.* It is the women who washed her, dressed her. Put lipstick on her face. Put eye shadow, angel face. Put her in a white dress with a shiny coat. No curls on her hair; they put a head-dress.’

Silence.

‘There were drums, huge drums, Uncle said. *Doomba-doo! Doomba-doo! Doodoomba-doo! Doo! Doo! Doodoodoo!* The whole village was together, they farewelled her like a queen. All of Lejwana at her doorstep. They sang, they danced, they drank. They feasted: platters of meat and rice, Chief Dikeledi paid for it. People ate fit to burst.’

Silence.

‘I feel rubbish.’

‘What do you regret the most?’ Dr Putnam says.

‘Being 7,000 miles from Mokgosi’s grave. Far, far from home ... I didn’t even keep the Aussie.’ Your smile is cynic. ‘McBrown. The divorce was a slap in the face for him, fourth year of our marriage. No wonder he went mean after that, the slap still ringing.’

*

A week.

‘How are you today?’ Dr Putnam. He sits in a comfortable silence, palms flat, parallel on his thighs. Sometimes he sprawls his arms casually on each armrest.

‘Angry. ANGRY.’

‘Talk to it,’ says Dr Putnam. ‘Talk to your anger.’

‘Why don’t they call it what it is? What it is it is IT IS!’

‘Why don’t they call what?’

‘What it is it is she died of.’

‘What do you want to call it?’

‘Break the circle of silence. It’s not malaria. It’s not pneumonia. It’s not tuberculosis. It’s AIDS. AIDS. AIDS!’

*

A week.

‘What do you want to talk about today?’ Dr Putnam.

‘Like what?’

‘Tell me anything.’

‘I have polycystic ovaries.’

Silence.

‘Tia was a miracle: lucky shot, no miscarriage.’

‘You say it like you are angry. Why are you angry, Sienna?’

‘I felt alone without Tia. When Mokgosi ...’

‘Say it.’

‘When Mokgosi died. It wasn’t my week. I phoned him for a swap over. Told him: *You owe me nights from school holidays. Mt Eliza, four nights—I’m taking one.*’

Silence.

‘He listened and said, *What’s wrong? Getting into my business, personal like we’re still married. I said, Mokgosi is dead. Tia didn’t tell you? He said, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Like he cared. You know you can talk to me. Any time. You can count on me, he said.*’

Silence.

‘Count on me? Tore my heart with the custody battle. Restraining order on me, effin prick. I couldn’t get to 100 metres of my baby. She was just three years old. Back home men don’t snatch babies from their mothers. My heart cut as bad as now, and he says count on me. It took a judge, two lawyers, many barristers and money money money to get my baby back. Count on me, shit prick. *Talk to Tia about AIDS*, I said to him. *Is that what it was?* he said. *Why Mokgosi died?* Get your nose out of it, prick—didn’t say that. I SHOULD have!’

Silence.

*

A week.

‘How are the tablets going?’ Dr Putnam.

‘Going? Chucked them down the shoot. Fucken diazepam 2mg.’

Silence.

‘*Take one tablet at night*, the pharmacist at St Vincent’s said. Night, day, does it matter? Makes me effin slur, forget to cry my river.’

Silence.

‘Fifty tablets 2mg each, a whole jar of stupid. You prescribed me 50 times of stupid. I don’t want to slur. Four bloody times and I chucked the effin things. Feel free to refund me. Bucks anytime for 46 pills, won’t take a raincheck I promise.’

‘If you do the breathing exercises I showed you, we won’t find a need to sedate you.’

‘I’d rather breathe than effin slur, sleep bloody stupid.’

*

A week.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Better.’

‘Without the diazepam?’

‘Been breathing the exercises.’

‘Good.’

Silence.

‘How do you feel about work now?’ Dr Putnam. Bland bland bland.

‘I go.’

‘Do you mean you still want to leave?’

‘I mean that I go, I work—there’s no more to it.’

Silence.

‘Are you still angry that Mokgosi hurts more than it hurt you when your mother died?’

‘No.’

Silence.

*

The day Mokgosi died, your sense of loss was so keen, it pierced holes into your gut. Cannon balls entered those holes, and cuddled. You found strength to send a text message to your boss, and text messages from your colleagues immediately buzzed back:

Sirens: *Terrible news. Thoughts, prayers. x*

Ava: *Try n remember healthier times. Anything you need xo*

Olivia: *Words fail—heartbreaking for you. So sorry x*

Summer: *She is your scar. Scars are only ugly to people who don't have them.*

Adelaide: *Sounds like she had a peaceful passing. Remember the good times together.*

In Lejwana people sit together, cry together when somebody dies. Here, they text. You did write back to Adelaide:

You: *The family is crying on the phone. Have to get Tia ready for school, then figure what's going on.*

Adelaide: *You need someone to give you a hug! Don't rush it with Tia. By all means try and get her ready but if she is late for school, she is late. Be kind to yourself.*

Poppy bought you a little box of peace. *You cannot find peace by avoiding life*, Virginia Wolf said. Jackson gave you a baby card with a wispy red tree: 'Heartfelt condolences. May your heart and soul find peace and comfort during this time, hugs.'

