

Deakin University

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Long Gone

Biographical note:

Julia teaches creative writing at Deakin University.

Stories from ‘The Earth does not get Fat’ have been shortlisted and published: *Lightship Anthology 2*: Alma Books (UK), *Glimmertrain* (US), *Meniscus*, *Bukker Tillibul*, *Word You Up* (Boroondara Literary Awards).

Research from the PhD has been published: *Current Narratives*, *The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds* Papers, *The Encounters: Place, Situation, Context* Papers, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience*, Cambridge Scholars.

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Chelsea and I were different. Outsiders. We stuck together. We were a bit left of centre, whatever that means.

Chelsea's Mum was a depressive or something. In the beginning, I asked Chelsea about her Mum and she said: *She's an enigma*. Then she said: *If you ask questions, I won't walk home with you*.

After that, I just talked about random stuff and I didn't ask anything. I wanted to be near her so I tried not to annoy her. *I wish my parents were enigmas*, I said. Chelsea looked at me like she wanted to stab me, so I said: *My Mum is so in my face I can barely breathe my own breath*.

My parents are conservative Catholics, old school, like from the 1920s. They live in the long gone and drinking and smoking are first class misdemeanours. If they catch me with booze or smokes on my breath, I'll be in exile at Catholic-land, so I stay pure.

I'm not a smoker anyway so that's no big deal but the grog I like. I had a few beers one night at Steve's but the aftermath with my parents was unbearable: sin and darkness, betrayal of trust, and blah blah. They went mental, as if I'd nailed Jesus to the cross myself: temptation and evil, getting caught up with the pack mentality and blah.

Chelsea swore all the time and it sounded good when she said it so I took some of it on, but it sounded too polite when I swore, almost apologetic. Chelsea looked at me sideways, giggled at me like I was a try-hard. She was right: I was trying pretty hard.

The only thing I didn't really say was cunt. Uncle Archie's mate said it at Christmas and that spoiled things for everyone. This mate of Archie's (Ron) was over from Perth for a spell (his wife gave him the flick). Mum and Jean had just finished serving the sweaty turkey lunch and Archie was talking about summer holidays. Dad said that he couldn't get any holidays until we went back to school because senior management had blocked out all of January.

Ron said: *Selfish cunts*.

Mum lost it. She was hysterical. She was so cut up about it that we had to leave. We were all starving. I had the turkey on my fork but she didn't care. Dad bought us McDonald's on the way home. Mum didn't even argue and she hates Maccas. We ate our lunch in a park across the road. It was actually more like an easement, dodgy as. Mum ate her fillet-of-fish between stabs of crying and deep sighs. Dad said: *It's okay, it's okay*, as if he felt sorry for her, but he has a vein on his left eyebrow that throbs when he's angry and it was pumping.

The plum pudding, said Mum; *we won't even get to taste it. I took a lot of time, soaking the fruit in brandy: it was V.S.O.P. It even has fresh dates in it. It'll be the best one ever. Could you...*

Could I WHAT? By now Dad was as close to yelling as he ever came. *It's Christmas Day, not a glass of wine in sight. We're eating ... McDonalds in a vacant park for... sake.*

He was desperate to swear. He was spitting his words out, staggering over them and spraying pieces of big mac over the grass. I knew that he wasn't saying everything he wanted to say because I could hear the words he wasn't saying. I could hear them lilting in the silence between the words he spoke.

Lilting... I know about it from playing the guitar. It's supposed to be about the rising and falling of the chords, or the voice, but for me it's only ever about the falling. It's meant to be a tripping rhythm, like a missing beat, but it's really a shadow, a falling shadow. Falling not fallen. Long gone but so there.

I'm not going back to get the ... pudding, said Dad, and that's that.

Chelsea taught me that words aren't harmful on their own. It depends how they're said, what is meant. When Chelsea swore, I was thinking about why. I was thinking of the words around the word. I was thinking context and intent. In Mum's case, the word was a stopping point. She couldn't get past.

