

Francesca Rendle-Short

Writing wrongs: the art of crossing over to ‘unbite’ the tongue

Abstract:

In a new book about studio spaces and studio practice, Brisbane painter Joe Furlonger states: ‘The happy accident is probably my motto, I think the only way forward is by making mistakes, and I make plenty.’

If you sin once, you can sin again.

In this article I am exploring this idea of ‘happy accident’ as it relates to writing a very particular and ‘rebellious’ Queensland story. How as an artist you begin to rely on these mistakes as a means of propelling yourself forward in your creative endeavours; how mistakes, even when they show you up in a not-so-good light, become a way of opening yourself up to the imagination and new possibilities.

To write anything a writer must betray something. It is transgressive. It places you at the very juncture of risk. For any writer, collisions of this ‘oops-I’ve-made-a-mistake’ kind can be confronting, how more so for someone ‘mining the body’ for her material and direction. In this case, in writing a ‘return to Brisbane fiction’, there’s a chance of ‘making different’, transformation. In other words, autobiography/fiction as a reckoning, a ‘righting’. To reclaim self.

Be with the body. Here find the tongue.

Keywords:

Autobiography – Shame – Queensland – Transgression – Betray – Body

Biographical note:

Francesca Rendle-Short writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She is in the middle of writing companion works about growing up in Queensland in the 1970s as the daughter of an ‘anti-smut’ campaigner – a novel, and a faux memoir about writing the novel. She is the author of the novel *Imago* and novella *Big Sister*. In 2005 she co-wrote a short play entitled *Us* for Six Pack at The Street. She is a lecturer and program director of creative writing at the University of Canberra.

*The happy accident is probably my motto,
I think the only way forward is by making mistakes, and I make plenty.*

Brisbane painter, Joe Furlonger
in *Studio: Australian painters on the nature of creativity* (Lloyd 2007: 70)

Crossing borders once

When I left Queensland I took everything with me. I didn't think for a minute I would return to Brisbane, certainly not to live. I had to leave the place I'd grown up in and all it stood for far behind, escape south across its border. This was my chance to shuck off conservative black-and-white thinking. Think for myself. It was still the 1970s, the middle years of the dark reign of Joh Bjelke-Petersen and his particular brand of political and social hubris.¹ In Queensland you were either for him or against him. My family were for him, especially my mother.

They said: *Don't do it, it's a mistake, you'll regret it.*

Little did I know then as I stuffed two huge suitcases full of everything I owned, leaving nothing behind, not a trace (so I thought), that this was my first step in the art of crossing over. *If you sin once*, I had learned by heart from the time I could talk, *watch out, you will sin again*. Going south was an act of transgression, like reading, like writing. Like opening yourself up to the new possibilities. The imagination was at work, instinctual. First sign of danger. Because we all know where bad girls end up, don't we – didn't my mother warn me? *Take it to God in prayer*, I was instructed, *ask His forgiveness*. (And always pronounce God's pronoun with a capital-H to enforce His Authority.) But I never did.

Crossing borders twice

You can imagine then my delight tripping over something H  l  ne Cixous said in an interview in Paris in 2002, where she told Ian Blyth: 'And after you have sinned once, as you know, you never stop' (2002: 109).² She laughed too – *as you know*. In the transcript of this particular interview I like the way Blyth includes this interjection in parenthesis, puts it between square brackets – like this, [*laughs*] – lets the reader hear the full complexion of Cixous's meta-voice, her trill, register. Comic timing. She's talking to him about *writing her mother*, how one thing always leads to another and how she found herself giving way to 'the flood' of her mother. She chooses words carefully (you can hear her casting the line): sin, trespass, transgression. Then she adds, not as a caution but with more of a victory note: 'But you know, when you think in terms of transgression, you're *on the way* to transgressing [my italics], you're already doing it.' Travelling south in the Greyhound bus I was *on the way* at eighteen.