You liked Kara's landscape card: yellow, lime, cherry, navy and chocolate in a child's scrawl. Stick trees, dotted birds. A pink butterfly aloft. Kara wrote: 'In the world of spirit there is no such place as far away. Your sister exists in your love for her and her love for you. You will still be able to visit each other. Remember her and she will return.' Signed with a love heart.

Dropping Tia to school was mechanical. At eight years old, she understood your grief. You said, 'Auntie Mokgosi has died. Remember she was sick?' Tia, clutched her schoolbag, nodded. 'Give momma a hug.' Hug.

On the way back, you didn't mind the couple holding hands who stared at you in the car park, tears blinding your parking. But you minded the neighbour and his paraplegic daughter in the lift. You avoided his eyes when he said hello. 'Hello,' you said, flat. You didn't want pity back, as pity is what you gave him for his daughter. Next day, again in the lift. You met his eyes, found a need to explain. The daughter was clumsy. Her face bobbed, her arm crooked stiff by her breast. Her curiosity in your dress embarrassed the neighbour. He flushed.

'Yesterday,' your eye on the girl. You tried a smile but it didn't feel right. 'Yesterday was sad. My sister in Botswana died.'

'Sorry to hear,' he said. The lift bumped, doors opened. 'Take care,' he said.

'Arrggggh,' the girl hummed.

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You lie in bed, unable to sleep. You flick on the lights, look at the white of the ceiling speckled with the cream of the apartment sprinkler—its circular ridges, indents and protrusions. Three silver hooks fasten the clear of the translucent plate covering the bulb.

Had to happen in March?

Death is easier in November—New Year round the corner. Come January, you set your mind to new thinking. You leave death with the year gone. Sucks in March; you have to live with death the whole year.

You pull out a drawer, take out your diary. Leaf to a page:

Entries in a diary

You:

4 March

Dear Diary,

Been up all night. Mokgosi went into a coma. Oxygen mask and then she died. Uncle Kopano told me.

Diary:

Dear Segomotsi...

Sienna:

Stop Diary, you can't speak to me.

Diary:

Dear Segomotsi...

You:

I said stop.

Diary:

Diaries can speak. We talk all the time.

Sucks about Mokgosi. Sounded for a while that she was stable.

You:

She was up and down but the change was quick.

Diary:

You have comfort in knowing Uncle Kopano's looking after things.

You:

9 March

Dear Diary,

Yesterday was difficult—they buried Mokgosi. Spoke to Uncle Kopano, it was painful. He said to be strong. I felt alone, in a way I had not anticipated. I've arranged a swap-over with Tia's father so I can spend time with family, with her. Feel that I need it.

Diary:

This would be the hardest thing about being so far from home. Hope having Tia gives you the connection you need to get through today. Hope every day from now gets a little easier. x

You enter the living room. Tia's wall of achievement is right opposite the bedroom door. You eye the certificates tacky taped to it:

- *After school care champion – gets along with others*
- *WOW! Best on the day, Taekwondo*
- *Certificate of MERIT—fantastic in the choir*
- *Sports Award: for always returning equipment*
- *You can do it! Student achievement award.*
- *This is to certify Tia McBrown has successfully qualified for a pen licence.*

Even if the wall stayed blank the child had been worth the battle. Family, you need it. You look at your watch. 4am.

Op-shop. That is where you got the watch. You are not an op-shop girl except to take things. Like Tia's purple and white tricycle. Like the Darth Vader Lego set. Like the Cookie Monster pyjamas. Like the Miss Muffet tea set. Giving—it's what people do in Lejwana. They help each other, share even when there is little. Here, they hoard, cling to material things they don't need. You hate hoarding; you efficiently get rid of what you don't need. Like Mokgosi's drama when you were little.

You were younger but stronger. Clap! Your knuckles firm on the head against Mokgosi's corn rows displaced unwanted excitement. You hate waiting too. You had time on your hands, so you popped into Salvos.

The watch sat right there by the entrance, in a glass showcase, four-shelved with lights. The Salvo lady—stern spectacles with metal rims, words as sharp as the tip of her lips—spoke clearly, concisely. Her lipstick was a cool bronze. She wouldn't take your hesitation. She fetched keys, unlocked the display shelf. She lifted a handful of watches but you didn't want those. You wanted the one of gold: gold face, gold chain, gold dials. It reminded you of the dazzle of ornaments around Chief Dikeledi's ankles, of the blonde wildebeest on Mokgosi's earlobes.

