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Where we're kept: Some consequences of writing sudden memoir

Abstract:

In this paper I have cut up and rearranged stories from my first attempt at writing and theorising sudden memoir. Here I discuss the ways that writing sudden memoir blurred the lines between how things were and how they became once they were forced into sentences. To do this I thread excerpts from those sudden memoirs in amongst the ideas of theorists I was reading at the time and my current thinking around nonfiction practice.

The construction of this paper involved salvaging small fragments from the stories I wrote last year. In this work I trace the disintegration of my relationship with the person whose life was most tangled up in my writing. Here I have made new the writing that gave away too much. In the place of those short stories, I have sewn together a broken narrative which reflects the fragmentation I have experience in my writing practice. The argument is accumulative, it is just a shift, a twist in perception over time.

Biographical note:

Romana Dalgleish is currently undertaking a PhD in creative writing at RMIT. She is interested in issues of authorial control in narrative nonfiction writing, particularly sudden memoir, where flash nonfiction is used to limit narrative to glimpses of recent private moments. Her research explores the circular relationship between her sudden memoirs and the theorising of these works. The focus on threading the two styles of writing into an extended narrative, where one informs the other, has led to a practice that breaks narrative moments into fragments and builds them into something new.

Keywords:

Sudden memoir – Nonfiction practice – Practice-based research

Pulling at threads (250)

Words can be read differently to how you think you write them. I did not understand what I was doing by committing us to paper. I did not see that structuring our small world would change it. I did not know how differently he saw us, until my words changed his feeling. Because I was distracted by the links. I was busy picking up pieces and playing with how they fit together.

We were two separates and safe in our isolation. Then the pact, sealed with night time roaming, threw away the distance. We laughed, willingly tying knots, blindly sewing skin to skin. The needles mum gave me when I left home dragging the dyed hair we used as thread, pulling through me and into him, then back again. Do It Yourself. We didn't want what everyone else had. But his hands aren't made for building and I'm no good at following instructions.

There are all these threads and everything depends on how you choose to tie them. There is no such thing as telling it how it was. I was warned before I started. Annie Dillard compares the experience of writing a memoir to 'cannibalizing your life for parts' (1998: 156). I thought that it was a great quote, but it did nothing to stop me. I was busy hacking away at the two of us, trying to get at the thirsty bits.

Connecting the dots (200)

I do not want him to think that the way I told our stories had much to do with how we were. Sheila Heti asks what it is that drives us to tell 'stories that [have] such arbitrary resemblance to our actual living. Why [do] we pick certain dots and connect them and not others?' (2012: 279). I am not saying that the stories I have written about us are not true, they are as true as I knew how to make them, I am saying they are just dots, and the ones I chose not to use mattered just as much.

These short pieces are more dots, but they are less connected. More like hopscotch than ice skating.

In response to the mess I made, I write small. I keep moving away from anything that tries to say too much. It is about control, probably. I am trying not to let the words grow bigger than the letters it takes to write them. See the numbers in brackets next to titles, they are a word count. I started doing that last year, now it feels like a lie without it. They keep track of what I give away. They tell you, and remind me, that these are puzzle pieces. They ascribe space and ration commitment.

The line that keeps fading (100)

There is something reckless about using the intimate as material for chopping up and rearranging. As I wrote, I did not understand what David Shields meant when he referred to 'the deep ambivalence writers have about using their personal lives to make a living' (2008: 86). At the time I thought that by thinking and writing about nonfiction story telling—by including a meta-narrative—I was assessing what it was that I was doing, and the processes by which I did it. Looking back at the way I forced

a line, a narrative arc, over our living, I realise how little faith I now have in cause and effect, in this led to that, in themes and plot and endings.

Delayed sudden introduction (500)

I do not remember finding the term 'sudden memoir'. I'd been skim reading while my boyfriend pretended to work on his landscape architecture assignment but mostly played the new records that had come in the mail. It took a lot more reading before I realised that no one else was writing about sudden memoir, then I had to go back through careless notes looking for it. I found it in Thomas Larson's *The Memoir and the Memoirist* where it is described as an 'assault on the present by the present and its colleague, an almost current past' (2007: 80). Larson goes on to explain that many memoirists are now 'writing of the immediate past, even the still corruptible present, not waiting for time to ripen or change what they know' (2007: 16).