Of course writers of imaginative works cross over all the time, back and forth; this is what they do. They transgress. And this is before they find their subject matter, before they discover a voice, before deciding on treatment. Robert Dessaix talks about how writers put themselves in the way of something else. How writing is a waiting experience. Waiting until what's inside crosses with outside, outside with in (Dessaix 1997). Sometimes with some stories you have to wait a lifetime and even then you write about it *obliquely* – to use a word fellow-Queenslander Janette Turner Hospital once used to describe her voyage between not too dissimilar parallel alien universes to mine (Turner Hospital 1991: 2).³ Transgressing twice times over I reckon, here using the word 'transgress' as a verb meaning to pass over or go beyond, violate, infringe, break.⁴ '*Transgress against*' meaning to offend or 'sin against' – there's that sin-word again – sin to the power of two, mathematically speaking.

Going to church holding hands

As a small girl I knew the difference between right and wrong all right; it was simple. Being right put you in the arms of Jesus like a little lost lamb and took you up the narrow, dangerous, scraggy path to the top of the mountain. You were safe, enfolded in His arms because you knew you couldn't get there on your own, you needed saving, and the bright shiny light of heaven above was your reward. Everything glowed glorious white.

Being right took you to church holding hands. Being right dressed you in your Sunday best to sing hymns and pray to God and to shake the minister's sweaty hand. Being right put you on the right side of the bible and Christian tracks and anti-communist pamphlets and sermons written by Godly men; with memorised verses glued hard to your tongue. Laying your head in your mother's lap during the sermon.

Being wrong – *being wrong* – being wrong sent you to hell. It was easy too, this road was wide and slippery like oil; you were swept along without knowing. Being wrong meant you would burn in hell, be buried in an eternal fire, to scream and writhe with your tongue hanging out all thirsty yelling for water that would never come because that was the point: hell was/is/always forever. Everything either pitch-black or the deepest of blood reds, this small girl could never make up her mind.

Being wrong meant you had to confess your sins, not just privately to Jesus at Quiet Time every morning, but publicly as well. Sinners stood up and were counted; sinners were punished. Really bad sinners, serial sinners, were excommunicated, sent to hell then and there. *Excommunicātus* literally means 'put out of the community'. It sits in the dictionary between the words 'excogitate' on the top side meaning to think out, devise, invent (from the Latin 'found out by thinking' to put it the other way round more correctly and so to shift the focus from object to subject), and the word 'excoriate' on the bottom side meaning to strip off or remove the skin from, to flay verbally, denounce, censure. In Golden Circle country you were on your best behaviour, you made sure you stayed put, never crossed over, never crossed anything, it was that dangerous. You had to watch your step or you'd fall down the cracks in the pavement, disappear forever to a *gnashing of tongues*. But what a lot of work it was to stay standing upright.

So my mother made sure we were all right, washed and rinsed in the blood of Jesus, hung out to dry on Sundays. She made sure everyone else in the world knew the difference between right and wrong too; she was self-appointed moral guardian to the whole of Queensland, not averse to speaking her mind. *Shame, shame* she would call out in packed public meetings about books people were reading and giving to their children, books she considered dirty and salacious. *You know what these filthy books do to you inside, you know what I am talking about; I don't have to tell you.*

*'Q is for Queensland where the reaction is'*⁵

Put simply, my mother and people like her thought the world was sick and going to Hell (with a big H); she had to put the world right. In Queensland she garnered considerable support for her very public position. Here, have a slow read:

About pollution.

*Pollution is the word of the day ... the most serious pollution of all, that of the minds and bodies of our children.*⁶

*To condone thus the spread of pornography as a 'necessary risk' is similar to expose babies, or weak, unprepared persons (and there are millions of them) to malignant germs for which they either have no antibodies, or have had not enough time or chance, to build the necessary antibodies.*⁷

About Communism and hell.

*We should take a lead from Communism which is very quick to take action by way of the 'purge' and bloodshed when it thinks necessary to eliminate political thinking with which its ideology does not agree ... What is happening to this country which we love?*⁸

*Sanctimonious clichés are small comfort in the face of mounting incidence of gang rape, V.D., illegitimacy and divorce ... We badly need tougher censorship. A recent church newsletter suggests the hottest places of hell are reserved for those who peddle such refuse for a few measly dollars. I claim no such knowledge of Hades, but when I pass some bookstores it seems I can almost smell the brimstone.*⁹

About the need for a bath, urgently too.

*A friend sent me some excerpts from the books in question, I almost wish she hadn't. They inspired me with an urgent desire of a bath.*¹⁰

(And boy, I knew about baths, being a child who suffered from boils, who had to soak regularly in Physohex to keep herself squeaky clean. Not that the baths saved me from the lance of my mother's scalpel – but the warm water did help to soften the skin.)

