



Narrative and Narrative Strategies to Explore Trauma: 'Up Close from Afar' – An African Migrant's Story

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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 (Enza Gandolfo, 2014).

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 (Christos Tsiolkas, 2008).

Abstract

In this essay I discuss the process of writing autobiographical creative fiction, and how a narrative on trauma can offer the potential for catharsis to both the writer and reader. I give a self-reflective autoethnographic account that draws from my own personal feeling of discontinuity and an awareness of being between worlds as an African Australian migrant. I focus on the self-knowledge that emerged from the act of writing a short story in the wake of grief. I use narration—the act or process of storytelling—to understand my own narrative strategies, how I tell a story. The essay is interspersed with excerpts from my short story *Up close from afar*—a story that follows the emotional journey of protagonist Sienna, an African migrant in Australia, who loses her sister to HIV. In mirroring into the creative fiction aspects of my own experience (loss), my relationship with Sienna was symbiotic. I needed her as much as she needed me. As I developed her character and transferred to her my direct experiences, she responded. Without answering all my questions, Sienna came along with new meaning that helped me understand and process my grief. I divide my essay into background, the power of narrative, autoethnographic research,

narrative devices and cathartic autobiography. My overall intention is to expose a written artefact (the short story) on death, an artefact that is, to me, also a metaphor for life.

Background

I wrote *Up close from afar* as creative fiction following the death of my sister Flora in Tanzania. 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, where hybridity is the experience of being between worlds or in two worlds, of changing identity to fit in with either world, of ‘otherness’. Dominique Hecq well defines the term ‘otherness’ as “a necessary category in the process of self- and cultural definition within a social system” (2015, p. 10). Hecq elaborates that, depending on context, otherness may refer to “an object of desire, identification, or rivalry in psychical, existential and political terms” (2015, p. 10). My context of otherness is that of identification, where there exists a self and an other. Existential thinker Simone de Beauvoir writes about the opposition between a sovereign self—a subject—and an objectified other (2010 [1945], p.11). As human beings, we are each individually situated in our unique relationship with the world, a relationship whose distinctive situation is not closed with respect to other cultures we experience. As an African Australian migrant, I am a person who is experiencing hybridity, where my sense of ‘otherness’ is a result of immersion in multiple or mixed cultures. It is this otherness, the hybridity, that robs me of a true sense of belonging.

The short story *Up close from afar* was a writing of the self, and it started with a skeleton: a narrative about grief. The rest was experimental. The writing became generative. The written became visible, more deliberate than speaking. Later, I understood how protagonist Sienna mirrored facets of me. Where at first the writing investigated, gradually it unbundled self-revelations. It motivated me to question my identity—the self and the unself; in the wake of my sister’s death, who was I?

In this essay, my self-reflexive discussion draws on literary writing (the creative) and autoethnographic research. In integrating excerpts of *Up close from afar*, my essay explores the process of writing fiction and the context of art as research. Through the essay I recognise the dual role of an artist and a scholar in the arts—a 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; there is power in narrative, for example in writing about trauma, as this essay explores.

The power of narrative

Narratives and narrative strategies are crucial devices that explore and facilitate the nature of being human. There is power in biographical and autobiographical writing. As an instance of discourse in an autobiography Paul John Eakin asks: “Who is this ‘I’, then?” (1992, p.3). The self or subject is the principle referent in autobiographical writing. There is potency in reflective work, albeit fictionalised, if it offers healing to its narrator(s) and recipient(s) through the act and process of storytelling.

In story writing, characters and their creators share a symbiotic relationship; each in some way influences the other (MacRobert, cited in Gandolfo, 2014, p.1). Judith Butler explores the link between survival and speakability—the courage to speak out—and the discourse of freedom (1997, p.147). The act of writing my story *Up close from afar* was a ‘speaking out’. My approach to the compositional space was with a sense of urgency, with a knowing that writing was an active speaking that emerged from a neutral position of unknowing, or a subjective position of knowing.

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, 4). 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 use the concepts of storytelling in this essay to shed insight into the writer as reader. A writer is connected with the character(s), with the story. Creation does not detach me, the author, from the work. Even the most reclusive writer connects with something. Integration with the work positions the author within a Freudian “process of sublimation”: refining basic drives, such as those of grieving, and converting them into creative impulse (Carter 2006, p. 72).