At a whim you do something crazy. You phone a friend, 5pm London time. You chat 40 minutes of gal nonsense. The camaraderie is soothing. You find sleep—the sleep of a thousand warriors. You wake up six hours later. It's Saturday.

Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre. You prefer the outdoor pool. You swim like the physio instructed: 'When you turn to breathe, level your cheek with the water surface, not nose up.' You agree with the physio: this way is less strain on your neck.

Peace is the result of retraining your mind to process life as it is, rather than as you think it should be. Wayne W. Dyer in Poppy's little box of peace. Water enters your nose, your mouth, just enough not to unsettle. Breathing cheek level with the water, you like it. It is almost like a water hug. The sun is playful. She patterns with her rays the base of the pool. A white ray bounces off a window to reflect on your tinted goggles as you breathe. Your face is in the water. The sun's rays are a comfort, like your name. The sun feels intimate.

Like Mokgosi's gaze.

*

A week.

Silence.

Silence.

'Tell me anything.' Dr Putnam. Bland bland bland.

'Anything.' You.

He smiles.

Silence.

Silence.

'I know to see when I'm drowning,' you say.

'Good. Make sure you keep swimming.'

You smile.

Silence.

Silence.

*

You drive home. Your eyes are dry. You go straight to the laptop and fire it up. Email letters to a friend, before death, before mourning—the remembering begins.

Date: Fri, Nov 29 at 7:06 AM

Subject: Misc

From: Sienna Segomotsi <ssl1ena@hotmail.com>

To: eBailey2

Dear Eric,

How's Denmark?

Back home when you were a prefect I always saw you as a politician. Then you went to seminary and I saw you as a bishop. Heard you married a white girl. I divorced a white man.

Remember my sister Mokgosi? The class ahead of us. She's HIV positive. Her condition has gone bad. She's in hospital...

Date: Fri, 29 Nov 08:38:48

Subject: Re: Misc

From: eBailey2

To: Sienna Segomotsi <ssl1ena@hotmail.com>

My Dear Sienna,

Tough to read about your sister now admitted to a hospital, of course I remember her. Courage! It will be well.

Date: Nov 30 at 1:41 PM

Subject: Misc

From: Sienna Segomotsi <ssl1ena@hotmail.com>

To: eBailey2

Dear Eric,

Mokgosi sounds in better spirits today after treatment. I suspect she has not been visiting the clinics in Lejwana for antivirals. She's embarrassed that people who know her might see her go there. Sad there's stigma associated with HIV.

Sent her money through Uncle Kopano. She needs a milkshake daily: boiled eggs, milk, ripe bananas and sunflower oil, that's what the doctor said. Everything else she is powerless to hold down.

Date: Fri, 30 Nov 13:51:23

Subject: Re: Misc

From: eBailey2

To: Sienna Segomotsi <ss1ena@hotmail.com>

Dear Sienna,

Glad Mokgosi can be provided with what she needs for special food. Healing takes time...

4 December

Dear Eric,

Our patient must be getting better as she is increasingly difficult! Even Uncle Kopano's wife is complaining, dodging care.

Mokgosi's still getting the injections for her TB. She was happy about the money I sent.

4 December

Dear Sienna,

One has to be very patient and very understanding with Mokgosi. It is not wilful or deliberate how she is reacting. It tires one to be sick and one is affected even psychologically. Only love can redeem!

7 December

Dear Eric,

Frustrated today... Uncle Kopano's wife phoned to talk to me urgently, in secret. She was in a toilet cubicle. Said she ambushed Mokgosi's doctor for information on the patient. With a palm-shake, moneyed of course, the doctor told. Now Kopano's wife knows Mokgosi is HIV positive. All this hush hush, 'positive' is a whispered word.

I said, 'Mama Auntie, I've known Mokgosi is positive for years.'

The doctor has only just told them to soak her soiled clothes in detergent to break down the blood before they wash them.

7 December

My dear Sienna,

Courage, courage!

4 March

Dear Eric,

Been up all night... I am the bearer of sad news. Mokgosi went into a coma today. She needed an oxygen machine. She passed away at around 8pm Lejwana time. Not sure what is happening yet as I need to speak to Uncle Kopano who will be one less crying. Mama Auntie is just wailing on the phone... Not sure I can travel yet but I am looking to do a trip this year.

I'll help them with the burial. Best I can.

Pray for her to rest in peace.

5 March

My dearest Sienna,

Death is not the end but a transition to another life. Strength my dear. From what you said, her body was shutting down bit by bit. What was the quality of life? She is at rest now.