The Little Red School Book started it (although my mother had been building her moral muscles slowly in preparation).¹¹ It was released in Australia in 1972 and kickstarted a ferocious and hysterical public debate in Queensland (hysterical in both senses of the word – emotionally disordered as well as extremely funny, from the Greek *hysterikós* meaning 'suffering in the uterus', which, when you think about this debate, *is* hysterical),¹² a debate to do with morality and decency, civil liberties versus

community standards, pornography and censorship, all writ large in the papers of the day. Queensland's *Courier Mail* was full of it – 'a moral landslide', 'gutter trash', 'suffocating filth'. My mother was declared 'anti-smut', for there was nothing private about her morals crusade; she let rip.

*It is indecent ... taught anarchy ... it's a strong warning to parents that they must be vigilant ... said anti-smut campaigner.*¹³

Washing yourself clean

In my family we were lucky; we had baths at either end of the house. Near the front was the boys' bath, the blue one. Near the back the pink, for the girls, the one I soaked in with Physohex. My mother liked to have a bath in the blue one because it was shallower and wider and neater; she could make more noise that way. Because there was nothing private about my mother's baths, no shame. Jesus took care of that.

How she slammed the door shut. How water poured in fast, poured in loud, all waterfall thundering from the tap. How you could hear her splashing and sluicing about with a great torrent of sound. Such a noise you imagined the whole bathroom was full of it; that she might have been in a bath made up of four walls with her head at the surface ceiling-high, exclaiming, victorious. That was it: my mother all victory, *marching as to war*. Anti-smut.

She didn't have long baths; Christians like her never indulged. This was more a snappy ritual: focused, controlled, determined – *Hallelujahglorybe* – to 'wash away' sweat and grime (in Brisbane you must wash every day). A self-perceived filth too, the flushing away of wretchedness that pricked her skin. She reached out from the bath, reached for saintliness *on earth*. Always believing, *believing*, she could wash away the sin of the world to then rise up dripping and wet across the lino floor, triumphant, as if from the grave, ready for the next fight. Together she and her Saviour were righting wrongs.

Which is why in this family we were baptised all in white in the City Tabernacle in Wickham Terrace in the centre of Brisbane. Purified by full immersion, dunked deep beneath the surface of water while being safely held in the muscle-arms of Jesus. How everything dripped and sagged on the other side afterwards, hair flat against skulls, water up the nose, how dresses clung tightly white and see-through to our bodies, naked-looking if you dared think about it. Not unlike writing if you think about this too. How writers strip off, how they bare themselves in public.¹⁴ How writers betray.

Revealing one's real character

In their 'art works' book entitled *Autobiography* Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang argue that inherent in the process of creating any autobiography you have to see yourself as *someone else*, you have to create a persona, invent a character/narrator (2004: 16). You create an illusion of truthfulness, is the way Dorothy Hewett puts it (1987: 18). She writes: *I'm changing myself, even as I write I am changing. When I sit down to write the last word of my autobiography, I'll be a very different person from the*

writer who struggled with the first paragraph. The actual process of writing changes the writer.

To ‘betray oneself’, the Macquarie Dictionary suggests, is to reveal one’s real character. Here the word ‘betray’ comes from the Latin *tradere* meaning ‘give over’: exhibit, reveal or disclose, unconsciously or consciously, disappoint. This combination of words – one’s real character – has a ring to it. The juxtaposition of ‘real’ with ‘character’ makes me think of other contested couplings: truth coupled with invention, facts and fabrication, record or document alongside storytelling and fiction, ‘free invention’ against ‘getting it right’. You-the-subject becomes you-the-object – *someone else* – transference or ‘carry across’ of the flesh-and-blood body into a linguistic body made for the page. In musical terms it might be called transposition, ‘across place’, to transform, transmute. In any case, it is a consecutive process as it gets going, then a concurrent doubling all at once as the two run together with only a slit of almost indiscernible daylight between – depending on the slant, the hold.