I had trouble finding out anything else about sudden memoir, so I emailed Larson asking if he knew of anyone researching the concept. Larson wrote back saying that he did not but referred me to Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*. In her nonfiction work, Woolf describes 'moments of being', moments of heightened sensitivity and awareness that are often preceded by shock. Woolf explains that as a child 'nothing made a dint on me' until her first moment of being which occurred as 'a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life' (1985: 71). As she grew up Woolf found that these moments became 'always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable [... and] shock is at once [...] followed by the desire to explain it' (1985: 72).

Larson is not specific about how sudden the writing of sudden memoir has to be, and since no one else was writing about it, that left the decision up to me. In attempting to put parameters around what counts as sudden, I came across Galen Strawson's writing on episodic identity in 'Against Narrativity'. Strawson explains that we cannot access past versions of ourselves, writing that the 'events in my remoter past didn't happen to me' (2004: 433) but to a previous version of himself. Strawson's theory of episodic identity can be used to dictate that the sudden memoirist must attempt to write while she is as close as possible to the version of herself that experienced what she is writing about. As a time constraint this is also unspecific, however I do not think the specifics are important here. What is important is getting down how it felt while it felt current, while it was turbulent, while the consequences of what had just happened remain unclear.

Writing the Pivotal (100)

Sudden memoir is written in opposition to memoir gathered from a safe distance, written neat, ready with context. In my own writing I am interested in isolating moments of being; small moments that feel pivotal, moments where you feel narrative being stitched to skin.

Suzanne Ferguson believes that in modern fiction we saw a shift in the interpretation of reality where adjustments of thought or feeling became the 'true "events" of the plot' (1982: 23). With sudden memoir the memoirist is standing so close to her material that it is hard to see in anything more focused than glimpses. It is through these glimpses into small, perhaps peripheral moments, that sudden memoir attempts to catch brief moments of living.

Some of what I'm not telling (500)

The narrative I wrote made a claim on the moments I fed it, possessing them. In response I learnt to sidestep; treasuring the pieces that were not written; the moments left outside of words. The moments I choose not to write about are important to me. There is little that I have privileged with the absence of description.

There is one night in particular that I have never been sure what to make of. It is as if it exists in a void. That it happened and then we woke up, kept moving, left it behind. Instead of getting closer to absorbing it into our mythology, what happened keeps hovering outside, refusing to be made sense of. The shock of it was everywhere but then again it seemed to evaporate with the heat.

Now that the years have worn on the fear is mostly gone, but there is a black hole where that night is. There was us before that night, there is us after. And the pieces will not fit together. It is as if the black hole ate something and the haze and the hurt make it impossible to see what exactly it took.

Over and over again I tried to write that night into history but never could. It has always existed just outside. Maybe it is because we will never understand what happened. Or maybe it is because it is not my story to tell. But I think that sometimes the story lives in the not telling. Not telling has become a delight of mine. A treasured place I do not want to take you. These moments that are sad and lovely, confused and exasperated, there is a thrill in refusing to translate them, watching them happen and letting them pass. But you want me to tell, don't you? You hate the not knowing.

Watching a younger woman Sarah Blackman writes that she is now 'so removed from the girl she was that she has a hard time imagining her. The girl is. She can see her, feel her—she is her and no one else, but she is also beyond imagining' (2012: 40). That is us. How we were before that night and how we changed afterwards. It was New Year's Eve. We were 18 and all in love with each other. Can you see it now? We were 18 and it was New Year's Eve and we were at a music festival. I wasn't even there. I was on the other side of the world crying into the bath about an ex-boyfriend. I should have held her hand. But that isn't what this is about. Guilt. It's about a stranger and what he took from us. It's about the woman who held her down. It's about our bodies and how they made them not our own. It's about all the different ways we fractured in the quiet. I wasn't there. We were 18 and then time kept moving.

Breaking into smaller and smaller (300)

I am still using my personal life in my work, but it is marked by an emerging obsession with the unreliability of hands and eyes in recreating. The stories I used to

write were short but they had a beginning, a middle, an end. They seem so brash in retrospect, so sure of themselves. They thought they were whole. They thought they knew what they were about.

Did it suffocate him, the way I tied him up in words?