When I went to the parties, Dom and the other guys would rag on me because I didn't get pissed. Chelsea said: *Don't worry. Those mainstream cunts wouldn't know their ass from their elbow.* I sucked the air in through my teeth because I still got a shock when I heard her say it, but I was totally chuffed as well because she'd put us in the same boat, downstream from mainstream.

My parents always picked me up at midnight: that was my curfew. Otherwise they were too tired for mass in the morning. If things got messy, I'd wait out the front. I didn't want Mum to see everyone, passing over today and into the long gone. At the very least, I tried to be right near the door when she arrived. Mum always stepped inside if she could. She waltzed in like Jesus on water, as if it was her God given right to meddle in every corner of my life.

Mostly we went to Steve's place because his Mum was never home and his Dad was long gone. Chelsea said: *You should pop a pill or something. Your parents won't smell a pill on your breath. If anything, you'll be filled with the love of Christ and they'll be over the moon.*

She twisted her long, shiny hair around her finger. *You could see what it feels like to be the messiah for a night, see what all the fuss is about. Everything's a fucken miracle. Try it.* She threw her head back and laughed, it was sickeningly seductive, she knew it was, she must have known.

I didn't laugh. I didn't think it was such a cracking idea. Chelsea wanted me to let my hair down and I wanted to loosen up but I was nervous. I wanted her too much and it made me careful. When her Mum was good, Chelsea let her hair down. *I'm making the most of it,* she said. But who can tell if you've ever really made the most of anything? Is your best the most? Sometimes my best is weak as. Sometimes the most is broken. Hollow.

My Mum was strange and I worried that I was strange too, and it made me strange, worrying about it, second-guessing my every move until I'd missed all my chances and I was lilting in the long gone. When I was with Chelsea, I could forget about Mum and it made me less strange. It unstranged me.

One time, I forgot about Mum so much that I wasn't waiting near the door. The music was loud and I was lirting in it. I was watching the toilet door for Chelsea, guarding it, making sure no one barged in. Chelsea looked pale, like she might throw. I was looking out for her and I wasn't thinking about Mum.

When I heard Mum's voice, I went out to the living room. Dom was standing there with his arm swung around Mum's shoulder. He had a vodka bottle full of water in his hand and he was gone. He stepped back from Mum, holding the bottle out to her, slurring. He said: *How 'bout you do the water-into-wine trick?* He was wobbling all over the place, laughing. Mum was standing stiff and straight like a goal post. It was awful.

I was angry with Mum because she weaseled in and brought this on herself, but I was dark with all of the others too, for standing around and laughing in a pack, with a pack mentality. Mum's God-loving was obsessive, even deranged, but she would never be mean to anyone, not intentionally. It's a sickening thing, having your Mum right in the thick of funny.

Dom was laughing, losing his footing with the force of his laughter. Mum stood still and said nothing. Her face was deadpan, dead as a pan. Dom leered at her, swaying. He said: *C'mon, Mrs Musgrove. Show us a bit of the talking in tongues then?* He lobbed his tongue out, flicking it around his lips, making a noise that sounded like a yodel but wounded, cut up by his laughing. He was waving his arms around as if he was dancing, but his legs were still.

Mum stood rigid, always and ever the post, pale and wide eyed.

Enough! I said, putting my arm around Mum's shoulder and turning her towards the door. Everyone froze. Someone stopped the music and everything was quiet. I led Mum to the door, taking her by the arm as if she was blind.

And the blind shall see and the deaf shall hear. Even the stuff that's long gone: over and done.

I looked back when I got to the door, remembering about Chelsea. She stared at me, confused, one hand against the wall to steady herself. As we backed out of the driveway, I could see Chelsea standing near the lounge room window. She pulled the curtain aside. Someone came up behind her and put his arm around her shoulder, edging his breath closer to her neck. It looked like Dom: spiky hair, broad shoulders. My Mum goes to prayer group with Dom's Mum and I figure she has her fair share to pray about, having a cunt for a son.

Arriving at school the following Monday, I was nervous. I thought everyone would be talking about the Mum-Show, but that was old news apparently. Everyone was talking about Chelsea and Dom. Suddenly I wished they *were* talking about Mum. I felt sick with the visuals. Ben walked in on them and they were both starkers, up to their ears in it apparently.