A parallel process Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang argue, this all-at-onceness as-it-is-happening, where the *writing itself* becomes the means of fashioning identity; not, in other words, what *is written* as a fixed and final statement of self (2004: 15-16). This is the work of autobiography, why, for instance I like to call this project ‘autobiographical work’ – how it gets me by the throat – where the word ‘work’ is a doing word and not a naming word in the sense of a finished thing. Put simply, I’m thinking process not product. So how does it happen?

First, a split in two onto the page – the becoming-someone-else bit. Margaret Atwood argues in *Negotiating with the Dead* that artists who are writers are doubles twice times over, for the very act of writing splits the self in two (2002: 32). Add to this the tricky matter of subject matter as it relates to the self and you have a third kind of trading or ‘giving over’. Add to *that* the uncovering of shame in writing the self (as composed in this particular and peculiar Queensland story of which I am speaking directly). Daring to speak up about uncomfortable things is a very singular kind of betrayal. You break ranks. How will your family react? Does your ‘illusion’ or way of putting things match up with their view? Will they feel betrayed? Is your mother the same as theirs? Will you be disinherited (literally and/or figuratively)? Is writing an act of dying?

I reckon you can’t write anything without betraying something.

In any case this is risky writing. It’s transgressive. Brian Castro calls it ‘dangerous dancing’.¹⁵ You open yourself up to attack.

Processing pineapples

Writers cross over all the time, insides with outsides, outside with in, it is their game, their play, performance of choice. Back and forth they go with story *and stories*, new sightlines, made-up fictions, interlocking songlines. Making sure the tension between ‘free invention’ and ‘getting it right’ is measured, plausible, has resonance. Can be thrummed across parallel strings as harmonics in partials and/or overtones.

It's a very particular Queensland intaglio I'm talking about. You could print this Golden Circle skin to see for yourself, see its transference of cuts and wedges, incisions and scrapings across the surface, a crossing over from the private into public with this text, this writing. The thing about shame is that it colonises your body, it inhabits you, so that you feel ashamed not just about the shame of origin (like original sin), you feel ashamed about revealing the shame – you want to bury it alive, bury it for good. You want to hide. Yet here I am on paper *out loud*. Thinking, writing dangerously. In fact, a strand of this very same story has already been planted in another place, a virtual kind of crossing this. In it, I introduce myself formally as a 'Never-Never Glory-Girl', a ravel of record and fabrication, a linguistic body, disobedient subject and necessary fiction, a 'vomit into existence' (inventing story to uncover story – intervention by invention), the shape of another person's mouth.¹⁶

A smell of rotting pineapples in the sun waiting to be processed

But in that piece of writing – and here's the rub and why I am re-sucking the pineapple so to speak – in it I made a mistake, a boo-boo, a howler is the way someone put it (unintentional, it's true). The thing is it's *still* wrong, it hasn't been corrected (ah, motivation shifts). And I have to admit, it takes some courage to let it be *as it was*, as it is (even with the encouragement of editors – 'leave it, it makes it more interesting for this', or something like that).¹⁷ That's where this whole thing started, where my thinking about 'writing wrongs' began – oh happy accident – because of the impulse for putting it *right*, the impulse of covering it up, not wanting to admit to failure. It is a bodily thing: the bur of 'sin' catches at the lining of my stomach, my bowels; I feel sick. It also propels me forward. For any writer, this kind of collision can be confronting, how more so for someone 'mining the self' for her material and direction.¹⁸ So let me digress for a moment to explore this a bit further to show you how a mistake can become a catalyst to taking the next step, by taking you back to those smelly hot pineapples rotting ripe in a Queensland sun. Return.

Excoriated skins

It was my big sister Ruth who gave me the word 'excoriate', dropped the word into my lap when she first heard I was writing about Queensland and *got talking*. When she was young she worked at the Golden Circle Cannery in Northgate on the outskirts of Brisbane over the summer holidays processing trainloads of ripe pineapples and came home sticky and stinky with excoriated arms. Pineapple juice got everywhere and you could smell the truth of her day's work on her skin. Things changed, she said, beginning with pineapples, they lost their innocence. Like paper cuts crisscrossing the skin – pineapple juice cuts. Imagine what would happen if 'doing pineapples' was your only job. To feel the sting of the acid in the cuts and abrasions up and down your bare arms day in, day out, bleeding with inevitable infection, how they never have a chance to heal. Taste excoriation.

Excoriate: the word with the rub.