When I read those stories now, I hear me begging him to show me where he ends and I begin. Everything I was writing ended up being about the inconceivability of extricating him from me, once the lines between us had been blurred. I wouldn't look at my feet because he said he loved them. I hated them for no longer being mine. In his silence I heard the ineptitude of words and longed for the things he didn't know how to say.

I used to trust my own words but I have lost that. I no longer write long, the short story is too vast, it writes itself in quicksand. My practice has been breaking down progressively over time. My writing has fragmented into smaller and smaller pieces. The words that emerge now are short and shattered. They are self-conscious; they want to know how they will be used, what they will be made to signify. They want control.

When you stand close you grasp just a few small pieces at once. Sudden memoir is suited to a fragmented form, fragments fit the standing close, the seeing in glimpses, the writing of shock in broken glass. Parameters are put in place for your own protection, or something like that. I do not know what any of this writing will mean to him; here are the questions and the tensions, I have tried to put them together in a way that leaves room for his thinking.

The problem with sentences (400)

Out of the tangle of voices and moments at my disposal I am trying to construct a coherence that I am comfortable with. Vivian Gornick thinks of memoir as a 'work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom' (2002: 91). Gornick's definition serves its purpose well. I see the difference between memoir and sudden memoir in memoir's impulse to deliver grand-scale wisdom, to highlight progression, to link two moments as chapters in a teleology. Through sudden memoir I am trying to write the peripheral, to make a collage out of the small shifts in the world as I construct it.

By writing our stories I created a simplified version of events that has begun to replace the real. Once our story was confined to words on pages it became difficult to unsee the progression narrated. Next to the progressive pull of narrative it is almost impossible to remember the loose threads, the moments that ran counter to the storyline I stuck to. I found myself behaving in ways that I thought would further the narrative, making mistakes just to write them into my stories. Looking back at my writing now, it is ironic how unnecessary those themes I encouraged were to the project.

The problem with sentences is that they give structure to the soundless unsure inside and around us. I may not have understood Shields' ambivalence but this is mine: do I write the dark and be satisfied with capturing shadows, or do I let the night pass me by in silences I struggle to make meaning from. Pam Houston describes her attempts at reducing the chaos of experience into the semblance of a line. Houston explains that eventually she 'began to suspect that linear narrative was not doing a very good job representing life as [she] experienced it' but how she still kept trying 'to stretch the things [she] originally conceived of as slinkies into straight lines' (2012: xii). I did that; I did that to us. But I am not doing that anymore. I am trying to find away to write slinkies.

The story is outside the story (200)

I am interested in the voice that enables narrative, the weaver who holds these moments together. In trying to write away from the narrative pull I have found structure in meta-narration. I am hoping that this voice, the writer examining what it is that she is doing when she plays with material fresh from her life, can hold fragmented works together without blending them into a story that is bigger than I am. Gornick writes that I need to 'first figure out what the experience is; then pull from [my] ordinary, everyday self the coherent narrator [...] best able to tell the story' (2008: 9). I understand what she is saying, it makes sense, only how do you do that when you stop believing in story? Perhaps the self who is writing is not the best self for this job. But since I have no intention of pulling out any other more coherent narrators from within it would follow that what I need to do is reconsider what it is that it is that I am writing.

Falling short of nonfiction (200)

Houston states that nonfiction narrative can only ever tell versions of the truth 'given the failure of memory. Given the failure of language to mean. Given metaphor. Given metonymy. Given the ever-shifting junction of code and context. Given the twenty-five people who saw the same car accident. Given our denial. Given our longings' (2012: xiv). She writes that 'for some of us truth can never be an absolute, that there can (at best) be only less true and more true and sometimes those two collapse inside each other' (2012: xiv). So let's put narrative on a spectrum; fiction on one side, nonfiction on the other, and then let's admit that a line cannot be variable enough to graph the complexities of truth telling in narrative.

Anything I have ever written exists in the space between. Because when I am writing about an old man in a dressing gown drawing trees in the afternoon, I am thinking about him and how he will remember us when the days we spent together blur into wonder and inconsequence. And when it is him I am trying to write about, it is really just another picture of me.

Asking you to stay (300)

I was asking what he thought, what he felt, what I had to do but he couldn't make sense of the strangled swollen inside of himself, he didn't know the words that could make me understand. In that silence I stopped believing in words that said anything bigger than *stay*.