I was fantasising all kinds of rampant bestial sex, her and Dom, all the positions, all the possibilities. Then I overheard Tiff say that Chelsea's Mum was down the gurgler

and that's why she wasn't at school. Suddenly my disgust was long gone. I wanted to help Chelsea. I wanted to tell her I'd always be there. She could hook up with anyone she wanted, including me of course.

When Chelsea's Mum was bad she stayed at home. She didn't leave the house. It was like she was hibernating and there were no in-betweens. It was all or nothing, on or off, and I tried to understand the pressure (that's why she went for Dom) and I pretended it meant nothing. I tried not to do my head in about it because they might have been doing other stuff, not the deed, and I tried not to worry if they did or they didn't because it was over and done and one day it'd be long gone.

I didn't see Chelsea for ages after that and I was beginning to feel like she was the enigma. I would turn up to the parties, just in case, but I would leave quietly when she wasn't there. Tiff's party was a last ditch attempt. Tiff made punch, loads of pineapple juice and crushed ice, shit-loads of vodka. We sat around in her back garden breathing the jasmine-scented air, punch bowl in the middle of the table, cicadas going crazy. Chelsea scooped a ladleful into a disposable cup and I did the same, eyeballing her so that she knew I was alive, ready to let my hair down. It was a balmy night and everyone was looking bronze and chilled out from the summer holidays (except for Chelsea, she looked strung out and skinny).

Chelsea got up from the table. I took a breath or two, that's as long as I could wait, and then I followed. I stepped out the front door and saw her heading down the driveway.

Wait, I said. I'll walk you home.

I'll be fine, she said.

I'll worry, I said. Let me walk you.

We walked fast, mostly in silence. I reached down and held her hand. She looked at me sideways but then she held on tight and we marched on. When we got to her place she walked up the concrete steps to the front door and turned around, still puffing. I stood on the ground below, looking up at her as if I was begging, praying. She lit a smoke and sucked it hard, eyeballing me. Her blue eyes turned black as she narrowed them, scrutinising me.

She looked a bit mean sometimes. Maybe it wasn't mean, just hard. She was beautiful, don't get me wrong, she was stunning. She smoked like an old-timer, blew it out soft and long, lips pursed, and then a couple of rings at the end, just for kicks. I hate smoking, cigarettes sicken me, but with her, like the swearing, there was something seductive about it. I could watch her swear and smoke all day long.

Thanks for walking me, she said.

It's a fair way. I can't believe you walk that, by yourself, at night.

I run, she said.

Chelsea lived on the other side of town, the industrial quarter. Most kids lived on the school side, the trendy side. Everyone said that the sea was different on the wrong side of town. Smelly. It's the same sea of course, just two kilometres south, but on the

dodgy side the sea is dirty and depressing like bad soup, smarmy and oily, slick with working-people's filth. Or so they said.

I stood there, looking up at Chelsea, inhaling deeply through my nose: trying to smell it. Chelsea stared at me suspiciously, smirking slightly, watching my hands. I slid them into my pockets. I slid them out again and then thumbs back in. *Who did I think I was? Who did she think I was?* I was the guy who looked out for her at the parties. I minded her bottle so Seagull and A.J. didn't help themselves, just for five minutes while she nicked out to the shed for a quick bong. Sometimes it was a bit longer than five minutes, if she pashed someone. *There's nothing in it*, she said, because I was standing beside her when she got it on with Angus. *It's just nice to have someone's tongue in your mouth for the rush.*

Chelsea finished her smoke and flicked it in under the brown tree ferns. We watched the glowing butt for a second or two. What was I doing? I was being there: Mr Rock Steady. I'd always been there, only she'd never looked at me before, not dead on, not deadpan, because I'd made myself straight and narrow, like a goal post. I'd been a nothing, afraid of everything. I'd planted myself on the cusp of the long gone.

What is the long gone anyway? It's just two words, stuck together, with a meaning all its own, and I wondered if that's what would happen in the future. I wondered if all the words would come together and mean new stuff, until there was only one thing to know, one all knowing thing. Maybe the one thing wouldn't mean anything at all, nothing, and that would be the end of the world, the end of everything, because nothing would make sense, nothing would mean anything.