Your homecoming... when it happens, when you go back to Lejwana, it will be historic.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research background: This story observes contributions to creative writing, and explicates the contexts of art as research. It identifies the dual role of an artist and a scholar for PhD candidates in the arts—a type of collaboration that engenders knowledge while creating art. Enza Gandolfo (2014) writes on empathy and emotion in the writing process, and speaks of therapeutic benefits of writing. She cites Christos Tsiolkas who says in an interview: ‘As a writer you take on aspects of your characters and if you are not careful the world you are creating begins to blend with the world you actually inhabit’ (Tsiolkas 2008, ¶13). In story writing, characters and their creators share a symbiotic relationship; each in some way influences the other (MacRobert, cited in Gandolfo 2014, ¶11). ‘Up close from afar’ is partly autobiographical piece, albeit fictional. It steals from Michael Olmert’s words: ‘Imagination is as much the biographer’s right and duty as the novelist’s’ (cited in Lee Brien 2014, §1). It offers an immersive gaze at angst where the written is visible, more deliberate than speaking (Vygotsky, cited in Colyar 2009, p. 429). Using the character Sienna, the story subconsciously, and then consciously, unravels forms of grieving and guides its players (author, character, reader) toward reconciliation with loss and self. It is a story manipulated to find healing. This illustrates that valid perspective, even in true autobiography, is amenable to contamination by creative impulse.

Research contribution:

‘The question of what compels writers to write and then to write particular stories is one that writers, readers and critics have been asking for centuries’ (Gandolfo 2014, ¶13). Dominique Hecq looks at the potential usefulness of psychoanalysis for the creative writer, and at writing in particular. She suggests that she writes to answer incipient questions troubling her mind, or to relieve some form of anxiety where cause may not yet be symbolised. She states, ‘I write because I

must do so, exhilarating, detestable or painful though this might be' (Hecq 2008, ¶14). Different realities, different drives compel different authors. In her article 'Becoming writing, becoming writers', Julia Colyar examines writing as a product, process, form of invention, and instrument of self-reflection (2009, p. 421). To Colyar, writing 'is a symbolic system which articulates what we know, but it is also a tool whereby we come to these understandings' (2009, p. 422); it is a method of inquiry as a means of illustrating (2009, p.424). I set out to write 'Up close from afar' to apprehend my own state of mourning. In this aspect, it was impossible to be objective. Like Sienna, I received prosaic text messages from colleagues. Like Sienna, I wrote back to some. This does not imply that each piece of my writing is the seed of a personal event. Yet the writer as reader is connected with the character, with the story. Creation does not detach. Even the most reclusive writer connects with something. As Gandolfo says, the artist 'cannot stand at a distance – observing, watching – they have to become part of the person, thing, and event that they are creating' (2014, ¶21). Integration with the work positions the author within a Freudian 'process of sublimation': refining basic drives, such as those of grieving or aggression, and converting them into creative and intellectual activity (Carter 2006, p. 72). 'Up close from afar' offered a means of dealing with inner contradictions. I created art whose effect was real.

Research significance:

As a *you* narrative, the short story attempts a teasing out of fact versus fiction, and employs metalepsis (figurative substitution) to disorient or re-orient the reader's 'frame of expectation' (Fludernik 2011, p.101). The story encourages a writerly/readerly relationship that is not divorced but prosperous, with co-existence between the two roles.

The writing draws on the imagination, research, conscious writing, serendipitous occurrences but also on the personal (logic, reason etc.). It involves dialogic engagement of the writer in conscious

and unconscious activity at different stages of the writing process (Colbert 2013, p. 2). 'Up close from afar' borrows from reality and the imagined, from the conscious and unconscious. In its study of authentic and abstract grief, the story exposes that there is no clean separation of an author and a reader.

Moreover, Sienna is 'between cultures': *here* and *back home* offer different webs of meaning. The narrative continues cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's social analytical discussion on cultural borderlands in modern cities, encounters with 'difference' that pervade the everyday in urban settings (Rosaldo 1993, p. 28). As a migrant, the self as subject, I offer this fictional narrative as personal insight into the reality of a person who crosses borders to new worlds (that become home), who shifts from a 'fixed, autonomous self' to 'multiple identities and voices' (Conquergood 1991: 185). The narrative offers knowledge of being 'betwixt and between worlds', a self-made refugee in a 'postmodern existence of border-crossing and life on the margins' (1991: 185). Through it, as a person of African origin in a western society, I constructed insight by cathartic sharing of personal and impersonal in-betweenness. The narrative speaks to the multicultural nature of places we inhabit. It also explores the potential of the self as subject, where cathartic autobiography can be a starting point for viewing new worlds, borderlands.

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