The mistake, I suppose, was simply enough, especially for someone who doesn't actually know Latin (was never taught it at school), who looks up words in the dictionary like any other untutored person would do and who, I know this for sure, was more interested in *her line of thinking* than in etymological 'truth'. The word 'excoriate' is made up of two parts: *ex* meaning 'out of' and *corium* meaning 'to hide'.¹⁹ Or so I thought. The first bit (bite) is right: *ex* as a prefix from the Latin meaning 'out of', 'beyond', hence to mean 'thoroughly' or 'utterly'. *Corium* on the other hand is not the verb 'to hide', as I wanted it to be, but a noun meaning 'a hide' or skin.

In my enthusiasm for play and association I wanted to connect my sister's excoriated hands and arms from the pineapple juice of Queensland, metaphorically, to the idea of shame and hiding the face. I was also fascinated where this word sits in the dictionary, between 'excommunicate' on the topside and 'excrement' on the bottom. Mind you, I can now see some other playful synergies when you think of concealing yourself in a hide observing wildlife.

Still, shame sticks (the root word 'shame' from the modern German word '*Scham*', which refers to the covering of the face – I got this bit right); shame multiplies. As Elspeth Probyn writes: 'To care intensely about what you are writing places the body within the ambit of the shameful' (2005: 131).²⁰ Shame then when the mistake was first pointed out to me (ouch), shame now in the retelling (double ouch – knowing too the mistake is still out there). I wonder too whether this 'mistake' is enough to be disallowed, disinherited from the writing/publishing world. Thought of as a fraud.

You see the thing is, I find all this really interesting (I do care intensely Elspeth). Once you start thinking like this, it's hard to stop – such a disobedient subject. The funny thing is it's easy to say oops, sorry, once you've said sorry the first time (just like the business of 'crossing over': if you sin once, you can sin again). So I'm glad I made the mistake, glad I got it wrong (can't believe I'm saying this). It lets me hover in an in-between world right here. Keeps me honest, as they say. Makes me laugh. Makes me wonder about all the other mistakes I might have made, might *be making* without knowing, without anyone pointing them out (not that that means they haven't been made).

In fact I'd like to say that I got it wrong *deliberately* as a lever for pushing me further in my thinking. It took me places (*takes* me places still – present tense), and further than I've been before, into uncharted waters, where the mistake becomes something else. Writing is full of such happy accidents I reckon, little things you trip over and make into new things if you open yourself up to the process, to recasting infelicities, to perfecting the technique of what Robert Dessaix calls irresolution (1997).²¹ Writing *fiction* is a licence to getting things wrong too, *deliberately*. Telling lies for poetic truth.²² Where you hover over the material, make things up to re-create gaps and absences, make *over* as Hermione Lee might put it (2005: 28). She brings together ideas of putting together and concocting or inventing (the 'making up' bit), with the idea of transformation and remodelling ('making over'). For the writer, there is always tension and tautness between 'getting the story right' and 'giving the life story a bit of shape'. Add to this, the idea of 'cutting up' or 'cutting out' – cutting

something – how a writer fashions or sculpts a narrative to reveal what it is she wants to reveal. Always making deliberate choices. Intervention and invention. Invention *and* intervention. Where everything you put together in the writing *could have taken place* and is completely plausible albeit rearranged and reassigned, to use Irish writer Louise Dean’s choice of words.²³ The smell of fiction all hot in the sun, hot up the nose.

That’s why I like writing this Queensland story – it trips me up, hitches my breath, opens me out. It makes me feel uncomfortable. Makes my heart thump cymbals in my chest. Forces me to stand accused. Opens me up to the shape of my mouth. *Unbites* the tongue. I would rather risk being thought of as a sham than to keep on burying the shame. Silence now makes me sick. Like Louise Dean, I reckon betrayal encapsulates the idea that *we can change* who we are.

This Queensland story

In a recent title about the goings-on in Queensland, historian Raymond Evans talks about the discomfort embodied in the place (‘embodied’ is my word, not his), about Queenslanders being ‘the banana-benders of Banana-land – a heat-stroked and skin-cancered people, dogged’, how it was a place of black-and-white thinking with ‘few shades of grey’ (Evans 2007: 219, 222). I agree.