I was being a freak. I knew it. I'd tried to pretend I wasn't left of centre but it was no use. I did my head in, instead of living loose, and that's where I went wrong with Chelsea.

Mum said: *It will end in tears; it will never work.*

I believed her because I was scared. I was soft as.

Chelsea yawned. *See you Monday*, she said.

I stood there, on the edge of everything, on the verge of the long gone. I didn't say anything but I didn't look away. I wasn't embarrassed by the stillness. I could do stillness. I could do anything if it would keep her from slipping through my fingers.

It's only early, I said. *Do you want to watch t.v. for a bit or do you want to go to bed?*

It was a slip of the tongue. She sucked the air in like she was going to laugh and then she coughed it out. I was going red but it was dark, she couldn't see. I would have loved to ask her to go to bed with me, of course I would have, but I didn't think that was something you would ask, not in words. I thought the words would be long and gone and it would all just happen.

I don't really have people over, she said, *because of my Mum. She's...*

I don't care, I said. *I won't tell anyone.*

Chelsea lit another cigarette. *Hmm*, she said, puffing steadily, considering.

My parents are as strange as they come, I said, and they're roaming around like it's everyone's business.

Chelsea laughed. She still looked reluctant to let me in so I had another crack at reassuring her. *My parents are freaks, I said. My life is skew too.*

She said: *Skew? What sort of a word is that?* She smiled and it was an easy smile and her eyes were in it too. Usually her eyes were dead when she smiled.

Wait there, Chelsea said, flicking the butt of her cigarette away and heading inside. She closed the door behind her. When she came back, she said: You can come in for a bit. But if my Mum comes out of her room, you have to leave, just get up and go. Don't say a word. Nothing.

We sat on the couch and she flicked through the channels on the remote. I put my hand on her leg. She rested her head on my thighs and wrapped her arm around my knees. I began to stroke her hair and she fell asleep. I was scared to move.

After an hour or so Chelsea's Mum came out. I'd never seen her before. She was wearing baggy underpants and a loose fitting singlet. She looked like a hooker. Not that I'd know. She looked like someone who'd had a hard life and no money to take care of herself, like a hooker at the end of the world, dead on her feet, skin slapped over her bones like white paint, old white paint, slightly yellow. Her shoulders and collarbones were sticking out of her skin like... like nothing. There is nothing I know that is as ugly as her bones poking out of her dirty yellow chicken-skin.

She stared at me like I was a mirage, here and long gone, and I held up my hand and mouthed the word: *Hi*. I swallowed noisily and I told myself that I didn't care how she looked because I didn't want to care. Who cares if she was a hooker?

She stared at me for a good while and then she held her hand up and waved. The hair under her arm was black. The hair on her head was orange-blond, wiry, like broken guitar strings. The darker, underarm hair ran down the midline of her scalp. She turned away from me, leaving the room as murkily as she had come, like an enigma, NO, like the smarmy wash from the smarmy sea on the wrong side of town.

When Chelsea woke up, she said: *I love Mum. I'm not ashamed of her. Don't think I am. I don't want you to see her because you'll think that I can't love her, or that she can't love me because she's so fucked up. She looks disgusting, she said, but really she's beautiful.* Chelsea sat up. She was crying. She said: *People look different when you love them.*

I saw your Mum, I said quickly. She came out before.

Chelsea sat up and gasped, white, panic stricken. She put her head in her hands.

I couldn't move because you were asleep, I said, floundering. I was worried that I was losing her, and I never really had her, but if you want something that much it feels like you have it. Almost.

Chelsea eyeballed me for a second. Then she put her head down again, crying, wet-breathing. She held her head in her slimy hands and she was gagging on her tears. It

sounded like she was gargling, like she was trying to keep her head above water, like she was swallowing air and water in the grimy, wrongtown sea.