Up close from afar was a partly autobiographical piece, albeit fictional. It stole from Michael Olmert’s words: “Imagination is as much the biographer’s right and duty as the novelist’s” (cited in Brien 2014, 1). It offered an immersive gaze at angst where the written was visible, more

deliberate than speaking (Vygotsky, cited in Colyar 2009, p. 429). Using the character Sienna, the story subconsciously, and then consciously, unravelled forms of grieving and guided its players (author, character, reader) toward reconciliation with loss and self. It was a story manipulated to find healing.

When my sister Flora died, I turned to what I knew: writing. My writing was a search, a journey, a coming through. Text shaped my silence. It shouted my chaos. When I write, I often start with a skeleton, a general idea, and then the writing shapes itself. Characters tell their story and the story's ending, like Sienna's, astonish me. To fully explore my grief in this story, it was essential to move the narrative geographically away from me. I divorced myself from my Tanzanian heritage, and found a point of reference in Botswana:

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?
(Bacon, 2016, p.1)

In interrogating healing through storytelling and narrative, I will borrow more excerpts from my short story for this essay.

Autoethnographic research

As autoethnographic research, I am focusing in this essay on personal narrative reflexivity. I am drawing from my own personal feeling of discontinuity and mirroring awareness of being between worlds as an African migrant in Australia. Coupled with writing that offers self-knowledge in the wake of grief, I am applying the self as data.

Autoethnography is a method that combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography—the study of “a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences” for the benefit of “*insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers)” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, 3). Researcher Dwight Conquergood acknowledges ethnography as a distinctive research method whose participant–observation fieldwork privileges the body as a site of knowing (1991, p. 189). In ethnography, the idea of the person shifts from that of a

fixed, autonomous self to a polysemic site of articulation for multiple identities and voices (Conquergood 1991, p. 185). The researcher is “betwixt and between worlds”, a self-made refugee, in a “postmodern existence of border-crossing and life on the margins” (p. 185). Simply put ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 1999, p.153).

As a subset of ethnography, autoethnography uses the self as data. Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing and ... seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, 1). ‘Auto’ refers to the individual or self and ‘ethno’ is from the Greek term *ethnos* in reference to race, people or culture.

Applying the self as research data in *Up close from afar*, my autoethnography crossed genres and moved beyond literary and sociological borders (Devault, cited in Whiting, 2012, p. 288). This is a concept that anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) refers to as “webs of significance” in which humans are suspended, where culture forms the webs and their analysis forms an interpretive science in search of meaning (p. 5).

In the ‘lived experience’ of studying my own grief (auto-ethnography) and that of Sienna’s (ethnography), I am going beyond examining relational practices, common values and beliefs; I am now studying my own experience analytically, retrospectively and selectively. It is a contemplative exercise that allows me to write about an ‘epiphany’, one that stems from, or is made possible by, being part of or by possessing a particular identity (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, 4). In the writing, I am attempting to explain how my response to the experiences is influenced by the cultural constructions in which I live. The drawn-in experience of observing my trauma means that, while I am its author, an ‘other’ outside the work, I am not divorced from the creative fiction. Rather I interact with it. I am coming at you, the reader, from an insider’s perspective.

The protagonist Sienna is ‘between cultures’. 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). To Sienna, *here* and *back home* offer different webs of meaning:

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.

(Bacon, 2016, p.1)

Like Sienna, my 'lived experience' is that of having roots in multiple cultures. By crossing borders and acquiring "multiple identities and voices" (Conquergood, 1991, 185), as a writer I find myself existing in the "zones of difference within and between cultures" (Rosaldo, 1993, 28). This story borrows from cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's work on cultural citizenship, ethical vs. cultural relativism, and how cultures are not separate; "they are not confined to their own individual museum cases", but rather "exist side by side in the same space" (Rosaldo, 2014, 14).

As a migrant, I offer this fictional narrative as 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).