Which is why autobiography is the perfect form to choose to write a very particular and ‘rebellious’ Queensland story because of its unstable qualities, its slippery character, the way it tempts the writer to err, skid and slide. It is, as Brian Castro argues, the most direct form of transgression (1995: 26, 32). It ‘declares itself against authority’, the best position for writing Queensland. ‘Places itself at the very juncture of risk’, which is the only sort of crossover that really *gives*. Its character is flawed, you can’t pin it down – strangely, a bit like Brisbane itself – but how in writing this ‘return to Brisbane narrative’ there’s a chance of ‘making different’, transformation.²⁴ In other words, autobiography/fiction as a reckoning, a ‘righting’.²⁵ To reclaim self.

As ‘a story of self’ autobiography has its own way of crystallising the truth by making a world to enlarge our sympathy, which is, of course, the way of fiction.²⁶ Any truth, if there is any truth to be found (moments of truth more likely), comes from storytelling – how the story is arranged, the pick of view, syntactical choices, preferred vocabulary, figurative language, register or key, timing and juxtaposition of ideas to show the funny side of this story while not losing sight of its seriousness. Its poetry. It’s always been comforting to come from a big family, especially to be near the bottom, to understand instinctively how there will always be a big number of stories for every single thing that happens, and how these story versions will by their nature vary, sometimes conflict, always be contested.²⁷

And the risk?

I’m heartened by something Janette Turner Hospital once said about the quirky thing she learned when writing *The Mango Tree*, a story that took her some 35 years to execute. That if you write autobiography people accuse you of making it up; if you write fiction people insist it’s really autobiography (1991: 4).

Be with the body

When my mother said goodbye to me at the Greyhound bus stop I never thought I'd come back to Queensland. I stepped away to go to university and she peppered me with parting words: 'Whatever you do, don't do English literature, do something else, anything else.'

What I am writing here and in other places begins with that step – '*doing*' English literature as she put it, '*doing*' reading too, doing writing. I am tracking a narrative line – part recall, part invention and all the juicy narrative tension this creates – that runs close to the body, scrapes the skin. Creating shades of grey for the embroidery to speak for itself, precisely because of the risk, Brian Castro would say, getting close to indistinctness, John Carey might add.²⁸ Magic, is the way Jill Ker Conway puts it, the magic of entering another life in order to think about our own (1998: 18). Which is how I like to think of my imagined interlocutor, the narrator/protagonist Glory-Girl – how writing her life reclaims my own (to reclaim meaning 'cry out against'). Entering her life to recover my body. Constructing a story that is bearable to tell. Which is why I want to finish this with one last crossing over, this time from dry land into water, not the water of a bath to wash a dirty body, but into a swimming pool, to play.

In Brisbane kids are always swimming to keep cool. There's a photograph my father took (he always held the camera) of me kidding around in a pool down the backyard in St Lucia, an above ground pool, a Clark Rubber special. The photograph is not framed properly; the head is cut off. You can't see the face, her eyes, her mouth, only a neck and a bit of a chin. The little girl's togs fall innocently off her shoulders to show her nipples. But will you look at her body, those strong thighs, her pumping chest, and look at those arms, how they fly about with pleasure, how they dance. How she loved playing like that all afternoon all through summer until the soles of her feet and the palms of her hands wrinkled up walnuts.

Be with the body, is the way Merlinda Bobis once put it to me, *here find the tongue*.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes: 'Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners' (1926/1967: 62).²⁹ I fancy my fiction – this autobiographical work unbiting the tongue (flesh and blood *and* linguistic) – is attached, in this instance, not to the corners of a house but to the fingers of the hands you see here, those limbs dancing a jig in the Clark Rubber pool in a Brisbane backyard some forty years ago. Trading something like heat, trading blood, trading story. Her hands and body make shapes like sounds, like words, like writing. Choreography: to write a body into existence.