I can see the love: I lied. Truth is, I saw a long gone hooker but I chose my words carefully so it sounded true and believable. I could see the love when I looked at Chelsea. She made me believe that you could love burnt out, long gone, druggie hookers. She made me believe that her Mum was lovable. She made me believe that cunt was a lovely thing to say.

I'm going to wash and trim her hair, said Chelsea, and dye it back to her natural colour: warm blonde with the shiny gold streaks. I'll get the orange wrongness out of it. It makes her skin look yellow. It's not yellow, only her hair makes it look that way because it's a cheap colour. She should have let me do it. I would have done a better job, and massaged her scalp with some nice conditioner.

Chelsea was talking fast, swatting the tears away like flies. She eyeballed me and I kissed her because I had no words. It was our first kiss. It was long, like a long salty conversation, like she understood perfectly what I was trying not to say.

She's really beautiful, said Chelsea. If she had another life she would have been in magazines. It's the greyness that makes her look awful, but if you take the sickness away, I mean the shadows and her hard life...

She would look like you, I said. I couldn't see it, not really, but I could believe it. Believing without seeing is long and gone.

Mum said: *Chelsea is different. She's not like us. Chelsea and her family are fringe people.* She said it like they were from the dark-side, another life form, and I wondered what Jesus and the lepers would make of that. I believed Mum because I let myself believe her and that's come back to haunt me because Chelsea and I had something crucial and Mum is a mystery to me.

When I thought about my future with Chelsea it was like seaweed around my neck: thick, flat and rubbery, and that's why the beach smells on the wrong side of town, because they have all the seaweed.

At the start I thought I would love Chelsea forever, even if she ended up looking like a burnt out hooker. I thought: *How could I stop?* I thought I could protect her and we wouldn't go under. I thought I could stop her getting long and gone in her own living body. But then I got frightened that Chelsea would end up all ratty. Broken and hollow like her Mum.

I was weak. I was scared of what Chelsea would become. I was afraid of the unknown, and there's nothing more long gone than being frightened of something that might never happen. I shook Chelsea off like a cold wind, steeling myself and telling myself that the crying was just a stage. I'm not strange or left of centre anymore. I didn't even tell her why. I didn't know. I ran hard into the long gone, pretending I'd done my best by her.

As time went by, Chelsea hardly came to school. Sometimes I walked home via her place, just in case, but I never saw her. I wondered if I had imagined her, conjured her, long and gone. I lurked in front of her house for a while and I thought I could

smell her shampoo, lilting in the wind, but it was probably just the smell of clean wet washing, blowing in the breeze on the wrong side of town.

I couldn't smell the smell that everyone talked about. Everyone said the wrongness was there but I didn't have the nose for it, I guess.

List of works cited

Derrida, Jacques 2007 (English translation and editors' foreword), 'The *retrait* of metaphor' in *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Research Statement

Research background

The story 'Long Gone' is a chapter from the short-story cycle *The Earth does not get Fat* (Prendergast 2013). The story makes a contribution to knowledge both in terms of content and aesthetics: the discontinuous structure of the surface narrative foregrounds processes of association at the heart of a fractured style of narration that is recuperated through the use of a metaphorical manoeuvre.

Within the larger structure of the short-story cycle 'Long Gone' is an example of how creative writing research operates by association and increment rather than in a logical and linear fashion.

Research contribution

The superimposition of images, fragments, ellipses and silences combined with an attentiveness to linguistic processes (resonance of parts of speech, potential meaning of slips of tongue) convey both the power of metaphor to create new realities and the haunting presence of alterity. Jacques Derrida suggests that alterity is the otherness that lurks behind the sign, simulating presence, making the otherwise empty sign full of meaning. In this way Derrida unpicks the concept of metaphor as all and nothing:

Being nothing, it does not itself appear, it has no proper and independent phenomenality, and not showing itself, it withdraws; it is structurally in withdrawal, as [...] differentiality, trace. (Derrida 2007: 75)

'Long Gone' foregrounds processes of association that occur at a generative moment of composition/engagement: processes that connect signs in the surface content of the narrative, processes by which we see (metaphorically) beyond when we know (logically).

Research significance

'Long gone' was shortlisted for the Glimmertrain International Fiction Open (US), 2013.