Narrative strategies

Where 'narration'—derived from the term 'narrate' or to tell—is the act or process of giving an account or a story, as of events, experiences, etc., 'narratology' in literary criticism is the analysis of narrative texts (Schmitz, 2008, p.43). In interrogating my short story *Up close from afar*, I am using narratology to understand the role of subjectivity in the inflection of a character's being, their becoming, existence, or reality; predominantly its

role in influencing how characters shape their dimensions and what constitutes their being. I am also using narratology to understand some of my own narrative strategies—the unique ways in which I tell a story.

I discuss in this section a number of narrative strategies that I applied in writing the short story, and these include characterisation, point of view, the self as subject and a transformation curve to the storyline that leads to resurrection alias healing.

Characterisation

Characterisation in *Up close from afar* was an important device to develop the trauma narrative. The psychiatrist, Dr Putnam, offers perspective. His role removes me, the invisible narrator manipulating Sienna, from the subjectivity of grief:

‘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 ...’ (Bacon, 2016, p.1 – 2).

In this excerpt, the character of Dr Putnam is impersonal. His voice is bland. He does not have to engage in dialogue. His mild nudging, or silence, provokes the protagonist to engage and share feelings of alienation, experienced at the workplace, with a complete stranger. His role almost neutralises the emotiveness of an otherwise subjective autoethnographic piece.

Point of view

As a *you* narrative (written in second person with ‘you’ as the personal pronoun), *Up close from afar* 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 short story, in its use of the personal pronoun ‘you’, directly addresses an invisible reader, inviting them to examine how they identify with the text and unfolding events. This approach to writing encourages a writerly/readerly relationship

that is not divorced but prosperous, with co-existence between the writer and reader:

‘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 (Bacon, 2016, p.2).

Informed insider—cathartic autobiography

The short story also explores the potential of the self as subject, where cathartic autobiography introduces a transformation curve—in this case the stages of grief. Through the eyes of Sienna, in her weekly visits to the psychiatrist, I gazed upon my own hopelessness, agony and rage, alone in Melbourne, removed from my family back home in Africa. In writing the self into a larger story across boundaries and borders, into a space of resistance between the individual and the collective (Denshire, 2014, p. 834), I embraced the self as subject and became an informed insider and an outside participant:

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.'
(Bacon, 2016, pp.2-5)

A resurrecting ending

For the trauma narrative to be effective, there were no Macbeths—the protagonist in William Shakespeare's play 'The Tragedy of Macbeth'. In *Up close from afar* curtains did not draw instantly upon a death. First there was death, and then came healing. The ending was uplifting. Gradually I introduced healing, gave the story a resurrecting finish:

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.

*

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.

Still can't sleep. 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 didn't need that drama, so you got rid of it. 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 (Bacon, 2016, pp.5-9).

A self-reflective conclusion

My essay achieves what it set out to do. It fits the kind of writing that Colyar terms "a method of inquiry as a means of illustrating" (2009, p.424). In its subsections the essay exposes a written artefact (the short story) on death, an artefact that is also a metaphor for life. Both the essay and short story are products, processes, forms of invention, and instruments of self-reflection (2009, p. 421). Together, they articulate what I know, and are tools whereby I come to understanding (2009, p. 422). Through protagonist Sienna, I was able to comprehend and process my grief. In this grieving, I questioned my identity as an African Australian migrant, and how the fact of mourning in solitude emphasised my 'otherness'.

I set out to write *Up close from afar* to apprehend my own state of mourning, it was impossible to be objective. Like Sienna, when my sister Flora died 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 was a narrative of grief, a burning story that remains cathartic. It offers knowledge, ever evolving. I still question why Flora died. Why she could not save herself, or be saved, in an era when the AIDS pandemic is meant to be manageable through anti-retroviral treatment.

Contemplating Judith Butler's linkage of survival and speakability—the courage to speak out—and the discourse of freedom (1997, p.147), I hark back to the considered words of a colleague who once told me: “Writing is your life line. But never think it is your life.” When I wrote *Up close from afar*, the writing heartened speakability—it gave voice to grief. It bandaged my wounds from the sharpest blade of new trauma. The short story was my life line. Like any story, there is room to expand, to develop. However in its simplicity, this written artefact evidences my metaphor for life, showcases that I write... to find. *Up close from afar* offers a means of dealing with inner contradictions. It is a creation of art whose effect is real.

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