Endnotes

1. In a new book on Queensland's history Raymond Evans is unequivocal; he calls this controversial era in which Joh Bjelke-Petersen won seven governments, a time of hubris: 'We won election after election, street march after street march,' declared Sir Joh with pride (2007: 217).
2. And I have to tell you, my heart leaps whenever I come across this three-letter word: to read 'sin'. It jumps out/off of the page, such a daring word to employ especially when it appears in a non-religious context. Don't these writers know the weight of it (I can hear my mother demand), how they err when they mock (perhaps she wouldn't say it quite the same way as this), how they are a breath away from hell?
3. Mangoes drew me to her first. Alongside the publication of her story 'The Mango Tree' is an 'author note' about the process of 'making it public' (Turner Hospital 1991).
4. All definitions come from *The Macquarie Dictionary Third Edition* (1997) unless otherwise stated.
5. 'Q is for Queensland' comes from *Australian Censorship: The XYZ of Love* (Hall 1970: 96): the unfinished guide to sexual censorship in Australia, 'unfinished because the censorship file fattens every week' (5).
6. TS Steven (Principal) and others, *Courier Mail*, 26/2/72.
7. F Winifred Jewett, *Courier Mail*, 15/2/72.
8. D Martin, *Courier Mail*, 29/2/72.
9. Ken Hood, *Courier Mail*, 11/2/72.
10. Ken Hood, *Courier Mail*, 26/1/72. The relationship between 'filthy books' and the need for a bath wasn't new. In 1901, there's a report of a certain Professor Edward Ellis Morris, a member of the Professorial Board at Melbourne University reacting to Balzac's *Droll Stories* with these words: 'I felt I defiled my mind reading them. I needed a bath after it' (Hall 1970: 98).
11. Queensland was the first state to ban the book (*Courier Mail*, 15/4/72). Federally, the Minister for Customs, Don Chipp, opposed the ban.
12. And when you look up this word on google, you find it linked to disorder of the body: 'hysterical: characterized by or arising from psychoneurotic hysteria; "during hysterical conditions various functions of the human body are disordered"' – Morris Fishbein' (http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&defl=en&q=define:hysterical&sa=X&oi=glossary_definition&ct=title) (accessed 19/9/07)
13. 'Book ban denies a right – librarian', *Courier Mail*, Saturday, 29/4/72, page 7. I first uncovered my mother in a file on censorship from the Australian Press Cuttings Agency at the National Library of Australia.
14. The writer Katherine Paterson (author of *Bridge to Terabithia*) talks about this, how writers seem contradictory, how they run around naked in public even though they are very private people (Rushby 2007: 12). John Colmer says autobiography is a form of literary striptease (1989: 7).
15. The idea of dancing comes from Castro's intriguing essay by the same name written before his book *Shanghai Dancing* was out in the world – written in the embryonic stages of that writing I imagine, that tentative time of testing waters with ideas (1998). It is Castro too who first introduced me

to the idea of writing your own disinheritance when writing autobiography, confirming what I already knew by heart.

16. Together, these two texts pull us together into a single but multifarious vortex of understanding in the way texts and bodies coalesce, in the way they weave together in unlikely *and likely* ways.

17. In conversation over a photocopying machine, if I remember right, not long after the smell of pineapples leaked out across the world.

18. It is John Colmer who suggests autobiography is ‘an archaeology of the self’ (1989: 7).

19. In this case the etymology is from the *Australian Oxford Dictionary* (1999).

20. Places *my body*, I wrote at the time, squarely in Queensland covering my face. I might add here, places my body now firmly in the spotlight, don’t you think?

21. The word ‘irresolution’ sits in the dictionary between ‘irresistible’ on the top side ‘irresolvable’ on the bottom. That just about sums it up, don’t you think?

22. As I write this a friend and colleague sends me Emily Dickinson’s ‘truth-with-a-slant’ poem in an email. ‘Tell the truth,’ so the poem goes, ‘but let it slant.’

23. Louise Dean writes about Belfast and the Troubles in 1979, the place where my mother went to university. Here, she talks to Bron Sibree (*Canberra Times*, Panorama, 6/8/05).

24. The naming of this kind of ‘return narrative’ comes from a new book about Brisbane’s literature and writing, *The Third Metropolis* (Hatherell 2007). Suddenly, I’m not alone, it places what I am doing in a field of wild pineapples; and I like that.

25. Feminist Carolyn Gold Heilbrun talks about autobiography as a reckoning (Steiner and Yang 2004: 94). ‘Autobiography is not the story of a life,’ she writes, ‘it is the re-creation or the discovery of one.’ That is to say, it is only in *telling the story* we find a story to tell. You’ll notice too in this discussion about autobiography I haven’t used the g-word. The idea of genre is, of course, artificial, like borders demarcating states, begging to be crossed (and you know, once you’ve thought of it, you’ve already ‘committed crossover’). The taxonomy of texts into genre is a way of categorising what has been built on by convention, by convenience. It opens the covers of books to sell them to readers – we all know this.