A few years ago I was at mum and dad's house writing an essay on the rights of gay parents. Mum had been doing the vacuuming; I'd gone downstairs to make a tea. I was going back upstairs when mum stopped me, asking what I was doing. I told her I was never having a child; that it sounds like as soon as you know you're having one you're scared. Mum put down the vacuum and told me how when she was five months pregnant she started bleeding. Dad was at sea; there was no one at home. She called an ambulance and was taken in to hospital. She said thought she was miscarrying, she thought she was going to lose me.

It was some of the placenta separating. The doctors wanted to monitor what was happening, so they kept her for observation overnight. She couldn't sleep because I was there but I might not stay. It was the first time that I stopped being an idea and became someone that she had to have, had to keep with her. She felt me move. She held me, in her, she held me and her in her arms and said don't go. *Tigerlily Don't Go*. Please stay. It was just her, but for the first time me. And she wouldn't let me leave her here alone.

My favourite thing about that story is how it manages to embody two moments of being; my mum's from when she was in the hospital, and mine, when I heard her talk about my life as tenuous, from before it was mine.

She said *stay* so that she might keep me. I said *stay* to hear him say that he was leaving.

These names that were never our names (150)

Tigerlily is the name my mother gave me in the hospital when she thought she might miscarry; Tigerlily is my mother's projection onto her unborn child. While the unborn baby in my mother's womb is me, it is also very much not me.

Tigerlily exists outside of me; she belongs to my mum.

The way that Tigerlily both is and is not me reflects how I hope he felt about Quick, the boy he became in my stories. Phyllis Rose says that 'you cannot write about someone else, however briefly, however sympathetically, without stealing a little bit of their self-determination' (2008: 36). I hope he understands that I attempted to define him in order to make sense of my own world, not to dictate his.

Taking more than what is mine (300)

Having written about our lives together, there is now a version of us that exists outside of and away from him and I. Telephone and Quick became infinitely bigger and smaller than the memories I made them from. The two of us are too tangled, too

changeable, to ever be distilled by sentences. While narrative tried to tie us up, making pictures of our laughter and metaphors of our hurt, we kept moving in time. While we grow and change and move away, Quick and Telephone go on, exactly as I left them, becoming more real than he or I could ever be.

Houston writes that her depiction of her partner in *Contents May Have Shifted* 'bears only a modest resemblance to the man I love and live with—less and less with every draft' but adds that 'the two wouldn't resemble each other much more... if I called him by his real name and tried with all my might to make the two characters match' (2012: xviii). I wish I knew how to explain the space between the him I knew and the him I wrapped up in writing.

I was aware of the unavoidable limitations to rendering our realities but I kept trying to write things the way they were. To capture what it was like to be us. Blind to what I might give up in consequence, I let Quick replace him.

The stories I wrote last year belong to the past. They belong to him too. They are his as much as they are mine. Actually, they belong to neither of us now.

Losing to narrative (150)

This paper is a narrative that started a few hundred words back and will end in just a few more. I highlighted some problems, I did not manage to find solutions for most of them but after lots of words I think that I have found some small ways of working with them.

There is little respite from narrative, we make it as soon as we remember, while we interpret, as soon as we argue. I made ours too big, I let myself say too much. The sudden memoir I write now is sharp and overexposed and cringey. It is out of date as soon as I have written it but that feels right to me, at least for now. It does not make a claim on the future or even much of the past, it is often irrational and uncomposed. It says less of how it was and more of how it felt, just briefly, until it passed.

Finding an ending (150)

Writing close to the moment, wrestling with the shock of the sudden, looking so hard at what was right behind me, it is unsettling to consider how little I managed to decipher at the time. How I managed to see and write and arrange with so little understanding.

Skip a few months and there is a girl crying under a heavy wooden desk. This isn't who she is meant to be. Time moves quietly. She hadn't noticed it wearing on. She hears the rhythms of the house around her; rhythms she isn't a part of. With the realisation that it's over, she grapples with the knowing that she has finally found the end.

Is this clear? That's me, under my desk. And this is me now, making sure he knows that that was where we finished. And this is me now, wondering how long ago we

realised that the days that we had imagined were brighter than he could draw, softer than I knew how to word.

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