26. Which is how Susan Sontag describes the making of fiction when discussing it with Caroline Brothers (2004: 75, 78). She says we can receive ‘an education of the heart’ from art, from fiction (79).

27. Hermione Lee introduces me to the technical word ‘versionings’, the idea of reinterpretations, making up or making over (2005: 29).

28. As I have discussed elsewhere (see www.textjournal.com.au/oct07/rendleshort.htm), John Carey introduced me to this word in his chapter on literature in *What Good are the Arts?* (2005: 213-48). It’s about the need to create room in an imaginative work, where the writer invites the reader to imagine, invent; swell with their own reckoning.

29. In the same essay, she also says fiction is ‘likely to contain more truth than fact’ (7).

Works cited

- Atwood, Margaret 2002 *Negotiating with the dead: A writer on writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Australian Oxford Dictionary* 1999 (ed) Bruce Moore, Oxford: Oxford University Press and Australian National Dictionary Centre
- Blyth, Ian with Susan Sellers 2004 *Hélène Cixous: Live theory*, London: Continuum
- Carey, John 2005 *What good are the arts?*, London: Faber and Faber
- Castro, Brian 1995 *Writing Asia and auto/biography: Two lectures*, Canberra: University College, UNSW and Australian Defence Force Academy
- Castro, Brian 1998 'Dangerous dancing: Autobiography and disinheritance', *Australian Humanities Review* 12 (1998–1999), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/castro.html>, accessed 4/7/02
- Cixous, Hélène 2004 'Cixous live', interview conducted in English, Paris, June 2002, in Ian Blyth with Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live theory*, London: Continuum, 99–112
- Colmer, John 1989 *Australian autobiography: The personal quest*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press
- Dessaix, Robert 1997 'Eros, voice, text', *Scarp* 31, October, 21–25
- Dean, Louise 2005 in conversation with Bron Sibree, 'Loving the fear factor', *Canberra Times*, Panorama, 6/8/05, 11–12
- Evans, Raymond 2007 *A History of Queensland*, St Lucia, Brisbane: Queensland University Press
- Hall, James and Sandra 1970 *Australian censorship: The XYZ of love*, Sydney: Jack De Lissa
- Hatherell, William 2007 *The third metropolis*, St Lucia, Brisbane: Queensland University Press
- Hewett, Dorothy 1987 'Autobiographically speaking' in John Colmer and Dorothy Colmer (eds) *The Penguin Book of Australian autobiography*, Sydney: Penguin, 17–18
- Ker Conway, Jill 1998 *When memory speaks: Exploring the art of autobiography*, New York: Vintage Books
- Koval, Ramona 2005 'Writing biography: Hermione Lee', *Books and Writing*, Sunday 25/6/05, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwritng/stories/s1466178.htm>, accessed 27/3/07
- Lee, Hermione 2005 *Body Parts: Essays on life-writing*, London: Chatto & Windus
- Lloyd, R Ian 2007 *Studio: Australian painters on the nature of creativity*, John Macdonald (ed), Singapore: R Ian Lloyd Productions
- The Macquarie Dictionary Third Edition* 1997 Arthur Delbridge (ed.), Sydney: Macquarie Library, Macquarie University
- Probyn, Elspeth 2005 *Blush: Faces of shame*, Sydney: UNSW Press
- Rendle-Short, Francesca 2007, 'Artists Talk: listen to the imagination', *TEXT* 11.2
- Rushby, Pamela 2007, *Australian Author*, August, 39:2, 11–13

Sontag, Susan 2004, 'Educating the heart: Caroline Brothers interviews Susan Sontag on war, memory, art and humanity', *Meanjin*, March 63:1, 73–86

Steiner, Barbara and Jun Yang 2004, *Autobiography*, London: Thames & Hudson

Turner Hospital, Janette 1991 'The Mango Tree and author's note' in Gary Disher (ed.) *Personal Best 2: Stories and Statements by Australian Writers*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1–13

Woolf, Virginia 1967 (1929) *A room of one's own*, London: Hogarth Press